Blood On A Sundial

by Maz

1. To kill this girl...

Prompt: #16 - Trail of Breadcrumbs

Watching the Slayer from the shadows, as she beat down that supercilious, puffed-up minion, Spike had to admire
her style. Not as technically perfect as the one in China, and not as angry as Nikki, but she had passion, enthusiasm... Well, she had something, anyway. And she seemed to have friends. That was... different. So he gave her the ironic applause and offered her his threats, but as he walked away he was thinking. With any opponent, the key was to identify her weakness and utilise it to his own advantage. This would take care, planning, time... On the other hand... there was always the tried and tested, full frontal surprise attack.

~*~*~*~*~

After the debacle in the school he decided to go back to his first thought. This slayer not only had friends - she also had family. It was annoying. But he had learned two things: Angel was in town and working with the Slayer, and the boy with Angel was one of her friends. He had been there in the alley. He had fetched the Slayer's stake. That suggested he was a trusted intimate. And Spike had his scent. Well actually, he had learnt three things - the other was that the Anointed One was a pain in the arse. Thankfully he was a pain easily dealt with.

Spike prowled his warehouse, glaring at the minions as
he plotted. There was definitely something different about this one. And what sort of a name was 'Buffy' anyway? A slayer should work alone. She shouldn't have a cheering squad all ready to throw in a spare stake. She certainly shouldn't have a mother who knew how to wield an axe. She was supposed to live in the shadows, mopey and lonely and bitter at the destiny that demanded she die young on the fangs of her enemy. It was in the rules, for God's sake! But this one did have the friends. And she was altogether too cheerful. It made Spike's skin itch.

He continued to pace, ignoring Dru's attempts to poke life back into that damned bird of hers. Friends could be a strength or a weakness. Humans were funny about things like that. They got attached. It was time to find out whether this slayer, this Buffy, was really as different as she appeared. Minions were two a penny so it was hardly a sacrifice, and it could yield some valuable information.

In the end it cost him six, but three days later he had seen enough to know that she would protect her friends at all costs. They were her weakness. All he had to do was pick them off, one by one, and lay them out, like a trail of breadcrumbs for her to follow, and she would go
wherever he wanted. After all, if it wasn't fun, it wasn't worth doing.

~*~*~*~*~

The Slayer, the boy and the third one, the little red head, were sitting on a large tombstone kicking their heels and chatting. The Slayer was actually playing with a yo-yo. Kids today! No culture! Didn't they know that teenagers hanging around in graveyards were supposed to have alcohol and tobacco? With a curt nod Spike sent Frank in.

Spotting his undisciplined rush, the Slayer jumped down and grabbed a stake out of her back pocket. "Stay there!" she yelled at her followers as she moved away from them, apparently determined to engage in the clear area between the graves.

Frank's initial rush succeeded in doing nothing but send him somersaulting over her head as she rolled and used his own momentum against him. He wasn't much of a fighter and it was clear that he was well out-matched. She wasn't exactly playing with him, but she wasn't treating him seriously either. The other five minions edged closer, but followed orders and didn't attack.
The red head stayed where she was told, behind the tombstone, knuckles clenched as she gripped the top, swinging her upper body left and right in silent support of the Slayer's moves. The boy, however, possibly out of some misguided instinct of chivalry, was edging hesitantly off to the side, around the periphery of the fight, clutching a stake of his own. This was perfect.

"Xander, stay back!" Buffy yelled, when she spotted his movement from the corner of her eye. So the boy had a name.

Frank went staggering back from a kick to the neck, arms windmilling, and she followed through with the stake in her right hand, leaving nothing but a gently settling cloud of dust. Charlotte came forward to replace him and Spike edged away and around the back of the DuLac mausoleum until he was directly behind the boy. It was easy, with all their attention focused on the fight in front of them, to slip a hand round the boy's shoulders and clamp it down over his mouth. By the time the Slayer had dispatched Charlotte and had taken in the fact that the other minions were not about to charge, he had the boy secure. This was the moment of truth, did she understand the mission, or was she still infected by the
belief that she could have an ordinary life?

She swung around, following the minions' gazes, and froze. Her dawning expression of horror was a joy to witness. Her eyes flickered around the scene as she assessed her chances of getting to him, before his fangs sank into her friend's neck. With a flick, Spike opened his knife, pressing it to the other side of Xander's neck. Pinned between fangs and steel, he stopped struggling.

Spike began to edge backwards, dragging the boy with him. Buffy matched him step for step, but didn't dare approach too close for fear of putting her friend's life in danger. The red-head had come from behind her protective wall and was also creeping forwards, a look of exquisite anguish twisting her pretty face.

Lifting his head and looking past them, Spike saw the minions dithering. "Well don't just stand there, people, come on!" he shouted. They charged.

All four of them leapt forwards and suddenly the Slayer had another friend to worry about and another fight on her hands. Spike faded back into the shadows taking Xander with him.
2. Conversations with (almost) dead people

Prompt: #17 - Father's Day

When Spike entered the room he was feeling cheerful - jaunty even. The plan had worked beautifully and he hadn't even lost all the minions - at least two had managed to find their way home. After he had got Xander out of sight and clocked him one, he had even managed to find a cute little shop girl for Dru. God, he loved this town! Anywhere else the sight of a guy wandering the streets at night with two limp bodies over his shoulders would have been cause for questions. But not in Sunnydale. He'd even got a smile and a friendly nod from some old guy out walking his dog.

Xander was sitting on the floor in a corner. Alfred seemed to have gone slightly over the top, using both rope and shackles on his ankles, as well as rope around his wrists. Spike shrugged to himself as he sauntered
across to the sofa and dragged it around so he could face the boy. At least he was awake. Finally. Pulling off his coat Spike dropped it on the sofa and sat down next to it. He leant forwards, elbows on his knees and looked at Xander. Xander glared back.

"What do you want with me?" He sounded like the petulant child he was. Spike raised one eyebrow. "I don't understand why you'd take me." Spike leaned back in the sofa, wriggled his hand into the pockets of his jeans and pulled out his Zippo. He rummaged around in his duster until he found his fags. Xander tried to pull himself up, to sit cross-legged, but found that the ropes around his ankles were too tight. Instead he lifted his knees and hugged them with his bound arms. He spoke to his kneecaps. "Am I just a meal then?" Spike smiled. "You do know I'm not the Slayer, don't you? I mean, you do know the bit about 'one girl in all the world'?" He glanced quickly up and down again. He was beginning to look a little panicked. "I'm nothing special, honestly."

Spike leaned forwards again, taking a good look at his prize as he pulled a cigarette out of the pack. "My Sire gave you to me, the other day," he observed.

Xander looked up, startled. "He was bluffing," he said.
"And he didn't give me. He might have offered. But there was no giving! And... What's a Sire, anyway?"

Spike lit his cigarette. "Your sire is the vamp who made you," he explained.

Xander's forehead wrinkled in thought. "You mean he's like... your dad?" He asked incredulously. "Wow! I thought I had it rough." This boy was amusing. If it hadn't been so clearly part of the plan to kill him, he would consider turning him, just for the entertainment value. "But he still didn't give me to you. You can't give a human being. It's... unconstitutional, or something."

Spike took a deep drag. Amusing? Yes. But he was also becoming irritating. "He bloody well did give you to me. In the school hallway. He came in and offered me your neck. If that's not a present from my Sire, what the hell is it?"

Xander leaned back against the wall. "I don't care. I'm not some object to be given away. I'm human. And I know it's not sensible to argue when I'm totally in your power. And I realise I can't move or escape or do... anything, really. So if all you're going to do is engage in stupid arguments, you might as well just kill me."
"Well sure, I'm going to. That's the plan. I kill you. I leave your body where it will be found with a clue which leads the Slayer to the next one."

"The next one?" The boy's voice went quiet and acquired a distinct quiver. Seemed like the Slayer's weakness was shared.

Spike shrugged. "Yeah, not sure about that one, yet. Could go for the Watcher. Or maybe that nice little red head. What do you think? Which one would hurt most?"

"You stay away from her!" The little puppy almost sounded fierce. "I'm not telling you anything. I don't care what you do to me."

"Could turn you. Then you could do the little red head." Spike mused.

"Or you could just give me back to Angel. Think of me as a Sire's day present, or something."

And that was just too much. With a growl Spike chucked his half smoked fag away and was across the room, crouching in front of Xander, before the boy had time to
blink. "You're a mouthy little bastard, aren't you? We'll see how you manage once I've ripped your tongue out."
He glared straight into Xander's eyes, seeing the fear that the boy had been hiding behind his snark. "I turn you and you won't be such an argumentative git. In fact" he allowed his voice to turn soft and smooth, "you'll want to do what ever your Sire says."

Xander gave a choked half-laugh. "Yes, I can see how that follows. Seeing as how it worked so well with you." In spite of his continued defiance, his heart rate had accelerated and his breathing was becoming distinctly ragged.

Spike leaned forwards towards Xander's neck and Xander shrank back until he was cowering against the wall, as if attempting disappear into it. Just as Spike's fangs touched the warm, soft flesh, the boy started a panicked mutter, "Oh man, Jesse. I'm sorry, Jesse. I'm sorry."

Spike pulled back. "Will you stop that." He growled. "It's distracting. And who the hell is Josie?"

Xander raised his bound arms and braced his hands against Spike's sternum, as if that would do any good, if Spike chose to go in for the kill. "J-Jesse! Don't you say
his name! He was my friend. The Master killed him and turned him and set him up as bait for us."

Spike flopped back on the floor with an exasperated sigh, bracing himself on his arms. "Oh, bloody hell! That's all I need! To be repeating some half-arsed plan of old bat-face's." A thought struck him and he added gloomily, "Which the slayer will be expecting."

He paused to think. "Okay boy, looks like it's your lucky day. You just got re-graded from un-dead bait, to live bait. I need you to have a heartbeat when Dear Old Dad sees you."

3. Bloody Family

Prompt: #18 - Wergeld

Spike left him there - time to get the next one. Couldn't leave a trail of bodies if there was only one body, that
wasn't even a straight line, more of a point. No, not even that. This one would stay alive, for now. Let them worry. They probably already had him dead, or turned. He could wait. They all could.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike watched the car slow down to turn and the headlights sweep across the lawn as it pulled up to the front of the house. He had been hanging around behind a tree for over an hour, but now his prey was in sight. He left the shelter of the shadows and sauntered along the street. The driver's door opened just as he came level with the car and the woman clambered out, over loaded with shopping bags. Taking a couple more, hesitant steps, he leaned towards her, the picture of reluctant interruption. "Excuse me, love," he called "I wonder if you could tell me where..."

She started, almost lost one of the bags and half a dozen oranges and some tins spilled out onto the ground. He stumbled forward, all eager helpfulness. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Here let me..." He crouched down next to her and started gathering up the fallen fruit, putting it back into the bag.
Pausing in the act of collecting the rest of her spilled shopping, she looked at him, embarrassed but friendly. "Oh no, it's okay. It was my fault, I just wasn't expecting..." He hefted the bag and stood, extending a hand to help her up. She struggled to her feet, embarrassment turning to confusion. "I'm sorry, do I know you?" She peered at him, squinting with the difficulty of a woman too proud, or too busy, to acknowledge her short-sightedness, shaking her head as if to knock a memory loose.

Spike stood straight and spread his arms wide, casually and carelessly allowing the bag to fall to the ground. There was a sound of glass breaking. Before she could do more than gasp he had pulled her close and buried his face in her neck, smothered her cry in his shoulder. He ignored the hands battering at his arms and sides. The blood was rich and vital in his mouth and her struggles became weaker, in direct counter-point to the energy flowing into him. It was pure life. He relaxed and slowed his drinking, allowing her warmth to spread through him in delicious slow motion, relishing the taste and the slow fading of her life-force.

He flew across the grass and crashed into the trunk of a
tree. Shaking his head to clear it, he gazed across the lawn and snarled - the Slayer was crouching over her mother's body while the Watcher rushed to the house, fumbling a set of keys as he ran. Damn them! He'd been robbed! That last heady drop, when the heart stopped, had been stolen from him. He growled and the Slayer's head snapped up, but she didn't rise from her protective huddle, or move the hand which was clamped onto her mother's neck to grab the stake he could see in her back pocket. For a moment he considered the chance that she would be an easy mark like that, too intent on keeping the rest of her mother's blood inside her body, to fight. But the expression on her face suggested withdrawal to be the better option, so he struggled to his feet and with one last snarl, backed into the shadows. He needed to check on Dru, anyway.

~*~*~*~*~

It was disappointing. But Spike hadn't survived over a hundred years of unlife without being adaptable. He just needed a new plan. He considered reverting to his earlier idea and turning the boy. He considered going after the red-head, or the Watcher, while the Slayer was preoccupied. He worried about Dru getting progressively
weaker, and his helplessness both frustrated and angered him. He needed to get the bloody Slayer out of his way. He paced.

A quick check on the boy, who was safe, if sulky, in the cellar store room and he headed back out to scout the Watcher's flat. The place was nicely secluded, with an unobtrusive door under the steps leading up to the flat above. Lots of useful places to lurk and he was using them to advantage when he felt it - the tingle along his spine that signalled family. And it wasn't Drusilla.

"Angelus," He turned and challenged the man who detached himself from the shadow of the gate post.

Angelus looked grim. "William."

Spike snarled. "Plonker! Why can't you ever get it right? I'm not your boy anymore. If you want to talk to me, you use my chosen name!"

Angelus conceded a nod. "Okay, and you use mine."

Spike paused, as if thinking that one over, but his Sire wasn't being violent so he must have something to offer. "Alright. 'Angel'." He put a bit of a sneer into the word,
just so Angelus would know who was the petitioner here. "What do you want?"

"I'm calling in Wergeld, Spike."

Well, that was... unexpected. "Wergeld?" he asked, sceptically. "And how exactly does that work, Mate? Who did I kill that I owe a debt for? I've been playing nice with the other clans. Anything in the family doesn't count, and you know it. So if you object to what I did to the boy..."

"Yes, the boy." Angel interrupted. "Is he alive?"

"Alive, no. Nor undead. But it wasn't me what turned him. That's down to the old man. There was some prophesy or something." His brow furrowed with puzzlement. "Thought you knew all that. Weren't you there when the Slayer killed him?" Angel was wearing an expression of complete bewilderment. "Come on, Mate. Get with the programme. Anointed One, right? So I got rid of him. But that's family. Wergeld doesn't apply, and you know it."

"No. Not him. The boy. Xander. Is he alive?"
Spike shrugged. "Oh, him. Yeah, sure Mate. Got him safe and sound, under wraps. What's he got to do with anything?"

Angel sighed his exasperation. "For God's Sake, Childe, what were you thinking? You kidnapped the Slayer's friend, you attacked her Mother. She'll hunt you down, and she won't stop. She'll keep coming until she kills you."

Spike pulled himself upright and stalked away a few steps before swinging back round. He lifted his arms away from his sides in a gesture of offering. "She can try," he announced to the sky and, incidentally, to his Grandsire.

Angel sighed again. He did that a lot. "Spike, please?" He paused and looked at his Grandchilde, reassessing his approach. "How's Dru?" he asked.

Spike deflated. "Not so good. She's getting weaker everyday." He threw up his arms. "If I could just get rid of the damned Slayer, I know I could find a cure. But whenever I turn around she's there, muckin' up the works. She's the gnat in my ear! The gristle in my teeth! She's the bloody thorn in my bloody side!"
"Spike!" Angel's yell, as much as the hands gripping Spike's shoulders, brought him to an abrupt halt. Angel started again in a more reasonable tone. "Spike. You don't have to do this. You can stop. I'll help you with Dru. I'll buy you the time you need to find your cure. But you have to stop this, before it becomes a blood feud. You almost killed Buffy's mother. She's lying in the hospital. She'll live, but Buffy isn't going to forgive this. I can negotiate a deal. All you need to do is pay the Wergeld."

"And why exactly should I do that? She's the enemy of the species. She's not clan. Wergeld doesn't apply to her any more than it does to the Annoying One."

"She's my clan," Angel said.

Spike looked at him, stunned by the realisation of just how twisted Angel had become. "Oh, I see. So I suppose now, I'm not? Now you have your band of humans, you don't have time for me and Dru. Is that it?"

"It's not like that. I'm trying to save you. You give Xander back and I'll make sure she accepts him as payment of your debt for her mother. And then you'll be free to sort out whatever's wrong with Dru."
"You bloody Bastard! You gave me that boy. And now you want me to give him back?"

Angel's voice took on a pleading edge. "It'll buy you the time you need to fix Dru. You said he's not dead. Come on, for once in your existence, be sensible. Buffy's strong and she's relentless." His mouth quirked in an amused and affectionate grin and somehow Spike doubted either emotion was directed towards him. "Even more so than you are." He gave Spike a little shake. "Pay the Wergeld and let me negotiate the peace. Take me to him, Spike. Let me help."

Spike's shoulders sagged and he took a deep breath. He thought about what it would mean to have Angel's assistance with Dru. He thought about sharing the load he had been carrying alone for so long. He looked up into Angel's face and grinned. "Okay Mate. Come on then. What are you waiting for? Follow me."

Angel's smile was more genuine this time. "Okay. Lead on, Childe."
As they walked back to the warehouse, Spike was quietly fuming. Family, clan, the whole bloody mess a soul could make of the simple bonds. Angel was twisted and bent out of shape so far he was hardly a vampire any more. Claiming the Slayer as clan and invoking Wergeld. It was so wrong, there was just no word for how wrong it was.

Angel glumped along beside him, thankfully refraining from small talk, because Spike didn't know how he would keep from screaming, if he once opened his mouth. By the time they reached the warehouse his jaw ached with it.

And then, there it was, the door and the lock bar that slotted into place to keep them safe during the day, innocently propped up next to the jam. Somehow it was so easy to grab it in passing and smash it into the back of Angel's head.
He felt nothing as he stood astride the body. "Nothing like a bit of insurance," he told the empty air, the bar still bouncing in his hands. "The boy, and now you." He looked down at Angel. "Fucking Wergeld, my arse," he snarled. "You have the gall to claim the Slayer as clan, against your own blood!" The second blow brought feeling back - a sense of justice done as the bones in Angel's left shoulder shattered. The third, smashing his right humerus, brought relief. Family, clan, loyalty, belonging, ownership and home. Those things were important. They mattered. Some crazy Gypsies committed an abomination and it all went out the window? Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. The bar crashed down on Angel's left leg.

Spike had it raised high above his head, ready to bring down on Angel's lower back, when movement caught the corner of his eye. He dropped the bar and was across the room in an instant. "Dru, love," he said, reaching out to steady her as she stumbled. "You shouldn't be up. What are you doing? Come back to bed."

She looked up at his face, eyes misty and vague. "I thought my Angelus was here." Her face crumpled and the pitiful weariness broke his heart. "I was dreaming again, wasn't I Spike? He's not here. He's never here."
Spike put one hand around her waist and brushed her hair back from her face with the other, tenderly stroking his knuckles down her cheek and ending the contact with a gentle nudge of encouragement to her chin. "Yes, Love, you were dreaming," he said softly. "Angelus isn't here." He pulled her close, taking comfort from her frail solidity, even as nightmare images of her turning to dust in his hands grabbed at his imagination. "Let me get you someone to eat. You shouldn't be walking around. You're weak."

His arm around her shoulders, she went with him easily and he ushered her back to the room he had appropriated for her. He helped her to lie down, smoothed the blankets over her and bent to kiss her forehead. "I'll be right back, precious. I'll find you a nice one, eh?" he whispered, as he retreated slowly backwards out of the room.

Grabbing Alfred, he gave swift instructions about the broken mass of bloody bones by the door, while he went to fetch a snack from the store room. Initial thoughts of feeding her the Xander boy were banished, as a new plan began to form in his head, coming to full fruition by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs. Oh yes! That
was good. Angel claimed the Slayer as clan and cast off his own? Let's see what the Slayer thinks of that.

He took his time choosing between the offerings, eventually picking out a small blond girl, brought in from this night's hunt. She was fresh and clean and if anything could tempt Dru's fickle appetite, he would bet it was something like this. Releasing the shackles, he dragged her from the larder and carried her back up to the ground floor. They would have a picnic in bed, while he worked out the final details for constructing his new toy. He had time and more importantly, he had at least one minion with some modicum of technical skills. It would be twelve or eighteen hours before Angel's absence was noticed.

~*~*~*~*

Spike stood on the walkway halfway up the wall opposite the main door. Like a pirate captain at the wheel of his ship, he surveyed his command. From here he had a clear view of most of the room: the door, soon to be conveniently propped open, and the trapdoors with their attendant chains and fixings, opposite each other against the side walls. Idly he swung the big, floor mounted
lever, first to the right, then to the left, watching the trapdoors fall open in turn.

He glanced over to Alfred. "Go talk carelessly at Willy's," he instructed.

~*~*~*~*~*

By the time the Slayer arrived, his preparations were complete. The minions didn't stand a chance. Not that that mattered. They were his forlorn hope, a sacrifice intended to make a point and take the edge off her energy, rather than a serious hope of victory. He stood back and watched her fight, realising, belatedly, that the very friends who were her weakness two days ago, were actually giving her more ferocity, now that she was fighting to free them, rather than to protect them. She was tricky too. When she lost her stake he thought for a moment that she was a goner. But she grabbed a chair, smashed it against the floor and used the broken back to stake two at once in a move he couldn't help admiring, even as he despaired of the stupidity of fledgling minions who didn't know better than to run at an attacker in tandem. He was a little encouraged when Alfred managed to take her down from behind. But it was short-
lived. One moment she was pinned under Alfred's fangs, the next she was flipping herself on to her feet as he staggered backwards. She landed a right and a left, sending him into a pillar. He bounced off and fell forwards, straight into a roundhouse kick, which sent him flying across the room. The Slayer grabbed a broken chair leg from the floor and as Alfred scrambled up, she closed. There was a brief x-ray like image of his skeleton hanging in the air, before he disappeared in a cloud of bewildered dust. Yes, she was good.

Spike continued to watch as she spotted the last of his suicide crew recovering from being thrown across the room in her first rush. She stalked over and dispatched him with clinical efficiency, coloured only slightly by vindictive satisfaction. Time to bring his toys into the game.

"Stop!" he yelled. The Slayer froze. Spike stepped into her view and leaned his hands on the railing, staring down at her. "Hello, Sweetie." He smiled.

Buffy spared a quick glance for Angel and Xander, tied to the walls, gags in their mouths, and turned back to look up at Spike. Her body loosened and she shifted into an easy, deceptively relaxed stance, preparing to spring.
"What? No minions?" he taunted. "Learnt that lesson, did we?" The tightening of her face was reply enough and he laughed. "So now we come to the fun part of the evening," he announced. He glanced right and left, directing her eyes to Angel and then to Xander and saw her take in their situation properly for the first time.

It was a pretty picture, he had to admit. They both had their hands secured behind their backs and were standing rigidly upright under the encouragement of the nooses around their necks, which were in turn fixed to rings in the walls above their heads. Angel was favouring his broken leg and didn't look too fit. The boy just looked furiously pissed off.

Spike placed his left hand casually on the lever. "You see, it goes like this. I push this lever to the left and the trapdoor under Xander opens, and he falls...." He spaced the next words out for emphasis. "Breaking his neck. Like a hangman's. Noose." His smile broadened. "Exactly like, actually." Her face was a picture. "I push it to the right and it's Angel's turn. I reckon I can only do one, before you get up here. But that's okay. I like my Slayers one-to-one. And since I'm feeling generous, I'll let you choose which of your avid admirers will survive you. Go on. Choose. Which way shall I go?"
She glanced back and forth between them, then back up at Spike. He could see the calculation she was making. "And I should probably mention, that although Xander's noose is plain old rope..." He loved this part. "Angel's is razor wire. You choose him and the wire will cut right through his neck. Come on Slayer." His voice turned vicious. "Tell me about family and loyalty and puppy dogs and tears."

She shook her head. "Why are you doing this?" she asked in total bewilderment.

Spike straightened his shoulders and shrugged. "Because I can?"

"No, that's not all this is. This is a test." She spoke like she was trying to figure something out. "What are you testing?"

"None of your fucking business," he snarled, then reconsidered - knowledge could be torture. And gloating was fun. "I want to know which of these two means the most to you. Which will you save at the cost of the other?" Good humour restored, he smiled invitingly. "Will it be Angel, the love of your life? Or..." He waved
his arm to the left, a salesman extolling the product on offer. "Will it be Xander, here, the ever loyal sidekick?"

Buffy's eyes skittered around the room, frantically searching for a third option. He watched her measure the distance between them and saw her realise that, once again, she couldn't get to him in time.

"Look, you don't have to do this." Her voice had acquired an edge which matched her expression. He relished the pain.

"Come on, Slayer. It's simple. Just choose. I promise the other will go free."

She glanced around the room again and started to sidle to her left, towards the shadows. It was like she had seen something. But he had the lever and he wasn't going to leave it in response to some lame bluff. She looked up at him and he had a split second to recognise the triumph in her gaze, before she darted out of sight behind a pile of packing crates. He leaned forwards against the handrail and if his heart beat, it would have stopped when she backed into the open again, with Drusilla held hostage against her chest, her makeshift stake held to Dru's heart.
She looked up, over Dru' shoulder. "You were saying?" she asked. Spike's fear paralysed him and he knew she knew it. "Come on down," she called, mockingly. Her voice hardened. "Come down and release my friends, or your girlfriend fits in an ashtray."

He pushed back from the railing. "I'm coming," he agreed. "Just you keep that hand steady, or..." He couldn't think of an ending for that sentence, so he didn't try. Instead, he leapt over the rail to land on the floor ten feet in front of her. She jerked her head to indicate Xander. "Him first," she instructed.

Xander's eyes widened with surprised relief above his gag and Spike walked over to him. He removed the noose first. As soon as it was off Xander pushed away from the wall, attempting to head butt him. The Slayer intervened. "Xander, Stop it! Get Angel," she ordered. Xander stopped and turned, presenting his arms to be untied, and as soon as Spike released him he reached up and pulled the gag free.

Xander walked over to Angel and Spike stood back, bouncing his nervousness and keeping a watchful eye on Dru. Some part of Spike's brain registered the boy's
curses as he cut his fingers, fumbling with the razor wire around Angel's neck and dimly he heard the 'humph' as Angel relaxed the tension in his good leg and staggered forward. But he couldn't spare the time to look - his attention was totally focused on Buffy and Dru.

Buffy shot a quick glance to the side. "Help him, Xander. Get him outside," she ordered. "I'll be out in a moment."

Xander snarled. "I hope you're going to kill that bastard."

Buffy turned towards him, dragging Dru around with her, and Spike saw the point of the stake push hard against Dru's bodice. Dru looked even weaker than she did earlier, before he managed to get her to eat. She gazed across at Spike, eyes silently pleading.

Buffy sounded weary. "Xander, I can't." And Spike had to think, to recall the boy's question. "I'm the Slayer. That means I have to do the honourable thing. Even if he wouldn't."

For a split second Spike considered arguing that point, but suddenly his arms were full of Dru and nothing else in the world mattered, except holding on to her. The sound of retreating footsteps was unimportant, his Dru
was safe. She lay in his arms, eyes closed, unconscious but solid, and he wasn't sure whether the tears he felt prickling his eyes were the result of relief, or frustration.

5. Realisation

Prompt: #20 - Pygmy

Xander lay on his bed, wondering at what point his life had gone so wrong. Ampata had been the embodiment of all his teenage dreams - exotic, beautiful, mysteriously foreign, and she'd liked him. That look she gifted him with, half admiring, half mischievous flirtation, had bowled his already bowled over ass... over again. It couldn't have all been an act. She hadn't taken one look at him and seen him as fruit, ripe for the picking. Had she? Did he really have that sign on his forehead - the one he always suspected was there? The one that said 'loser'.
Maybe it was just that he was the only guy in the Scooby Gang (you couldn't count Giles) and the Scooby Gang always got caught up with the evil. Was that why she had chosen him? His brain refused to accept that. But it seemed too much, to think it was just bad luck, over and over. He felt like his whole life was screwed lately. A quiet summer had been followed by non-stop badness, and then he got kidnapped by Spike and almost hung by the neck until he was dead. (Thank goodness for Buffy!)

He paused in his mental harangue to reassess that thought. Okay, so maybe the Scoobies went looking for the evil and he just got... got. But not this time! This time they were meant to have a nice, normal foreign exchange experience. But Buffy ended up with a murdered boy and a South American Mummy? And he ended up with a broken heart. It was wrong! Besides anything else, why couldn't Cordelia pick the evil short straw for once?

The mournful strains from his CD player came to an end and the shrill call of the telephone split the resultant silence. Without looking, he lifted the receiver, put it down again to kill the call, then dropped it on the bed next to him. He reached out his other hand and hit replay. He didn't want to talk to anyone and his parents,
at least, respected that. But Willow was never able to leave well enough alone. He knew how the conversation would go - Willow would ask him if he was okay and he'd say 'yes'. But he wasn't okay and he didn't want to be okay. He wanted to wallow. He wanted to grieve. Even if he didn't really know what he was grieving for. For Ampata? For himself? For his own lost dreams? Maybe it was time to change the CD. It was a bad sign when he started getting poetic.

Willow wanted to apologise. She wanted to take the blame for their argument and hear that he forgave her. But it wasn't her fault and he knew it. He'd been looking for it. He knew her buttons and he knew how to push them.

He was just so mad at the injustice of it all! There should be a rule about the victim not turning into the monster. Abused children shouldn't grow up to be abusers and murdered girls shouldn't turn into life sucking demons. He sighed. He knew it was stupid, but he really didn't need Willow pointing it out, being all logical and academic about it. Like Ampata hadn't been a real girl, with real feelings and real dreams - as well as being a life sucking demon.
When Giles gave them a lift home last night, they were all pretty depressed. This morning, when he got up, the emotional load had not been magically lifted from his heart. He dragged himself to school, unimpressed by the bright skies and the cheerful shouts of his fellow students. He feigned a sudden interest in the psychology of Romeo's and Juliette's doomed love during first period, just because he didn't want to face Willow's and Buffy's sympathy. But as they left class he was surrounded, Willow taking up position on one side of him and Buffy closing in on the other.

With a free period, they did what they always did and headed for the library. The girls chatted across him, about love and doomed romances, and he was grateful to them for acting as a buffer between himself and the rest of the world. Just outside the library doors a change in the tone of Willow's voice caught his attention. It was hushed and concerned and he turned to her, thinking she was addressing him. "What?" he asked, pulling himself back to the real world of gradually emptying corridors and slamming classroom doors.

She looked up at him in surprise. "Xan-der," she admonished. "Where've you been?" and she smacked him lightly on the arm. "I just asked Buffy how Angel's
doing? You know, with the broken bones." She spoke across him again, her voice once more sympathetic. "Is he walking yet? Did you find a source of blood?"

Buffy grinned. "Oh yeah! Nurse Buffy to the rescue, with a good supply of human blood, full of all the vitamins and minerals a healing vampire needs."

Xander was amazed. "You're giving him human blood? What do you do, go pick up stray people and take them over so Angel can have a quick bite? Do you arrange them a cab home, afterwards?" He knew he'd failed to hit the comedy note. He knew it had come over more as snark, than joking, but he didn't care. Willow gave him an odd look as she pushed open the doors.

They walked into the library just as Giles was coming down the stairs from the stacks. At sight of them, he smiled. "Willow, hello. Xander, how are you?"

Xander opened his mouth to reply, but just then Giles spotted Buffy, as she walked around Xander, and his face and voice both softened with concern. "Buffy, How are you? How's Angel? Is he responding to... treatment?"

It was too much. "Angel, Angel, Angel. Who the hell cares
how he is?"

Buffy stopped and turned to confront him, blocking his passage. "I care," she said. "I care about Angel and he cares about me. He cares about us."

"Angel's an emotional pygmy. If Angel cares about anything, it's Angel."

"Xander!" Willow was becoming repetitive in her scolding. "You shouldn't say things like that." She paused for a moment, apparently thinking about why he shouldn't say such things. "It's racist," she said.

Xander snapped. "What?" he asked. "I'm insulting the pygmies of America? Come on, Willow. Get a life!"

Thankfully, Giles interrupted, preventing any response Willow might have made. "Please? Can we focus on business?" He turned away from them. "Buffy, have you had any sightings of Spike?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, I'll go back to the warehouse, but I don't expect to find them."

Giles took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his
nose. "Yes, well, best to be certain, I suppose. You go and have a look tonight and report back. If they've moved on it could be difficult to find them again, but there is always a chance."

Buffy nodded her agreement while Xander stood where she had stopped him, gazing around at the faces of his friends. So it was... what? Business as usual? Like Ampata had never been there. Like she had never smiled at him, or sat with him and laughed as she ate a Twinkie. Like she didn't matter? Like what he felt for her didn't matter.... Like they hadn't deposited the desiccated body of the real Ampata on the edge of the hospital grounds, where it was sure be found.

He hitched his book bag on his shoulder and turned towards the doors. "Okay, Guys. That's great. I'll see you later. I have to...."

As he pushed through the doors, back into the corridor, he heard Willow calling, "Xander, what's wrong?" But he ignored her.

He found a quiet corner of the sports field to hide out and spent the rest of the day doing... nothing. He couldn't face them. Even when the final bell rang and the
school started to empty, amid shouts and the roaring of engines, he didn't move.

That had been his mistake. Because, of course Willow found him. She knew his spots, just as he knew her buttons.

She tried to be sympathetic, but since she didn't seem to know what she was supposed to be sympathising with, she didn't do so well. Eventually he challenged her, pouring out a full day's worth of brooding and grieving and she'd... been surprised. And then had come the snark and the snipping and eventually the recriminations, on his side, as his temper mounted in the face of her cluelessness.

Now, lying on his bed, he wondered if the Scoobies didn't suffer from their own version of 'Sunnydale blindness' and for the first time he wondered if the reason no one spoke of Jesse was because they really didn't remember him. He'd always assumed it was grief that kept them silent. And he'd done his best to respect their needs. But now he wondered. And as he lay on his bed, ballads full of heartbreak for company, he wondered why he seemed to be immune.
6. Halloween

Prompt: #21 - Comics

Spike strode down the length of the room, spun on his heel and turned back to look at Dru, his arms raised away from his sides in a gesture of expansive pleasure. "Come on, love," he said, trying to instil in her some of his own enthusiasm. "It's much nicer than the last place. There's space here to expand. And a snug room downstairs for us, out of sight of any chance of sunlight. I've had your bed moved in." He trailed off in the face of her vacant apathy. "Oh love, please?"

Dru looked up at him from her chair. "I'm your princess." It wasn't a question but he rushed back to reassure her, just the same.

"Yes, my love. You are my princess. My wicked plum." He laid his hands on her shoulders, smoothing them down her arms to take her hands. "You're my dark delight. My
wondrous jewel." He lifted her hands and bent his head to kiss them. "My all."

She smiled, a small wistful smile. "But the prince shall live in mourning when the flowers die," she said sadly.

"No, love. The Princess will blossom into her realm again. She'll rule the sundry planets and hold sway over it all."

Dru's face fell. "The Cats have found their hidey holes and the mice come out to play."

He knew he'd lost her then. She was off somewhere he couldn't follow. He had no idea how much of what she said was metaphor and how much was just nonsense, but he knew enough to take precautions. Turning around, he yelled, "Double the guard on all entrances. In shifts through the day. I want constant watch, people. No one gets in here. No one!" Turning back to Dru, he lifted her into his arms. "It's late, love. And you're feeling the coming of the sun. Let me take you where it'll never shine? Let me look after you?" He carried her down the stairs to their new room and laid her on the bed, before he retreated to the chair, to watch and guard her sleep.

~*~*~*~*~
Xander caught up with the girls at the counter of Ethan's Costume Shop. He started to salute Buffy and just managed to avoid hitting himself in the head with his toy gun. Grabbing the gun in his left hand, he finished the salute with a flourish. "Sergeant Harris of Blackwing reporting!" he said smartly. "Ready and willing for action, Ma'am." He glanced at Willow "-s," he added.

Willow laughed. "Doofus," she said fondly. "You're dressing up as a comic book hero?"

"Not just any comic book hero, Ma'am. The Blackwing were the greatest soldiers comics have ever produced. And I've been with them since I was five." Adding belatedly, "Ma'am."

Buffy smiled. "That's not a costume," she observed.

Xander shrugged. "I've got fatigues from an Army surplus at home. Call me the Two-Dollar Costume King!" He raised his gun appraisingly "Okay, so it's not the most realistic of weapons, but have you seen the price of those? Not to mention the chance that the Sunnydale police might actually do their job for once and shoot me, thinking it was real. The way this year's going, that could
actually happen." He grinned to show that he was joking, but a part of him was feeling smug for his forethought.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike was watching a video of the Slayer fighting. "Here it comes," he warned. He stared up at the television mounted on the scaffold, where the Slayer was busy staking a vampire. Holding up his hand he commanded, "Rewind that. Let's see that again." He noticed the boy hovering on he edge of the fight, as always. At one point he surged forward as the vampire staggered back from a blow, and pushed the witless fool back towards the Slayer, just as she grabbed a post out of the ground. It was a pleasure to watch. Especially since the new pile of dust in the park wasn't one of his. "You see that? The way she stakes him with that thing? That's what's called resourceful. Rewind it again."

Drusilla came to stand behind him, placing one hand on his shoulder and whispering into his ear, "Miss Edith needs her tea." Spike turned, sliding an arm around her waist. She cocked her head appraisingly. "Do you love my insides? The parts you can't see?"
Spike nuzzled into her neck, wishing she was strong again. He pulled his head back and gazed into her eyes. "Eyeballs to entrails, my sweet. That's why I've got to study this Slayer. Once I kill her, you can have your run of Sunnyhell."

Dru's eyes lost their focus and her voice became sly. "Don't worry. Everything's switching. Outside to inside." She seemed to waver and he got ready to catch her, should she fall. "It makes her weak."

That sounded interesting. "Really?" he asked. "Did my pet have a vision? Come on, talk to Daddy. This thing that makes the Slayer weak? When is it?"

Dru's smile was among his favourite things and she gifted him with it now. "Tomorrow," she said.

That couldn't be right. "Tomorrow's Halloween, love. Nothing happens on Halloween."

"It does now. Someone's come to change it all. Someone new."

~~*~~*~~*~~
Xander stood in the school hallway, a line of eager young faces gazing up at him. "Okay, on sleazing extra candy: tears are key. Tears will normally get you the double-bagger." As he talked he walked up and down in front of his rank of kids: the weathered veteran imparting his knowledge and experience into those eager, impressionable minds. "You can also try the old 'you missed me' routine, but it's risky. Only go there for chocolate. Understood?" The kids all nodded so he turned smartly and did a little drill step on the spot. "Okay, troops. Let's move out."

~~*~~*~~*~~

Sergeant Harris conned the immediate area, all his senses on the alert as he tried to figure out what the fuck was going on. A roar in the distance caused him to spin, raising his rifle. He sighted on the large brown beast like thing. A clean head shot. It didn't matter what it was, head shots always worked. It veered off into the shadows behind a house and he lifted his eyes from his telescopic sight to broaden his view. The place was in chaos. He didn't have a fucking clue where he was or how the hell he got here. But wherever it was, it wasn't normal.
Maintaining maximum alert he moved forward, scanning the environment for the rest of his squad. They would know what was happening, what the target was and how he'd lost his memory of recent events.

A young girl came running down the street and he readied himself to assist, or defend himself. She stopped in front of him. "Xander?" she gasped. He lifted his rifle. "Xander! It's me, Willow!"

So she had mistaken him for someone else. She didn't look threatening, but he had learnt through bitter experience that appearances could be deceiving. "I don't know any Willow," he replied, cautiously.

That didn't seem to dissuade her, rather it seemed to annoy her. "Xander, quit messing around. This is no time for jokes."

She seemed convinced he was someone else, but she may know something useful. "What the hell's going on here?" he asked.

Her face fell. "You don't know me?"

Didn't look like she was going to be any use to him. He
mentally reclassified her as someone to protect. That felt right, so he went with his instincts. "Lady, I suggest you come with me and we find some temporary cover, until I can work out where the rest of my unit is." As he started to move on, she grabbed at his arm. Her hand passed straight through it.

She looked down at her hand, shook it, like it had a dead battery or something and reached out again. This time her entire arm disappeared into his chest. He jumped back, alarmed and a little freaked.

He raised his rifle again and aimed it at her as he began to step back. "What the hell are you?" he asked.

She looked as freaked out as he felt. "Xander, please listen to me. I'm on your side, I swear! Something crazy is happening. I was dressed as a ghost for Halloween, a-and now," her voice began to quaver. "I am a ghost. And you were supposed to be a soldier, and now I, I-I guess you're a real soldier."

Of course he was a 'real' soldier. He'd served in three separate wars. But nowhere had he ever come across a ghost before. "You expect me to believe that?" he asked.
A growl sounded behind him and he swung around, rifle at the ready. The ghost girl jumped in front of him. "No! No guns! That's still a little kid in there!"

It looked more like a garden gnome. "Step out of the way!" he ordered.

But she came right back, "No guns! That's an order!" The creature had already run away so he lowered his weapon. The girl looked around the chaos in the street. "We just need to find..." Her eyes locked on another young woman in some sort of ball gown, who was wandering dazed among the parked up cars. "Buffy!" she cried, taking off towards the newcomer.

Sergeant Harris followed. "I just want you to know that I'm taking a lot on faith here," he announced to no one.

The ghost girl seemed to know what she wanted, even if he didn't. She reached the prom queen and spoke to her urgently. "Buffy, what do we do?"

Buffy? Weird name. Weird girl - she took one look at them and fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Another scream split the night, this one more high
pitched and panicked than the noises the monsters made. Monsters. He'd called them monsters in his head. Like they were real.

Yet another girl came running around the corner. "Somebody help me!" she cried.

Harris moved to intercept her, grabbing her arms to keep her on her feet and bring her to a halt. Thrusting her behind him he sighted on the big bear that was chasing her and shot it in the leg. It went down with a squeal and crawled away into the bushes. The cool logical part of Harris' brain began to fill in the blanks - it looked like he'd fallen into some sort of battle in the middle of a fancy dress party. At least the prom queen was on her feet again. He spread his glare impartially across all three of them. "What the..." he censored himself, "blazes, is going on here? What are you civilians doing mixed up in a conflict zone?" Turning back to his latest charge he took in her costume for the first time. "And why the... hell are you dressed as a cat?"

"Dressed as a cat! That's it!" So now the ghost girl had flipped, too. She was bouncing on the spot, waving her arms around in excitement. "I've got it!" she cried. "I know where it started." She looked past him, deflating as
suddenly as she had started to buzz. "Oh no!" she said.

Harris turned to see what she was looking at. A young man in a long leather coat and punkish bleached hair was striding towards them, followed by six others, with very strange faces and a couple of the garden gnomes. Catwoman grabbed the Princess. The ghost girl pointed towards the young punk. "That one.... Not a civilian," she said.

Harris raised his rifle and took aim, but he was unwilling to kill just on her say so. "Halt!" he shouted.

The punk laughed. "And who's going to make me?" he yelled. He turned to his followers. "You lot, stay back! This one's mine."

That didn't sound very friendly. Harris took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. The young punk rocked as the bullet pierced his shoulder, but surprisingly he didn't fall. He did however stop his advance. "Fucking hell! That hurts!" he growled. Then something strange happened - his face seemed to change. Suddenly Harris was gazing across the four feet that separated them, into glowing yellow eyes.
Behind him someone screamed. Harris raised his rifle and turned it as he swung, so the butt slammed into the punk's head, knocking him over. He looked around, just in time to see the Princess taking off pursued by the cat. Glancing over his shoulder he noted that the punk was not going anywhere soon and his weird followers seemed to have scattered.

The ghost rushed up close to him, getting in his way. "Listen," she said. "You find some cover, I'm going to get some help."

Before Harris could say anything she was off, running down the street. He watched her disappear round the corner and mentally shrugged - it was sad, but it was one less civilian for him to worry about. He took off after the other two girls, catching up with them in an alley off a main shopping street. It looked to be mostly warehouses. He spotted a door. "This way!" he called as he forced it open. Catwoman bundled the princess in before her and Harris slammed the door shut and shoved the bolt in place. "I'm going to check if there are any other ways in. Stay here!"

Behind him came the sound of pounding on the door. Across the room, he slammed the only other door shut
and locked it. The pounding was replaced by the ominous squeal of tearing metal. He rushed back and leant against the door, attempting to hold it closed. "GO-OOOO!" he yelled. Then the door gave way, taking him down with it.

He must have been out for an instant, because the next thing he knew the strange men had both the girls in hand and the young punk was standing over him.

"Hello, pet." He grinned. "That was a merry dance. But I think it's over now, don't you?" He reached down and pulled Harris to his feet. He was stronger than he looked.

Harris straightened his back. "I don't know who the fuck you are, but you're getting nothing from me but name, rank and serial number."

The punk laughed. "Very nice, pet. But you can stop your game now. You know who I am. And you know what you are. Don't you?"

"Sergeant Alexander Harris, Serial number: Alpha Tango Delta 68594," he rapped out.

The punk's brows gathered in a frown. He looked hard into Harris' eyes. "Upside down and inside out..." he
muttered to himself. "Well isn't this interesting. You even smell different. Not so... terrified."

Harris pulled away, looked the punk straight in the eye and stood to attention. He nodded to his captor and relaxed into 'at ease' with his hands behind his back. Keeping the rest of his body still, he slid his right hand into the waistband of his trousers and grasped his spare pistol.

The punk grinned. "Well, this is just neat!" Turning to his followers, he began to issue instructions. "Tie those two up. Take them back to the lair. This one, stays with me. For now."

Harris launched himself forwards as he brought his gun round. Slamming into the punk he knocked him over. The punk recovered fast, seeming to spin in mid-air. He grabbed Harris' wrists and forced the pistol up, so the shot went through the roof. Then he fell back, dragging Harris with him. They landed on the ground, with Harris on top and he tried to use his weight to his advantage. But the punk was really strong and somehow managed to roll them over. Bracing himself over Harris, his face shifted into that weird mask from the street. His teeth
looked huge and very sharp from this close range and he began to lower them towards Harris' neck.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander got one arm free and raised his... water pistol? His eyes flew to Spike's face and he saw comprehension there, just before Spike was lifted bodily off him and thrown across the room. Buffy reached down a hand and helped Xander up. She tossed her head and the black wig came off, exposing her natural blonde. She turned around and faced Spike as he scrambled to his feet. "Hi, honey. I'm home."

Then she was across the room. She landed one punch in Spike's gut and another two to his face. Spike staggered back. With a scissor move that Xander would have sworn was impossible in those skirts, she followed up with a kick to his chest. Spike crashed back into the wall by the door. He grabbed a length of pipe that was leaning there and swung it at her. She caught the end of it and pulled him around so he collided with a crate, releasing his hold on the pipe.

Using the pipe like a quarterstaff, Buffy swung it into his
face and followed up with a jab to the stomach. He doubled over. Planting the end of the pipe on the floor and leaning on it she laughed. "You know what?" she asked, rhetorically. "It's really good to be me."

Spike managed to regain his feet and looked around at the three piles of dust, and at the open door his other followers had fled through. With a last growl, he staggered after them.

Xander helped Cordelia up from where she had landed when Buffy had attacked her captors. "Hey, Buff. Welcome back," he said.

She smiled. "Yeah! You, too."

In the corner was a small boy, his face just beginning to scrunch up in a prelude to tears. "I'm scared!" he howled. "I want my mommy!"

Cordelia rushed over to comfort him and Xander shrugged at Buffy with a rueful grin. "You know what?" he asked. "One day, I'm going to have some say over the way my life goes. And when that happens, I'm going to declare Halloween illegal. What was that you said about 'one night off'?"
Dru was dealing her cards on the table in the middle of the room when Spike came up behind her. Placing his hands on her shoulders he bent down and whispered in her ear, "Darling! I heard a funny thing just now. Lucius tells me that you went out on a hunt the other night."

Dru pouted down at her cards, refusing to look up at him. "My tummy was growly. And you were out."

Yes, he was out. Watching Xander. Waiting his chance to take his property back. It had become a matter of face, even if he was the only one who knew it, that he eat the boy. Twice he'd had his fangs on Xander's neck and twice the Slayer had got him away. It was getting old. He would retake his own.

For the last two weeks it had just been frustrating - the
way Xander was never alone. If the watcher didn't drive him home, the Slayer escorted him. Spike was reduced to watching from a distance, and haunting the back garden of the boy's house, so he could watch him in his room. As meals went, this one was a lot of trouble, but it was the principle of the thing.

At the moment though, he had other concerns. Spike put his arms around Dru from behind, imprisoning her and holding her close. "Did you meet anyone? Anyone interesting?" he asked softly. "Like Angel, for instance?"

Drusilla squirmed in his grasp, peering down at the picture of a man on a horse with a goblet in his hand. "Angel?" she asked, distractedly.

She seemed to be listening, which was something to be grateful for. "Yeah. So..." He dropped a kiss on her temple. "What might you guys have talked about, then?" He thought about what Lucius had said about the encounter in the park. Angel had been gone by the time Lucius caught up with her and he had not been close enough to hear their conversation, but the description of their almost embrace was enough to irritate. "It's a bit off, you two so friendly, him being the enemy and all," Spike snapped as he pushed away from her.
Dru cowered in her chair and whined. Loud voices could do that to her, especially since she got so sick. Spike was immediately remorseful. "Oh, I'm sorry baby. I'm a bad, rude man." He came around to her side, where she could see him, kissed her forehead again and felt her immediately begin to relax - her alarm as short-lived as her attention. "I just don't like you goin' out, that's all. You are weak." He picked up one of her hands, kissed it and sucked a finger into his mouth. Looking down at her out of half closed eyes, he smiled. "Shall I let you tell my fortune?" he enticed.

Dru tilted her head and gazed up at him, her own eyes huge and trusting. "Will you cry, my sweet?" she asked, dreamily.

Spike was momentarily disconcerted, unsure if she wanted him to cry now, or was seeking clarification of some future event. "Why should I cry, love? What's going to happen, to make me sad?" he asked, hoping he'd guessed right. She was quite capable of flying into a sudden rage, if she thought he was wilfully misunderstanding her.

"My poor Spike. All the world's a game, until the kittens'
claws get long and sharp." Her voice turned vicious. "They tear into your skin and they won't let you go! Not even a little bit!" She stopped and gazed up towards the ceiling and her voice took on a dreamy, sing-song tone. "Cry, cry, the hunter's going to cry." Damn! He'd lost her. He knew that lilt in her voice. It meant she was off in her own world again. She tapped the card. "You keep missing him. Squandering your chances for the promise of more." That almost sounded like sense. "But the purple tulips bloom at night and so must we." Unfortunately, that didn't.

Dru collapsed back in her chair, apparently exhausted. Spike stroked her hair back from her face and signalled Lucius. "Go fetch a nice tender one and bring it here. I don't want your mistress tiring herself on some thick skinned old man." He turned back to Dru. "Will you eat for me, love? If Lucius brings someone up for you." He stroked her hair. "Will you try?"

His ministrations were interrupted by an unexpected voice. "This is so cool!" Spike spun around. There was a boy standing as easy as you please in the middle of the room! "I would totally live here."

Instinctively Spike moved between the interloper and
Drusilla, glancing around for any minions. Only Lucius was in sight, frozen by the door down to the store room. "Do I have anyone on watch here?" he shouted. "It's called security, people. Are you all asleep?" He stepped forward. "Or did we finally find a restaurant that delivers?" he asked.

The boy couldn't possibly know where he was. "I'm Ford. And I know who you are." Or maybe he did.

"Yeah, I know who I am, too." Spike said. "So what?"

The child smiled. "I came looking for you, Spike. You are Spike, right? William the Bloody?"

"You've got a real death wish. It's almost interesting." A movement to his right distracted Spike for a moment and Francine walked in, clutching a book. Spike took it from her and nodded to her to stand guard over Ford, as he leafed through it. What he saw looked very promising, although he only understood the chapter headings. "Oh, this is great. This'll be very useful." He looked up. "So, how did you find me?"

Ford grinned. "That doesn't matter. I've got something to offer you." He paused, expectantly. "I'm pretty sure this
is the part where you take out a watch and say I've got thirty seconds to convince you not to kill me?" He smiled again, adding, "It's traditional."

Spike was less than impressed. He slammed the book shut and strode over to Ford. "Well, I don't go much for tradition." Grabbing him by the ear, he pulled Ford forward, exposing his neck. His face shifted and his fangs were in the boy's throat, the blood just beginning to flow, when Drusilla spoke.

"Wait, love!" she cried, running over to them and placing a restraining hand on his shoulder.

Spike pulled back and looked round. "What?" he asked.

Any explanation she might have offered was interrupted by the meal. "Oh, c'mon! Say it! It's no fun if you don't say it."

Spike turned back to him. He must be mad. "What? Oh." Releasing the ear, he pushed the boy away and recited in a flat voice, "You've got thirty seconds to convince me not to kill you."

Ford gave a little bounce. "Yes! See, this is the best! I
wanna be like you. A vampire."

For a moment Spike thought he was hearing things. "I've known you for two minutes, and I can't stand you. I don't really feature you livin' forever." He turned back to Dru. "Can I eat him now, love?" he begged.

Drusilla shook her head, a message he couldn't read in her eyes and Ford took advantage of the pause to speak quickly. "I'm offering you a trade. You make me a vampire, and I give you the Slayer."

Spike was suddenly intensely interested, but it wouldn't do to show his hand. "You can deliver the slayer, can you?" he mused "And why should I believe you?"

By the time the boy stopped talking, Spike did believe him. It was interesting, this one's desperate determination to cling to existence. Sickness hung over him like a subtle cloud. Didn't make any difference to the blood, but it didn't bode well for the boy himself. Of course, walking into Spike's lair was not usually a prelude to a long and healthy life.

Spike waited until the explanation petered into silence. He could feel Dru at his back - feel her excitement in the
grip of her hands on his arms. He looked at Ford and held his gaze, as if considering the offer. After thirty seconds Ford began to fidget and Spike thought Dru was ready to vibrate apart. He shook his head. "No deal" he announced. Ford's eyes widened in surprise and Dru's fingernails cut into his biceps. Her gasp was followed by the sound of her teeth snapping together, all too close to his vulnerable ear. "You want this so much," he added, "you'll have to give me more than that." Dru let out a little moan, which morphed into a reedy chuckle. Ford's shoulders slumped with the relief.

"I want Angel, too," Spike informed him. "You know who Angel is, don't you?" Ford nodded. "Good." Spike stepped away from Dru and walked across to the table. He turned and leant back casually against the edge, arms braced behind him and ankles crossed. He looked up at Ford "You still here?" he asked, with deceptive mildness. "Get out! Tomorrow sunset is quite soon enough to see you again."

The boy opened his mouth, hesitated and Spike could tell he wanted to check the deal. "I keep my word, once I give it," Spike said sternly - a bit of reassurance to stiffen Ford's spine. Ford nodded warily, but had enough sense to accept that. He shrugged and backed out of the
warehouse into the daylight.

Dru floated over to Spike. "My clever tiger," she crooned. "You want my Angel out of the way, so the doves are unprotected."

Spike laughed, standing up so he could take her hands. He raised them in turn to his mouth, dropping a kiss on each wrist. "Got that cage downstairs," he said, "and the shackles. You need a pet you won't kill through neglect, love. I reckon it won't matter if you forget to feed him once in a while. With the Slayer dead and Angelus safe, you can have your run of this town and we'll make you well again."

8. Sunset

Prompt: #23 - Osmosis

Even from across the alley, where he stood in the darkness of a deep-set warehouse door, the air was heavy with the sickly odour of the boy, Ford, mixed with
a febrile excitement of many different signatures. The smell of sickness was alluring, promising an easy kill and a good meal. Spike pulled the night air deep into his lungs, his hunter's senses assessing and separating the component parts of the complex of scents, recognising both family and property, woven through the more mundane landscape of petrol, old fast food wrappers and... patchouli oil. The scents shifted as the air moved and the door across the alley was pulled open, sucking air with it, then the movement settled, heralding the appearance of his grandsire with an out-flux of warmth, human sweat, alcohol and a stronger trace of patchouli.

Spike watched Angel, Xander and Willow leave the club. Angel strode away quickly, body stiff with contained irritation, hiding from the humans the limp that Spike's experienced eye detected. After two weeks the broken leg should be better mended than that. Soft tissue and muscle would mend overnight, bones in a matter of a week or so. It was nerve damage that required more time and blood to rebuild. Spike knew he had done no real damage to Angel's nerves. Dru distracted him before he could smash the bastard's spine. But Angel was still in pain. It was interesting, like he was starving himself. Spike looked more critically, assessing his grandsire. He carried less bulk than Spike remembered from his pre-
soul days, but he was a long way from being the walking skeleton starvation produced. Maybe it was something to do with the animal blood he lived off. Such a thing had probably never been tested before, but it was possible that human blood was superior in more ways than just flavour.

He watched as the others dawdled, letting Angel outstrip them. Their heads were close together and a trickle of nervous feminine laughter reached Spike's ears. Xander put an arm around the girl's shoulders and Spike was surprised by the annoyance that gesture roused in him. At the end of the alley Angel paused, turned and relaxed his stance as he waited for the children to catch up. They disappeared together around the corner into Main Street.

Spike was about to go and investigate the club more closely when the evening breeze brought a stronger waft of sick human to his nose. Stepping back into the shadows, he saw Billy Fordham enter the alley and head straight for the door. Pulling a key out of his pocket he inserted it in the lock in the handle and put his shoulder to the door, as if it weighed too much to shift with ease. Spike detached himself from the shadows and, in spite of his heavy boots, ran soundlessly across the alley,
catching the door as it swung closed behind the boy. He held it still, just off the latch, for a few moments listening to the footsteps move away from the other side and, by the change in the echoes, begin to descend a set of metal stairs. Then he pushed it open and slipped inside.

Cautiously he stepped forward, through the inner door and slipped behind it. Leaning against the wall, hidden from any casual glance, he looked down into the well of the room, focusing on each of the inhabitants in turn, scenting for any signs of agitation or sickness. Except for Ford they were all healthy and, for all the nervous excitement in the air, there was no fear. Spike had to admire the kid's ruthlessness, using their stupid religious beliefs against them. Playing along, as one of the flock, when he was actually as big a wolf as any vampire. Spike's focus shifted to the three in the centre of the room, just in time to catch the tail end of the conversation that confirmed his initial impression of the game plan.

The whole crowd were apparently addicted to the more cheesy of Hollywood's vampire stereotypes, but the freak in blue was the worst. "Good? That's, that's it?" the freak asked, voice shrill with frustration as he trailed after Ford. "That's all we know? Well, when are we...?"
Ford pulled his arm free from the pleading grasp. "Soon, all right? Soon."

"Oh, soon, okay. If you say so." He obviously wasn't satisfied, but didn't have the nerve to insist. Instead, he whined. "Y'know, you could gimme a little more information here. I'm trusting you. I'm out on a limb here. Not to mention the lease is almost up on this place. Who's gonna cover that?"

Spike smirked. 'Not going to be your problem anyway, mate,' he thought.

Ford swung back around, his exasperation now obvious. "Marvin...." Marvin flinched and opened his mouth to interrupt. Ford pulled himself up and smiled, ingratiatingly. "Sorry. Diego." He emphasised the name, mocking his pawn, who didn't seem to notice the contempt. "Don't worry. Everything's gonna be fine." He fumbled a small bottle out of his pocket and extracted a pill. Turning to take a glass of water from a girl, who came to join them, he added, "Just make sure you're ready when I say. True believers only."

The girl had all the markings of a conventional teenager
in ostentatious revolt, all flowing lace and heavy eyeliner. Another attentive follower to her doom. "I can't wait!" she said. The dreamy longing in her voice was slightly nauseating but the ribbon around her neck made for an attractive invitation. "Do you really think they'll bless us?"

Diego subsided, his brief foray into independence quashed. "Right, whatever," he grumped. "I guess we just continue to trust you." He didn't look happy, but he wasn't going to push.

Ford smiled at both of them, rewarding them for their good behaviour. "Chantarelle." His voice was faintly chiding but indulgent and full of reassurance. "Of course they will. A couple more days and we'll get to do the two things every American teen should have the chance to do: die young, and stay pretty."

Spike snorted, derisively. 'Sure. And you'll all live happily ever after in your gingerbread houses, surrounded by flowers and fairies.' He scanned the room again, assessing the collective mood. 'Those of you who aren't fairies already.'

He left as silently as he'd arrived, allowing the door to
close gently behind him. Gazed up at the few stars visible through the orange glow of the street lights, he assessed the time: nearly 2 a.m. Time to find a late supper and head home. Come sunset this would be over, and if it got him the Slayer and his grandsire, that would be great. But even if they didn't fall for Ford's games, it looked like it would still bring him and his a very nice meal for very little effort. It might not be a delivery service, but it was the next best thing.

~*~*~*~*~*

Sunset came soon enough and Spike gathered his troops for their orders. "When we get there, first priority's the Slayer and Angelus." He turned to Lucius. "You. Guard the door." He pointed at a big, muscle bound male. "You. Stay with him. Don't let either of them near it. Someone'll bring you something to eat later." He surveyed the rest of his little force. "Once we have them under control, then you can do what you like. There's plenty for everyone, so let's remember to share, people." Walking over to Drusilla, he knelt to take her hands. "I'm sorry you're not up to this, love."

Dru lay back against the cushions from which he had
shaped a snug nest on the sofa. "I want a treat. Bring me a treat."

Spike smiled "A very special one you'll have, pet. If the Slayer's blood doesn't cure you completely, it certainly won't hurt. And whatever happens, we still have the book. I just know there is a cure in there. It's being a bugger to translate, but we'll do it, love. Lucius will do it." He directed a glare at Lucius, who cowered strategically behind his large partner for the evening.

Spike turned back to Dru, who smiled, her expression as sweet and trusting as any of the countless children she had enticed over the years, but oh, so weary. It would be such a relief to have her well. When she was well, her visions didn't exhaust her, as they did now. When she was well, she just knew things, like she absorbed them from the very air. She said it was like they were all of them floating in a sea of knowing which pushed at their skin, but only she was permeable enough to let the pictures through. He'd laughed to hear her use a word like 'permeable' and called her his 'little osmotic generator', until she threw her tea pot at his head. He wanted that back. He wanted his lively, joking, laughing Sire back. He wanted to dance and play. He wanted her visions to come easily again, instead of leaving her wrung...
out. He wanted the security of knowing when they were true - because her visions had saved them from destruction more times than he could count. He bent his head and kissed her lips, a quiet kiss of love and devotion, and he resolved that she would be whole again. In the meantime, he had a slayer to catch.

Rising to his feet he pulled out his keys. "Lucius! Felix! Bring the cars around."

~*~*~*~*~

With a squeal of burnt rubber Spike brought his car to a halt by the door of the Sunset Club. 'Stupid name,' he thought, with a private sneer. Lucius parked more sedately behind him and they all clambered out into the alley. Signalling Lucius and the hulk to lead the way, just in case the Slayer was there and had the upper hand, Spike waited to make his entrance. The rest of the cannon fodder forming in a semi circle behind him.

The door was unlocked. That could be a good sign, but Spike was taking no chances. With his designated doormen inside and still not dust, he stepped forward carefully. The welding kit, which had been there earlier,
was gone. He ran his hand down the back of the door. So was the door knob. So that's how the little rat had kept everyone inside. Turning to Francine he pointed at a pile of rubbish. "Pass me that length of rebar." He bent the steel across his knee, into a U shape and wedged it around the door jam to prevent the latch closing. Then he took the four steps necessary to pass through the inner door, to the top of the stairs.

Angel was down in the pit with the cattle. Ford and the Slayer were up on the walkway to his right, arguing. Spike hissed in annoyance, right next to them was Xander. The Slayer had her fists clenched in the front of Ford's shirt, as he strained back from her face. "Ford, these people don't deserve to die!"

Ford laughed, bitterly. "Well, neither do I! But apparently no one took that into consideration, 'cause I'm still dying." He sneered at her. "I'm sorry, Summers. Did I screw up your righteous anger riff? Does the nest of tumours liquefying my brain kinda spoil the fun?"

The Slayer shoved him away and he staggered back a few paces, grabbing the handrail to steady himself. As the immediate threat of violence receded, Xander looked around and spotted Spike. "Err... Buffy," he said,
hesitantly.

Impatiently she swung around. "What?" she asked, just as Ford pushed away from the railing and slammed into her back, knocking her off balance and straight into Spike's arms.

Keeping her off balance, Spike twisted and threw her to Francine, Joseph and Sam. "Hold her!" he ordered. They latched on, twisting her arms up her back and immobilising her. Spike turned back in time to take possession of Xander, as he charged blindly into him. "And what do you think you're doing, pet?" he asked. Xander kicked and squirmed, but he wouldn't get free this time. Spike turned to Ford, his face rigid with anger. "What is Xander doing here?"

Ford pulled himself upright. "I couldn't shake him. He insisted on coming if Angel came." He watched as Spike immobilised Xander by the simple expedient of knocking him out. "Anyway what do you care if there's one more than planned? I thought you'd be pleased." Spike snarled and for the first time in their acquaintance, Ford showed fear. He backed up slowly against the handrail, his knuckles turning white as he gripped it. Spike's fist caught him under the chin and he fell back with a crash.
"Spike!" Angel's voice cut through the sudden quiet. Spike lowered Xander carefully to the floor and turned to look down at his grandsire. From above he looked faintly ridiculous: feet spread, body taut but hunched and fists clenched at his sides. He looked like he was caught between a fighting stance and a childish temper tantrum.

"'Ello Ducks," Spike called, exaggerating his accent. "Fancy meeting you 'ere. Now ain't this a nice little get together?" He strolled back to the top of the stairs and gazed down.

Most of the sheep were now cowering back against the walls, some instinct telling them that this was not the way it was supposed to be. Except for mushroom girl. She was creeping up the steps towards him, an expression of transcendent expectation on her face. He'd transcend her alright. "It's time, isn't it?" she whispered, as she raised her eyes to his and straightened her back. "I'm ready for the change. Please, I need you to bless me."

Spike kept his eyes on his grandsire. "Not a twitch," he warned, "or your girlfriend's a goner." He paused in thought. "Well...." He let that hang as he redirected his
attention to Chantarelle.

Behind him he heard the Slayer struggling. "No! Stop!" she shouted. "Listen to me!"

Chantarelle's eyes shifted to a point beyond Spike's right shoulder and her expression softened. "Why are you fighting this?" she asked. "It's what we want!" Her voice was soft and dreamy and she turned back to him, like she'd been thralled. "We're going to ascend to a new level of consciousness! Become like them. Like the Lonely Ones." And maybe she had, but only by her own delusions. Spike snorted to himself, 'opium of the masses' was true, since 'the masses' were such gullible fools. "This is a beautiful day," she whispered, gazing up into his face.

The Slayer was apparently getting desperate. Spike could hear grunts and the shuffling of feet as she fought her guards. "This is not the mothership, people!" she cried. "This is ugly death come to play!"

Spike grinned as he turned to look at her. "Got that right," he said. He caught Francine's eye. "Clock 'er one for me, there's a love?" He watched with satisfaction as the Slayer slumped under a blow to the temple and
turned back, just as Chantarelle reached the top of the steps. Shifting into game face he roared at her and she flinched a bit, but didn't back down. He tore the choker off of her neck and as if the truth of her situation was at last beginning to penetrate, she began to cry in fear, but still she didn't move - frozen now by confusion at the unexpected form her dreams and faith had taken. He grasped the back of her neck and signalled his minions. "Take them all," he said. "Two of you, get him."

The vampires leapt past him, jumping over the rails into the crowd below. Most of them went straight for the food, but he watched with satisfaction as Sam and Francine followed orders and took on Angel.

His grandsire burst into action, kicking Sam across the room, where he crashed into the wall, sliding down to slump in an untidy heap, but Francine was there, slashing at his side, her knife drawing blood. He was slowed by his remaining injury. He managed to ram a fist into her face, sending her staggering, but he was off balance. He danced clumsily back and, to Spike's great glee, landed awkwardly on his left leg and Spike heard the crack as it broke again along the half healed fracture line. Joseph jumped on his back, bringing him down. Spike turned and sank his fangs into the neck he held.
Hang on! Sam, Francine and Joseph? With a sudden sense of dread Spike pulled back from his meal and turned around. Sure enough, there was the Slayer. She was awake, but she was just sitting there, Xander next to her. For a moment, he was puzzled by her inactivity, then Xander lifted his hand offering something for Spike to take: a small black box, the size of his hand.

The Slayer spoke. "Did you really think this was our only plan?" she asked, with a smug smile. Xander was trying to give him a cell phone. "My Watcher wants to talk to you. He's at your place, right now. You are going to let these people go."

Numbly Spike reached out and took the phone. "Everybody stop!" he yelled, as he lifted it to his ear. He watched as they obeyed him and stopped feeding. Joseph got up from Angel's back. Sam began to stir in his corner and Francine stood shaking her head to clear it. Spike spoke into the phone. "What do you want?"

The English accent came over clearly. "I think it's more a matter of what you want, don't you? You want proof. Well listen to this."
There was a rustling sound and then Dru's voice, soft and weak, but unmistakably Dru. "My poor prince. I'm sorry, my love. Don't cry."

"Dru!" Spike cried. "It's gonna be alright, baby. Dru, are you okay? Dru?"

Silence, and then the Watcher was back. "Give the phone to Buffy. Once I'm assured that all those people are out, I'll leave here."

"You touch Dru...."

"And you'll what?" His contempt was an almost physical thing. "Give the phone to Buffy."

Spike felt like he was moving through molasses. He handed the phone over. "Let them go!" he shouted, signalling his minions back against the walls. He watched as the sheep huddled together, then broke and ran for the door. He watched as Xander helped the Slayer to her feet. He watched as Angel limped past him up the stairs. Spike grabbed his arm. "You!" he accused. "You led them to my Dru."

Angel shook his head. "We were tracking Ford," he said.
"He led us to you." Then he pushed past and followed Xander and Buffy outside. At the door, he paused and reached out to remove the bent rebar from the jam. Looking back at Spike with an expression of regret and half apology, he pulled the bar free and stood. And a shudder ran through him, just as a searing pain split Spike's dead heart. Spike screamed and collapsed forward onto his knees. Lifting his eyes to Angel's face, he saw an expression of pained surprise there. Angel staggered, but kept moving out through the door. He reached for the handle and began to pull it shut. "I'll come back and let you out," he promised as the latch clicked into place, leaving Spike weeping and trapped.

In the corner Ford began to stir. He rolled onto his knees and pulled himself upright, using the hand rail for assistance and gazed around, confused. "What happened?"

Spike swiped his arm across his face. "We're stuck in a fucking basement," he growled.

"And Buffy?"

"She's not stuck in the basement."
Ford shrugged. "Hey, well, I delivered. I handed her to you."

Spike felt the muscles in his face move into a parody of a smile, even as the bones beneath shifted. "Yes, I suppose you did," he said. "That and so much more." He paused for a moment, to savour it. "And now, you get your reward."

9. Gossamer Wings

Prompt: #24 - Crab Apples

Spike sat back against the stairs, numbly hugging his knees as he watched Ford struggle to haul painful breaths into his ruined lungs. Francine was keeping the remaining minions well clear, recognising that something very serious had happened, even if she had no comprehension of what it was. She had dusted four who had shown themselves unhappy with Spike allowing the humans to leave, or at their exclusion from the aftermath, but the disturbance had hardly registered on Spike's consciousness, absorbed as he was in his task. He rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled over to the broken body. Looking down into eyes slitted in pain. He grinned. "Nearly over," he promised. "At least for now."
Drawing a fang across his wrist, he let the blood flow. Then he bent his head and latched onto Ford's neck, whilst pressing his bloody wrist to Ford's mouth. A promise was a promise after all. Ford's heart stuttered to a stop just after his ruined throat managed to swallow a single mouthful of Spike's blood. Spike sat back on his heels, lay his hands on his thighs, threw back his head and howled.

By the time the sound of the latch clicking open heralded Angel's return he had sunk back into himself, exhausted and limp with sorrow, loss and the inadequacy of revenge.

Angel paused in his halting progress down the stairs and took in the scene. He bypassed Spike for the moment, instead going over to the last few minions, cowering all incomprehending against the wall. They, recognising his power and his age, reacted predictably - straightening up and lowering their gazes to the floor, presenting themselves for inspection. It made Angel's task so easy. A series of fast jabs and they fell to the ground as dust, one by one. He turned back to his grandchilde.

Wearily he lowered himself to sit on the bottom stair and gathered Spike's hunched form into his arms. "I'm sorry. I
should have known he'd never leave her alive. He's a Watcher. And for all his mild mannered ways...." He lapsed into silence, realising that Spike was not yet ready to hear his own apologies for this mess. Holding him close Angel gently stroked Spike's hair, soothing touches from a hundred years before and, at last, Spike let his tears run free. They sat like that for nearly an hour.

Eventually Spike raised his ravaged face to look at Angel, his eyes huge and questioning. "How could you stand it?" he asked. "What you did? How...?"

Angel sighed. "I don't know," he said. "It was different for me. She sent me away. In China... She set me free. That broke the bond. But even so... It hurt. Oh God, it hurt!" He shrugged. "I didn't think I'd survive it. But I did. I watched her disappear to dust under my own stake, and it almost killed me." He cupped Spike's cheek in his large hand. "I know you're hurting. And I find I can't walk away from that. But you need to get out of here. Buffy... She'll be coming back for the body. If you leave she'll assume that one of those piles of dust over there is you."

Climbing awkwardly to his feet, he pulled Spike up with him. "Come, Childe, I need to get you out of town."
Without a backward glance, Spike allowed himself to be led, unresisting, up the stairs and out into the alley.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike lay back against the silk and lace pillows of their bed, his body relaxed in the aftermath of lovemaking and watched his Sire dance around the room, dragging her partner's limp form with her. It was so good to see her strong and well. He ran his tongue around his mouth, savouring the flavour of her rich blood - the blood that made him, the blood that healed him, the blood that always tasted of home.

Dru stopped and opened her arms, watching the young stockbroker fall to the floor at her feet. She slowly raised her head, an expression of playful glee spreading across her face as she gazed at him from beneath her lashes. Stepping over the body she drifted towards him, light as a feather, or gossamer on a gentle breeze, and climbed onto the bed. Like an elegant panther, she crawled up the length of Spike's legs and he watched the hard, smooth muscles of her arm flex, entranced all over again by her wicked allure.
She was crouching over him and all he could see was her face, alight with laughter. "The knight and the knave, my love. You remember humanity too well. But so do I." Her laughter filled the room, echoes like wind chimes. "Do you remember, my sweet? How my mummy ate crab apples and lemons, raw? She said she loved the way they made her mouth... tingle." Her eyes turned wistful. "Little Anne... Her favourite was custard... brandied pears. And pomegranates. They used to make her face and fingers all red. Remember? Hmm? Little fingers. Little hands. Do you?"

Spike tilted his head back against the pillow so he could look at her properly. His body felt languorous, at peace. "I wasn't made then. I don't remember that."

Dru leant down until their noses touched and her eyes merged into one. "My baby boy. What will you do? Kitten's claws can be trimmed, but beware the cat." Cupping his face in her hands, she made a playful snatch with her teeth at the tip of his nose. "You have to wake up now."

Spike wanted to protest that, but his throat had seized and the words wouldn't come. He struggled to drag in enough air to form words, but it was thick as glass, or ice,
and his tongue froze solid in his mouth. He shook his head, part denial, part attempt to free himself and he lost her eye, her eyes, as she pulled away from him.

Above him the ceiling faded from black to white as he opened his own eyes. His beautiful Sire was gone.

~*~*~*~*~

From the television news he gathered that three days had passed as he lay lost in his drunken stupor. Empty bottles scattered haphazard across the floor, marked his progress. The mini fridge full of unopened cartons of cow and pig blood was evidence that he had Angel to thank for the hotel room and the booze. From the telephone directory on the bedside table, he gathered that he was in L.A..

10. Life and Honour
"I have no idea," Buffy said, glumly. She was slouched in her chair, elbows resting on the table, her chin in her cupped hands. Without moving her head, she raised her eyes to look at Willow. "I haven't seen him since last night," she added. "He split, just after we dropped Xander off." Willow's face scrunched in a silent question and Buffy sighed. "I went by his place this morning, but he wasn't there."

Xander looked around the library, thinking there were better places to spend a lunch break. But Giles was at some sort of emergency teachers' meeting and they were waiting for him, to report on the aftermath of the Sunset Club. Considering the fact that they had saved about 15 lives the night before, Buffy was remarkably depressed. He wandered towards the desk, where his bag lay, just in case there was a chocolate bar that he had somehow overlooked, when a thought struck him. He swung around. "Hang on, he wasn't in? How do you know he wasn't in? Did you knock the door down?"

In other circumstances Buffy's guilty expression would have made him smile, but in her current mood, she'd think he was laughing at her. She shrugged "Err." She
shoved a hand in her pocket. "He gave me a key," she explained. "He said it was for emergencies. In case I ever needed a place to hide out."

Xander threw up his hands in mock exasperation. "Man! Do you know how many times I've used that line? Give a girl a place to feel safe, lull her into a false sense of security, and..." In retrospect he was grateful that the sound of the door opening as Giles returned, saved him from having to finish that sentence. It didn't seem to be working very well, anyway.

Giles paused in the middle of the room taking in Buffy's woebegone expression, Willow's sympathetic concern and Xander's embarrassment. "Well, it's good to see that everything's normal here," he said, with a faint smile. He went over and took the seat opposite Buffy. "You obviously got them all out?"

"Yes. Got them out. Got them to ER. Left Spike and his gang locked in the club. Walked Xander home. Did an extra patrol. Found nothing."

Giles smiled. "Alright. Tell me what happened this morning. What did you find?" He cocked an eyebrow, questioningly. "I presume you went back to the scene? Is
Spike dust?"

Buffy shrugged indifferently. Giles turned to Willow. "Angel's disappeared," she explained. "Buffy was just telling us."

Giles face and voice both softened. "But he's done that before, Buffy. It's surely not something to get worried about. He'll come back." He got up and disappeared into his office. There was the sound of mugs and teaspoons and a kettle being switched on. A few minutes later he returned with a tray which he placed on the table. "Come on, all of you. Sit down and have some tea." Xander dragged a chair up to the table and reached for a mug.

Once they were all settled and even Buffy had slouched back in her chair, tea held tightly in both hands, he started again. "Why don't you begin at the beginning and tell me what happened last night," he suggested.

With Buffy uncommunicative and Willow not yet having heard the whole thing, Xander took the story telling upon himself. He explained how they got to the club and discovered too late that they were locked in. How Buffy confronted Ford and they learnt the reasoning behind his crazy plan, and how the other members of the club just
wouldn't listen to anything they said. He described Spike's arrival, flanked by a whole nest of minions, like some avenging angel. That description earned him a raised eyebrow and a faint smirk from Giles. Xander felt himself blushing and took a breath to regain his composure. "All I can say, Giles, is it's just as well we had your backup plan because there were so many of them, they overwhelmed us easily. Spike knocked me over and I think I was out for a moment. They knocked Buffy out, too. By the time I got to her she was coming round though. That's when I phoned you. And she got Spike to talk to you. And what ever you said, it worked. He made them all stop, and let the crazy people go. We all got out as fast as we could. And the rest is history, as they say."

Finally Buffy looked up. "We didn't all get out." She said. "We forgot Ford."

"Oh, Buffy," said Giles, sympathetically. "I'm so sorry. Did you find him this morning?"

Buffy shuddered. "Yes I found him. I wish I hadn't." Her face screwed up with distress. "They had fun, Giles. They had fun. And what was left... It was not pretty. I've seen things. But that..." She trailed off, staring blankly down at her tea. Then she looked up. "But Spike kept his promise."
We'll have to keep an eye on Ford's body, because he'll not be resting long." She placed her mug carefully down on the table in front of her. "Why would he be so vicious?" she asked. "Just because yet another of his plans didn't work? You'd think he'd be used to that by now."

Giles took off his glasses and polished them thoughtfully. "It could be," he said cautiously. "He had been promised both you and Angel." Xander thought Giles looked uncomfortable, but the others didn't seem to notice anything odd. Giles hooked his glasses back over his ears and settled them on his nose. "What else did you find? Do I infer that Spike was no longer there?"

"No. He wasn't. There were a dozen piles of dust, but no sign of any actual vampires."

Willow perked up. "Do you think maybe Angel went back and dusted them all?" she suggested. "I mean, if the door was still intact, they couldn't have got out."

Buffy shrugged again. "I called the police from the call box by the cinema. And hung around until they arrived. They took the body away. Do you think I should call on his parents. Except... they're probably not in Sunnydale."
Willow could you..."

"Sure Buffy. I'll get right on it." She moved over to the computer and switched it on.

Buffy slouched back again, despondent. "How could we just leave him there?" she asked of no one.

Xander remembered the expression on Spike's face, as he took the phone from Xander's hand. He'd already guessed the source of their bargaining power. The desperation in his voice, as he tried to reassure his girlfriend, had totally undermined any hope of playing the tough guy and bluffing his way out. Xander had been mesmerised, fascinated, to see such human reactions in a soulless demon. He had totally forgotten about Ford. "We concentrated on the people down on the floor of the club," he said. "Ford was off to the side. It was dark over there. I guess..." He couldn't think of any excuse that didn't sound totally lame.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander hugged his coat tightly around himself, even though the night was not cold. Buffy lay a bouquet of
roses on Ford's grave. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say," she observed as she stepped back.

Giles put an arm around her shoulders. "You needn't say anything."

Glancing up, she relaxed into his embrace for a moment, before stepping away. She crossed to Xander and leant against his shoulder, thoughtfully "It'd be simpler if I could just hate him. I think he wanted me to. I think it made it easier for him to be the villain of the piece. Really he was just scared."

Xander grunted. "I guess."

She gave him a nudge with her elbow. "Nothing's ever simple anymore, is it? I'm constantly trying to work it out. Who to love or hate. Who to trust. It's just, like, the more I know, the more confused I get."

Giles smiled faintly, encompassing them both. "I believe that's called growing up."

Buffy pouted. "I'd like to stop then, okay?" She turned serious again. "Does it ever get easy?"
The grave at their feet began to move and a hand reached up out of the ground. Suddenly Ford was there, lunging towards them. Buffy stepped into his attack and plunged her stake into his heart with no more effort than if she was crushing a bug underfoot. The dust gradually settled on the newly disturbed earth.

Giles answered her question as if the incident had never happened. "You mean life?"

"Yeah." Buffy nodded. "Does it get easy?"

"What do you want me to say?" Giles asked.

Buffy looked across at Xander, probably seeing her own expression mirrored in his. She looked up at Giles. "Lie to us."

As they turned away, towards the gates, Giles began, "Yes, it's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after."

Xander stayed where he was for a moment gazing down
at the now empty grave. He heard Buffy reply, "Liar." Already her voice held a lighter note. Xander thought about Ford's desperation in the face of death, his determination to win, to somehow stay alive, no matter what the cost. He thought about Spike's desperation when faced with a threat to his girlfriend, so he gave away a sure victory over his two arch enemies. Yet, in his own twisted way, he'd kept his word to Ford. Something in Xander acknowledged that and even approved. He wondered if all that undead life had really been snuffed out by Angel and left as a pile of dust on the floor. He thought about Jesse. Then he shook himself, shoved his hands in his pockets and hurried to catch up with the others.

They were nearing the gates of the cemetery when Angel detached himself from the shadows and moved to intercept them. His posture was more hunched and miserable than usual. He didn't say anything, just stood there, eyes locked on Giles. Giles actually looked uncomfortable. If it had been anybody else, Xander would have said he fidgeted.

Buffy hurried forward and laid a hand on Angel's arm. "Where've you been? I've been so worried. Are you okay?"
Angel tore his eyes away from Giles and looked down at her. His mouth curved in a slight smile and he nodded. Then he shook his head. "Not really," he said. He turned back to Giles. "You killed her. You dusted Dru, didn't you?"

Xander watched as Giles' back stiffened and he reared his head defensively. Buffy turned to look at her Watcher in amazement. "But we gave our word," she protested. "I gave my word. You wouldn't...?"

"I didn't give my word," Giles' voice was harsh. "And even if I had. She was a vampire. Eventually she would have recovered her strength. And then all her future kills would have been on my hands. I couldn't allow that."

Xander was amazed to realise that the foremost emotion in his heart was a sense of betrayal. He'd always believed, in some formless, unquestioning way, that he and Giles shared a common understanding of what was right, a sense of values. Abruptly he was adrift in a world, where honour apparently had no place. Betrayal swiftly turned to anger. "We gave our word, Giles. We!"

Giles interrupted. "For God's sake Xander! Grow up! She
was a vampire. A compulsive thief of blood, a thief of life..."

But for once Xander didn't feel like deferring. It wasn't like Giles was his watcher. "No, Giles. It does matter. I don't care if all vampires are undead kleptomaniacs. I don't care if you did the sensible thing. It was wrong!" He realised he was shivering. He swung round on Angel. "Is Spike dead?" Angel shook his head. "Did you let him out?"

Angel shrugged, then nodded. "Yes I did."

Xander turned back to Giles and caught the expression of shock in his face. "But why?" Giles asked. "Why would you do that?"

Angel's face was unreadable. "Dru was my childe," he said, before he spun on his heel and walked away, through the gate and out of sight.

Buffy stood for a second looking from Xander's angry face to Giles shocked one, then she took off after Angel, at a run. Xander watched her go. He turned back to Giles and shook his head regretfully. "I'll see you tomorrow,
Giles." He turned away to make his way home in the dark, alone.

11. Fooling around with cars

*Prompt: #26 - The Great Unwashed*

The welcome to Sunnydale sign crashed flat under the wheels and the vehicle skidded to a halt, hard up against the curb. 'Right!' He thought, punching the air and incidentally denting the roof of the car. The satisfaction might be childish, but it never got old. The car was a write-off. It had been fun, but he had his own car stashed away safe at a warehouse on the edge of town. This one meant nothing.

Back in L.A., when sobriety eventually hit, like the proverbial ten ton truck, the loss and sorrow had swamped him again, for a while. But he was the big bad and nothing was going to keep him down for long - not the loss of his sire, not the desertion of his grandsire, again, not despair, not 120 miles, not anything. Plus,
there was his whole new purpose to consider.

In that musty motel room, he gathered his armour - Levi's, Docs, duster, half-full bottle of Jack Daniel's - and headed out in search of revenge. Once on the city streets, weaving between the early evening crowds, he only had one thought: 'no fucking car'. It was a rough neighbourhood Angel had dumped him in and he pushed his way through the tide of the great unwashed, searching the streets and alleys for a suitable ride. Most of the vehicles were rust-trap wrecks or flash-boy prick substitutes, painted in such poor taste that there was no way he would be seen in any of them.

Something caught his eye and he paused, cocking his head as he gazed across the road at a couple of young lads hanging around next to a sleek, black late model Thunderbird, with no painted flames running down the wings. They looked to be on guard duty, keeping a wary eye on a gang hanging around on the corner a few hundred yards along the street. Spike dodged through the traffic to cross near them. Once back on the sidewalk he slowed his pace to a casual amble and wandered up to them. He caught the eye of the older looking of the two and nodded his head in greeting. "Nice wheels. They yours?" As if. The guy who owned this beauty didn't wear
a scuffed leather jacket and faded old jeans.

The boy frowned in annoyance, possibly debating if he could carry off the lie, possibly wondering if Spike was going to cause trouble. Then his face relaxed. It wasn't the first time Spike's lack of height and bulk proved useful and it wouldn't be the last. "Nah, man. This is Jimmy DeNozo's car. So you'd better not touch it, or he won't be happy."

Spike shrugged in apparent acceptance. "Don't know who Jimmy DeNozo is." He shared a glance between them and added, with a conspiratorial smile, "but I guess I don't want to, huh?"

The boy laughed. "Oh, he's okay," he said. "As long as you don't get on his bad side." He turned to look at the door of the building next to them. "He'll be back soon. Just doing some business. He won't mind you looking. As long as you don't touch."

Spike nodded and edged forwards, bending over to admire the chrome hub caps and peering in through the side window. The paintwork gleamed and the interior was customised leather. Jimmy was a man of taste. "Manual transmission," he noted, admiringly. "Very
nice."

The other guard pup wandered over, attracted by the diversion and wanting a little reflected glory from his association with the object of Spike's admiration. He was ostentatiously tossing a set of car keys up in the air and catching them again.

Leather jacket grimaced in a pantomime of disapproval. "I guess," he said. "I don't much like a stick drive, myself. But Jimmy swears you can get more performance, if you know what you're doing."

Almost there. Spike turned and smiled his understanding. "Yeah. But he's right. Automatics are okay..." He shrugged again. "I suppose it's what you're used to. They're not common where I come from."

The second boy, barely fifteen by the look of him, came closer. "You talk funny," he observed. "Where you from?"

They were right next to him now and he lifted his arms as if he was going to shrug yet again. Before they knew what was happening he had cupped a hand around each of their heads and crashed them together. "England," he
said, grabbing the keys from the boy's hand as he went down.

Spike glanced around the street and up towards the door of the building. No sounds of alarm, no one pausing to investigate, just the steady stream of cars driving past. The gang on the corner didn't seem to have noticed anything, either - too busy posing and showing off their street cred. Spike opened the off-side door and piled the two unconscious bodies in the passenger seat, one on top of the other, wandered around to the driver's side and got in. As he started the engine he was already planning his route out of the city and remembering a quiet spot on the highway where he could stop for a meal and leave the litter behind.

12. The importance of planning

Prompt: #27 - Hamartia

Note: Hamartia - 'A term coined by Aristotle to describe "some error or frailty" that brings about misfortune for a
tragic hero. *Hamartia may be interpreted as an internal weakness in a character.*' Ref *Glossary of Literary Terms and -' In Greek, the word *hamartia* is rooted in the notion of missing the mark (*hamartanein*) and covers a broad spectrum that includes accident and mistake.' Ref *Wikipedia*

Thanks Lit_gal

Watching the watcher, Spike decided to be careful. The man obviously suspected there was something dangerous about. He'd never been reckless, but now he was acting more like a timid mouse than a fighter of evil. He only ever left his house in daylight and even then he'd cross the road rather than walk along the shady side of the street, or even through the shadows cast by a tree. Lurking under cover of the alleys, Spike watched him - separated by a mere twenty yards, which might as well be the distance to the moon.

It was beginning to grate on Spike's nerves. It wasn't that he was impatient. That was never his flaw. The problem was, he got so bored by the slow game, quite happy to spend days plotting and planning, once the plan was set, he wanted it done. When he got bored he tended to improvise, which had led to some of his greatest successes, like holding Angelus to ransom, as well as
some of his more ignominious disasters, like parent teacher night or holding Angelus to ransom.

Eventually the man would let his guard down. And Spike's burning need to rend and tear was not going away any time soon. He drew back further into the shadows and a smile spread slowly across his face. On the other hand, why wait? Spinning on his heel, he headed back to Willy's and the trapdoor leading to the sewers. There just had to be a way into the school, somewhere.

~*~*~*~*~

The library was a place of safety and comfort - a place of certainty, even in the face of the uncertainties they discussed there all the time. But Xander had been avoiding it for the past two days, still uncomfortable with his feelings about that last conversation with Giles. He'd done a lot of thinking, skulking alone around the school, lying on his bed in the evenings, and aloneness had bought honesty in its wake. Eventually he'd faced a truth about himself - he loved that sense of belonging to an inner circle and by staying away, he was hurting no one but himself.
So here he was hesitating at the doors, having followed Willow and Buffy at a distance, as they left their class after last period. The girls had been in the extra literature class. He had been in woodwork, where he'd lost himself for a while in the smooth turning of the lathe and the satisfaction of watching the curls of wood separate from the main block, as he fashioned a fruit bowl which his mother would appreciate for five minutes and would then put aside. As so often happened, his mind had spiralled around the memories of Jesse, like the wood turning in its clamps. Jesse, who was such an integral part of his life, that he never thought about him. Until he was gone. Now it seemed like he thought about him all the time.

Lost in the concentration on craft, his hands doing the thinking as the wood took form beneath the blade, he remembered the night after Ampata died and how he had arrogantly assumed that no one else remembered Jesse. Which led to thoughts of love and loss, which somehow led to thoughts of Angel and Dru and eventually to Spike. The idea that he would ever see the terror of threatened loss in the face of a demon, would have been unthinkable only days ago. The idea that Xander himself would ever actually agree with Angel,
about anything, was just as weird. But as he carefully angled the blade to bite a little deeper, he found himself suffering from a sense of sympathy for both Angel and Spike. Yes, Angel was a pain and Spike was evil, and Dru was just scary, but she was their family and in their ways they obviously loved her and mourned her loss.

And by some lights, what Giles had done was right. Surely it had to be right to destroy any vampire? Did it matter that they'd said they wouldn't? Xander reached for a different chisel as he considered that. Except Buffy didn't do it, when she rescued Xander and Angel from Spike's warehouse. And Spike didn't turn Xander, although he could have, when he had him prisoner. But he had turned Ford, as he had promised to do. It was beyond weird that Xander respected the actions of a vampire and felt betrayed by Giles' resort to expedience.

When the bell rang, Xander halted the lathe and removed the half formed bowl, putting it carefully aside. Giles was a watcher. Trained to train the slayer. Trained to fight the vampires. In killing Dru he did his duty. And wasn't Xander's disapproval stupid? Giles couldn't let a powerful vampire like Dru continue to exist. It would be a contradiction of everything he believed in. As Xander quickly swept the wood shavings into an almost tidy pile
and headed out in search of forgiveness, another thought crowded in to find its resolution. Going back to the library was a purely selfish act. It might be the right thing to do, but it wasn't noble. He was drawn back by an addiction to being at the hub of something, by a fear that something would rise and he not be there to help prevent it and by the sheer need to regain the normality of his abnormal life. He could call it weak. He could call it stupid. He could admit it was a flaw. But he had to recognise that it was not because of some honourable desire to save the world. What it was, was simply that in the library he felt important. He loved the ego rush of knowing things the rest of the town didn't even begin to comprehend. It wasn't as simple as that, of course, but there was enough of that selfish impulse to make him see that the world was more complex than he'd expected. And maybe that was true of Giles too.

~*~*~*~*~

Books had always been a constant in Willow's life - books for study, as a source of knowledge, books for birthday presents every year, which her mother would sometimes actually spend time with her discussing, books with their rich, mouldy smell and their wealth of ideas that
captured the stray thoughts and channelled them in new directions. That was why the library was such a welcoming place - it was where the books lived.

Ever since she started school, the library was the place she went to find peace. The fact that it wasn't particularly popular with most of the other kids was a bonus, in the past. But since Buffy came to town and her world turned upside down, the library had a new reason to be a favourite place, a new attraction - Willow had never had a girl friend before. Xander and Jesse had been her companions in loserdom. But Buffy... she was beautiful and glamorous and strong, and she hung out in the library. It was like all Willow's best things come together. And the fact that now Xander also hung out there... Well could it get any better? Just walking in the doors put a bounce in her step. Her place of private retreat had become new and warm and full of companionship. Buffy was the best of best friends. She opened up new worlds of experience. She may not be a big book person herself, but it wasn't like she was stupid. Buffy did other things. And she did them from the library. Willow's solitary refuge was now the nerve centre of a major operation. It was thrilling and Willow felt proud she could share her personal space with Buffy and Giles, and join them in the fight against evil.
As she pushed open the doors, the warm, musty atmosphere washed over her and she revelled in its calming influence. Giles looked up and smiled and Willow basked in the welcome. If she was honest, Giles approval was almost as important to her as Buffy's friendship. Most teachers approved of her, but Giles... he saw her. To him, she mattered as a person. She wasn't just good grades and a dutiful demeanour. She was Willow. Someone real.

The sound of the door opening again made her look around and there was Xander. The familiar rush of affection and physical heat flooded through her at the sight of him. Her Xander. Handsome, strong, a bit of a dork, but hers. He'd always been hers. The problem was, how to make him see that. Buffy understood, she even tried to help, but it wasn't working. Xander, big dork-man that he was, seemed determined to miss the obvious. Maybe he really didn't see? It was so clear to Willow, but Xander remained stubbornly blind. As she turned back to Giles she decided to ask Buffy, again, what she was doing wrong.

~*~*~*~*~
Giles looked up when Buffy and Willow entered the library and as he caught Buffy's eyes he felt the strange blaze of pride that always took him by surprise, at the sight of her. He smiled. "Hello, you two. Thank you for coming." And there was Xander, trailing along behind them, as always - hesitating at the doors, before pushing them open. Did he always doubt his welcome, Giles wondered, as he took off his glasses and walked over to the table?

There was something about Xander that irritated - a tentativeness of demeanour, that he covered with ill-conceived jokes which made Giles want to smack him. That was Xander - most of the time, an irritating presence Giles accepted as an extension of Buffy and Willow and which he couldn't avoid. He'd even developed an exasperated fondness for the boy. But just occasionally Xander would come out with some throwaway line that illuminated whatever problem or puzzle they were facing in such a way, and with such startling clarity, that Giles' pride was pricked. At first he'd assumed it was an accident, but after the third or fourth occasion, he began to take note. And as he watched, Giles' irritation grew. How could Xander be capable of such original insights, such lateral intelligence, and yet be
so obviously, an academic under-achiever? How could he come out so carelessly with the solution to problems? It was as if he didn't have to think about it, at all. So Giles started to watch the boy. He wasn't a high flyer. Not like Willow. He wasn't a natural leader, like Buffy. He had no air of command, no decisiveness, yet sometimes he found answers that eluded Giles' brain, honed by years of study. It was perplexing. It was annoying.

Giles was honest enough to recognise that it was his own pride that took offence. Academia had always come easily to Giles. By the time he was 16 he could read and write five languages. By the time he graduated from Oxford he could speak, if not read, another four and had a thorough knowledge of the arcane. So how was it that an untutored boy could see solutions where Giles trained mind found only problems?

Giles sighed. Pride. Or more precisely, academic pride. That was his fault, and he knew it. Intellectual arrogance based firmly on a foundation of book learning. Xander didn't have it. So Giles resented Xander's flashes of inspiration. They undermined his comfortable expectations and his values. And that just annoyed him more. He knew he was hard on the boy, but there was something about Xander that got under his skin.
He turned back to the group gathered before him and began to tell them about his fears that Spike was back in town.

~*~*~*~*~

Extra English was a drag, although her Mom had been pleased that Buffy had been selected to take the class, so at least it made up for the fact that she was flunking history. Not that her Mom knew that, exactly. Heading for the library, Buffy leant half an ear to Willow's bemoaning the blindness of men, and Xander in particular, but her mind was concentrated on the problem of reconciling Giles and Angel. The scene in the graveyard the other night, and later when she caught up with Angel and he told her he'd taken Spike to L.A., had been difficult. Giles was not feeling very friendly towards Angel at the moment. And she needed them to like each other. It was not that she wasn't sympathetic to Angel's decision, but when it came right down to it, Giles was right. Drusilla was a vampire and Giles had a duty, just as she did, to wipe vampires off the face of the Earth. She smiled at her own extravagance, but that didn't make it any less true. Why couldn't Angel see that?
When she followed him that night, he came as close to snapping at her as he ever had. All he would say was that Drusilla was his child. Buffy was just glad that, for whatever reason - probably the need to cover their escape - she hadn't killed Dru herself, when she had the chance. As they walked past their lockers, outside the craft room, she decided she needed to find out more about what vampire families were. It was stupid being jealous of a woman who was not only dead, but also dust. So another illicit foray into Giles private collection, was definitely in order. She turned to Willow to make the suggestion, but was brought up short by the realisation that Willow was still bemoaning Xander's blindness. Okay, she could hold that thought. She'd suggest it later. For now, they'd best see what Giles had to say about why he'd called a meeting.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander braced his shoulders and his courage and pushed open the library doors. The first thing he saw was Willow's smile and he felt his own face relax as he smiled back. "Hey, guys," he said, cheerfully. He nodded to Giles. "So, what's going down? Anything big? Do I need
to hide?"

Buffy laughed. "Xander," she teased. "As if I'd let anything hurt you." Her face fell and she turned to her watcher. "There isn't anything, is there Giles? You haven't unearthed an ancient prophesy, or something, have you?"

Giles reached into his pocket and pulled out his handkerchief. He began to polish his glasses, but it was obviously an automatic action, to give him time to gather his thoughts. "No," he said. "No prophecy. Something more mundane and hopefully easier to deal with." He glanced from face to face. "I think I saw Spike this morning."

Xander looked at Buffy and Willow and saw the shock in their eyes. Surely, he thought, they must have expected that? He turned back to Giles. "Was he watching you?" He asked.

Giles shoulders slumped slightly. "Yes. I think he was. I suspect he's looking for revenge." He picked up a small book from the table. "I've been doing some reading. It seems Spike was with Drusilla for over a hundred years. I didn't think such devotion was possible in a vampire, but
it appears that as well as being his Sire, he cared for her. I would say, almost like a human would care for their spouse, if such a concept were not virtually impossible to believe."

Xander frowned. "Why would it be impossible to believe?" he asked. "Can't vampires love? I mean, they were human once, weren't they?"

"No, Xander. I've told you before, vampires are not human. They are nothing like human, except in form. The soul leaves and the demon inhabits the empty shell. They may carry the memories of the human they have killed, but that is all." He sounded impatient, so Xander decided to just shut up. He had an apology to deliver, so it was best not to make it more difficult than it already was.

Buffy headed over to the book cage and began hunting through the weapons cabinet. She pulled out a crossbow and turned back to face them. "Where did you see him, Giles?"

"He was in the alley next to the cinema. I was across the street. He couldn't reach me because the sun was out. But I think it's significant that he was out and about, in the daytime."
Buffy nodded. "Okay, I'll start there and work my way around to Willy's. See if he's seen anything. Willow, could you go online? Pull up the map of the tunnels and see if there's an exit in that alley. Xander, uhm..."

Xander smiled. "Don't worry, Buff, you go. I'm sure Giles can find something for me to do." She nodded and headed out. Willow was already at the computer, logging in. Xander turned back to Giles. "Uhm... Giles, could I talk to you, please?" He looked across at Willow, already engrossed. "Er... In private?" he added.

Giles raised his brows and stared at him, as if debating what Xander might have to say that needed privacy, but then he sighed and nodded. "Alright. Shall we...?" He waved one arm vaguely, indicating the door and together they walked out, the way Buffy had just left. Willow didn't look up.

Once safely in the corridor Xander drew a deep breath and turned to face Giles. "Listen, Giles. I know I was a bit harsh the other night." He paused for a moment at Giles expression of surprise, before gathering his courage and continuing, "I just wanted to say, I was sorry. I was wrong. What you did. Well, it shocked me. But I guess, it
was the right thing to do."

Giles expression melted into softer lines and his smile was one of real warmth. "Xander," he said. "You constantly surprise me." He shook his head, but it wasn't in disagreement. "Thank you. That can't have been easy to say and I admire you for having the strength of purpose to say it."

Xander grinned in relief. "So there's hope for me yet?" He suggested.

Giles laughed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I think you are growing up, my boy. I think there is every hope for you."

~*~*~*~*~

Spike slipped out of the basement access, after watching Buffy pass, and looked around. The library would be down there and it seemed like everyone had left for the day. All the better, because he'd bet the Slayer's gang was still safely ensconced, doing whatever slayer groupies did, while the Slayer was off hunting down innocent demons.
He edged forwards, pausing at the corner to take a quick gander. Better and better, his prey was playing right into his hands. He watched as Xander and the Watcher talked. Was the boy leaving? No, it was like they'd come out here to have some private conversation. They were a mere fifteen feet away. Spike could almost taste the watcher's blood.

Bursting into action, he sped around the corner and crashed into Xander, knocking him across the corridor and into the wall. He was out for the count, so Spike spun around to confront the watcher, whose expression was suddenly hard.

Spike paused to savour the moment. "Not expecting me?" he asked with a sneer. "Or is that where your slayer's gone? To find me? Sending a girl out to deal with a personal problem? Not gonna happen, mate. I've come for you."

He sprang forward, grabbing Giles by the neck and shoving him back against the wall, hands at his neck. Giles was scrabbling at him, pushing at his chest, trying to get free, but Spike's hold was stronger than any human. The watcher seemed to realise that, because he dropped
his arms to his sides and Spike took advantage, to get a better grip, lifting the Watcher's feet clear of the floor. "You killed my Dru, you bastard. You don't know, yet, what pain is, but you will."

Giles began to struggle again and Spike pulled back one arm to deliver the knockout blow that would allow him to take the man and leave. His car was just a block away, waiting with his plans for retribution.

He had a moment to register a change in the watcher's eyes, then Giles pulled his hand free of his jacket pocket, flipped open the lid of the bottle he held and splattered the contents all over Spike's wrist.

Spike screamed, more in shock than anything else, as his hand exploded in pain and started to smoke. He pulled back and Giles held up the little bottle, displaying a black cross on the label. "Holy water," he gasped. "And I've got more." Even as he bent slightly, with the effort of drawing breath into his lungs, he was digging another flip topped jar out of his other pocket.

Spike took a step backwards, snarling and Giles lifted his arm, thumb already prising the lid free. "Don't try it, Spike," he threatened between gasps. "Stay back."
Warily Spike took another step backwards and his boot nudged something soft. Something that moaned softly. He kicked back and his heel caught the thing behind him. There was of the sound of a head hitting the wall and the moaning stopped, utterly. The watcher was still trying to catch his breath and Spike held his eyes with his own, forcing him not to look down at the body at Spike's feet. Then Spike turned, grabbed Xander's arm, hoisted him up and over his shoulder and ran.

Behind him he heard a yell of outrage, and the sound of feet starting to follow at a stumbling run. But a middle-aged man was no match for vampire speed and Spike was through the basement door and down the stairs before the Watcher had even reached the turn in the corridor.

He hitched the boy's dead weight into a more comfortable position on his shoulder and quietly let himself out of the school basement, into the tunnels.
13. Kidnapped

Prompt: #28 - A penny saved is a penny lying worthless in the drawer

Consciousness came in increments -- an awareness of existence, a knowledge that there was a world, a headache to kill all previously known headaches, aches and pains that were not being helped by the jolting that the universe was subjecting him to and finally a realisation, which brought mild panic in its wake, that he couldn't move his hands. Interestingly, the awareness of who he was came last of all.

Xander opened his eyes. His head felt loose on his neck and he squinted against the pressure of the dim, dirty looking light, muted as it was by the paint on the windows. Windows...? Through the smeared black paint he could see other cars, some trucks, the occasional building. He groaned and leaned back into the seat, experimenting with stretching his back and leg muscles, which protested the attempt. He appeared to be tied down by a rope around his waist and another around his chest. There was no seatbelt per se, but the ropes did a
fine job of keeping him in place. There was also a rug over his lap, which should have been comforting, but somehow... wasn't, and under it his wrists were tied together, something wider than rope keeping them secured firmly to his thighs.

The car sounded like it was going fast along a good road and he rolled his head against the rest to look the other way - and there was Spike. He closed his eyes, not yet willing to face this particular truth. Vague memories of Giles and the corridor outside the library surfaced - he'd been standing talking, apologising... but after that, there was nothing.

Spike's voice interrupted his confused attempt to locate more coherent memories. "You awake then?" he asked casually. "Beginning to think I'd hit you too hard, you've been so quiet."

Opening his eyes again, Xander realised that there was no putting this off. He was with Spike. In a car. Spike, himself, looked comfortable and relaxed, cigarette in one hand, the other on the wheel, like he didn't have a care in the world. Xander forced the pain in his head to the back of his mind and a stray memory of some TV programme sidled into his consciousness - something
about getting the kidnapper to talk, making them see you as a real person. Would that work, when the kidnapper wasn't a real person? "Where are we?" he asked. "And why are you driving so fast?" Another thought struck him. "Why are you driving at all?"

Spike smiled faintly. "It's what you do on the highway."

"Highway?" That didn't make any sort of sense. "We're what? Where?" he stuttered. "Are we leaving Sunnydale?"

"Already left." There was a definite note of satisfaction in that voice.

But it didn't do Xander any good. "What? Why? Where are we going?"

"Away." Spike turned back to look at the road, just in time to veer around, and pass, a large white truck with a picture of happy smiling children on the side.

Xander closed his eyes for a moment, seeking the relief of ignorance. Not really a viable option any more. But his questions were getting him nowhere, except for making his headache worse. He peered at Spike from under half
closed eyelids and decided to try a different line. "Why have you tied me up?"

Spike's expression clearly announced his opinion that Xander was crazy, and maybe he was. "Because you'd try and escape, if I didn't," he explained, in a voice reserved for the really terminally stupid. "And I don't want to waste time chasing after you."

Xander absorbed that comment. "This is crazy," he asserted. "And why the hell do you keep kidnapping me?"

Spike shrugged. "Fuck knows, mate. I was going for the watcher."

"So this is just me and my terrible luck, again?" Why didn't that sound as crazy as it should? Something in Xander sank under a sense of the awful inevitability of this moment.

Spike turned to glance at him, his brows raised in enquiry. "You'd 'ave preferred I got the watcher, after all?" He sounded... honestly interested in the answer.

"No! Yes... No... I mean... I'd prefer you didn't get either
of us." He took a deep breath and started again. "You do know that Buffy's going to hunt you down, if you kill me? I might be dead, but I'll get my satisfaction where I can. And right now that's with the picture of you dust, and her with a stake in her hands."

Spike spent a moment apparently considering that prospect. Then he nodded to himself. "What if I don't?" he asked.

"Huh?" That didn't compute. "Don't what?"

"What if I don't kill you?" Spike asked again, a note of exasperation entering his voice.

It was like the breath was wrenched forcibly from his lungs - hope like a great... something...? To hell with metaphor. "That would be good." Xander agreed eagerly. "I like that. In a 'much better than death' way." Then sanity reasserted itself, like the unwelcome relative at the party. "But I've got to ask this... just so I know where I sit, although I'm sure I'll regret it... but... why wouldn't you? Isn't that what you do?"

Spike shrugged. "Usually," he agreed.
Xander stared at the vampire, totally perplexed. Spike was usually more communicative than this. And didn't it say something about his life, that he knew that. Time to try something else. "Where are we?" he asked, with as much calm as he could muster. Spike just looked at him. "Where are we going? And are we nearly there?"

"No!" Spike snapped. "Listen, mate. This isn't some comfortable Sunday drive in the country. I'm abducting you. Don't you get that?"

Okay. Mistake. Must try harder not to annoy the kidnapping vampire. Taking a deep breath, Xander tried again. "Will you at least tell me where we are?"

Spike's voice shifted back to friendly, as easy as pie. "Just passed Gorman. South of Bakersfield."

Bakersfield? That couldn't be right. Bakersfield was miles from Sunnydale. Xander blinked, taking the time to gather his wits. "Huh?"


"Huh?" His wits had obviously taken a vacation.
"Forget it." Spike said. At least he didn't sound mad, this time. "They weren't anything to write home about."

Xander took another breath and waited to see if the world would make sense, anytime soon. Nothing happened, so he decided all he could do was persist. Trying for calm, he asked, "Why are we going to Bakersfield?"

Spike smiled at him and suddenly Xander knew he was being played with. "We're not. You asked where we are and I told you."

The headache was coming back and it was bringing it's friends. But getting information was important. "Okay," he agreed, slowly. "So where are we going?"

"New York."

"Huh?" That was unexpected. And a bit of a shock. "Why?"

"I like the place. Killed a slayer there. Had some good times."
New York? That was days of driving. And it wasn't north of Sunnydale. At least, not last time he'd checked. "Umm... Spike... I know my geography isn't what it should be, but Bakersfield isn't on the way to New York."

"No, pet. I know." His voice was a study in nonchalance. "Do you like raspberries?"

"Raspberries?" Were they playing non sequitur tennis?

"Dru liked raspberries. The only human food she'd eat - said they tasted like fear, all sharp and sweet." He smiled into the distance, beyond the paint smeared windscreen. "Made her lips all red..."

There was nothing to do but give up on sanity and humour the crazy vampire. At least until the headache cleared. "Yes, I like raspberries."

Spike's smile turned smug. "Knew you would, pet."

Giving up, Xander closed his eyes and tried to relax. He stopped straining against his bonds, let his body go limp and concentrated on his breathing. Doing his best to ignore the crazy man driving the car, he pinned his faith on a quick rescue.
After what felt like an hour, but was probably just fifteen minutes, Xander opened his eyes again. He felt better. His head was clearer and although he still had no idea how he'd got here, he thought he was ready to face wherever 'here' was and maybe try for a plan. Through a scratched hole in the paint, a road sign caught his eye. "Err... Spike... That was the Road to Bakersfield we just passed."

"Yeah, I know." Spike nodded. "But we're not going to Bakersfield. We're going to Reno."

Okay, so maybe being ready to face the situation was a bit optimistic. "I thought you said we were going to New York."

"I did. We are. But we're going to Reno on the way."

"Hang on. Bakersfield isn't on the way to Reno, either."

"Know that, pet. 'S why we're not going to Bakersfield." Spike glanced at him, one eyebrow raised, and
apparently decided to take pity. "We left, going south, so that if they got sight of the car, they'd assume I'm heading for L.A.. Instead, I turn north." He sounded proud of himself and Xander began to lose the hope of rapid rescue, he'd been clinging to.

Instead of dwelling on that, he took his time appreciating the first sensible thing Spike had said since he woke up. "Are you going to let me go?" he asked.

Spike shook his head. "No."

"So I come back to the original question: if you're not going to let me go, and you're not going to kill me, why did you kidnap me?"

Spike pulled a cigarette out of the packet on the dash and lit it, before he answered. "Didn't say I wasn't going to kill you."

"Yes you did. You said you weren't going to kill me."

Spike blew a cloud of smoke at the windscreen and a slow grin spread across his face. "No, I said I didn't know if I was going to kill you."
In spite of everything, Xander felt his own lips twitch. It was crazy. He'd been kidnapped. By a vampire. And the vampire was making fun of him. He took a deep breath. "And I ask again: why me?"

"The Watcher had holy water."

That was probably not a non sequitur. "So?"

"So you were on the floor behind me, unconscious, and he was across the corridor with holy water to hand."

"So I was just convenient?"

Spike sounded almost regretful. "Could say that, pet."

"Great!" Xander sighed. "So are you going to let me go?"

"No, not yet. I've got plans."

That was worrying. "What do you want from me?"

There was a smirk. It definitely had smirk-like qualities. "What are you offering?"

"Err..." Xander tried to think of something. And came up
Spike laughed out loud. "You're just trying to save your life."

"Well, yes!"

His voice took on a sympathetic note. "Not much of a life, mate. Why would you care so much?" He glanced over at Xander and the sympathy turned seductive. "I can offer you unlife. Believe me, it's a much better deal."

Xander shivered. "I like my life," he said, with emphasis. "You may not think it's worth much. But I like it. And even if it's not worth much... Even if it's only worth... A..."

Desperately, he tried to think of something that was worth something, anything. "A penny..." he said, triumphantly. "A penny saved..."

"Is a penny lying worthless in the drawer." Spike interrupted with a grin.

"No! Is a penny gained - as in building up wealth and... and happiness and... And my life is worth a lot more than a penny."
Spike's amusement was clear in his voice. "Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves, you reckon?"

"Yes. Something like that." Xander snapped. "Just... No! That's it! I can't cope with this. My head aches and I'm uncomfortable. And I've been kidnapped. Again. And..."

He trailed off and Spike, for once, didn't push it. Silence reigned.

~*~*~*~*~

An hour later, Xander was getting hungry. Shaking his head at his own stupidity in even asking, he turned to Spike. "I don't suppose you'd packed any food for me?"

Spike looked across at him. He seemed pleased? That Xander was talking again. He shook his head. "Nah. Wasn't expecting to be hightailing it out of town. Thought I'd have the Watcher with me. And that just needed a trip out to the woods for a bit. Nice quiet place with no people. I wasn't interested in feeding him."

"Please" Xander pleaded. "Enough. I don't want to know what you were going to do to Giles. I don't want to know
what you're going to do to me - if you even know yourself - unless it is to get me some food. I am going to concentrate on little things. Can we do that? Food? I haven't eaten since lunch."

Spike scratched his forehead, thoughtfully. "You are high maintenance, aren't you, pet?"

"High maintenance? I'm human. We get hungry. It's natural. Don't you... No, forget I started to ask."

Spike shot him a look and grinned. "Every day's, nice. Every other day's, okay. Leave it more than three or four days, and it gets uncomfortable."

"I didn't need to know that." He glared at Spike. "Why are you being so friendly?"

Spike looked like he had to think about it. "Well we're stuck here, together. Don't see the point in making it unpleasant."

"It is unpleasant. I'm tied up."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm being friendly. It could be worse."
Xander slumped back in his seat and decided to stop humouring the crazy vampire by talking to him. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the growling in his stomach. A small voice in the back of his head pointed out that if he was really scared, food would be the last thing on his mind. He ignored that and concentrated on plotting his escape. He was aware of sidelong glances from Spike, but he ignored them too. He was getting good at ignoring things.

His eyes opened with a snap, as the car veered to the right and they left the highway. "Are we there yet?"

Spike growled. "No. But there's a rest stop place here. If it'll make your body stop with those bloody disturbing, organic noises, I'll get you food."

Xander perked up and began to think about stopping near people and how he could get help, without putting lives in danger. Somewhere along the way, without him noticing, the sun had set. Maybe he'd been asleep. The world outside was dark, but there were lights up ahead. The car slowed, slightly, as it turned into the rest stop parking lot, but Spike drove past the area reserved for families and pulled up between two huge trucks, out of sight of the shops and restaurants. He opened his door
and climbed out. Xander waited for the ropes to be untied, but Spike just slammed the door shut and started to walk away.

"Hey!" Xander yelled. Spike looked round. "What about me?"

Spike came back, opened Xander's door and leant his forearm on the roof as he looked in at Xander. "You stay here. I'll get you some food."

"But... I need to pee," Xander said, with a flash of inspiration.

Spike's eyebrow was raised, sceptically. "You wait here." He repeated, before slamming the door again and walking off towards the glow of neon lights.

With another example of inevitable bad timing, Xander realised that once the thought of having a pee had occurred to him, his body decided to agree with his mouth. He looked down at the rug covering his legs. Shuffling his feet, he managed to get one heel over the trailing edge. He caught the cloth between his feet and began tugging it slowly down. When it cleared his thighs he saw that the thing holding him still was a long leather
belt, wrapped around his forearms and legs in a figure of eight, which he couldn't pull out of, without first getting rid of the rope at his wrists. He tried twisting his hands, but the knots were too good to slip. There was no way he was going to get free on his own. He looked around. There was no one in sight.

Xander flexed his body and felt some give in the ropes around his waist and chest. The knots securing them were well out of reach, right across the bench seat on the driver's side. Spike must have been sitting on them. That's why they were looser, now that he was gone. Xander wriggled some more, trying to edge his way across to the wheel, so he could hit the car horn with his head. Maybe someone would come and get him free before Spike got back. He paused. Getting him loose would take time. Spike had only gone to get food. It wasn't like he needed to use the facilities. If Xander attracted help, he might as well be signing the Good Samaritan's death warrant. He leaned back and closed his eyes in defeated recognition of the double, triple, bind he was in. Any escape would have to be solo. For some reason Spike didn't seem to be planning to kill him. But Xander wasn't stupid enough to believe he would show such restraint towards everyone who crossed his path.
With a sigh of frustration, Xander slumped back in his seat and concentrated on controlling the growing pressure in his bladder.

~*~*~*~*~

That was how Spike found him, when he returned. "'Lo, pet," he said cheerfully. "Here, got you a burger and some fries."

"Spike."

"Yeah?"

"I really do need to pee. And unless you want me to do it all over your leather upholstery, I really need to get out of here."

Spike's face screwed up in an expression of distaste and he dumped the stuff in his hand on the roof of the car. Crouching down he undid the knots, then he came around to the passenger side door and opened it. Bending down he picked Xander up bodily and lifted him out of the car, placing his feet on the ground. The belt
meant Xander was now bent over and even Spike could see that wasn't going to work, so he undid the buckle, freeing Xander's arms. With a groan Xander stood upright, staggered slightly and leant back against the car until he found his balance. Mutely he held out his arms, offering his wrists to be untied.

"No, that's enough mate. You can manage your fly with bound wrists. Come on." Grabbing Xander's shoulder he led him away from the car and further into the shadows, stopping by the back of the truck and turning Xander around so he faced the rear wheels. "There," he said. "Go on."

Xander glanced around, then at Spike. "Umm... Can you, maybe, not watch?" he asked.

Spike grinned. "Performance anxiety, is it?" But he didn't seem annoyed. "Okay. I'll turn around. Just be quick, yeah?"

Xander struggled to undo his jeans and fumbled himself free. The sheer physical relief was wonderful and he groaned as his body relaxed. When he finished he did his best to put himself away and once he felt comfortable again, as comfortable as it was possible to be with bound
wrists and a vampire at his shoulder, he turned back to Spike and nodded.

Back in the car, Spike retied the ropes and wrapped the belt around his legs, but left his arms free. Then he passed Xander the bag and a big shake with a straw. "Eat up. We've a way to go before sunrise." He paused to consider. "Not going to make Reno." He frowned. "Shame. Still, I know a place just outside Sacramento. We'll stop there. Okay?"

Xander wondered why Spike bothered to ask, he was too busy eating to answer anyway.

They were back on the highway before he'd even started on his fries.

14. History Lessons

Prompt: #29 - Et tu Brute
The room was almost big enough for the two cheap lounge chairs it held, in addition to the bed and the rest of the usual furniture. It was also clean, if a bit old and worn. Spike had pulled the blinds closed as soon as they got in and hadn't turned on the main light, so it was only by the small amount of diffuse sunlight that got around them that Xander could see anything, from his vantage point tied to one of the chairs three feet from the foot of the bed. He was feeling very wary.

When they'd arrived in Sacramento a few hours before dawn, Spike seemed to know exactly where he was going - a nondescript motel somewhere to the west of the city. He'd left Xander in the car when he went to check in and then drove right up to the door of the room they now occupied. There hadn't been a chance for Xander to run, even if he'd known where he could run to - with no money, even if he got free, the means of successful escape defeated him. It was only later that he thought about how Giles would probably accept the charges of a collect call, if he could only get away. And Giles' telephone number was one of only three or four he had memorised. But for now, there was no chance - he'd been marched in and immediately tied up again.

It wasn't uncomfortable, exactly, but his arms were held
fast to the wooden armrests, more rope wrapped around his shins and each front leg of the chair and finally there were the multiple turns around his waist which kept him fast in the seat. He fixed his eyes on his captor. "Why am I is still alive?" Okay, maybe not the most sensible question, but Xander wanted to keep Spike talking.

Spike was sprawled on his back on the bed, a bottle of bourbon clutched in one hand. "Because you're my bargaining chip," he said easily. "Your Scoobies will never sacrifice you."

That made the sort of sense, that didn't. "But you've got away. Scot free. Why do you still need me?" The small voice in the back of Xander's head was screaming at him to shut up and stop tempting the vampire. But for some reason he persisted in ignoring it. It was partly what Giles would call 'sheer bloody-mindedness' and partly a simple desire to know where he stood. He needed to understand what his chances were. Plus - distracting the vampire from the bottle of high proof alcohol. Xander had enough experience with unpredictable drunk humans to know that he really didn't want to face an unpredictable drunk vampire. And Spike had been drinking steadily for the last hour.
"What makes you think I'm not going back?" Spike laughed and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Your Watcher killed my Dru. Think I'll just forgive and forget?"

Oh. "But last night... On the road... you were..."

"I was what? I was nice?" Spike sneered. "I was being friendly? I was making your abduction pleasant?"

"Er... no, not pleasant. But you were friendly. Sort of. I mean... you didn't kill me and you brought me food."

"Sure, pet. Need you healthy, don't I? And last night, I needed you docile. I was nice and we got to Sacramento with no fuss. But if you think for one minute that you are anything but a walking bag of blood to me, then you're more deluded than I thought."

For the first time, Xander felt real fear. How could he have forgotten? God! Had he been deluded? Or could he blame concussion? If he'd had the freedom to move, he'd have kicked himself. Just because in the privacy of his own head, he'd seen something in the two vampires in his life (and stop and marvel at that concept) that spoke to him, as Giles' behaviour didn't, he'd forgotten exactly what they were. What Spike was.
He was being held prisoner by a vampire. An evil, bloodsucking fiend. And no number of burgers and no amount of apparently friendly teasing would change that. It was a wonder he was still alive. Okay. Think Xander. Think hard and for once in your life, think smart.

Keeping Spike talking seemed like a good idea. He'd already drunk most of a bottle and although he wasn't acting drunk, exactly, his movements had become a bit wider and looser.

Xander shifted, as much as his bonds would allow, and tried to think of a safe topic for conversation. "Actually, I was thinking more about how you said you were going to New York."

"So we are. Doesn't mean I'm planning on staying there forever. Got something to do. But after that, we're going back to Sunnydale and I'm going to find myself a Watcher." He lifted the bottle to his chin and tipped it to drink. A dribble of liquid escaped from the side of his mouth and tricked down his cheek to disappear into his hair.

Xander didn't miss Spike's use of the word 'we' and, in
spite of his current predicament, he took some comfort from the idea that Spike wasn't planning on using him as a handy food source as he crossed the country.

"But we're not going straight to New York? Can I ask where we are going first, then? And why?" That felt like a much safer question than anything to do with his own life expectancy. A sudden thought that Spike might be planning to turn him, so he'd help with hunting Giles down, sent a bolt of panic through him. Spike had teased him with that idea weeks ago, last time he had Xander prisoner.

Spike lifted his head from the pillow and peered down the length of his body at Xander. "Calm down, pet. We're going to Reno," he said. "Got to see a shaman."

"Oh. Okay. And you need me with you, why?"

"Well, can't very well sort you out, if you're not there."

The panicky sense of dread turned into something far more solid, and far more scary. "Sort me out?"

Spike levered himself up on one elbow and rested his head on one hand, the neck of the bottle gripped loosely
in the other and propped against his thigh. "Yeah. Don't want to have to keep you tied up all the time. Cramps my style. We're going to get you fixed up with something to solve that little problem."

"Uh hu?" For a moment, language failed him. "What problem?" he eventually managed, and he could hear the desperation in his own voice as his imagination took him places he'd never wanted to go.

"Yeah. Going to see a shaman. Big guy with the magic. He's got a handcuff that'll stop you straying, without me having to worry."

"Straying?" He suddenly felt like the neighbourhood dog, but the sense of relief as he realised that whatever magical handcuffs were, they would only be needed for a still human captive, took the sting out of the thought.

By the time Xander got his breathing back under control, Spike appeared to have lost interest in the conversation. Lifting the bottle to his lips, he tipped it back for another drink. His eyebrows rose in an expression of surprise and he lifted the bottle higher, holding it above his face as he squinted thoughtfully into the open neck. One solitary drop of Bourbon gathered on the rim and fell into his
eye. "Bloody hell!" The bottle flew across the room, just missing Xander and rolled away across the carpet as Spike flopped onto his back rubbing his eye furiously. Xander did his best not to laugh.

Spike lowered his arm and lay still, gazing up at the ceiling. "Pass us that other bottle will you, pet?"

Xander shook his head. "I can't, Spike. I'm tied up."

"Oh. So you are. Forgot." Rolling off the bed, somehow still graceful in spite of the quantity of alcohol he'd consumed, Spike stalked past Xander to the chest of drawers and picked up the second bottle. Returning to the bed he sat on the edge, gazing blankly at the carpet between his feet. Time stretched endlessly for Xander as he waited for whatever was going to happen next. His emotions were having trouble keeping up with Spike's changing moods. The fear overload of a few moments ago seemed to have dissipated, leaving him tired but calm. It wasn't that he'd given up, he thought, just that there was only room for so much terror in his mind at any one time. Whether quiet Spike was a safer thing than talkative Spike, he didn't know.

up at Xander, his eyes unfocused. "You have no idea. One hundred years. She was so beautiful. Rescued me."
Suddenly he was looking straight at Xander. "How old are you, boy?" His eyes raked Xander's body, head to toe. 
"Sixteen? Eighteen? Can you even imagine what a hundred years with one person, 'slike?" Xander decided not to answer that and a moment later Spike continued. 
"No. You can't even begin." His hands twisted around the neck of the bottle, not trying to open it, possibly trying to strangle it. "She pulled me from the wreckage, and life was fun. With her, life was always such fun." Deliberately he opened the bottle, allowing the cap to fall carelessly to the floor. "We danced across Europe and Asia. Through wars and plagues. We watched the comedy of your little lives." He raised the bottle to his mouth and took a long swig. "You humans. Think you're so smart. But you don't know. Your place on the food chain, is way down. Way, way down." Once again his eyes shifted to some unseen point in the distance. "You play your games of power. Your games of betrayal and deceit. You think you're so clever." He lifted the bottle in a careless gesture, as if toasting Xander's health. "Until you've seen an old master with all his court, you haven't got the first clue what power is.

"I watched the Chinese rebel against occupation. I
watched the Nazis rise in Europe. I saw the blunt instrument of hate they wielded. I saw their enemies descend to their level." He paused and his voice softened. "But I've seen the power of an ancient court, and I watched The Master kill his master, just so he could leave London and come and die in Sunnydale. And The Old Master... you know what?" He laughed harshly "He looked surprised. All 'Et tu Brute', like he hadn't done it himself, in his time." Suddenly he grinned. "You have no idea the shock waves that set off."

He turned his head and this time Xander felt he was actually looking at him. "My Dru saw it all, before it happened. She got us out of the Old Master's Court." He paused, turning back to stare at nothing, and when he resumed his voice was dreamy with memory. "She was good at that. Tried to get me to leave Europe back in the 30's. Didn't listen to her, that time... so she left me there and I ended up on a submarine." He snorted with mild amusement, before a sweet smile spread across his face, softening his expression. "But she came back for me. She always came back for me." He looked up at Xander again. "She had dark hair and pale skin and muscles like steel and a body as soft and welcoming as a tropical night." He stood and walked over to the chair. Placing the bottle on the floor, he set his knee on the seat and sat down,
straddling Xander's legs. Xander reared back as far as he could, but Spike leant forward, his right hand bracing himself on the chair back behind Xander's head. With his left hand he gently brushed the hair back from Xander's forehead and stroked the backs of his fingers down Xander's cheek. He shook his head. "No. The hair's similar, but it's not the same. And your skin's different too." Sighing he pushed himself back onto his feet, picked up the bottle and returned to the bed. Xander heaved a sigh of relief.

Somehow managing to keep the bottle upright, Spike rolled across the bed and pulled himself up to lean his head against the headboard, booted feet crossed at the ankles on the quilted satin bedspread. "You should get some sleep pet. Busy night tonight." He took another swig, emptying the bottle. They both watched as it rolled away and clunked to the floor. Shuffling down into a more horizontal position, Spike grabbed the edge of the blankets and dragged them across his body.

Xander sat awake, as the hours of daylight passed, watching as the vampire lay unmoving in his cocoon.
15. Shopping

Prompt: #30 - Arrhizal - Destitute of a true root, as a parasitical plant. Rootless (which kind of sums up Spike at the moment). A parasitic plant without roots eg mistletoe

Another night, another city. Reno was... another city. Sometimes Spike got so tired of the mass of humanity. They were useful - cities - the way the food gathered together in convenient herds. There were always people on the fringe, ready to be picked off and never missed: the old, the sick, the outcast, or just the stragglers. But sometimes, the stink of them overwhelmed him and he yearned for the clean air of the mountains.

Once past Colfax, as the road lifted them higher, out of the smog of the valley, it was as if he could feel his spirit expanding. On impulse he turned to share his pleasure with the boy, but Xander wouldn't meet his eye, sitting slumped in the passenger seat, sulking. Well sod him. Spike would ignore him if he didn't want to play nice. He sat back and relaxed, one hand gently guiding the car.
around the shallow bends, the other elbow resting in the open window sill. Spike felt at peace with the world. The ache of Dru's absence was still there, but for the moment it was dulled - an almost familiar pain.

As the fresh air blew away the last remaining cobwebs from his brain, he found his thoughts following unfamiliar trails - examining his actions of the morning. There had been two empty bottles on the floor when he woke up this evening and he had vague memories of waxing lyrical, expounding on history and human and demon nature. He'd been expansive, and a bit maudlin, memories of Dru pouring out of him as fast as the alcohol poured in. But the boy had been an attentive audience, so he'd found himself relaxing as he talked. It had been... pleasant, somehow, to be able to speak freely, in front of someone who he didn't need to be wary of. When he woke up he'd felt much more cheerful, looking forward to another night of banter and snark. So what had gone wrong? What had changed? Come to think of it, Xander hadn't been very friendly at the beginning of the night either. He'd started awake immediately Spike got out of bed and hadn't been grateful for either the breakfast Spike had fetched for him from the diner across the road, or for the fact that Spike left him alone in the bathroom to wash and freshen up. Spike considered that - it wasn't
like Xander didn't know he couldn't escape. He must have seen, when they arrived, that the bathroom had no window. So he couldn't have been sulking over some thwarted escape attempt. But for some reason he'd dragged himself around the room, yawning and mumbling discontentedly, as if the world was against him, until Spike began to wonder why the hell he kept him alive. But he'd got in the car, when told to, and not even protested the ropes, like he was half asleep.

It was inconvenient having to keep him tied up, but that was something that would soon be taken care of. At least this stage of the journey was only a couple of hours. And after tonight, things would get easier, Spike was sure. Somehow it was unnerving, having him sit there, a silent, brooding lump. "What's eating you, mate? Come on, not used to you being quiet."

Xander turned his head and gazed at Spike, an expression of pained disbelief on his face. "I'm tired, Spike. I didn't sleep."

"Huh! Why not? I didn't tie you up so tight. You should have been comfortable enough."

"Comfortable?" Xander's voice rose to a screech.
"Comfortable? I was tied to a chair and sharing a room with a bloodsucking demon who had just told me I was nothing more than a convenient snack. How the hell was I supposed to be comfortable? How the fuck was I supposed to sleep?"

Spike laughed. "Language, pet. Should be ashamed of yourself." He thought about what Xander had said. "So the reason you're sulking now, is because you're tired?"

"I'm not sulking." If that wasn't a sulky voice, it was certainly weary. "I'm just tired."

Spike pulled the car over to the hard shoulder. "Hang on." He reached round to the back seat and dragged another rug out from the pile of gear stacked there. Shuffling across to Xander, he spread it across the boy's legs and up to his shoulders, tucking the edges snugly around his neck. "There," he proclaimed. "Humans lose body heat when they sleep. You'll be okay now." Settling back behind the wheel, he started the engine again. "Get some rest, and maybe you'll be better company when you wake up." He didn't miss the disbelieving stare, but Xander did close his eyes and relax his body. Spike monitored his breathing as he drove and after a mile or so it slowed into the rhythm of deep sleep.
It was almost a relief to reach Reno. For some reason the silent presence beside him had left Spike feeling more alone than if he really had been. The boy hadn't made a sound for the last hour, not a snore, not a snort, not a whimper. It was oppressive.

The highway split the town in two and Spike followed it right to the centre before turning off into the side streets. It had been a few years since he was last in these parts, but it appeared the places where the deals were done remained the same. Uppers, downers and everything else besides, were easy come by - just a matter of pulling up in the right place and handing the cash through the window. Spike glanced across at Xander as he stirred back to life. He was looking a bit better. "Want something to eat, mate?"

Xander blinked his eyes, clearing them of sleep. "Please."

A quick stop at yet another burger bar, a careful scattering of chemicals across the meat as he walked back to the car and sit back and watch the boy eat. He was out of it within ten minutes. He'd be fast asleep for at least three hours. Might do him some good. Spike smiled at himself, well aware of the irony of drugging the
boy back into oblivion, after he'd spent the past hour wanting him awake and talking.

Parking the car in a properly guarded lot, Spike left it there while he went to find the current location of Old Man Black Wind's shop. That entailed visits to some of the seedier casinos and short sharp interviews with likely looking residents, but after a couple of hours he got the information he was looking for, as well as a few thou in winnings and takings.

Xander was still asleep when he returned and he briefly considered waiting until the next night. But if the boy wasn't sulking about being tied up before, he would once he was more himself again and rousing him now, so that he could regain a small amount of freedom, was worth the trouble.

Spike drove carefully through the narrow backstreets and alleys until he felt the shift in the air that told him he was close. He pulled up and got out, untying the ropes and releasing the belt, before giving Xander a gentle slap on the cheek to wake him.

"Ghuh," Xander groaned, peering up at Spike through half open eyes. "What? Uh... Water?" he croaked.
Spike shook his head. "Sorry mate. Didn't think of it. Get you some inside, okay?" He hauled the boy out of the car and to his feet. Xander staggered forwards, unsteady and still dopey from the effects of the drug. "Now then. Listen. You gonna cooperate?" Spike asked, holding him steady by his shoulders. He gave him a little shake. "I won't tie you up, if you promise to be good." He let go of Xander's shoulders and he didn't fall over. "Give me your hand and we'll just walk along, friendly as you please. Come on, pet, this way." Taking the boy's hand in a strong grasp, he led him carefully along the alley until they reached the place where the air seemed a little thicker. Spike reached his other hand out and gave a little shove, and they were there.

The room was big and bright, some source-less light, with the spectrum of fluorescents, illuminating every corner. Spike winced at the sudden change. The walls were lined with glass fronted, steel and chrome cabinets, all full of jars, bottles and boxes. The place had a clean, almost clinical look, which belied the nature of the merchandise. Xander gazed round dumbly, probably not taking it in properly, although he must have registered the barrier they had just passed through. Spike's attention was immediately fixed on the figure of the man behind the
counter opposite them. He was small and slim, dressed in a neat checked shirt and looked all of twenty five. His hair was short and dark and neatly combed and with his thick rimmed glasses, he projected an air of geeky harmlessness. Except, Spike knew for a fact that he'd looked exactly the same thirty years ago and probably still would in thirty years time. Dragging Xander behind him, Spike walked up to the counter and nodded. "Black Wind," he greeted.

Old Man Black Wind smiled. "Spike. Long time, no see. What can I do for you today?"

Spike raised a questioning eyebrow. "Straight to business, eh? What you so nervous about?" Black Wind said nothing, just smiling in a counterfeit of embarrassed friendliness. Spike snorted with faint amusement at the act. "Okay. We'll be quick. That suits me fine." He indicated Xander, with a shrug. "Need a cuff for this one." Pulling Xander over, he wrapped an arm around his shoulders to hold him still. "Two things: don't want him running away, and I don't want him trying to kill me. Can you do that?"

The old man looked at Xander thoughtfully, his fingers stroking lightly along the edge of the counter in front of
him. "Hmmm. For a price, yes." He looked back at Spike and his eyes were sharp and piercing. "Wait there." He edged along to another section of the counter and pulled open a drawer, lifting out a shallow tray. Carrying it carefully, he returned to where Spike stood and placed it on the counter in front of him. He caught Spike's smirk and grinned back as he removed the sprigs of mistletoe and holly, exposing the contents underneath. "For protection," he explained. "Holly protects against lightning and evil spirits, and mistletoe is good for virility. Not quite in keeping with the décor, I'll admit, but style is only style - magic is business."

In the bottom of the tray, on a bed of black velvet, were a series of curved lengths of different materials, looking like nothing so much as drawer handles on display in a hardware store. There was silver and onyx, copper and turquoise, mother-of-pearl, peridot and amethyst, among others, all perfectly circular in cross-section and paired with an identical twin. Black Wind reached into another drawer and pulled out a pair of callipers. "Let me see his left wrist," he instructed. Spike lifted Xander's arm and laid it on the counter. Xander stood unresisting and Spike wondered if that was still the drug in his system, or if the old man had done something to keep him docile. Black Wind carefully measured the
dimensions of Xander's wrist, then ran his fingers thoughtfully down the edge of the tray, stopping next to a pair of Jade crescents. Holding the callipers above them he compared their dimensions. Satisfied he nodded. "Jade," he said. "That's what you need. What range do you want? And do you want him incapacitated, or hurting?"

Spike hesitated as he thought about it. "Incapacitated would mean, frozen?" he hazarded. Black Wind nodded. "Hmm, could be dangerous if he suddenly froze solid. Make him easy to pick up, but make him an easy target for other things too. Those my only choices?"

"Those are the standards. Cost you three thousand. But if you throw in two promised favours, I can make it so he just feels really uncomfortable. A sort of compulsion. He'll feel worse and worse, until he turns around." He shrugged and grinned. "And as soon as he does... he'll feel better." Reading Spike's face, he nodded. "Range, one hundred yards?"

"Hang on! Two promises? That's a bit steep." Spike smirked. "But I'll give them to you... so long as they're things I'd do anyway. Nothing against my nature or my interests. Deal?" Black Wind's eyes narrowed
thoughtfully. "'Cause I don't really care if he's hurting." Spike added, his smirk broadening.

Black Wind's mouth tightened in annoyance, but he nodded his agreement to the deal. Removing a silk handkerchief from his shirt pocket he carefully picked up the two pieces of stone. "Raise his hand," he instructed. "And be quick. I'm expecting visitors." Spike did as he was told and Black Wind brought the two bits of jade together, so that the ends matched up, creating an oval bangle that encircled Xander's wrist. He began to mutter under his breath as he wrapped the handkerchief around the stones. After a moment he pulled away, allowing the handkerchief to drop. The jade was now a single oval and Xander had a bracelet. Black Wind's forehead wore a faint sheen of sweat, which he wiped away with his left hand. He dragged a pad of paper over as Spike placed three thousand dollars on the counter. Laying his left hand, palm down, on the pad, Black Wind muttered a few more words, then he tore the page free and folded it. He picked up the money and shoved it in the front pocket of his jeans, without counting it, and handed the paper to Spike. "Here's the instructions," he said. "Nice doing business with you. Now go. Please?"

Spike took the paper. "Good to see you again, old man."
He nodded towards Xander. "How long before this wears off?"

"An hour or so. Close the door behind you, yeah?"

"Cheers, mate. If it doesn't work..."

"It'll work. You know my stuff always lives up to the label. Now, go."

Taking Xander's hand again, Spike turned and walked towards the blank wall at the back of the shop. Reaching it, he gave a push and stepped forward. Then they were in the alley. The car was parked fifteen yards away.

~*~*~*~*~

One motel was much like another. Spike had used his hour to find them both something to eat, leaving Xander in the car while he did so. Then he had found them a place for the day.

This room had two beds and Xander was already ensconced in one of them, consuming his picnic supper, becoming more and more his usual self with each bite.
Spike sat back against the headboard of the other and read through the instructions. "It works on intention," he said.

Xander looked across at him, over the top of the apple he had just raised to his mouth, his eyes big and questioning.

"Your new bit of jewellery, pet. It works on intention. Means that although you can hurt me, kill me, by accident, you can't do it intentionally."

Xander looked down at his wrist. He took a bite from the apple and put the rest down carefully on an empty paper bag. Taking hold of the bracelet, he tried pulling it, but it was too small to pass over his hand. He frowned, belatedly remembering to chew, before swallowing to speak. "That place was real then? We really were in some weird white shop, or clinic, or something? With the guy with the huge eyes? I thought that was a crazy dream." He swallowed again, nervously. "What have you done to me?"

"Ain't done nothing. Well, nothing much. Just bought you a pretty, for my pretty." Spike grinned at Xander's expression of disgust. "It's magic, pet. Magical hand
cuffs, remember? Stops you running away. Says here, if you try, you'll feel nauseous. Then if you keep trying, you'll feel so uncomfortable, you won't know which way is up. But as soon as you turn around and start coming back to me, you'll feel better." He raised his eyes from the paper to look at Xander, who was glaring at him. "Hey! I paid extra to get you that. Could have been a cheapskate and gone with agonising pain, or something that made you freeze on the spot. Should be grateful."

"Grateful," Xander gritted out, between clenched teeth. "Grateful, to be tied up more effectively than I have been for the last two days? Grateful that you went for the padded cuffs?" His voice rose angrily. "They're still cuffs, Spike!"

"Calm down, pet. You've got a range of a hundred yards. And no penalty if you get outside that, by accident - you'll be okay, as long as you're attempting to come back." He folded the paper and put it safely away in his pocket. "See? Could be worse." He glanced at Xander and his voice hardened. "Don't!" he ordered as Xander picked up the apple and raised it, as if to throw it at Spike.

"'Cause you can't hurt me, but I, sure as hell, can hurt you. And if you misbehave, I'll not have a qualm about turning you over my knee, like the naughty child you
are." The apple crashed into the wall on the far side of the room. Spike grinned. "Done with your tantrum now? Good. So go to sleep. We've still got a ways to go and I want to be on the road at sunset. Get out of this town, before that old bastard decides to call in any favours." He leaned forwards and unlaced his boots, kicking them to the floor, then he crawled under the covers and rolled over. He was asleep within minutes, in spite of the weight of Xander's glare on the back of his neck.

16. Not waving, but drowning

*Prompt: #31 - Hairbrush*

Xander finished eating his breakfast... supper... whatever meal it was. His life had become nocturnal. And wasn't that a weird thought? Counting back, he realised it was only two days. The day before yesterday, at this time, he'd been loitering on the way to school. Today he was sharing a motel room with a vampire.

Spike didn't move the whole time it took Xander to eat
the sandwiches and fruit Spike had supplied. Stuffing the packaging and apple cores into a single paper bag, Xander laid it carefully aside. The light from around the edge of the blinds was brighter now. He gave the bracelet on his wrist another futile tug. Nope. No way was that getting past his hand. He knew, in a theoretical, distant sort of way, that he was tired, but the food had given him a boost of energy and fear was doing the rest. He visually measured the distance to the door. Spike was a lump of blankets on the other bed, his face turned away from the faint daylight. Xander watched him and started to count. Spike still hadn't stirred by the time he reached five hundred, so he began to edge slowly across the mattress. Moving very carefully, praying the bed wouldn't creak with his shifting weight, he lowered his feet to the floor and rolled off onto his knees, lifting his body evenly away, until he was sitting back on his heels on the floor.

He froze, waiting painfully to make sure his movements were undetected. All he could hear was his own breathing, which seemed incredibly loud in the still room. He had a flash of memory of a TV show from years ago - something to do with a hunt through a haunted house and he opened his mouth, breathing through it, instead of his nose. The silence deepened.
Placing his hands on the floor in front of his knees, Xander pushed himself upright. His sneakers made no sound as he backed cautiously towards the door, eyes fixed on the patch of stark whiteness that was Spike's hair. When his right foot met the edge of the carpet, he stilled again, checking. Then he turned and placed a hand on the door handle. One last look back and he twisted the knob, wrenched the door open and lurched out into the welcoming daylight.

Xander heaved a huge sigh of relief. Step one accomplished. He was safe. Now he just had to work out how to get home, before the end of the day. Leaving the door wide open, only regretting the fact that it faced northeast, so the direct light didn't penetrate far into the room, he staggered to the car and laid his head on his folded arms, braced on the roof, as he caught his breath and considered his next move. No car keys, so no chance of just driving away. He needed help.

Looking around, he saw that the motel consisted of a row of rooms joined by a shallow porch. At the end of the row was the city. The morning rush-hour seemed to be in full swing and the air was heavy with exhaust fumes as rows of cars crawled past the motel entrance. He
considered hitching a lift, but they were hardly moving faster than walking pace. Between him and the road was the office. Of course, Spike would choose the room furthest away. Probably a habit developed over years, so the screams of his victims wouldn't attract undue attention.

Stepping away from the car, Xander walked out into the open and headed that way. It felt wonderful to have the sun beating down on his head. Elated and carefree, almost giddy with relief, he deliberately walked down the centre of the parking lot, past the few cars and the row of white lines which marked out the territories attached to each room. He stuck his hands in his pocket as he ambled, swinging his shoulders to some imagined music. As long as he stuck to daylight, he knew he was safe, in spite of the vague feeling of not-rightness that was attempting to crawl into his head and spoil his good mood.

He was twenty yards from the office when the first wave of dizziness struck, causing him to stumble and almost fall. Pausing he pulled his hands free and scrubbed his face, running his fingers back through his hair, tugging slightly in an attempt to clear his head. He looked around. Nothing had changed. The sun still shone
brightly, the cars still crawled past, but it was as if a pall had been thrown over the world. Shadows lurked at the edges of his vision and the skin on his forehead and cheeks felt tight. He took a couple more steps and a second wave of dizziness hit him. As it slowly cleared, he found himself bent over, hands braced on his knees. His stomach churned and he fought the desire to lose his meal.

Taking slow, deep breaths, he counted them in and out: one, two, three, four, five. The air tasted foully of rubber, burning at his throat. Bending his knees slightly, he pushed himself up with his arms. He felt like an old man - stiff and achy. Concentrating on the office he took one more deep breath and continued on. As he walked, the dizziness gradually transformed itself into a low, throbbing pain in his temples and by the time he reached the two shallow steps up to the office door, he had to hang on to the hand rail and pull himself up.

He fumbled blindly at the handle, opening the door more by luck than judgement, and lurched through, collapsing back against it to close it, panting with the effort of staying upright. The air here was dusty, but lacked the nauseating chemical stench of outside. He opened his eyes.
The man sitting behind the desk looked up from the magazine he was hunched over and leant back in his chair. He was young, though older than Xander, and heavily muscled. Xander squinted across the room, suddenly realising the character of the establishment. He didn't look very promising as a source of help, dressed, as he was, in a faded flannel shirt with the arms ripped off, over a blue T-shirt with a gold logo across the front. His hair was shaved away on the sides of his head, leaving a bristly patch balanced on top, and he had a long moustache, which gave him an even more villainous appearance than the clothes and hair cut already did. A double page spread of a sleek black motorbike was revealed on the desk in front of him. But appearances could be deceiving. He might be a real nice guy. He raised one heavily tattooed arm and ran his hand across the top of the strange brush of hair as he stared at Xander, neither encouraging not questioning.

Xander wiped his brow. "I need a telephone," he said.

Tough motorbike guy shook his head with a grunt. "Broke." Okay, maybe appearances were right.

Xander concentrated on his breathing, feeling the sweat
start up on his forehead. "Is there another?"

The guy looked at him critically. "Don't be sick in here. Go outside," he ordered, turning back to his magazine, apparently dismissing Xander from his thoughts.

Xander felt tears gather at the corners of his eyes and willed them back. "Please?" he whispered.

The guy looked up again, apparently surprised to see Xander still there. "Next door." He nodded vaguely to the left. "C-store's got one outside." He turned back to his magazine. That was definitely a dismissal.

Xander stared at him for a bit longer, but he didn't look up again. As he stood, trying to overcome the almost paralysing discomfort and summon the energy to move, Xander remembered Spike reading the instructions for his magical cuffs. Oh God! He tried to remember exactly what Spike had said. A hundred yards, was that it? He was feeling worse and worse with each passing moment, his skin itched and his bones ached and suddenly he knew, it was not going to stop. If he was going to call Giles, he would either have to go back to Spike, until he felt better, or be quick about it. Whatever the magic was, it didn't feel like a specific compulsion to return. And
having been possessed twice, Xander knew what that felt like. But whatever it was, the urge to run back to the room and hide under the blankets was strong, and strangely, that was the very thing that finally made him realise he had to hold out. If he went back until he recovered, it would be twice as hard to set out again. Plus, who knew if he'd get another chance?

His hand found the door knob behind him and he stumbled back out of the office, turning right towards the street, hands braced on the wall. The darkness was encroaching ever further on his vision, the sweat on his nose and brow prickled like needles and the skin all over his body felt tight and sensitive. His left hand hit air and he almost fell. Raising his eyes from his feet, he realised he'd reached the corner of the building and was on the sidewalk. He looked around frantically, searching for the convenience store. There it was. The twenty yards between him and it, stretched away like the expanse of the Sahara. Focusing solely on the phone booth by the door, Xander allowed the darkness to take the rest of his vision. "Okay," he muttered. "On three." He took deep breaths as he counted. "One, two, three." With a lurching move he launched himself into space. Each step was exquisite discomfort, but by reciting Giles' number over and over, like a mantra, he managed to ignore that and
keep his eyes fixed on his goal. Vaguely he was aware of other people rushing past, of the noise of traffic beside him, of the sun cutting into his brain. He held on to the sequence of Giles' phone number, as if they were the only thing in the world that mattered, as he forced his legs to move.

Then he was there. He was on his hands and knees, but he was there. The telephone hung above him like the Holy Grail, finally found. Walking his hands off the wall, he got himself upright and fumbled the handset off its rest. The buttons on the keypad were dancing all over the place and he had to close one eye and squint with the other to make the '0' stand still long enough to hit it. He got the handset up to his ear and leant his back against the wall, catching his breath and gathering his thoughts for the next challenge. The voice of the operator was cool and businesslike.

He forced the words out through teeth clenched against the pressure. "I need to make a collect call to a number in Sunnydale." He recited his mantra aloud and heard the connection going through.

The ring tone sounded. It sounded again. And again. And again.
"There's no answer from that number, Sir. Is there another you want to try?" She sounded almost interested, sympathetic. But Xander didn't know another number. His brain could hardly compute anything other than the ones he'd been reciting. The handset fell from his hands. Faintly he registered the tinny voice. "Sir. Are you there, Sir? Do you need me to call 911?" He was sitting on the ground, back against the wall and the handset swung in the air next to him.

For long minutes he didn't move, listening to the buzz of the dial tone, as the truth of his situation settled in his brain. The pain began to fade, slightly. Eventually, he realised that he was beginning to attract attention. Wearily he hauled himself to his feet and looked around. The cars still crawled by at walking pace. The sun was still bright in the sky. He turned and walked back towards the motel.

~~*~*~*~*~~

Inside the room, standing back in the shadows, Spike watched Xander's approach. He noted the slumped shoulders and the defeated stance. With a smile of
satisfaction he went back to bed and this time he went to sleep.

When he woke up seven hours later, he found Xander curled up on the veranda outside the door. He looked peaceful, although he was hugging his jacket tightly around himself in his sleep. It had been sunlit in the morning, but now the long shadows of late afternoon had probably robbed him of his warmth. Spike dragged a blanket off the bed and laid it over the boy, before going back inside. There was no rush, really and a long, relaxed shower would set him up nicely for the drive ahead.

17. Make and mend

*Prompt: #32 - Ankara*

Spike nudged Xander with his foot. "Hey, time to get up." Xander didn't react. He nudged him harder. "Come on. Up you get. This guard dog at the door impression is all very well, but it's time to get up and get moving."

Xander turned his head and opened one bleary eye. "Woof," he whispered, half-heartedly, before pulling the blanket over his head.

Spike reached down and grabbed the corner, dragging it
away. "Go get a shower. I'm going to find us some food."

That woke the boy up. He sat up suddenly. "But... but, you can't." Spike raised an eyebrow, questioningly. "A hundred yards," he stuttered. "I'll have to go with you." He paused, as if finally facing an unpleasant truth. "Oh God, I'm stuck with you, aren't I?"

Spike smiled. "Don't worry mate. Won't be a problem. You're not trying to leave. It works on intention, remember? I can leave. You can't. Got it? Now go shower. I won't be long." And he stepped over Xander's legs and walked away along the porch, towards the town. He was aware of Xander's eyes following him, but when he got to the office and looked back, the boy had already disappeared.

In fact he was an hour, or more. It felt so good to be out on his feet, instead of endlessly sitting in the car. He started to run and then kept going, for the sheer joy of it. Finding himself a good meal was not a problem, a homeless guy on a park bench, and there were more than enough shops open to provide a suitably healthy meal for a human. It had been a long time since Spike had needed to eat human food, and it had changed. It was interesting, actually looking at the variety on the
shelves, reading some of the labels and picking through the fruit, savouring the fresh, green smells. He took his time.

~*~*~*~*~

Grocery bag in hand, Spike strode back towards the room, feeling light and carefree. It wouldn't last, but for now it felt good. He'd almost reached the car and was already reviewing the best route out of town, when Xander's head popped into view above the roof. Spike took the last three steps slowly and carefully placed the bag down on the lid of the boot, as he peered around the far side of the car. His possessions were spread across the tarmac and he stood for a moment, rooted to the spot with surprise.

Xander reached back inside the open rear door and hauled a small wooden box off the seat, placing it carefully on the ground. He looked up at Spike and grinned. "Don't worry, I'll put it all back. I'm just trying to make some space."

"Some space?"
"Yeah, for my stuff. I need some clothes, Spike. I've been wearing these for three days. I've been thinking - like most of the day and in the shower, just now, and I figure, if I'm stuck with you, and you're not going to kill me, you'd better buy me some clothes." He looked up at Spike and his voice took on the tones of exaggerated concern. "Unless you like sharing a car with a stinky human?" Reading the answer to that in Spike's face, he nodded. "Didn't think so." He clambered back into the car and busied himself with rearranging the stuff piled there. Spike leant back against the rear wing, dug his fags out of his pocket and settled back to watch Xander work, and to make sure his own possessions were all safely returned to their places.

By the time Xander had finished, all the gear was stored away again, leaving a patch of seat about eighteen inches wide, still empty. Xander stood back and admired it. "My wardrobe," he said, proudly. "I can't do anything about leaving, so I'm going to have to make the best of things. Right?"

"Er, yeah, sure, mate," Spike mumbled around his fag. "The best of things." He felt adrift in the face of this new creature. This wasn't the defeated boy of the morning, nor the sulky one of the night before. What the fuck had
happened while he slept?

Xander nodded briskly. "Okay then. Is that mine?" He gestured towards the grocery bag. Spike nodded. "Good, I'm starved. What did you get me?" He grabbed the bag, sat down on the porch step and started pulling things out of it. The plastic wrapped sandwich stayed out, as did the carton of milk and one of the apples. The rest of the apples, the grapes, sliced meat, bottle of orange juice and the bread rolls, went back. He looked up. "Thanks. I'll come with you next time. Guess they didn't have proper junk food when you were alive, eh?"

This was very strange. "Aren't you even a bit afraid?" Spike asked.

Xander paused in unwrapping the sandwich and glanced up. "Totally terrified," he agreed, seriously. "But since I can't do anything about where I am, I've decided I need to take control of what I can. Way I see it, this is good for both of us - I get to be clean and you get to have an unsmelly co-driver."

In the face of the inexplicable, Spike latched on to the last word. "Co-driver?" he asked, dubiously.
"Sure. Why not?" Xander paused, as if he expected an answer to that one, but Spike could think of so many reasons, he couldn't pick one out of the mass. Giving up with a shrug, Xander continued, "So, mall? shops? clothes? We're all packed. We can go now, if you like."

~*~*~*~*~

The parking lot was fairly empty, which Spike took to be a good sign. He parked near the main doors and sat back, hands braced on the wheel. Xander looked at him. "You have to come with me," he said. "I can't walk away from you, remember."

Spike sighed and hauled himself out of the car. With a shake of his head, he watched Xander march ahead, as he trailed him towards the shops.

Xander headed straight for some cheap chain store, Payless or Target, or something. Spike caught up with him and herded him away, to a store which looked more like one he would be seen dead in.

Jeans were easy. Spike noted the size Xander was looking at, walked over to the shelf of Wranglers and picked up a
pair, thrusting them into Xander's arms. Shirts were more difficult. Xander headed to the generic T-shirts, with their glaring bright colours, but no way was Spike associating with Xander in orange. He grabbed hold of the boy by the scruff of the neck and steered him away from the piles of cheap clothes in sealed plastic bags, to an area where the shirts hung on hangers. With a quick glance, to assess Xander's size, he picked up navy blue, black, forest green, maroon and grey and added those to the pile in Xander's arms.

Xander gazed at him, open mouthed. "Hey, man, what are you doing?"

"Buying you some proper shirts, in proper colours, which don't make you look like a neon display."

"But I like those colours, is not just that they're cheap." Spike just looked at him, sceptically. "Colours are expressive."

"Yeah, pet, expressive of God-awful bad taste." He scowled at Xander and stomped off to find a couple of long sleeved shirts.

Xander glared at him. "Those are so conventional. I'm
seventeen, I'm supposed to explore possibilities."

"Well I'm 120, and I know better." He dumped the shirts on the pile. "Socks and knickers," he said, pointing. "Go."

Back at the car Xander deposited his new purchasers lovingly in his space on the backseat. He shoved his hands in pockets of his new jeans, hunched his shoulders in his new leather jacket, and looked up at Spike shyly. "Thanks," he mumbled.

"Just get in the car, whelp. I need to get out of here."

~*~*~*~*~

As they pulled on to the I-80, Xander leant back in his seat and turned to Spike with a grin. "That was fun. I got more new clothes in half an hour than I did in the last year. You," he added, with emphasis, "are a man who knows how to shop. You'd put Buffy to shame." He sighed with satisfaction. "I feel like we're bonding. This could be the start of a beautiful friendship."

Spike smirked. "Do you, pet?"
"But I'm not going to turn nocturnal, okay? So next place we stop, I want to be close to the restaurant. Will you give me some money?" Spike said nothing, but Xander didn't seem discouraged. "The way I see it, if I'm stuck with you, I'm going to have to make the best of it. Then, I figure, I hang around and wait for someone to kill you, since I can't do it myself."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Going to be waiting a long time then. Hundred and twenty years and two slayers have tried that and I'm still walking."

Xander looked thoughtful. "Two slayers? Hmm, I think I remember Giles saying something about that once. Something about China? When was that?"

"1900, there abouts. Boxer Rebellion was in full swing. Blood and fire in the streets. Dead missionaries all over the place. Took her out in a temple."

"Why were you in China?"

"Don't know. Just went where Darla's whim took us. Took us to China."

"What about after that?"
Spike shrugged. "Back to Europe, through British India, Persia, Turkey, Greece, back to Germany, eventually. Then we went to Paris for a while. What is this, twenty bloody questions?"

"British India?" Xander sounded honestly puzzled. "Is there more than one?"

"Sure, they've got them all over." Spike glared at the boy. "What do you think?" Xander was doing a parody of polite interest. Spike sighed. Again. "You know? The Raj? Sun never set on the British Empire and all that rot?"

Xander frowned. "But it did set. It's gone. The US is the new power in the world."

"Not how it worked. They meant literally. Think about it, Canada, the UK, good bits of African, India, Australia and a fair smattering of Pacific Islands - there was always somewhere in the British Empire with the sun in the sky."

"Have you been to all those places?" Xander asked, apparently diverted by this new thought.

Spike raised an eyebrow. Again. "Lot of them."
"So after India...?"

"By sea to Persia, as it was then, then overland." At Xander's interrogatory grunt, he explained. "Don't want to spend too long at sea, pet - food's limited." He thought back to that long journey, only months after Angelus left for the second time, and remembered Dru's savagery, whenever he let her out of his sight. "Shirraz was beautiful in those days. Dru loved the Middle East, better than Asia. We went through Palestine to Turkey - Adana to Ankara to Istanbul. That was all the Ottoman Empire in those days, of course."

"The Ottoman Empire?"

"Don't they teach you anything? You know sultans, harems and eunuchs."

"You're kidding?" He sounded awed. "You mean like the Arabian nights?"

"So you have read some literature, then?" Spike observed.

Xander grinned, self-depreciatingly. "Well, I saw a movie."
Spike laughed back. "Tell you what pet, once we get to New York, I'm going to teach you to read."

18. A leaf in the wind

Prompt: #33 - Hopi

When the phone rang, Giles was in the middle of his habitual, slow Saturday morning wake-up routine - tea, shower, shave, tea, breakfast, more tea. More accurately, he was only half way through the shave portion of his morning routine. For a single moment he considered letting it ring, but too many years of suffering from, and preparing for, emergencies, won over that base instinct. Throwing his razor into the hand basin, he ran down the hall to the living room, trying to stamp down the spark of hope that rose in his heart.

The desk was a mess, necessitating a rapid search under copies of Occultus Quaero and Argentum Veneficus, and a Hopi Koshare mask (acquired in the mistaken belief
that it was a relic of the local Chumash tribe, an error he could kick himself for, now that he knew more about the subject) to find the source of the insistent summons.

He was surprised that whoever it was hadn't rung off, the time it took for him to find the damn thing. As a result he was a little abrupt in answering. "Yes?" he snapped.

There was a pause, then an uncertain voice asked, "Giles?"

Giles sat down in shock, only a moment later registering with gratitude that there had indeed been a chair behind him, as the spark took flame. "X-Xander? Is that you? Oh thank God! Xander, are you alright? Where are you?"

"I'm okay, Giles. I'm not dead. I promise." He sounded so close. "But Spike's got me."

Without conscious thought, Giles' hand lifted to cover his eyes and he wiped it down his face as he took in the news. Not quite the worst he had feared, but still bad. His hand was covered in soap and he wiped it clean on the leg of his trousers. "Xander," he said, urgently, "tell me where you are. I'll come and get you."
Xander sounded almost calm, it was worrying. "I'm somewhere in Nebraska, or possibly Iowa. And you can't come and get me. There's this whole thing with a spell. I can't leave. I tried a couple of days ago. It wasn't nice. You have to trust me on this one." He paused. "Oh, and I can't kill him, either."

Giles propped the phone under his chin and groped through the rubbish for a pad of paper and a pen. "Where's Spike, now?"

"He's asleep. I'm in the lobby of the motel."

"He's not there with you?" Giles sat up in his chair, hope blossoming. He took a breath, to calm himself. "Get out of there, Xander," he instructed. "Get into the daylight and keep going. Get to a bank. Any bank. Find out where you are and call me in half an hour. I'll arrange some money for a flight, or a bus, or something."

Xander's reply was impatient. "Giles. You're not listening to me. I. Can't. Leave. It's a spell." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Listen. I'm playing nice. I figure if I do that, he won't kill me. We're going to New York. I don't know why." Another pause, longer this time, but Giles somehow sensed that he shouldn't interrupt. "Can
Giles reached up and pulled off his glasses. "They've already filed a missing persons on you."

"They did? That's nice. I mean... Okay." It was indicative of something, that Xander sounded surprised. "Hang on." He asked, suspiciously. "Was that because you did it already?"

Giles would have laughed, if it hadn't been so bloody tragic. What did you say in such a situation? "I'm sure they're worried sick about you."

For a moment Xander's voice held a hint of humour. "Yeah, I'm sure they are." He took another deep breath and seemed to dismiss further thoughts of his parents from his mind. When he spoke again, he sounded lost, forlorn. "I don't know what to do, except what I'm doing."

Giles refocused on the immediate crisis "Has he hurt you?"

The hint of a laugh was back in Xander's voice, but it sounded strained. "No. He bought me clothes. And he
got a room close to the lobby, because I asked. That's how I could make this call. I can't go further than a hundred yards from him, Giles. He can leave me, but I can't leave him. Thing is, I don't want him to leave me dead, hence the playing nice."

Giles mentally reviewed Xander's previous statements. "Okay, tell me about this spell. Everything you know." Maybe he could find an counter spell, if he knew what he was looking for.

"It's a bracelet. Green stone, smooth, no markings. He got it from a guy in Reno. I don't remember much. I think my memory is a bit cloudy on that." Xander paused, as if trying to pull the memories in. "I think I remember walking down an alley... then I was in this really weird shop... and this guy had these huge eyes." There was silence at the end of the line, then a 'huff' of frustration. "And that's it. I can't remember exactly how he did it, but I got a nifty magic bracelet that acts like a handcuff, so I can't leave and I can't kill him - not that I've tried that, because really, the trying to leave was bad enough. And I can't get it off."

Giles could feel Xander's frustration. "Be strong," he admonished. "We will sort this out. You may not be able
to kill him, but I can. We will get you back and we will find a way to get you away from him, even if we have to kidnap him, so he comes back with you. You hear me, Xander?" He put every ounce of conviction he could manage into his words - determination and hope were powerful weapons, in their own right. "We will get you back. And we will break the spell."

There was a sound of choking, over the phone. "Ugh, Giles, sorry, even listening to that plan is making the spell kick in. I'm sorry. I've gotta go. Give the girls my love, yeah?"

The dial tone sounded loud in Giles' ear and he pulled the phone away and stared at it blankly. He would have to talk to Buffy and Willow. Tell them Xander was almost safe. Buffy had been tearing Sunnydale apart for five nights, searching for Spike. Her instinct would be to rush off immediately to the rescue, but Giles knew it was more complicated than that. As he carefully placed the handset back in its cradle, he wondered if there hadn't been some deliberation in Xander not disclosing his location. Xander knew Buffy very well. Meanwhile, Giles needed an alternative plan. He turned and began to scan the bookshelves when another thought struck him. Picking up the phone again, he dialled a number from
memory. There was a pause, then, "Ms Calendar, Jenny. I need your help tracing magic workers in Nevada."

19. The undead poets' society

Prompt: #34 - Trollop. Defined as: A woman regarded as slovenly or untidy; a slattern

Spike glanced at Xander, asleep in the passenger seat, as he exited the GW Bridge. After eight days and nights, the boy seemed to have finally settled into acceptance of his status as prisoner. It had been a mostly uneventful trip and for once Spike was happy to have it so. He'd been laying low, driving every night, finding inconspicuous motels for the days and feeding only once, just before they drove out of town. Being careful like this was usually second nature, but he'd got lazy on the Hellmouth, where the most blatant behaviour didn't raise more than an eyebrow. Getting here had been his immediate goal and it was not a bad thing to have a reason for re-establishing well learnt habits of discretion.
So why had he taken the boy? At the time, it had been expedient, but there was no doubt, if it had not been Xander, his kidnappee would probably have been a snack on the road, eaten and forgotten by now. He shook his head, faintly puzzled by his own behaviour. It was true that the boy had captured his imagination from his first encounter, when Angelus offered him up as a peace offering, but looking back, that didn't seem enough of a reason. Circumstance may have brought them together, but why was he still here, unharmed, after more than 3,000 miles?

Tired of trying to figure it out, Spike shelved such thoughts and concentrated on the road. Even in the middle of the night this city was never still and where he was heading was right at its heart.

One of the many advantages of living for a hundred years, was the convenience of accumulated interest and property - especially when the pounds and dollars accumulating were just leftovers from past meals. Spike had learnt a lot from Angelus in the first twenty years of his unlife, but he'd learnt even more from Darla in the next - before he took Dru and left the Old Master's Court.

He turned a last corner and there it was - the building
had been empty when he'd 'acquired' it in 1933, on one of his periodic visits to the US, before the lure of the rising power of Nazi Germany had drawn him back to Europe again. Through all the years he'd maintained this place. It had been his base of operations in the seventies, when Nikki had tried to close him down, and it was still his.

Spike pulled the car into the ground floor garage. The first task was to locate Azumar, who should have got a few leads for him by now. It was only 4am, plenty of time to get unloaded and back out on the streets. In fact, he paused and considered Xander again. Yes, the boy could do that in the daylight. He nudged Xander. "Come on, you. We're here and we're going out." Xander mumbled something incomprehensible. "Oi! Wake up ya lazy slattern." Spike nudged him again.

Xander raised his head and lifted bleary eyes to Spike's face. "Huh?"

"Not a morning person, are you, Pet?"

"It's not morning. It's the middle of the night. Where are we?" He rubbed his face. "And what do you mean, 'slattern'? What's a slattern?"
Spike just grinned and ignored the last question, in favour of answering the first. "My place," he said. "One of my places. New York." He opened the door, climbed out and walked around to the passenger side, opening that door too. "Come on. There's stuff to do. People to see. Questions to ask." Reaching a hand in, he grabbed Xander's arm and hauled him to his feet. "Come on. We're going out"

Xander came reluctantly, but soon he was standing, leaning against the door, shaking his head to clear it, as he gazed around the space. "So this is home?" he asked, unenthusiastically.

"No, you ninny. This is the garage. Home is upstairs. But that can wait. We're going out. I have a date with a demon - if we can find him. He has information I need. So move your lazy arse." He grabbed the collar of Xander's jacket and dragged him towards the door. "We'll unpack when we get back. Or do you want me to leave without you?"

Xander shook his head once more. "I'm coming. I'm coming. You don't need to get nasty about it." He pulled himself free of Spike's grasp, but he kept walking and
Spike smiled to himself. Xander had learnt through uncomfortable experience that the spell interpreted a direct refusal to accompany Spike, when told to do so, as an attempt to run away. Spike had no fear that the boy would allow more than the maximum one hundred yards to separate them. In fact he stuck to about fifty, as he trailed Spike down the street.

As he walked, Spike gazed around at the closed up boutiques and the bars and clubs which still showed lights. This place had changed dramatically since his first visit in the early years of the century. Then it had been the Lower East Side, a prime hunting ground, as long as you concentrated on the lost individuals and avoided the tight-knit European immigrant families. By the seventies, when he and Dru were here and Nikki interfered with his plans, it had already been renamed the East Village. Now he was back to pick up those threads Nikki had tried to cut. Somewhere in this city was a clue he had been searching for, intermittently, for sixty years. Somewhere was the information he needed to find the Gem of Amara. And this time the slayer would not get in his way. He glanced back at Xander, grinned to himself and, with renewed determination, headed to Marley's, as a first stop in his search.
For three nights Xander had trailed behind Spike as they roamed the streets of lower Manhattan, searching for God knows what. For three nights Xander had maintained his maximum safe distance and refused to go with Spike into the various dens, clubs and bars he been searching through. Instead he'd hung around outside and generally been bored out of his mind.

Which had left him with far too much time to think and he was still nowhere nearer to understanding why Spike had kidnapped him. Spike, himself, was singularly uncommunicative about what he was doing in New York and Xander was stubborn enough not to ask. They had fallen into a pattern of communicating for essentials and not much else. It was almost comfortable. Xander was having difficulty remembering what his life had been like before Spike.

His determination not to change his sleep patterns to accommodate his captor's preferences had not lasted long. After the second night he'd had to admit that he really did need more than a couple of hours sleep in
every 24. The morning after that second night he'd been staggering by the time they got back to Spike's apartment and he'd fallen into the nest of cushions and blankets he'd claimed in the corner of the main living room and slept through most of the day.

Their new home was an old garment factory, well outside the garment district and now stripped of its machines and most of the work tables. Instead the ground floor was an open space, where the car was parked, the next floor was living space and the floors above were unused. The living space was amazing -- a single, huge room, with a fully fitted kitchen at one end and a big bed at the other, polished wood floors with African and oriental rugs, comfortable chairs and a couple of oak dressers. There was a bathroom off to one side, bigger than any he had seen before, with a bath and a shower but no toilet. For that he had to go back down to a room on the ground floor, with stalls and coat hooks and a redundant clock card machine on the wall outside. At least the plumbing still worked. When called on it Spike had shrugged. "Did this place up in the seventies, didn't need a bog, so didn't put one in."

Xander had staked out a space against the wall, under the shuttered windows and near the kitchen, as his,
dragging one of the dressers across, to create a partition and to hold his belongings. He appropriated cushions and blankets from the couch to make up a bed on the floor. Spike raised an eyebrow, but made no comment.

The first day, Xander spent exploring the building as Spike slept. The top two floors were a treasure trove of old junk and he poked into cupboards and identified suitable hiding places, for when he had things he wanted to hide. Eventually hunger drove him back down to the kitchen and he produced a meal of sorts from the odd mix of ingredients Spike had picked up before they headed home. That was the one time he didn't trail behind Spike and, looking back, he had to smile about the fiercely whispered argument they'd conducted over fresh vegetables versus packets of chips.

~*~*~*~*~

On the fourth night they left the factory as usual, Xander trailing behind, but Spike seemed reluctant to leave. As he locked the door behind them he turned to Xander. "How about we take a night off, pet? How about we go do something... something different? Pretend we're just two blokes out for a night?"
Xander was stunned and nodded, only realising a moment later what he had done. But as they walked down the street he thought at least it wouldn't be another night of leaning against walls, like he was trolling for customers, and being bored out of his head.

The bar was really not what Xander had expected. Dark? Yes. Smoke-filled? Yes. But rowdy? No. Half the occupants seemed to be drinking coffee and there wasn't a single demon in sight, at least not that Xander recognised. A small stage with a spot-lit stool and microphone occupied one corner and the walls were covered in posters advertising books, films, concerts by bands he had never heard of and yoga and meditation classes. Spike pointed at a small table near the door and marched over to the bar. Xander watched him go, briefly considering marching off himself, in the opposite direction, but that would only lead to another night standing around street corners, so he shrugged to himself and slipped into one of the seats.

When Spike came back, he was carrying a whisky and a beer for himself and a large glass of lemonade which he placed in front of Xander. "Just sit still and keep quiet, okay mate? I'm taking the night off and I'm going to have
a quiet drink. And I don't want any bitching from you about where I choose to do it."

Xander picked up his glass of lemonade and took a sip. Just then a loud clicking sound indicated that the microphone had been switched on and Xander's attention was grabbed by the guy up on stage. "Welcome all, to tonight's open mic night. And to start us off, here's one of our regulars. Let's have a round of applause for Jimmy."

There was a polite spattering of applause around the room and a tall gangling figure stood up and walked towards the stage.

```
~*~*~*~*~
```

Four hours later Xander was wondering if he should take up drinking. One amateur poet after another had taken the stage and read their verse to the thin crowd. Most of them appeared to be college students, a couple of years older than Xander. A few looked older still. Some of them were actually not bad, in Xander's opinion. Some of them were awful. Through it all Spike slouched back in his chair with a faintly supercilious smile on his face (although
Xander noticed that he was listening carefully) every now and again lighting another cigarette or signalling for another drink. At least he seemed to be able to hold his liquor, which was more than could be said for the small group of Goths and Punks at the table right in front of the stage, who had been getting gradually louder as the night progressed.

It was close to 1am when a small, scrawny guy, with long blonde hair, got up and hesitantly made his way towards the stage, clutching a notebook tightly. It looked like he'd really had to psych himself up to step forward. The MC introduced him as Robby and explained it was his first time, an introduction that didn't seem to help the guy's nerves at all. He fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, sat down on the stool, fumbled the adjustment of the microphone, almost dropped his notebook and then spent too long nervously leafing through it. The punks began to jeer softly and Xander felt kind of sorry for the guy. Eventually he seemed to find what he was looking for and looked up, gazing round the room over the tops of everyone's heads. Glancing back at his notebook he took a couple of deep breaths but, just as he opened his mouth again to speak, he was interrupted. "Why are we waiting?" one of the punks called out, singsonging the words in mocking tones.
Robby's eyes went wide with surprise and he gulped. He glanced frantically around, but the MC seemed to have temporarily left the room. He took another breath and blindly reached out, grabbing the microphone stand, and began. His voice was hesitant and he held the mic too close, so every breath rasped loudly, distorting the words.

"I lie in bed and dream of you.
Why do you hurt me so?
We share a space, but not a life.
Why do you haunt me so?
I hear you weep, 'most every night.
But you don't notice me.

I see the wounds she leaves behind,
which I know that I could heal.
If you could only look at me,
I know you'd see my soul.
And if you did, then you would see,
that we were meant to be."

By the time he'd stuttered through the last line, the jeering from the punks was virtually drowning him out. Other members of the audience appeared to be torn
between embarrassment and amusement at their antics and, although a couple of people looked at them meaningfully, no one actually told them to be quiet. Then someone did.

Spike surged to his feet and was across the room before Xander could even blink. He grabbed the two loudest young men by their collars and hauled them to their feet. What he whispered to them couldn't be heard by anyone, but the crash as their two heads banged together echoed around the suddenly silent room. Spike looked up at the young man on the stage. "You carry on, mate. I'll get rid of the garbage," he announced, and he marched the two young men to the door, which someone quickly held open for him, and tossed them out into the street. Turning back into the room he slapped his hands together, as if wiping them clean, looking pleased with himself. Xander stared at him, open mouthed with surprise, as he calmly reclaimed his seat.

Meanwhile Robby had taken the opportunity to vacate the stage and the MC had returned. He looked around the room, spotted Robby sitting back in his corner and nodded to him, before going on to introduce the next act. The remaining group of punks stayed for another few minutes, as they finished their drinks and those of
their departed companions, then they stood up, ostentatiously casual, and swaggered out of the bar.

Xander turned to Spike questioningly. "Why did you do that?" he asked. "You didn't even try to eat them."

Spike's eyes narrowed consideringly, then he shrugged. "Not hungry," he snapped. And that appeared to be it.

The bar closed shortly after two, by which time there were only a few remaining stragglers. Spike and Xander were the last to leave.

Out on the sidewalk Spike stood gazing up at the sky and took a deep breath. He stilled and Xander watched as he swung his head from left to right, apparently searching for something. He nodded. "Come on, mate, this way," he said, as he took off, with Xander hurrying along behind.

They rounded a corner and there in front of them were the jeering group of punks. They stood in a loose circle, with their backs to Spike and Xander, watching something in their midst. The shouts of encouragement, the clapping and the stamping of feet were loud in the confined space. Spike sniffed the air again and stalked
forward. When he reached the oblivious group he brought his arms up, sweeping them outwards and two bodies crashed into opposite walls of the alley. Another two fell beneath crashing blows to the sides of their heads, from the edge of Spike's fists, as he swung his arms back together and a fifth flew across the alley, colliding with a dumpster as Spike's left foot caught him squarely in the ass. By the time Xander was within a couple of yards of the action there were five unconscious bodies on the ground and the remaining three were turning away from the object on the floor, finally registering that something else was going on.

Spike stood in the centre of the alley arms lose by his sides, feet braced squarely a foot apart. He considered the three young men in front of him, tilting his head to one side, as if in considering them, he found them wanting. Xander backed up to the wall and began to edge towards the lump they had been playing with, but his eyes were fixed firmly on the four figures standing in a loose circle a few yards away.

The three punks exchanged a look, each one of them was bigger than Spike and they obviously hadn't registered that five of their company were already unconscious. With a yell they charged. Spike fell back half a step
shifting his weight for balance and let them come. At the last minute he bent double and the leader did a spectacular somersault over his back, crashing to the floor behind him. Spike was upright again in moments and blocked a clumsy punch from the one on his right, grabbing his fist mid blow. The other one bent over and charged, as if to head-butt Spike. But Spike danced out of the way and the punk went stumbling past him, only just saving his head from crashing into the wall by bracing his hands in front of him.

Spike looked like he was just holding the other guy's hand, but his victim, his attacker, moaned in pain and slowly collapsed to his knees. Spike brought his other fist down on the young man's wrist and Xander heard a sickening crack as the bones in his arm snapped. A follow-up blow to the temple and another body lay unmoving on the ground. Spike spun around, as his last conscious opponent grappled him from behind and this time they both went over.

Xander tore his eyes away and looked at the object of their earlier attentions. As he had suspected, it was the poet. He crouched down unsure about whether to touch, afraid of doing more harm. Thankfully, Robby chose that moment to groan and open his eyes. He rolled onto his
back clutching his ribs. Even in the dim light of the alley Xander could see that he would have a livid bruise to his cheek shortly. But it didn't look as if his neck was broken. "Can you get up?" he asked. "If I help you, do you think you could stand?" Robby nodded, so Xander got his hands under Robby's arms and hauled him up. Getting one of Robby's arms around his own shoulders to help him, they staggered together back towards the Street. Once there Xander glanced around searching for help of any sort. "Do you live near here?" he asked.

"At the University," Robby gasped. "It's not far, but I think I'll take a cab. Please, can you help me find one?"

Xander nodded. "Sure. Come on. If we go that way, it's busier. There's sure to be one there." He glanced quickly back down the alley. He could make out two figures on the ground, but no detail. It was more than a hundred yards to the main road, but since he was planning to come back he silently prayed that the spell wouldn't misunderstand him and kick in.

It didn't and he managed to find a cab and assist Robby into it. By the time he got back to the alley, Spike was waiting for him, a satisfied smirk on his face. Xander looked at him. "Are they all dead?" he asked wearily.
"No, pet, not all of them." He tilted his head to one side, considering Xander. "I have to eat. But I know how much I need to live. You get the young poet away safe?"
Xander nodded. "Right then. Let's be getting home. That was fun, but I'm thinking the telly will have been delivered by now. Come on." And he turned and walked away, leaving Xander confused, horrified and relieved in his wake.

20. Going out to the dance

Prompt: #36 - Batting a thousand

For the next few nights Spike went out alone and came home as the first glow of sunrise began to light the sky. Xander should have spent that time re-establishing his human sleep patterns, but for some reason he found he couldn't settle. He tried climbing into his nest of blankets and pulling the covers over his head, but he always ended up sitting in one of the easy chairs, channel hopping through the seemingly endless range on the big
TV. When he eventually found a station that showed nothing but classic SciFi he could have cheered and when he accidentally stumbled on a porn channel he couldn't believe his luck, although he sat watching in a state of mixed excitement and dread, with his finger hovering over the button on the remote and more than half his concentration focussed on listening for boots on the stairs, for fear Spike would come back and catch him before he could switch back to the Star Trek re-runs.

Each morning Spike came in, glanced across at Xander and disappeared into the bathroom. When he re-emerged he went straight to bed and that was Xander's signal to clamber into his own corner and finally get some sleep. They didn't talk and the silence was really getting to him. He didn't do silence very well.

By the fourth night he'd had enough and when Spike dragged on his duster, obviously planning to go out again, he cracked.

"Spike?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I come with you?" he asked hesitantly. "If you told
me what you're doing... maybe I could help?"

Spike just looked at him. "Why would you want to do that?" he asked, eventually.

"I don't. Well... I mean... I don't know what you're doing. But I... I just thought... I've been stuck here for days and..."

"Getting cabin fever, pet?" For some reason he looked pleased and Xander scowled at him. "You can go out anytime you want, as long as you come back."

Xander was stunned. "I can?"

Spike raised a satirical eyebrow. "Intention, mate. How often do I need to tell you?" His eyes narrowed. "And no, you can't leave on the promise of coming back in twenty years." He pursed his lips in thought, his tongue pushing at the back of his bottom lip. "Time I set some ground rules," he said grinning. "Just so you can make your intentions clear. You can go out to the shops, but you come back here once you're done. Before I start to notice you're gone. If you stay out too long you'll know it and the spell will kick in."
"How will I know when you start to notice I'm gone?" Xander asked dubiously. This had to be a trick. But he was so desperate for company, he thought he'd trade anything for some conversation.

"Intention." That was definitely smug and the repetition irritated Xander. "It's when you think I'll have started to notice. Okay?"

The accumulated pressure of the last week suddenly broke through, now that Spike was acknowledging his presence, making Xander want to scream. "Why are you doing this?" he cried in frustration. "Why are you keeping me here? What do you want from me?"


"Company? But you don't talk to me. You go out and leave me here. You come home and go to sleep. What is this?" He drew in a heaving breath and collapsed back in his chair. "I don't understand," he groaned. "And oh my God, I sound like my Mother."

Spike burst out laughing. Then he sobered up and shrugged. "Been busy," he said calmly. "You seemed alright. Didn't seem to mind."
"I didn't mind," Xander agreed. "But I've been stuck here for days and I'm going crazy."

Spike looked puzzled. "Does that mean you did mind?" he asked.

"No. Yes. I don't know." Xander felt his frustration mounting again. "I don't know anything right now. I don't know why I'm here. I don't know what you want. I don't know... anything," he finished, throwing up his arms.

"I suppose I just forgot about you," Spike mused. He shook his head. "You looked happy enough."

"You forgot about me? What is this? You kidnap me. Haul me right across the country, then you forget about me?"

"I've been busy. I brought you food, when you ate the last lot." He almost sounded defensive. Almost. And Xander was almost fooled, but there was something in his tone... something Xander just couldn't pin down, which alerted him.

"You make me sound like the pet cat," he groused. "Give it food and it's happy enough. Doesn't need any
attention. Better than a dog - you don't have to take it for walks." By the time he finished he was almost spitting and Spike was laughing again.

"Okay, pet," he acknowledged with a final huff of laughter and an expression of satisfaction that worried Xander slightly. "If you've finally given up on this ostentatious habit of staying outside the door, you can come with me and I'll tell you what's going on. Sort of. I finally got a lead. Need to go talk to a guy. You come too and we'll see about how you can help."

"Help with what?"

"Ah, that would be the part I'm not telling. Yet."

This time as they walked down the street Xander walked at Spike's side. The night was clear, unseasonably cool and the traffic was light, with more people on foot than usual, as if they had been persuaded to leave their cars behind by the clean smell of the evening. Spike led the way and the silence between them was almost companionable. Not like the heavy, expectant, ignoring silence of the last week.

"So where are we going?" Xander asked.
Spike turned his head, his expression still guarded. "Going to see a guy called Azumar. I've been looking for him. Finally found him last night. He said he had a lead for me. He's been doing a job for me for the last few years. I was beginning to wonder if he was avoiding me. Seems like he might have come through."

Forty minutes later, after walking numerous streets of brick apartment buildings and specialist retail outlets, Spike came to a halt in front of a small, dark shop in dire need of a paint job. Xander gazed up at the faded lettering on the sign but he couldn't quite make out what it said.

Beside him Spike braced himself, taking a deep breath and letting it out noisily. "Right then. Let's see what he's got." He stepped forward and pushed open the door. Xander followed closely behind.

The inside was a mess. Empty display cabinets, broken packing crates and scraps of paper littered the bare lino on the floor. In the faint light that came through the dirty windows it all looked depressingly chaotic. Opposite the front door, a bead curtain hung in the entrance to a back room. Spike strode forward. The beads clattered as he
thrust them aside. He held them back for Xander as he stepped through in his wake.

Suddenly a light snapped on and Xander blinked as his eyes adjusted. He glanced round quickly, taking in the empty shelves lining the room and a large chair, against the far wall, but his gaze was captured and held by the figure standing with one hand still on the light switch next to what seemed to be the back door of the shop. He wasn't big, not as tall as Spike and slimly built, dressed in faded jeans and a denim jacket over a faded blue T-shirt with the Yankees' logo and the slogan 'Reggie Jackson Batting a Thousand for New York' emblazoned across the front. He wore a red baseball cap pulled down low over a face that more closely resembled a monkey than a human being and he stood with a hunched posture, as if attempting to appear inconspicuous, although that could be his natural stance.

Spike halted, squaring his shoulders and raising his chin slightly, so he looked down his nose at the strange creature. "Azumar," he said, with a nod of acknowledgement. "Right on time. So what have you got? I'm here like you asked, but I don't see a book."

Monkey man hunched even more, twisting his neck so he
looked up at Spike sideways, the picture of obsequious respect. "Master Spike, so good of you to come. I have it, I promise. It'll be here in a moment." He wrung his hands together, like he was washing them.

Spike snorted. "Not sure I trust you, mate. You're being altogether too polite."

"Please, Master Spike. You know me. You didn't need to bring a guard."

Spike snorted again. "Him? He's not a guard." He turned his head to regard Xander. "Not sure what he is. But I'm damned certain he's not a guard."

"Not sure what I am?" Xander asked incredulously. "I'm a prisoner, that's what I am. I didn't ask to be here. I just got kidnapped and dragged across the country."

Spike laughed. "Yeah, well, that's true enough. But you can calm down, pet. No need to get riled. I'll figure out something for you eventually."

Xander actually growled. "How about you figure out letting me go?"
Spike shrugged and Xander felt the dismissal of his concerns. Turning back to the little demon Spike said, "Come on then, what are we waiting for?"

At that moment there was a sound of the shop door opening, followed by footsteps across the outer room. Xander backed away from the doorway until he was pressed against one of the shelves, while Spike turned around slowly on the spot, just as three large vampires entered. Beyond Spike, Xander saw Azumar pull open the back door and another vampire came in, elbowing the little demon out of the way.

Xander turned back to watch Spike as he confronted the vampire at the head of the delegation. This one was smartly dressed in a snazzy suit, in contrast to the combat trousers and leather jackets of the others. He carried a gold topped cane and Xander guessed he was the one in charge. He would have taken him for a dodgy car salesman, if it weren't for the heavy ridges, the yellow eyes and the very sharp teeth.

Spike maintained his human face, pursing his lips and scrunching his nose in apparent puzzlement, as if racking his memory. "Don't think I remember arranging to meet anyone except his-nibs here. Who are you and what do
you want?"

Smart and sleazy shook his head and the demon face was replaced by something that matched the suit far better. He glanced quickly around the room, noting and discounting Xander and nodding approval to Azumar before returning his gaze to Spike. "William the bloody. I've heard of you."

"So what? I've heard of me too. What of it?"

"I'm Heinrich," he announced with supreme certainty, as he stepped around Spike and casually sat in the large throne-like chair, propping his walking stick against the arm.

Spike turned again, tracking him as he moved. "Never heard of you."

Heinrich's eyes flickered briefly but he masked his annoyance quickly. "I'm the Master of New York," he announced. Xander thought he looked like the kind of guy who made announcements a lot.

Spike shrugged. "So?" But his eyes darted quickly around the room and he took a casual step backwards, so that
he could keep all three henchmen in sight.

"So... Azumar here tells me that you're looking for Argentum Veneficus. Is that correct?" Spike didn't reply, merely cocking an eyebrow questioningly. "Where did you hear about that particular book?"

Spike smiled calmly. "What's it to you?"

"Not much. But I'm interested. It's supposed to tell the whereabouts of a certain famous gem. If it weren't for the fact that the gem was a myth, I'd be wondering if you were making a play for it." He looked around the room from his position as focus of attention. "If there was any chance that the Gem of Amara was more than a myth, I'd be a little put out if I discovered that some minionless itinerant had come into my territory to steal it away."

Spike followed his glance, casting his own eyes around the empty shelves. "Err. Right mate. That's what I'm here for. Searching for a myth." He threw up his hands in mock disgust. "Come on. Be serious" he said, with a derisive laugh. "The Gem of Amara?" He spun on his heel but was brought up short by the two hulking vampires in the doorway. Turning back to Heinrich he tilted his head to one side and regarded him thoughtfully. "Is that why
you've gone to all the trouble of getting this treacherous little snitch to lure me here? You think I've actually got a lead on the Gem of Amara? And you're some sort of master? I'd have thought you'd be too busy ruling the roost and keeping the city in order to be wasting your time on fairytales."

Heinrich frowned. "So why do you want Argentum Veneficus? Who told you about it?"


Heinrich's eyes narrowed. "The Prince of Lies? I've heard of him too." He leant forward, leaning on the arms of the chair. "And he told you it contained the whereabouts of the Gem of Amara?"

Spike's shoulders slumped. "No mate," he enunciated warily. "He didn't. It doesn't. I'm not looking for any bloody gem. I want it for something else." He looked up at Heinrich and, if it had been anybody else, Xander would have said he looked innocent. "If you've heard of me, you'll have heard of my sire?"

"Everybody's heard of Angelus." Heinrich sneered. "An
object lesson to us all."

Spike growled. "That wanker's not my sire. My sire is Drusilla."

"Drusilla the mad?" Heinrich looked thoughtful. "I heard that rumour, but I didn't know it was true. I wouldn't have thought, from what I've heard of her, that she was capable."

Spike's growl echoed around the room and for a moment his eyes flashed yellow. "She's quite capable," he snapped. He paused and apparently wilted. "Or at least she was. She's sick. That's why I'm looking for the book. I think it's got the cure."

Heinrich closed one eye and focussed the other on Spike thoughtfully. "And you've been looking for it for sixty years?" he asked.

"No. I've been looking for it for three years." Spike flicked a quick glance at Azumar then a longer one at Heinrich on his throne.

Heinrich nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm. You almost convince me." He leant back, bracing his arms. "Tell you
what... Whether it's the Gem, or not, it's sure to contain useful information. Since you're in my town, and I hold the power here, why don't you bring your sire to my court and I'll look after her, while you find the book. Then, when you've got it, you can sort out her cure and then we'll see what else the book contains. Together. How's that?"

Spike shook his head. "Can't do it. She's not here. I took her to the Hellmouth for a rest cure. The air there's invigorating. It makes her stronger. She's there now."

Heinrich frowned "Did you?" He paused thoughtfully. "Okay. A second deal. I'll keep that human of yours instead."

For a moment Spike looked nonplussed, then he pulled himself together to object. "No. You see mate. Um. This human... he's tied to me. Can't survive if separated. Isn't that right Xander?" Xander nodded fervently. "Anyway," Spike went on. "Why do you think he's tagging along behind me? Why do you think I keep him? I need him to find the book. So leaving him with you isn't really an option." He looked back at Xander, sweeping him from head to foot with his eyes. "Besides... what would you do with him?"
Heinrich's smirk was decidedly twisted. And cruel. "I'm sure I'll think of something."

Azumar crept forward and bowed deeply before Heinrich's chair. "Master, the human said he was a prisoner."

Heinrich smiled. "Is that so? It seems to me William, that you were attempting to steal the human away. I said: This is my city. The Gem may be a fairytale. You're right there. But this search for a book? I don't think you have any idea where it is. And you certainly don't know what's in it. This is a waste of my time. You're just the childe of a mad woman and an abomination. You have nothing for me." He looked over Spike's shoulder. "Take him, boys."

As the three vampires sprang into action Spike went from totally still, to whirling dervish action, in a split second. Xander cowered back against the shelves intent only on keeping out of the way, until it occurred to him that although he couldn't kill Spike...

A flash of steel caught Xander's eye just as one of the vampires staggered backwards towards him. From somewhere Spike had produced two long knives. Xander
fended the lumbering body of Heinrich's minion away, pushing it to the side where it crashed into a packing crate smashing it to splinters. Xander snatched a broken sliver of wood from the wreckage and shoved it through the vampire's back, straight through his heart. A small voice in the back of his head cried 'Yes!' and as the dust settled around his feet he turned back to watch the rest of the action.

The knives Spike wielded were each at least seven inches long and he used them to good effect. The two remaining vampires were hanging back out of reach and Spike had got himself positioned in a corner, so they were forced to come at him from the front.

Heinrich rose to his feet. "Get him!" he shouted. "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

Hulk on the left lunged forward and grabbed Spike's wrist, forcing it upward, but they weren't a team and his mate followed his lead just a moment too late. Even though Spike's arms were occupied battling the upward pressure of hulk number one, somehow he managed to kick out with his right leg, catching hulk number two square in the chest, sending him staggering backwards towards Xander too. It was almost instinct that caused
Xander to raise his makeshift stake and it was probably pure luck that ensured it pierced his heart.

Almost absently Xander noted Azumar edging cautiously towards the back door, but his attention was focussed on the fight in the corner where the remaining hulk's extra height and weight seemed to be working to his advantage as he forced Spike's arms to bend under the pressure, bringing the twin knives close to Spike's exposed throat. Xander watched with his heart in his mouth, unsure whether he should just let Spike get killed. He glanced across at Heinrich, who had relaxed again and was sitting back in his throne smiling. Slowly he turned his head and looked at Xander. Xander's heart clenched and a shiver travelled down the length of his spine at the sheer malevolence of his expression. He turned back to the fight, now silently cheering Spike on, as the hulk shifted his feet into a position which would allow him greater leverage. The blades of the knives were actually touching Spike's neck and a thin stream of blood was running down the left side to soak into his collar. All the hulk needed to do was bring them together and Spike's head would separate from his shoulders.

Spike's knee flashed upwards and the hulk went reeling back, screaming and clutching his groin. Spike bounced
once on the balls of his feet, then he pounced. With his arms crossed in front of him he closed the distance between them and with a wide, expansive gesture he threw his arms apart. The blades flashed and the hulk's head momentarily sprang free before it fell, hit the floor, bounced once and burst into dust, followed closely by the rest of his body.

Spike spun round to face Heinrich who slowly stood back up. "Very impressive," Heinrich sneered. "Those were three of my best minions. But they were just minions. Let's see if you can face a true master?" He reached down, picked up his walking cane and took three paces forwards, twisting the top of the stick and pulling it apart, exposing the long length of a stiletto sword blade. Spike took a half step backwards, crouching into a defensive position with the knives held in front of him. Heinrich threw the sheath of his sword stick away and lunged forward in one easy motion. Metal clashed on metal as Spike raised his knives to block the sword's advance. Heinrich stepped back and Spike once again resumed his defensive posture. They circled each other in the small space, eyes narrowed as they assessed each other's moves. Xander watched breathlessly. He really wasn't sure which way this would go. Somehow Spike's lighter build and two serviceable knives seemed almost a match
for Heinrich's greater reach and longer, single blade.

Suddenly Spike straightened up. With a growl he threw the knives in opposite directions so their points buried themselves in the walls leaving the handles vibrating with the force. "This is bollocks! Who needs bloody weapons?" With a strange crunching sound, loud in the sudden quiet of the room, his face transformed into that of the demon and with a roar he dived to the floor, somehow twisting in midair so he landed on his back, sliding across the lino towards Heinrich. Bringing his arms up he grabbed Heinrich's wrist, wrenching it downwards with a twist which forced his hand open so that the sword rolled harmlessly away, just before Spike's shoulders collided with Heinrich's shins causing him to topple clumsily forward, tripping over Spike and crashing to the floor.

Heinrich was already in gameface and if the situation had not been so violently serious the combination of gameface and shocked confusion would have made Xander laugh. Heinrich didn't think it was funny either. He scrambled to his feet at the same time that Spike did another of his inhuman manoeuvres and somehow bounced from flat on his back to upright. Heinrich charged, head down with the full force of his bigger body
and his speed. He crashed into Spike shoving him backwards and Spike's head cracked against the sharp edge of one of the shelves. His body went limp in Heinrich's grasp as he shook his head in confusion and Heinrich roared his victory as he brought his mouth down to Spike's exposed neck.

Xander gaped at the sudden turn of events and for a second was frozen. Clenching both hands around the splinter of packing crate that he still held, he ran forward. Heinrich must have heard his footsteps because he raised his head from Spike's neck and began to turn. Xander closed his eyes and brought the sliver down into Heinrich's back with all the force he could muster. Heinrich roared again, this time in pain, but he remained disconcertingly solid and Xander realised that not only had he missed the heart but that he'd probably also condemned himself to whatever painful future Heinrich's earlier look had promised. He staggered back dragging the sliver of wood out of Heinrich's back as his hand forgot to let go. And somehow that did the trick. A twist to the left as he staggered must have sent the splinter into Heinrich's dead heart because suddenly there was nothing between him and Spike but a cloud of dust.
Xander regained his balance as Spike straightened himself against the wall. Xander gazed gape-mouthed at the gradually settling pile of dust and Spike raised an amused eyebrow. "Thanks mate," he said with a thoughtful smile. "Guess I owe you one for that."

Xander shook his head, pulling himself together. "Fuck off Spike," he said wearily. "I didn't do it for you. I was saving my own neck. Think I didn't know I wouldn't last a day with him?" He turned and looked around, noticing that Azumar had gone. "Are we done here?"

Spike laughed. "Sure pet. We're done. Come on. Enough excitement for one night. I'll find Azumar tomorrow. You deserve a drink. I know a place that'll take no notice that you're not twenty-one." He slapped Xander on the shoulder and gave him a small shove towards the door.

Xander went where he was pushed, but he did look back to growl again, "I said I was doing it for my own sake."

Spike shrugged. "Doesn't matter pet. You saved my life. Same difference, far as I'm concerned."

Hours later, in the aftermath of the alcohol, which had temporarily done a great job at replacing the adrenalin
but by then was only making his head ache and his stomach roil, Xander paused long enough to wonder if it had been worth it.

21. The night after the morning before

Prompt: #37 - Devotee

Waking up was a slow and uncomfortable process. Xander's body was reluctant, but some instinct buried deep in his brain was insistent. He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes. The room was dark, but he hardly noticed that because the first thing he saw were a pair of yellow eyes hovering in the air next to him, glowing like twin headlights. He let out a gurgling scream and scrambled madly backwards, blankets and cushions shifting under his flailing hands and feet.

The glowing eyes disappeared to be replaced by Spike's voice, "Calm down, pet. It's just me. Hang on, I'll get the light."
There was the sound of boots retreating across the wood floor, then the light above the stove flicked on and Xander could see Spike, dressed and looking ready to go out. He sagged with the loss of sudden tension and drew the blanket back over himself, up to his chin, as he watched Spike return.

Spike squatted down next to him again, this time in his human face. He studied Xander closely. "Looking a bit peaked, love. How you feeling?"

Xander groaned, bringing one hand up to push his hair back off his forehead. It felt sweaty and lank. He rubbed his eyes. "Well since you've now woken me up, I think I can safely say..." He paused. "I really wish you hadn't," he finished, with as much vehemence as he could muster, before subsiding again with another groan. "I think my head's going to fall off," he added pitifully as he began to push the blanket away, preparing to play the martyr. "Okay. I'm getting up."

Spike shoved him back down with a smirk. "Think maybe you'd best stay in, today," he suggested. "I've got to go hunt down that snitch. You don't look like you're in any state for a scrap. Positive liability like that, what with being a target now, an' all."
Even to Xander's foggy mind that sounded not right. He blinked, blankly at Spike. "Target? Why am I a target? I don't want to be a target." Running both hands up over his forehead and through his hair, he attempted to scratch life back into his brain through his skull. "Really... I'm just as happy being overlooked." But he pulled the blanket back over himself, just in case Spike was serious.

Spike snorted with what could have been amusement. "Too late for that mate." He said. "You killed three vampire's last night, including the so-called master of New York. That sort of thing doesn't go unnoticed. There'll be a new master ready to step up, but they'll have to prove themselves. What better way than to kill the human who killed the last master?"

Xander squinted up at Spike. "But it was just luck," he protested. "You shoved the first two at me. And the only reason I got any of them, was because they didn't really notice me. The only reason I got close to the master, was because he was concentrating on you. They took one look at me and knew I wasn't a threat. And I'm really not. The only way I'd ever manage to kill a vampire, would be pure luck." A sudden memory of The Bronze and Jesse's face just before it disintegrated caught Xander unawares
and the pain in his head was dwarfed by the pain in his chest. It was so intense that he curled himself up into a ball in an effort to escape it.

Spike didn't appear to notice anything because he continued the conversation, "Doesn't matter. You did it and you were seen to do it. I'll silence Azumar, the little bastard, but if you think the story's not all over the city by now, you're dreaming. And there's no way a sneaky bloody ingrate like him will play it down, if only to explain why the hell he ran away." He rolled backwards so that he was sitting on the floor with his knees bent up in front of him, leaning on his bracing arms. "Hmm... looks like I'd better teach you a few moves. Didn't drag you 3,000 miles just to have you get yourself murdered in New York."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that..." Xander said.

"Don't go there, pet," Spike warned with a subvocal growl.

Xander subsided back into his nest. "I think I need coffee," he said. "I'm not sure I can cope with offers of martial arts training from the undead when I'm not even awake." He closed his eyes and snuggled deeper into his
cushions, as if he was going to go back to sleep. "I think I must be dreaming," he mumbled.

Spike laughed again and Xander could hear him getting to his feet. "You get yourself some coffee. Probably could do with some food inside you too. Soak up the remains of the alcohol. I'm going to go torture a snitch. I won't be late. We'll start your training tonight."

Xander heard the door open and close again, but he didn't move. This was too weird. Maybe just another hour...

~*~*~*~*~

In fact it was nearly 5am before Spike returned. By then Xander had drunk most of a pot of coffee, had a very long shower, eaten a meal consisting completely of fried foods and was much more awake. He looked up as Spike closed the door behind him, threw his duster onto the cushionless sofa and came to sit at the kitchen table. Xander poured the last of the coffee into a second mug and shoved it across to him.

Spike picked the mug up with both hands, elbows resting
on the table and tilted it in a toast of thanks. He took a large gulp and closed his eyes as if savouring the flavour. "That's better," he said, as he put it back down. "There are some demons who don't taste bad, but there are some..." he shook his head slightly. "Can live on the stuff, but it tastes like shit..."

Xander wasn't sure he really wanted to know that, although part of him was thinking 'better a demon than a human'. He knew what Spike lived off, but he really didn't know what he'd feel about it, if he ever let himself follow the thought through to its conclusion.

Spike looked up at Xander and spoke again, "Too late to start training tonight. But I was thinking as I was coming back... Halloween night, you shot me. You know how to use a gun? Or was that sheer luck, too?"

Xander got up and busied himself making another pot of coffee, as he tried to work out how much he wanted to tell. In the end he realised that there was really no point in holding back. Spike did seem serious about teaching him how to look after himself in a fight and the truth was, he did remember, in a sort of second-hand way, a lot of the background training behind soldier guy. In fact on a couple of occasions since then, when he had acted
without thinking, he'd even managed to replicate some of those moves, although his muscles had protested the next day.

He turned and leaned back against the kitchen counter. "Halloween. Yeah. It was a whole thing with costume possession. There was a guy. I think Giles knew him." As he said the name aloud, he felt a pang of such intense home sickness wash over him that for a moment he thought he'd fall. He shook his head, pulling himself together by main force. "Some sort of devotee of chaos. Something like that. And everybody who got their costume from his shop ended up turning into whatever they'd bought. I bought a toy gun and that was enough to turn me into a battle seasoned sniper." He smiled reminiscently. "Shot you in the leg, didn't I?"

Spike didn't seem annoyed. He merely cocked an eyebrow, inviting more. "Yes I remember," Xander admitted. "I remember drills, regs, ordinance and the command structure. I could give you a guided tour of half a dozen different army bases, home and overseas. And I'm pretty sure I can put together an M-16 in 57 seconds." He walked over to the table and picked up his mug, taking it back to the sink and giving it a rinse to get rid of the dregs. "But I also know that guns don't do shit
Spike nodded slowly. "No, they won't kill, but they can hurt like hell. Put a bullet in the right place and it'll sure slow the vampire down." His fingers tapped against the surface of the table as he stared down into his coffee, lost in thought. Eventually he looked up, a sly smile gradually spreading across his face. "Shotguns," he said. "Think you could manage that?"

Xander nodded. "Yeah, sure. And they're different how?"

Spike's smile became a full-blown grin. "You ever seen the damage a blast from both barrels of a shotgun can do? Take your head right off."

Xander found himself smiling back. "That sounds good. I mean... I would like to learn how to fight... I do know the theory... Well some of it... But my body just won't do it."

"Probably just need practice, pet. Could be your brain knows but your muscles don't. We can work on that, too."

They sat up long beyond sunrise while Spike explained how they could turn the basement into a firing range and
the kind of moves he thought Xander could learn, given his pseudo military background while Xander joined in enthusiastically, recounting his memories of combat and special ops training. When they eventually separated to their respective corners at around 10am, Xander felt more in charity with Spike than he ever had.

His last thought before he fell asleep was to remember how the night before Spike had said he could leave the factory as long as he intended to come back and how he really should try and find a public call box and phone Giles again. Soon.

Part Twenty-Two

Prompt: #38 - Abacus

Thanks to @sparrow2000 for the prompt that helped me get into Xander's head for this one.

Over the next few nights Spike kept Xander busy clearing the garbage in the basement of the factory. It was mostly pallets, broken furniture and unidentifiable bits of old
machines. Junk that had been shoved down there because it was easier than getting rid of it properly. It was a bit like sifting though the city dump and a bit like the biggest rummage sale of the century, and there was the occasional treasure which Xander put carefully aside - a box of unused accounts books, mostly undamaged by damp, a small and very dirty teddy bear, a strange black lacquered tray with rods strung with beads across it and the remains of gold decoration, a painting of a man in a top hat standing next to a big desk and a tin cup from some amateur boxing contest. Each morning Xander re-emerged into the apartment filthy and exhausted. Each day he slept like the dead.

One night when Spike went out, he came back carrying a long duffel bag which he stashed upstairs before coming to help Xander move some of the remaining, heavier rubbish. They set to together then, shifting the stuff to the sides of the room and clearing the floor. From somewhere Spike produced new tools and paint and Xander found pleasure in the way they seemed able to work together, sparking ideas and plans for the final layout as they progressed.

"This space," Spike said. "We'll keep it clear. Few mats on the floor. Make a good training area." He swept his arm
out, indicating the other side of the room. "Over there. We'll have the firing range."

Xander eyed the area. "Do we need a wall? To mark it off... you know... to prevent accidents?"


"Nothing much. Just to stop anyone getting in the way, without knowing."


Xander grinned back. "Shot gun," he said.

Spike grimaced. "Point. Okay. Wall it is."

The next night there was a hammering on the main entrance doors which Spike answered. The procession of amiable looking creatures in work clothes and hefting tool boxes who entered, had Xander's eyes bugging out of his head. However, once they got to work rigging up new electric lighting and power in the basement he was only too happy to take kitchen duty and provide regular
mugs of coffee for the labourers, between shifting stuff out of their way.

It was almost a week before Xander remembered his promise to himself, to phone Giles. He'd been so busy, he'd forgotten. That thought gave him pause and he was so distracted trying to work out why he'd forgotten that he almost split the batten he was fixing. He leaned his head against the wall, the stone cool on his forehead as he tried to figure it out. Part of the problem was that he didn't know exactly what he was going to say. His life was so messed up. He tried to count back over all that had happened since Spike grabbed him: a week of sleeping and driving and sleeping again, sitting in the car, gradually learning how to talk to Spike. Learning how to avoid confrontations. Learning. Then here. How long was that? Three weeks? Four? It seemed like forever. And Sunnydale felt like a dream. Like something he'd made up, or something from his childhood. He could picture the library, the gym, his bedroom with the posters on the walls, but they were distant. And he couldn't pull Willow's face clearly to mind. He could remember that his Mom had to call him every morning to get him up for school, but he couldn't remember her voice or the last thing his Dad said to him. There were individual moments, like photographs: his Dad sitting in his chair in
front of the TV, his Mom at the kitchen table hunched over a mug of coffee, Willow and Buffy walking ahead of him past a row of lockers, but he couldn't remember their faces. It wasn't logical. He knew it was only three weeks, or maybe four, and if he thought about it he knew all the events of his life. But it was like he was remembering a film he'd seen. How could four weeks have changed him so much that his real life felt like a distant memory, or something that had happened to someone else? Only Giles was clear. Their last conversation in the corridor outside the library seemed to be the only memory that came with clarity of colour, scent and surround sound - Giles' face as he gazed at Xander with real approval for the first time and the warm rush of affection he'd felt to receive a look that was usually reserved only for Buffy or Willow.

He glanced across at Spike, wielding a paintbrush with careless abandon, his shirt, jeans and skin already covered in spots of white. Xander threw his screwdriver down. "Back in a while," he called as he ran out of the room, digging his hand in his pocket, feeling for loose change.

As it turned out it was not so difficult. There was a drugstore half a block down, the call went through with
no problem and Giles was there. The way he said Xander's name, his accent and his concern, almost broke Xander's resolve. But he managed to hold firm and concentrated on the facts it was sensible to share, on recounting the length of their journey and the fact that they were somewhere in lower Manhattan and he was safe. It hadn't lasted long before his money was gone, just enough time to reassure Giles that he was surviving and to promise to phone again soon. Then the call cut out. Silently he returned to the factory, picked up the screwdriver and finished fixing the shelf in place.

Finally it was done and Xander allowed himself to take some pride in the sight of the large empty room with its concrete floor, clean walls and empty shelves. That night a delivery truck arrived and unloaded floor mats and an assortment of gym equipment. And as if that was some sort of trigger, his brain crashed back into gear and the question that had been nagging at the back of his mind, and which he'd been refusing to face, crashed with it - Why was Spike doing this? What was his game? And with that thought came another: Did he dare ask?

That morning, before exhaustion took him, he lay in his bed rewinding through the surreal conversation in the kitchen on the night after his first hangover. Spike had
talked to him like a friend and Xander had allowed himself to be seduced by it. After days of being ignored and then the exhilaration of dusting three vamps and having Spike actually talking to him again, he figured he'd just gone a bit overboard. That was his excuse and he was sticking to it. But in spite of that, and almost without him noticing, he realised that he spent all his time walking on egg shells, being careful about what he said and how he said it. Hyperaware, listening for the signals that Spike's mood had changed and he'd decided Xander was more trouble to keep, than not. Spike's attitude to Xander was unclear. Spike's motives for everything he did were a mystery to Xander. For the life of him, he didn't know why he was still alive. Grateful to be so, but totally in the dark as to why. Spike had said 'company' and maybe it was as simple as that. Certainly, day by day, Xander felt a little more certain that Spike didn't have any immediate plans to kill him. And when Spike was helping him shift rubbish or paint a wall and laughing when Xander almost put his foot in the can, it was possible to ignore, or even forget exactly what Spike was. But he went out each evening, alone. And he didn't need to eat any of the meals Xander cooked for himself. It was those moments of realisation that caught Xander, like he'd hit a brick wall and suddenly he was frightened again. Frightened for himself, and frightened for the
residents of New York.

In the early hours of the next morning Xander tried to call him on it. They were sitting in the kitchen and Xander had made hot chocolate for them both. He moved the dirty plate from his own meal into the sink and there was something in the way Spike looked up at him and smiled that gave him the courage.

"Did you find what you're looking for?" he asked.

Spike cocked an eyebrow. "What d'you mean?"

"That demon guy, the night we got attacked, you were expecting him to give you a book? Did you get it from him the next night?"

Spike's smile faded and Xander tensed, cursing himself silently, but Spike just seemed to be thinking about his answer. "No," he said eventually. "He didn't know where it was. Said he saw it at some sort of sorcerer's estate sale about ten years back, but it was bought by a human and he couldn't track it."

"Was he telling the truth?"
Spike grinned wolfishly. "He was telling the truth. They always tell the truth. In the end."

Suddenly Xander felt sick, at exactly the same moment that he realised why Spike had been late home that night. He sat back in his chair and shoved the oversweet chocolate away, concentrating on calming his breathing and his stomach. "That's good," he mumbled just for something to say. "Err... well... I guess I'd better be going to bed." He pushed himself up and away from the table. "Night Spike. I'll see you in the morning." And he fled downstairs to the old factory restroom.

When he came back Spike was already in bed, apparently asleep. The mugs had been cleared off the kitchen table but the light above the stove was still on, so he could see his way across the room. He turned it off and clambered into his own nest, pulling the blankets over his head.

23. Unfriendly fire
Prompt: #39 - Inertia - ref Wikipedia - In an isolated system, a body at rest will remain at rest... unless disturbed by an unbalanced force.

"No." Spike sighed. "That move never works. It's too obvious." Xander lay on his back staring up at Spike standing above him, legs spread either side of Xander's thighs. Xander's back ached from the throw that had sent him crashing onto the mats. He managed a grimace and accepted Spike's hand to pull him back to his feet. "You keep trying for it," Spike added. "But think about it. It's instinct to protect your balls. That only ever works in cartoons." He paused and Xander knew he was thinking about the fight with Heinrich's goons. "Mostly," he added. "Anyway, you need to be a lot faster than that, and your opponent needs to be a lot stupider than me. Any normal man will always bring his knees together, as soon as he sees your muscles twitch. You ever let anyone catch you there?"

"No, I haven't," Xander admitted. He leant forward, hands on his knees, to catch his breath. After a moment he looked up at Spike from under his hair. "Okay. So when you say think...?"

"Let's go back to basics," Spike suggested. "How to fall..."
Xander grimaced. "Er... I've had lots of practice at that. You could call me the king of falling."

"Falling properly," Spike interrupted, sternly. "Falling so you don't hurt yourself. Falling so you can get up again." Xander straightened under the verbal whip and nodded to show he was paying attention. "Right," Spike said. "So, when I do this..."

~*~*~*~*~

Spike stood in the middle of the mats, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. He raised his arms in front of him, hands flat, palms up, and twitched his fingers with a 'come and get me' motion. Xander ignored the taunt and concentrated on his own stance, keeping out of reach and dancing lightly from side to side, trying to spot an opening which never seemed to come. Eventually Spike dropped his hands and his shoulders in apparent disgust. He turned and began to walk away. Xander didn't hesitate. Three running steps and a leap and his forearm was around Spike's neck and he was clinging onto Spike's back for dear life.
At exactly the same moment that he realised that attempting to strangle a vampire would probably not be as effective as it would be on a human and he began to pull back his free arm to punch the side of Spike's head, Spike heaved his shoulders as he bent forwards, tipping him and he landed once more, flat on his back.

Spike spun on one foot and dropped so he was sitting on Xander's chest. He grabbed Xander's wrists and held them firmly still, smirking down into Xander's face and shaking his head in mock disapproval. "Oldest trick in the book, mate." He stood up so he was straddling Xander's legs and hauled on his imprisoned wrists, dragging him back to his feet. "You don't have a clue how to attack. What was that watcher thinking, not to train you at all?" He sighed. "Right. We'll start with defensive moves. Maybe you'll learn how to attack, by being attacked."

~*~*~*~*~

After a couple of hours, which Xander mostly spent looking up at Spike from the floor, Spike walked away and picked up the black duffel bag he'd brought down from the apartment with them. Lifting it up onto one of the shelves he unzipped it, spreading the flaps to allow
him to pull out a double-barrelled shotgun and a couple of handguns, which he placed on the shelf above his head. Boxes of shotgun shells and other ammunition followed. Xander wasn't close enough to read what was written on the boxes but he guessed they weren't small calibre. He wandered closer, peering up in an effort to see exactly what Spike had brought. Meanwhile Spike shoved the empty bag aside, picked up the shotgun again and turned to face Xander. "Starter for one, pet," he said tossing the gun across to Xander, who caught it automatically. "Let's see you load that."

Xander hefted the shotgun thoughtfully, assessing its weight and inspected the guard, trigger and safety catch. He broke the breach and saw that it was unloaded. Closing it again he raised it to his shoulder turning slowly, aiming along the barrel until he came to a stop pointing directly at Spike's face. "Boom," he said, pulling the trigger and pretending to react to the recoil.

Spike merely raised an eyebrow and reached up to pull down the box of shells. Xander dropped the shotgun from his shoulder and broke it open again. Taking two shells from Spike's hands he shoved them into the breach and turning carefully away snapped the gun closed. Once again he raised it to his shoulder and began to swing
around in a circle. Before he'd got anywhere near pointing towards Spike, although the dream was tempting, his body was already rebelling and he knew he couldn't do it. Dropping his arms he hugged the gun across his chest and sighed.

Spike's smile was faint but smug as he walked across the room to the far wall. He grabbed an old pallet which had been too broken to be recycled into shelves or a part of the firing range and leant it up against the wall. He came back and stood behind Xander. "See if you can hit the top left corner," he instructed.

Xander carefully lifted the gun again, this time noticing the finer details of its balance, and manipulated the safety. "I've never used a shotgun before," he said. "I don't think they're very accurate, are they?"

"Let's see." Spike suggested. "Never really got into firearms, myself." Xander raised the gun, sighted on the pallet and pulled the trigger. The sound of the explosion was nearly deafening in the enclosed space and Xander was sent staggering by the recoil. Spike's hands caught his shoulders steadying him. "More power than you expected, eh?" The bastard was laughing.
He raised it again and this time he ran his forefinger backwards and forwards across the trigger, judging the pressure. Once again he aimed, thinking about what the recoil had done to him. The explosion was still deafening and the recoil was still hard, but this time he was ready for it and his body eased with it, by instinct. He raised his head and looked across the room. There was a rather large impact mark in the freshly painted white wall just above head height and another in the middle of the broken pallet. He hrumphed in disgust.

Accepting two more shells from Spike, he reloaded. Lifting the gun again, he took careful aim. This time it didn't sound so loud. Or maybe he was going deaf. He looked up. The top left-hand corner of the pallet was missing. He smiled. "Looks like this young dog remembers its old tricks."

Spike smirked back and clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice one." He headed for the door. "You have a play with that. I'm going out." He pulled the door open, pausing just before he left the room and looked back. "And don't touch the handguns. I'll know if you do." With that he left.

Xander aimed the gun at the door. "Boom," he muttered
again. Then he turned back to his original and Xander-safe target.

~*~*~*~*~

Even after five days of intensive training, Xander still seemed to spend only two minutes on his feet before Spike was pulling him back up from the mats. He ached in places he hadn't known existed before and had more bruises than a lifetime of Larry and Co had ever inflicted. But at least he was managing two minutes now. That was better than at the beginning of the week.

Spike's hand came down on his shoulder, jarring tender muscles and joints. "You're improving. But you're gonna need to do better, before you can face the new master." He frowned. "Or even his lowest minion."

Xander straightened up, still breathing heavily. "About that..."

Spike shook his head. "Not a chance. You went and got yourself noticed. If they weren't too busy fighting amongst themselves, they'd have come for you already. Think yourself lucky you've got time." He paused and
appraised Xander. "Right then. We'll take a break." But before Xander could relax he added, "Let's have some fun. Come on."

He grabbed Xander's arm and pulled him over to the makeshift firing range, handing him the twin handguns. Xander's original idea of a short but straight shooting range had developed during its construction, into something far more complex. Spike had taken up his idea of a wall and between them they had built an obstacle course with targets on ropes and pulleys that Spike hauled into view as Xander progressed around narrow corners and under and over the obstacles in the way. Xander suspected that Spike came down to the basement and moved things around while Xander was asleep, because the targets came at him from all angles as he made his way through the course. But here he had confidence. The memories of his soldier alter ego took over during this exercise and he found that instinct meant he rarely missed. When he had his guns and was firing two handed, his doubts fell away and his body knew what to do, as his mind went cool and calm.

~*~*~*~*~
From somewhere Xander pulled a move which blocked the sweep of Spike's leg and although Spike broke contact and re-established his balance and position, Xander knew that he had found something which connected his body to his inherited memories. It was still imperfect, but there was a tantalising promise of more to come.

~*~*~*~*~

When Spike grabbed him, instead of fighting back, for the first time Xander rolled with the move so that for a moment Spike's balance was gone. He hooked a foot behind Spike's ankle shifting his weight so his shin became a fulcrum, his body applying the load. For what felt like a long moment they hung there, unmoving, and Xander began to fear his play would fail. He leaned further into Spike, applying more pressure and suddenly, as if he'd somehow pushed them past some tipping point, they crashed together to the floor. He landed in a sprawl half on top of Spike, losing his advantage. While Spike pushed him away and rolled back onto his feet with all the natural grace of the predator, Xander lay still, exaggerating his panting, arms spread to either side.
"Come on mate," Spike called. "You were doing better there. Get up." He stepped forward to offer Xander his hand, as he had a hundred times before. Xander raised his head weakly, sighed in apparent resignation and lifted one arm. Spike grabbed it and stepped back to haul Xander upright. But before he could begin to exert any force Xander brought his right foot up and slammed it squarely into Spike's crotch sending him staggering backwards. Xander bounced to his feet, crowing victory as Spike lay curled up on the floor, clutching his balls protectively, half into gameface.

Looking down at him Xander's grin stretched into a full-blown laugh and he leant forwards bracing his hands on his knees as the laughter interfered with him catching his breath. Eventually Spike raised his own head and began to uncurl with a groan, although he didn't attempt to stand. He took in the sight of the madly laughing human and a reluctant grin began to spread across his own face, which slipped back into its human mask.

"Never works, huh?" Xander gasped. "I don't know about that. But man, you should've seen your face." And he began to laugh again.
The laughter appeared to be infectious because very soon Spike was laughing too and Xander flopped down onto the floor next to him. Eventually Spike managed to gasp a few words. "Proud of you, pet." He said. "Proud of you."

~*~*~*~*~

As the days went by, Xander gradually became aware that he felt easier in his body than he ever had before. For the first time in as long as he could remember his muscles seemed to be working with him, rather than sabotaging him with their awkward reluctance to do what he wanted.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander had discovered that the best time to ask questions and hope of a straight answer was at the end of their 'day'. He pushed his empty dinner plate aside, picked up his soda and took a sip. "Why do you want this book anyway?" he asked. "You said it was for Drusilla, but that was a lie. So what's it for?"
Spike looked up from his glass of whiskey. He hesitated but then shrugged. "Old Heinrich was right about what I wanted. There's a thing called the Gem of Amara. Sort of what you'd call a Holy Grail. I aim to find it."

"Why? What does it do?"

Spike looked amused. "Who says it does anything? Maybe it's just worth a lot of money?"

"Somehow I don't think you'd be interested in something, just because it was worth a lot of money."

"I don't know," Spike said with a leer and a significant look. "I might be."

Xander straightened in alarm. "What does that mean? Am I worth money? Is that why you're keeping me?"

Spike smirked. "Didn't say that did I?" He slouched back in his chair and shrugged again. "Don't worry, pet. I was just winding you up."

Not fully reassured, Xander asked, "And why should I believe that, instead of what you said before?"
"No reason at all." He stood. "You'll believe what you want to believe. You'll just have to wait and see, won't you?"

Xander didn't sleep well that day.

24. Two's company...

Prompt: #40 - Revenge is bliss

Spike came into the room from the stairs. "Get a move on. We're going out tonight."

Xander looked up, the last spoonful of breakfast poised in midair. "Huh? What?" he asked, intelligently. He shook his head and tried again. "Why? Where?"

Spike's voice was deadly serious for once. "One of Heinrich's brood finally came out on top. We're going to meet her on ground of our choosing."

"Her?"
"Yes, Her." Spike's frown turned into a full scowl. "You got a problem with fighting a woman?" he asked. "She's a vampire, remember? She's also wiped out at least half a dozen other claimants to get where she is. So she's not really in need of your chivalric protection."

That hadn't been what Xander meant, but now that Spike had challenged him on it, he couldn't remember what his real point had been. One thing did tug at his brain though. "If she's come out on top, why does she need to kill me?"

Spike sighed. "Not you," he corrected. "Us. She needs to get me because I'm older and not family and a potential threat. I could step in and take the city away from the whole clan. You're with me, so she needs to take you out too." He smiled suddenly. "'Course, she might choose to keep you alive as a trophy. Or turn you and make you hers..." He paused, thinking. "Or turn you and kill you twice." He nodded in apparent satisfaction at having thought of all the possibilities. "That's what I'd do, if I was her. Bit of revenge is all well and good, but doubled... that's sheer bloody bliss."

Xander meanwhile was still figuring through the earlier
part of Spike's speech. "So when you said I got myself noticed... I was the target... What you really meant was you were the target and I'm in danger because I'm with you."

"You killed Heinrich." Spike said, his tone making it clear that they'd dealt with this. "If you weren't with me, someone would have got you already. But they know who I am, so they're being cautious. Now get yourself dressed."

Xander looked down at his jeans and shirt and wiggled his toes in his socks. He considered pointing out that he was dressed, but Spike didn't seem in the mood for sass. "How do you know all this?" he asked instead, picking up the empty cereal bowl and taking it over to the kitchen sink. "You haven't been out tonight."

"Little bird told me." Spike said, walking back to the door. "Fifteen minutes," he added over his shoulder as he left.

Xander grabbed his sneakers from the corner and pulled them on, tying the laces in ten seconds flat. Grabbing his jacket he ran to the door, opened it cautiously and peered down the stairs. There was no sign of Spike so he tiptoed down, keeping to the edge of the steps and
avoiding the one that creaked. At the bottom he stuck his head round the door and looked into the open space of the ground floor.

At first he couldn't see much of anything. The room was big and the light from the single bulb that hung from the ceiling barely penetrated the corners. The car occupied the space in the middle, close to the big double doors to the street. Beyond it were a few empty store rooms, but they were always locked, while to his left was the doorway to the old staff wash room. He reminded himself for the tenth time that he should really buy some cleaning materials and make that place a little more welcoming. There was still no sign of Spike.

Xander wasn't sure what he was looking for, or why he was being so cautious, but he had acquired a good working knowledge of Spike's moods over the past few weeks and something was bothering him, so he went with his instincts. Cautiously he stepped out into the room.

A faint sound caught his attention and drew his eyes across to the main doors. The single man-door swung open and Spike came in, followed by another man. Xander ducked down behind the car, out of sight.
Crouching down and trying not to think about what would happen if Spike caught him spying, he crept forwards until he got to the corner. Carefully poking his head round the tail fin, he could see them standing together just inside the door. The guy looked young, maybe a student. He was fresh faced with longish dark hair and he was standing very close to Spike. Xander hesitated, cursing himself for his own curiosity that had sent him following so soon and casting about in his mind for ways to get Spike away, which wouldn't end up in either of the humans in the room being dead. There was the low murmur of voices, but the words were too soft for him to make out what was being said. Suddenly Spike pulled the young man to him and spun him around so his back was plastered to Spike's front. Spike's left arm went around the man's waist, holding him close and his right arm slid around the man's neck, the hand resting gently on his shoulder. The pose was somehow intimate, almost sexual. Spike buried his face in the man's neck.

For a split second, which felt like full minutes, Xander froze in disbelief. He had been fighting, and running from vampires for over a year, but he had never actually seen one feed before. Then he shook himself free of the sick fascination and deliberately not giving himself time to consider what he was doing, he was up and running
towards them yelling, "No!"

Spike looked up and glared at Xander, his yellow eyes swirling with incipient violence, blood on his fangs and lips. "Piss off," he growled. A shiver of dread passed through Xander, but it wasn't that which brought him to a screeching halt. It was the fact that the man in Spike's arms raised his own head and growled at him through his fangs. Xander froze.

Spike gave a snort of disgust and released the vampire, bringing his right arm up to his mouth, licking away the trail of blood. They had been feeding on each other, Xander realised.

Spike glanced between the two of them. "Xander meet Jimmy. Jimmy, this is Xander. You don't touch him. Understood?"

Jimmy nodded vigorous agreement, his body language meek and his eyes pleading from beneath heavy brows. Spike gave him the shove towards the door. "Out," he said. "Scout around, keep those eyes open, let me know if that bitch Flavia makes a move."
He watched as Jimmy sidled to the door and slipped through it, then he turned back to Xander.

25. A walk in the park

Prompt: #41 - Asylum

"You," said Spike. "Should keep your arse out of things that don't concern you."

Xander's fear metamorphosed and he found that the emotion causing shivers in his spine and shoulders had coalesced into his stomach and erupted now as burning fury. "Who the hell is that?"

Spike cocked an eyebrow. "Jealous?" Xander snarled and Spike sighed. "That is someone you don't need to concern yourself with."

"I'm not stupid, Spike. Don't try and lie. Did you go out and drag a random vampire off the street, or is he yours?"

Spike looked at him for a moment before answering. "He's mine. Was a student at the University. Studied computing." He shrugged. "I need a computer expert."
"You need a computer expert? So you just go out and kill one?"

"Well, yeah." Like it was the most obvious thing in the world. And from Spike's perspective, perhaps it was.

But isn't like that for Xander. Another thought hit him. "Why? I mean... What do you need a computer expert for? To scout around looking for the new Master of New York?" He put as much contempt as he could into the question.

Spike was beginning to look annoyed and Xander knew he should shut up, but for now Spike seemed willing to answer, even if not politely. "No, witless. I need a computer expert to hack into a computer system."

"That is just so wrong." Xander looked at Spike and realised they might as well be speaking different languages. "Oh, why am I even surprised?" He glanced around, searching for any logical alternative, as if he could persuade Spike to change. "Couldn't you have got the help without killing someone?"

The expression on Spike's face was a strange mixture of bewilderment and sullenness. "Maybe. But this is easier."
A touch of self-righteous accusation entered his voice. "If you were more use, you could do it. But you can't, can you?"

"No, I can't." For a moment he almost believed Spike had a point and it was his own lack of any useful skills that had condemned a man to death. Then common sense made a welcome return. "And that is so not the point." he said, indignantly. "And anyway, what are you doing sending your precious computer expert out there to scout out the local big bad?" A low growl brought him further back to his senses. "Other than you that is. I mean, you're the real big bad. We all know that... but..."

Spike thankfully interrupted his floundering attempt to placate. "Jimmy won't fight. He's too young. He doesn't know how to handle himself, let alone a weapon."

But now was not the time to back down completely. Xander felt momentarily proud of the sneer that he knew was stretching across his face. He was learning some useful stuff from Spike. "And here I thought all vampires came out of the ground with a full knowledge of martial arts."

Spike sighed wearily. "Don't be bloody stupid." He
shrugged. "Kid didn't know how to walk, hardly. Not going to be an expert in the fighting department right off now, is he? He's scouting around and he'll let us know when the Bitch Queen starts to move. He's all gangly and harmless looking, that'll keep him safe. That, and he'll switch sides in an instant and she knows it. You on the other hand. You're as much a target as me. So you are fighting." He bent down and picked up the duffel that Xander hadn't noticed at his feet. Walking to the car, he dumped it on the hood and pulled it open to extract a hunting knife, Xander's handguns and the shotgun, placing them carefully down next to the bag. He reached in again and extracted boxes of ammunition. "Come here, mate," he said, tossing a box to Xander who caught it without thinking. It was followed by one of the guns. "Load up."

Xander came over to stand next to Spike and inspected the gun. He pulled a magazine from the box and shoved it into place, sliding the breach to push one shell into the chamber. Placing that gun back down, he picked up the other and repeated the operation. Meanwhile Spike was loading the shotgun. Xander grabbed another few magazines and shoved them in his jacket pockets. He also grabbed the knife.
It was as if they were out for a casual evening's stroll on the town. The duffel over Xander's shoulder sagged with the weight of the shotgun and the twin Colts were heavy in the pockets of his jacket. But Spike seemed in no hurry, ambling up Broadway like any other tourist. He seemed almost relaxed, pointing out various landmarks and even disclosing some bits of history, as if he'd been there. Which he could well have been, Xander realised with a shock. It was strange how he kept forgetting how very old Spike was.

Since he was in such an approachable mood, Xander decided to see if he could get a better idea of what the hell they were doing. "Where are we going, Spike? And who's going to be there?"

Spike shrugged. "There'll be Flavia and her nest, her court if you like. Seems like there'll be a load of witnesses too." Catching Xander's puzzled expression, he jerked his head back over his shoulder. "We've got company," he explained. "They won't do anything. Just come to see the fun." Xander looked around, as they continued walking,
and gradually became aware of the company Spike meant. Here and there dotted through the crowds, individuals were keeping exact pace with them as they headed uptown. "'Bout twenty of them, I reckon. Probably every vampire in Manhattan."

"Twenty?" Xander asked, amazed. "Is that all?"

Spike glanced across at him. "Not counting Flavia's court. Sunnydale's not like other places. You know how much we eat? Even a city like Manhattan has a limit when it comes to the number of dead bodies they'll accept. Even with the blood houses, this place couldn't support many more than this."

"Blood houses?"

Spike shrugged. "Don't have to kill, you know. That last drop is a buzz, but it is not necessary. Legend is, in the old days, before my time..."

"Before your time?" Xander interrupted. "So you mean in the really old days?"

"In the old days," Spike repeated, with obvious restraint, "there were arrangements. But now, people ask
questions, so you have to kill to avoid witnesses. Law enforcement's too good. A bite can be disguised as long as the body's dead. You'd be surprised how modern forensics make a whole lot of wrong assumptions, just because slit throats have always looked that way, so it's in the literature. They get trained to accept it. The houses are an alternative - humans who're addicted to the bite and know what they're doing. You can live without killing, but only if you are in with the in crowd."

This was amazing news, thrown so casually into the conversation and Xander felt a wave of relief so profound, that he was surprised he hadn't been aware of the worry. "Wow! So all we have to do is defeat this Flavia woman and get you in." he said, excitedly. "You can feed without killing. That's fantastic!"

Spike didn't answer, instead he came to a halt and looked around. Xander glanced around too. Across the street and behind them other figures stopped walking. "Not far now, pet." Spike nodded ahead. "Into the park, before it closes." Xander looked at his watch. It was half-past midnight. They crossed the street to the gates. Behind them their shadows coalesced into a single body and followed.
"What are they doing?" Xander asked. "Are you sure they are not Flavia's?"

Spike shook his head. "Not hundred percent." He smiled slightly. "But pretty sure."

Central Park. They left the path immediately and walked on the grass under the trees. Through the gaps between, Xander could see the buildings of Upper Manhattan towering above them, while in other places the trees obscured everything, casting deep shadow. Jimmy appeared and took up position five paces behind them.

After a while Spike slowed down even more. "Don't want to get there too early," he observed. "Take our time, now we're out of sight of the humans." He wandered over to a large tree and leant against it. "Might want to stash the bag here," he suggested. Xander slipped the handles of the duffel from his shoulder to the crook of his elbow and opened the zip to extract the shotgun. He dropped the bag at Spike's feet and broke the breach to recheck it was loaded properly. Meanwhile Spike leaned his head back against the trunk of the tree and gazed up at the night sky glowing orange with the reflected light of the city. They waited.
After a while, Spike stirred. "What's the time? Can't see a single bloody star in this place."

"Quarter past one," Xander said.

Spike grunted acknowledgement. "Give it another half-hour," he observed. "Then we'll move."

Xander rested the shotgun against the tree, pulled the knife out of his pocket and clipped it onto his belt at the back. He pulled the Colts from his pockets one by one, releasing the magazines, checking they were full and snapping them back into place, before tucking them into his belt. Then he went and leant up against the tree next to Spike and joined him in watching the leaves above them whisper against the sky.

Jimmy loitered nearby. Now that his eyes were more accustomed to the dark, Xander could see that his human face was smooth and round, innocent and young looking. He might be a student, but he didn't look any older than Xander and right now Xander felt older than his years. "Computers, huh?" He asked. Jimmy nodded nervously shooting quick glances at Spike, as if checking it was all right for Xander to speak to him. Spike didn't move, so Xander took that as permission. Jimmy was
eager but awkward and Xander recognised the signs from his own high school days, which now felt so long ago - Jimmy was a full-blown nerd. Conversation was difficult, but somehow he managed to extract a rather confused account of a late walk home from the computer lab, falling into conversation with a stranger who really seemed interested in what he had to say, then waking up locked in one of the store rooms on the ground floor of the factory. Xander looked sharply at Spike who was chuckling quietly, obviously pleased by the note of awed hero worship in Jimmy's voice. Xander gave up in disgust.

Eventually Spike pushed himself upright. "Come on," he said. "This way." He led the way further into the park.

This far from the roads the air smelt a bit cleaner, a warm, heavy dampness held trapped under the trees. They continued walking, skirting the large open spaces until they reached a place where the trees thinned out and they took the last few steps into a small clearing.

In front of them a phalanx of ten vampires in full game face stood flanking the figure of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black catsuit with a silver zip down the front. Xander turned to Spike to make some witty comment about 70s chic meeting 80s punk, but the
words died on his lips as Spike's face also shifted into its demonic form.

Spike glanced along his shoulder at Xander. "Now would be a good time, mate," he suggested.

Xander looked back over his shoulder. He and Spike were alone with five yards of space between them and their erstwhile shadows, who had now emerged to stand on the edge of the clearing. Jimmy was hanging back in the crowd. "Ignore them," Spike added. "They'll not interfere. Just here to see the fun. Your problem is the ones in front."

Xander nodded and loosened the twin handguns in his belt and swung the shotgun up to a position of ready-rest, as he took in the rank ahead. They were all big and powerful looking, which was intimidating, even though intellectually he knew that the weediest vampire could probably still outfight him hand to hand.

Spike planted himself squarely, feet apart, legs straight and shoulders squared. His natural swagger projecting cocky confidence and defiance. "Flavia," he shouted. "You want me? I'm here."
The woman at the centre of the line raised her arms horizontally and signalled. Two of her followers moved forwards. "I'd take those two out now, pet," Spike suggested, conversationally. "Aim for their necks, yeah?"

Xander felt the calm of desperation take hold of his mind and he raised the shotgun. The two vampires walked towards them, heavy footed but agile. They looked to Xander like approaching giants, he almost expected the earth to shake. He aimed at the one on the right and with a total sense of unreality, pulled the trigger. The recoil jerked his shoulder but before the movement was complete instinct snapped into place and he was already swinging the barrels to aim at the second. A peripheral part of his brain noted that his first target had disappeared, but his eyes were focused totally along the sights. Again his finger operated without his conscious intervention and the second recoil hit him.

Dimly he registered Spike's gleeful cry of, "Nice one, pet." But before he could relax a scream of denial split the air and he recognised the voice as Flavia's as she yelled, "Foul! Go! All of you, go!"

Then the remaining eight, and Flavia herself, were running towards them. Xander dropped the shotgun,
realising that he had no time to reload and grabbed the handguns from his belt. Instinct was now the only level on which his mind was functioning and instinct had a name: Sergeant Harris. He stood his ground and knowing that body shots would do nothing, aimed for heads and kneecaps. A handgun didn't have the deadly accuracy of a proper sniper rifle, but that really wasn't an issue in this situation, where the enemy were almost on top of them.

It took multiple hits, but one by one, heads exploded and bodies fell. He was aware of Spike getting involved in real hand to hand to his left, and he took out one of the minions who was about to jump on Spike's back, before he was distracted by the need to deal with closer opposition, personally.

By the time he realised that there were no more vampire's heading his way there were three empty magazines on the floor at his feet. He looked around searching for Spike and saw him engaged with catsuit woman. They were too close together for him to get in a clear shot so he moved nearer, gun at the ready. Even to his untutored eye they looked well matched. He paused about ten feet away as a kick from Spike sent Flavia staggering backwards. But she righted herself almost immediately and closed again while Spike was still re-
establishing his balance. Her punch to the centre of his chest jerked him backwards, arms momentarily out of control, allowing her to grab his right wrist and heave him off balance as she used her entire body and his own momentum to swing him around so he landed flat on his back on the ground. Xander raised his gun but Spike did his crazy body flip and was already back on his feet.

Spike and Flavia circled each other cautiously, trading occasional jabs, testing each other's reach and reflexes, both too experienced to rush in recklessly. A seemingly lucky kick from Spike caught Flavia's left arm, causing her to back away and pause, shaking it. Spike advanced and managed to get a hand to her neck, but a moment later her right arm came crashing down on his elbow, breaking his grip. She took her advantage and her left fist crashed into his temple. As his head rocked to the side and his balance was once again uncertain, she followed up with a knee to his side, just above his hip. Xander's arms had dropped as he watched, but he raised them again, aiming for Flavia's legs. As he began to fall Spike grabbed the front of Flavia's catsuit and somehow managed to hook the ring on her zip. As he went down so did the zip, exposing her chest and underwear for all to see. Even as he hit the ground, Xander could see that Spike was laughing. Flavia managed to pull away and took the time
to straighten her clothes which in turn allowed Spike the freedom to regain his feet.

He stood upright hands on his hips and flicked a grin at Xander. "What you reckon, Xander? Think she wants me?"

Xander shook his head in disbelief as Spike's inattention proved his downfall. Flavia closed, punching him again in the temple and the chest. Spike grappled with her, managing to capture her right wrist and her left shoulder. He brought his head forwards swiftly, slamming it into her forehead with a sickening crash, which had little apparent effect on either combatant. Flavia got her right leg hooked around Spike's ankle and he couldn't dance away. He forced her captured hand up in the air attempting to shift her balance backwards, but she collapsed in his grip, dragging his arms back down and shifted her weight forwards, trying to tip him. Xander took aim on her right knee. He pulled the trigger, just as she shifted her weight again, causing them both to twist to the left. Spike howled and collapsed, releasing Flavia who staggered back out of reach.

Spike clapped one hand to his calf and brought it away bloody. "Hell! My best pair of jeans." He glared at
Xander. "I wore these to impress."

Xander lowered his arms. "Sorry," he shouted. "I was aiming..." he trailed off dumbly, as he realised that the spell hadn't triggered.

Spike simply growled and got back to his feet. Once again Spike and Flavia circled cautiously. There was a slight limp in Spike's movements. Flavia darted forward and Xander thought that this time surely they would close with each other, but Spike danced back and evaded her. Sergeant Harris was scanning the immediate vicinity and suddenly he understood Spike's tactics - there was an area of gravel just behind him and he was heading that way. As Xander expected, as soon as the wounded foot crunched on the loose stones Spike appeared to stumble. His leg shot from under him and he had to use his hands to prevent himself falling completely, leaving him crouched and open. Flavia gave a roar of premature victory and pounced, arms reaching forwards, just as Spike's left hand swept upwards and with deadly accuracy he hit her in the eye with a sharp chunk of granite.

Flavia went down like the proverbial log and in moments Spike was crouched over her, his weight holding her
down and one hand firmly gripping her neck. Without looking up he said, "Pass us your knife, pet."

Xander walked over to them and silently handed Spike the hunting knife. Spike took it and replaced the hand at Flavia's throat with its blade. "We done?" he asked. "I won. You lost." Then with more emphasis, "Are we done?"

Flavia removed her hand from the bloody wreck of her eye and spat at him, "You brought guns into a formal challenge. How dare you?"

Spike grinned, his fangs distorting his mouth and subverting the open and charming expression of his human smile, into something monstrous. "I never was one for the rules. But he's human. None of the ancient codes apply." He shrugged. "And the only reason my human's here at all, is because you included him in your challenge to me." He tilted his head, considering her. "I never challenged you. I killed your sire because he came after me. I didn't proclaim Holmgång then. And I'm not doing it now. You want to be Master of New York?" he asked. "You carry on. But you do it on my sufferance. I could call Wergeld for what you and your sire have done. Your sire called me an itinerant. And so I am. But not
because I have to be. It's what I choose. I'm no outcast. So I'll grant you asylum. You leave me and mine alone, okay? And if ever I call you, you come running and offer your due. You got that?"

Flavia growled with frustration but a glance up at his face seemed to convince her and she conceded. "Yes, My Lord. I've got it."

Spike swept his eyes around the edge of the clearing. "And witnessed?"

The words seemed to choke her, but she got them out. "And witnessed My Lord."

Spike flung back his head and burst out into a loud and carefree laugh. He shoved himself to his feet. "Fuck that," he said, reaching down a hand to help her up. "Forget the My Lord bollocks. Just do what you've just agreed and we'll get on fine. Main thing you have to remember is to leave me and mine the hell alone. Okay?"

Standing before him, blood still trickling down her face, Flavia nodded again. "Do I have your permission to rebuild my court?"
Spike waved a dismissive hand. "Sure. Do what you like." She bowed in homage and over her back Spike caught Xander's eye. "Just choose carefully, and no gratuitous killing. Don't want the Peelers on my back because of your carelessness." Once again she bowed acknowledgement and this time she began to back away. Spike turned to Xander. "Come on mate. Don't know about you, but I could do with a drink. Where the hell is that Jimmy?" He looked around, spotted him and waved him over. "And later," he added, turning back to Xander, "you can take this bloody bullet out."

Note: Holmgång (or holmganga) was a duel practiced by Norsemen. It was a recognized way to settle disputes. Ref: Wikipedia

26. Sunshine on my shoulders

Prompt: #42 - Cafeteria

They left the park, Xander walking silently beside Spike and Jimmy trailing behind. Xander realised he was still in
shock - the spell hadn't triggered! He turned to Spike and opened his mouth, but his brain clicked into gear just in time. If Spike hadn't noticed there was no way he was going to remind him. Instead he asked the next question that occurred to him, "What the fuck just happened? I saw it, but... what the hell just happened?" He stopped, trying to get his thoughts under control. "And where did your accent go?"

Spike smirked, "Formal event, a Holmgång. Formal events have formal words." He glanced around at the teeming crowds, the bright neon lights and the roaring traffic. He wasn't limping as badly as before they left the park but his stride was definitely less cocky than usual. "Let's get a cab," he suggested. "I really want that drink and I want it somewhere that doesn't ask questions."

Xander nodded. "Sure. Why not?"

Spike signalled to Jimmy who went to the curb and started trying to attract the attention of any of the many passing yellow cabs. Spike wandered over to a shop window and leant up against it, digging a packet of cigarettes and his lighter out of his pocket and lighting up. He stayed there, seemingly at peace with the world and his smoke. Xander glanced around, then went to
lean next to him. "Are there really only twenty vampires in New York?" he asked.

Spike blew smoke into the air and gazed up at the windows opposite. "Well there were thirty, now there's less." He glanced around, as if he could assess the extent of Manhattan from their position surrounded by tall buildings. He appeared to be totting something up in his head. "Population's usually pretty stable. There were always about fifty, when I was here before." He looked along his shoulder at Xander. "There's the main nest. What the pretentious call 'the court'. That's as many as ten. Then there's pairs, and groups of three or four scattered around the periphery. Flavia just lost her entire court, so she'll be looking to rebuild. She'll pull in some of the ones from the edges and make the rest."

Considering that, Xander remembered something else Spike had said to her. "Why did you tell her to choose carefully?"

Spike shrugged. "She looks like the impatient type. I gave her a warning, that's all. Nothing to do with you. If she chooses carefully, she'll choose the ones who last."

~~*~*~*~*~
Being out in daylight was strangely liberating and Xander felt his heart lift with the freedom of it. He mooched. There was definite mooching going on, as he walked the streets at a leisurely pace. He had $50 in his pocket and a backpack loaded with a pad of paper and a couple of books (for verisimilitude, Spike said, causing Xander to snort with amusement, which in turn had pulled a smile from Spike). The streets around him teemed with bright young things, rushing to class or loitering in small groups, and as he watched their faces he felt a momentary pity for them and their carefree belief that life would always be so easy. He was again struck by how much older than them he felt, even though in years they had to be older than him. He shook the thought away. It was a bright early summer's day with none of yesterday's mugginess. Not too hot, but warm enough to be comfortable without his jacket. He would have felt like a sore thumb if he'd come here in his old clothes from home. As it was, he just felt out of place because of his whole life. A slim girl with long red hair walking arm in arm with a tall, skinny guy momentarily caught his eye and he felt a pang run through him. Then she laughed and the sound was wrong, so he shook his head and continued with his mooching.
Locating his destination proved no challenge, once he'd got to Washington Square Gardens and for a moment he stood still, watching the steady stream of students going in and out of the building. Tilting back his head he squinted up at the sky, basking in the feel of the sun on his face until a cloud crossed in front of it and the bright warmth was instantly taken away. There was no real reason to put this off, so he shook himself, squared his shoulders and joined the crowds of students, doing his best to look like he knew what he was doing and that he belonged there.

After half an hour of wandering around Xander had to agree that the library did have what they needed, but he also had to admit that the chances of getting in after closing, were slight. No matter how brilliant he was, Jimmy had obviously not been the type to break into libraries to get more study time. But that was why Xander was on this expedition in the first place, so it was time to use his initiative. Grabbing a campus map from the information desk he ducked into a rest room and locked himself in a stall while he studied it. The Computer Science Department was the next obvious choice, but there had to be other possibilities.

~*~*~*~*~
Tailgating a group of kids as they entered the main door of the hall proved remarkably easy. He didn't want to appear hesitant so he continued to follow them, even as his eyes scanned the entrance looking for any signs indicating where he should go. He didn't see any so he kept following. Then the group began to break up and he glanced around, confused. He was standing in the middle of the cafeteria and his human shield were busy grabbing extra chairs and pushing them into place around one of the tables. With a sudden feeling of panic Xander looked around the room, imagining himself the focus of attention, that at any moment someone would point to him and call out "Who are you? What are you doing here? Get out, impostor."

One of the guys he'd followed got up and headed to the queue of other students waiting to be served, leaving the rest guarding their table. Xander stood frozen to the spot, feeling like a jilted fool. With a flash of inspiration, he turned back towards the door and waved as he pretended to spot a friend. "Hey man!" He called, maybe a little too loudly because at least five people nearby looked up surprise. "Been looking everywhere for you," he added, as he rushed past the queue and back out of the room.
Once in the corridor he broke into a jog, until he was able to round a corner and collapse against the wall, panting with the after-effects of his panic. 'Okay, Xan-man. Pull yourself together. Breath. Think. It's got to be around here somewhere'. The corridor was momentarily empty but what he really needed was a directory. This place was huge. He thought about going back the way he'd come, but the idea of walking past the cafeteria was too much. Cursing himself for a coward he continued further along the corridor, peering through the glass panes in the doors as he went. Most of them looked like offices, with the occasional lounge with coffee machines and a scattering of students. The corridor ended in a stairwell. He'd have to go back. He sank to the floor, hugging his backpack and decided to wait it out for a while.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander pushed open the door, once again trying on his bravado for size. As he walked in he took a quick look around. Luckily there were only four or five students occupying the benches and they were concentrating completely on their screens. None of them looked up. Xander made his way over to the furthest corner, where
nobody could see what he was doing and pulled up a stool. The computer was turned on, its screensaver swirling in multicoloured sleep. He gave the mouse a little shake to wake it up and was greeted by the requirement to log on. Grabbing his backpack he pulled out the books, taking in the titles for the first time. 'Nineteenth Century Poets' and 'The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge', what the fuck? Digging in the side pocket of his bag, for pens and pencils, he laid them out to look as if he was studying and flipped open the pad of paper. Jimmy's login details were on the first page and he concentrated on his two fingered style as he tapped them into the machine. Now it was just a matter of waiting until the room was empty. In the meantime there was a whole world available on the Internet for the touch of a button. Maybe he could find out a few things about Sunnydale, about Spike, and about a really cool idea he'd had after the fight yesterday - it really shouldn't take two or three shots to the head with his Colts to dust a vampire. Opening the web browser he set to work.
27. Doing IT

Prompt: #43 - Narcissus

Spike surveyed the front of the building from across the street. He allowed his eyes to sweep across the exposed windows, noting the faint flash of a torch which marked the presence of at least one security guard doing his rounds. With a nod to Xander he led them away, around the corner and into the alley that ran along the back of the row of converted Victorian office buildings. As they walked past parked cars and occasional dumpsters Jimmy counted backwards in a low whisper, until they got to approximately the right place. Xander ran his eyes along the ranks of windows. "I stuck a sheet of paper in the one I unlocked," he explained. "Like a flag. Hang on. Look. That one there," he added, pointing. "I jammed the catch with a pencil."

The wall in front of them obviously enclosed a small back yard and was about fifteen feet high. The door set into it was strong and well locked but the window Xander was pointing at was set close to the edge of the yard and they should be able to reach it from the top. The next yard seemed to be the main goods delivery point, since the wall had been removed to allow trucks in to the reinforced back door. If necessary they could maybe pick
the lock and get in that way, but they would be one floor too low and there was security inside. Better to make straight for the room they wanted. He walked up to the base of the wall and looked up, measuring it, before turning back to Xander and Jimmy.

Xander was hanging back, already glancing around with that discouraged look on his face that irritated Spike for some reason. "It didn't look so high from inside," he whispered.

Spike shrugged. "Not to worry. It's not that tall." He walked around to the open space of the loading bay. "Come on. What are you waiting for?"

Xander glanced at Jimmy, then back at Spike. "What? You want us to hoist you up, or something?"

That made Spike grin. All this time in the company of a vampire, all that time fighting them in Sunnydale and the boy still didn't know what he was dealing with. He winked at Xander and stalked over to the foot of the wall and jumped, grabbed the top and hauled himself up in one smooth fluid movement. Not to be outdone and probably wanting to show off to Spike, and possibly show up the human, Jimmy followed. Not quite so graceful,
but still managing to reach the top without assistance.

Xander stood below them and looked up at Spike sitting astride the wall, his right leg dangling, his foot swinging at least three feet out of Xander's reach. He sighed in resigned recognition. "There's no way I can get up there by myself," he whispered fiercely.

Spike stretched his right leg straight. "Jump and grab hold of my ankle," he instructed.

Xander crouched slightly and jumped up, reaching for Spike's foot. One hand brushed Spike's boot, but he couldn't get a good grip and he ended up back on the ground in a crouch. He stood up again, wiping his hands on his jeans and shook his head.

"Once more, pet," Spike instructed. "Bit more spring in your legs, yeah?"

Shaking his head in disbelief, Xander paced backward, measuring the distance. He took a couple of running steps and launched himself upwards again. This time he managed to get one hand around Spike's ankle and the other on his foot. He hung there for a moment before tilting his head back and looking up. "Now what?" he
"Now, hold on tight, okay?" Spike began to bend his leg, lifting Xander further off the ground. When he had his knee bent almost to his chest, he reached down and grasped Xander's wrist. "Grab my hand," he said. Xander's weight shifted from his leg to his arm as the boy let go his hold on Spike's boot and quickly shifted it to Spike's forearm. Spike's foot swung free and Xander was now hanging six feet clear of the ground. Placing his left hand in front of him, Spike used his shoulder muscles to lift his right arm higher, pulling Xander's dead weight with it. Xander shifted his left hand from Spike's arm in order to grab the edge of the wall and Spike twisted on his perch, getting his right foot up onto the wall and pushing with his left arm, began slowly to stand up.

One small swing and Xander was sitting secure. Spike let him go. Xander sat on the top of the wall, his legs dangling. He turned his head and gazed up at Spike in amazement. "Wow," he said.

Spike executed a little dance step of shear exuberance, balancing on the narrow brick top and spun on the spot to inspect the back of the building again. As he turned he caught Jimmy's eye across the top of Xander's head and
winked. Jimmy's slight frown immediately lightened and he grinned back, happy again, now that his Sire had noticed him. Fledges and minions, they were so predictable.

Spike pulled a hunting knife similar to Xander's, from the sheath on the back of his belt and passed it to Jimmy. "You're nearest," he said. "Go stick that in the gap and jimmy the window," he added, ignoring Xander's snigger.

Jimmy took the knife and walked along the top of the wall until he reached the back of the building. He leant across and grabbed the sill. It took only moments for him to insert the point of the blade at the base of the pane and work it open enough to get his fingers into the gap and push upwards. Heaving himself up onto the ledge, he shimmied through the gap and into the room beyond.

Spike climbed over Xander's seated form then turned and gave him a hand up as Jimmy opened the window wider. Spike pulled himself into the room and took a quick look around at the computers on their benches. Xander was still on the wall outside, but already leaning over, trying to get a good grip on the window frame. He hauled himself over, for a moment he teetered on his stomach, half in and half out, before pitching forwards in
an ungainly heap onto the floor inside. Cursing under his breath he scrambled around until he was sitting and tried to look as if that had been deliberate. "Stupid vampire stealth thing," he muttered.

"You finished playing?" Spike asked.

Xander got to his feet, looking faintly resentful, and took his time dusting himself down to hide his embarrassment. Spike spared him a glance, but was more interested in what Jimmy was doing to one of the computers. "Okay all yours. Do your thing. I want to know where that book is and I want to be out of here, sharpish. Got that?"

Jimmy nodded enthusiastically "Not a problem. Just let me log-in," he said eagerly. He pulled up a stool and set to work. Within minutes he was engrossed. "Shouldn't take more than half an hour," he muttered. "If all goes well."

"Make it go well." Spike was peripherally aware of Xander wandering aimlessly around the room, idly hitting keys and shifting mice, but he was being quiet, so Spike left him alone. Until he got bored with watching Jimmy. When he wandered over to Xander he saw that the boy
had apparently found a computer that hadn't been turned off. "Thought you said you didn't know how to use these things," he commented.

"No, I said I didn't know how to hack into the secure network of a commercial enterprise. Everyone knows how to surf the web."

Spike raised an eyebrow at him. "Learn that at school, did you?" he asked. Xander nodded. "Okay. So show me."

Xander looked at him in surprise. "You want to know how to....?"

"Yeah. Never had the chance before. Didn't have these things when I was human." He paused. "Didn't have cinema. Didn't have TV. Didn't have computers." He pulled up a stool next to Xander. "Come on, show me how it works. What's this web thing look like?"

"Okay. Well, see this? This is the mouse."

"I know that, you berk. I do watch TV. I know what a computer looks like. I've just never used one."

"Sorry." Xander moved the mouse and clicked it. The
screen changed. "There. This is Yahoo. It's the search engine. You type words into this box and Yahoo finds web pages with those words in."

"Just like that?"

"Yep. What do you want me to look for."

"How about me?"

"Huh?"

"Put 'Spike' in there. Lets see if there's anything about me."

"Err... trouble is... if it finds the word 'spike'... it can't tell what kind of spike. You could gets loads of hits for Spike Lee, or Spike Milligan, or railroad spikes, or... I don't know, all sorts of spiky stuff."

"Okay, put in 'William the Bloody'"

Xander just looked at him. "Narcissistic, much?" he asked.

Spike scowled. "Don't go all articulate on me, pet. You
don't know what that means. Hardly know how to read, if I remember right."

"Hey! I read. I read today. When the computers froze, before the other guys gave up and left. I read the books you gave me." He placed his right hand on his heart and stretched out the other, hamming his delivery. "I wandered lonely as a cloud, that floats on high ... er, something, something. When all at once I saw a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils." He grinned and looked up at Spike from under his hair. "Doesn't even rhyme. And how does a cloud wander, anyway? Sounds like it should have legs."

"Don't mock Wordsworth, pet,"

"And I do so, know what Narcissistic means."

There was definite sulk in that voice and Spike was about to retort, when he was interrupted from the other side of the room.

"Sire, I'm in."

Suddenly Spike lost interest in scoring points, or defending the art of a bloke who'd been dead for over a
hundred years. He was across the room in moments, wanting to see what Jimmy had found.

"I've got their archive accounts. Do you have any idea how long ago the book was sold?

Xander came to stand next to him, peering over Jimmy's shoulder.

"1992. 22nd of June." Catching Xander's incredulous look he added, "Told you - they all tell the truth in the end."

Xander shuddered.

There was more clicking of keys as Jimmy typed rapidly. Then he sat back. "There it is. Argentum Venificus, slightly foxed, one tear in the binding. Wow! That was a lot of money to spend on a book."

"So who bought it?" he asked impatiently.

"There's no name. Just an account number and 'WC, London'. Does that mean anything to you? There's an address."

Spike growled with suppressed excitement and
frustration. He started to demand more information when he heard something. He cocked his head, listening. There was a faint sound of foot steps in the corridor outside. "Print it out, quick. I'll be back." He went to the door, listening carefully, locating the direction of the approaching security guard. Xander followed him and behind them there was a faint hum as the printer started to work. "You, stay here," he ordered, pushing Xander back with his hand on Xander's chest.

"No. Stop. Please? You don't have to kill him. You said you'd go to the blood house to feed." The boy sounded frightened, but Spike wasn't sure if it was for himself, for Spike, or possibly for the guard. "If you kill him, people will ask questions and they'll find out someone was hacking and they'll track it back and find out that you're interested in the book."

Spike paused. That sounded almost convincing. Could they do that? Trouble was, he didn't know. He growled again and shot Xander an interrogatory look. The boy was pleading with him with his eyes. He hesitated. "Can they do that?" he asked Jimmy.

Spike checked the door was locked and turned back to the room. "Turn off that screen and get down," he instructed, taking up a position against the wall, out of sight of anybody looking through the glass pane in the door. Jimmy did as he was told, while Xander took up position flat on the other side of the door. Stupid human boy, he'd probably try and get in the way if Spike did have to take the guy out. He still looked a little panicked, but at least he was being quiet. The footsteps got closer. They stopped outside the door and the knob rattled as it was tested. Spike got ready, listening for the sound of a key in the lock. They waited. Then the footsteps resumed, moving away and he relaxed. Next to him Xander let out a huff of held breath and slumped against the wall. Jimmy's head appeared from behind the bench. "Huh!" Spike snorted. "You got that page?" Jimmy nodded. "Right. Lets get out of here then."

Xander raised his head and turned to look at Spike. "Thank you," he breathed.

~*~*~*~*~

Getting out was easier than getting in and half an hour later they were a mile away, heading back to the factory.
Xander was almost skipping with suppressed energy and relief. Jimmy was eagerly offering to set up a computer at the factory, if Spike wanted to hack any more auction houses. Spike was scanning the information on the sheaf of printed pages, not really listening to either of them. Watchers' Council. Damn! Wasn't it just his luck that the only copy of the book he needed had been bought by the bloody Watchers' Council? He wondered if that antiquated bunch of old dinosaurs had got around to computerising their inventory yet. Xander started jumping, playing hopscotch along the paving stones and Spike turned to Jimmy. "Yeah. We'll do that. Get a computer and you can see if you can track it down."

Jimmy's face lit up with the gleeful knowledge that his Sire needed him and he opened his mouth to say something, but Spike silenced him with a gesture, peering into the darkness of the alley they were passing. "Quiet," he ordered, as a figure detached itself from the shadows and stepped out in front of Xander, who froze mid-hop before placing both his feet on the ground and stepping carefully backwards to Spike's side.

Spike looked at their visitor. "Black Wind," he greeted. "What brings you to this side of the country?"
28. Diversion

Prompt: #44 - Riposte

Black Wind took another step forward and stopped under a streetlight, deliberately exposing himself to view. "Calling in a debt, my friend," he said. "You owe me two favours for what I did for you when..."

Spike interrupted, "Yes, I remember."

Black Wind's smile turned as predatory as any that had ever graced Spike's features, looking out of place on his youthful, innocent face, but he merely nodded, acknowledging Spike's obvious desire to not discuss their last meeting. Instead, he shrugged "So, we talk?"

~~~*~~*

Xander placed the cup of hot water on the coffee table in
front of their guest, retreated to the other easy chair and sat down, curling his legs under him and gripping his can of coke in both hands. His previous exuberance had drained out of him with Black Wind's appearance, as if it had never been there and he'd been subdued for the rest of the walk home. And for all that Spike had not been taking any notice of the boy, he missed that lightness of spirit. Now, sitting curled up in their living room Xander might look relaxed to a casual observer, but Spike could see the tension in his body, which matched the tightness of his own muscles. He wanted to say something, some witty remark or barb that would cause Xander's own wit to lash out with a snarking riposte and lighten the mood, but Black Wind had brought an atmosphere of foreboding with him and the task was beyond him at the moment.

Black Wind himself looked totally relaxed, seated comfortably on the reassembled sofa, for all the world like he was in his own home, which was an irritant in and of itself. He was dressed the same as on every other occasion Spike had ever seen him: casually smart, his dark hair tidy and his thick rimmed glasses both hiding and framing his eyes. Sitting there, he looked like Jimmy would have done in a couple of years time, if Spike hadn't got to him first, and his aura of harmless
gawkiness would have fooled anyone not familiar with his true powers. Jimmy himself had been left downstairs, guarding the door, Spike neither wanting, nor trusting the fledgling with whatever Black Wind was about to bring down on them. He moodily contemplated his whisky. He knew the protocols, so he waited as Black Wind pulled a leather pouch out of his pocket, extracted a pinch of some dried powder and sprinkled it into his cup. He gave it a stir with his finger, lifted the cup to his nose, breathed in the steam then took a sip, before placing the cup carefully back on the table.

Only then did Spike break the silence. "What do you want, old man?" he asked.

Black Wind flicked a glance at Spike then turned to Xander. "Thank you," he said with a broad and friendly smile. "I appreciate the trouble you took to boil water, just for me. One day I will find a way to return the favour."

Spike felt his hackles stir and growled low in warning, while Xander's own gaze switched between the two of them and he returned Black Wind's smile with a tentative one of his own.
Turning back to Spike, Black Wind nodded. "My apologies, Master Spike." He hesitated. "But your boy... he's from the Hellmouth. I don't know why I didn't realise it... immediately." He glanced at Xander again. "State of mind, maybe? Alertness? Yes, it could be, that would mask..."

Spike jumped in quickly, before he said too much. His boy wasn't stupid, after all. He was quite capable of joining the dots and realising that Black Wind had seen him before, even if he didn't remember it himself. "Yeah. He's from the Hellmouth. What of it? That a problem to you?" He looked over at Xander and saw that he was unconsciously fiddling with his bracelet, his eyes fixed on Black Wind. But there was no sign of recognition in his face and Spike gave a small sigh of relief, as he recognised that fact. Some of his tension eased.

Black Wind shook his head. "No. Just a coincidence," he said. "Just an interesting coincidence, I'm sure." Spike made a hurry-up motion with his hand, urging Black Wind to come to the point, he wanted this over and the old man out of his home. Black Wind nodded, acknowledging Spike's right to decide what Xander was told. "Business, yes. You owe me two favours."
"Already said that." Spike agreed. "What else?"

"I'm calling one in." There was a definite note of mischief in his tone and Spike felt himself begin to relax, at last. Maybe he'd been making too much of this sudden appearance?

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I got that too. So? What is it? You got a story to tell? Tell it."

Black Wind's features settled into a more serious fame and he sighed as he picked up his cup and stared into it. "I have been forced to relocate the entrance to my shop, here. I am not happy about it, but it couldn't be avoided. I don't wish to stay. You know I prefer the desert and the mountains to this... cacophony of mechanical living." He shrugged in the general direction of the city outside with a grimace of distaste. "But there were enquiries being made. Someone was asking questions in Reno." He paused for a moment, as if feeling for the shape of the story. Spike rolled the last of the tension out of his shoulders, sat back and took a sip of his whiskey. "At the same time, I had some visitors. Careful men. Not local. I'd done some small jobs for them already. Their roots are not in this land and they needed an intermediary, some augmentations... Simple stuff. Small stuff." He looked up
and caught Spike's eyes, holding them with his gaze and Spike could feel the ancient power. "But last time they came... they asked too much."

"What did they want?"

"They want me to loosen the binding of native magic on someone of mixed heritage, so she is more responsive to their roots, without the influence of mine."

"This a matter of honour?" Spike asked.

Black Wind was staring into his cup again but he looked up at this. "No. This is a matter of wrong. Such a thing is counter to everything. It is not to be done."

"So why do they want it?"

With a shrug, Black Wind gave what could only be called a slightly hysterical laugh. "They are European magic," he said. "They want her under their influence alone. Her native blood is not great, but here on our soil it calls strongly. They are afraid of what they don't know. And they fear she will reject them and their ways. They want control of her and of her destiny." He looked up again and the serious nature of the order was clear in his eyes.
"Even if I could do this thing without harm to myself, to my spirit, it would weaken her, but they don't care about that. To them, what is not in their compass, is not to be trusted."

"Hang on." Spike leant forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees, his glass clasped lightly in his hands, as a realisation struck him. "Are you saying you want me to go save this 'her'? Is that it? Because we had a deal, mate. Nothing against my nature. And random rescuing of damsels in distress don't qualify. Go find yourself a hero. This doesn't count, so you can't ask me to do it."

"Spike, Spike, really." Black Wind chided, his face lightening into true amusement. "Do you think me stupid?" adding as Spike opened his mouth, "don't answer that." Spike settled back in his chair with a smirk and Black Wind smiled faintly in reply. "I don't want you to rescue the girl. The slayer is always capable of looking after herself." He paused thoughtfully. "Until she isn't."

"The slayer?" Spike was incredulous. "You're asking my help, for the slayer?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Xander frantically wiping spilled coke off his leg, as he gazed open-mouthed
at Black Wind. "What, about Buffy?" Xander asked urgently. "Is she in danger?"

Black Wind nodded to himself. "Yes, a coincidence," he observed quietly. His mouth twisted in a parody of a smile as he turned to Xander. "The slayer is in no danger from me. I told you. What they asked of me is wrong. It would compromise me. Taint my power. I won't do it." He turned back to Spike. "They have driven me out of Reno. Driven me here, because this is where you are. And I want you to stop them. That's my favour." He held Spike's gaze as he continued, "They also have something of mine. A small carved stone. I want it back. Do this for me. Kill the members of the Watchers Council who have followed me to New York, retrieve the Anashaman, and one of your debts to me is paid.

29. The Anashaman

Prompt: #45 - Argos.
"But, but, that can't be true," Xander said, oblivious to Spike's scowl. "You must be making this up. The Watchers Council are the good guys. They help the slayer. They can't..." he petered out as Black Wind turned back to look at him.

Black wind's expression was bland, unless you were awake to the glint in his eyes. "I am not lying," he explained. "I have no interest in European magic. I had no reason to contact the Watchers Council. No reason to care about what they do. But they came to my shop, to my home, and they threatened me. They have an American slayer and she has some blood in her veins which calls to this land. They want to weaken her links to Our magic, so the other part of her ancestry is all that is left. And that holds to Europe. They want to weaken an aspect of her power, so they have control. I would refuse on those grounds alone. To deliberately weaken someone's essence? That is not what my magic is about."

Obviously still not convinced, Xander's voice took on an edge of sarcasm. "So you're what? Like a good shaman? A white shaman? That's why you come to ask a vampire to kill humans?"

Black Wind smiled reassuringly, but still with an edge.
"Black, white, good, evil, these terms mean nothing," he said with a vague wave of his hand. "They are words used to name opposites. It's a European way of thinking. I am not good or evil, child. But I am whole. To make someone less than whole? That would diminish me. It would hollow me out, like a canker in the soul of a tree." He sat back in his seat and for a moment he looked weary. "The slayer line is old. She comes from the source of humanity itself. But she is born in a human body, which is part of the present and the route to it, from the past. This slayer has roots in Europe and in this land." Again he smiled. And this time it was not reassuring. "The Council has never felt comfortable when the slayer is born out of their familiar realm."

The preaching registered on Spike's mind, but he was not really listening, at this however, he looked up sharply. "Are you saying that my first slayer was weakened somehow?"

Black Wind shook his head "I'm not saying anything about her at all. Where were you? How old were you?

"The first was in China, when I was twenty years dead. The second was here in New York, African American bird. What do you know?"
"Nothing, my friend. I know nothing for certain. At twenty, there is no reason you could not have met and killed a slayer at full strength. I have no reason to believe they have tried to do this before. I only know the ones who came to me and asked me to perform an abomination."

Spike relaxed, slightly reassured "That's better. Yeah. 'Course she hadn't been tampered with. Was a good fight," he muttered.

~*~*~*~*~

After Black Wind left, Spike went downstairs and sent Jimmy out, scouting for information. He was useless in a fight, but he was intelligent enough to ask questions and young enough to look innocent while he did so. With the information Black Wind had supplied, Spike had no doubt Jimmy would locate the council members. He, meanwhile, went to pay a visit on Flavia, leaving Xander at the factory.

~*~*~*~*~
The sun had only been down for half an hour when Xander entered the hotel. Spike had roused him out of bed with, "Come on. We're going to pay a visit on a couple of watchers. You want to check the truth? You can join the team."

Xander had blinked up at him. "We have a team?"

"Yeah. You and me. Jimmy stays here. He's no good to man nor beast in a fight. Bring your guns."

So here he was, about to infiltrate the watcher's den. He crossed the marble floor of the foyer, trying to appear confident of his welcome and asked the clerk at the front desk for Roger Wyndam-Pryce. The clerk looked doubtful, but picked up the telephone and dialled. "Mr Wyndam-Pryce, Sir. There is a... young gentleman at reception asking to speak to you." There was a pause as he listened to the voice at the other end. "No, Sir. Yes, Sir. I'll ask, Sir." He looked up at Xander. "Since you don't have an appointment, do you have any identification, please?"

"Just tell him I have a message from Buffy." The clerk looked doubtful. "Buffy. Just tell him... Look, let me talk
Taking a step back from his desk, the clerk shook his head and spoke into the telephone again. "He says he has a message, Sir. From someone called.... Buffy? Yes, Sir. Buffy. I see. Yes, of course. Thank you, Sir." Placing the handset back in its holder he nodded to Xander. "Room 443. Take the elevator to the fourth floor, turn right and it is on your right."

Xander nodded back, feeling a slight glow at the fact that he'd succeeded in getting past the guy. Without the magic 'B' word, he had no doubt the clerk would have taken great pleasure in showing him the door. With a grin he turned away and hurried to the open elevator, before Spike went up without him.

The hallway was plush. That was the only word Xander could use to describe the thick carpet, the real paintings on the walls and the shiny brass fittings on the doors. Room 443 was exactly where the clerk had said and trying not to feel nervous, Xander raised his hand and knocked, while Spike stood out of sight to the side.

The door was opened immediately, but before Xander could open his mouth, Spike pushed past him, and past
the man who had opened it, and stalked into the room, taking up a position in the centre of the open space, facing an older man, who was sitting on the sofa, in the act of talking into a telephone.

Xander followed more cautiously, glanced around, taking in the positions of the two occupants and stepped back against the wall, where he could watch them both. The seated man spoke slowly, "I think I may need to call you back, Mr Giles. No, no trouble, I think I may have been mistaken about the nature of my visitor. I'm sure you're right. I have no doubt she is well known in some circles." Keeping his eyes fixed on Spike, he carefully laid the telephone back in its cradle. "William the Bloody," he announced, calmly. Xander saw the younger man blanch. "This is a surprise. Close the door, Wesley."

Spike grinned, "You've heard of me?"

"No. We've met. 1963. My colleagues and I fell upon you slaughtering an orphanage in Vienna. Killed two of my men before you escaped." Standing up, he walked casually to the window and looked out, raising his hand in what, even to Xander's eyes, looked like an unnatural move.
Spike expression sharpened to one of gleeful enjoyment. "Don't bother, Roger," he said. "They're dead too."

A flash of shock crossed Roger Wyndam-Pryce's face, before he was able to control himself and Xander heard a whimper from the younger man, Wesley. "Do be quiet, boy!" Roger snapped and it took Xander a moment to realise he was talking to Wesley, not to him. For himself, he was just as thrown as Wesley. Who was dead? Although he had no doubts that Spike intended to kill the watchers, he had agreed that they needed to learn the truth behind Black Wind's accusations and had had some vague idea that if it all turned out to be rubbish, as he very much hoped it would, he could intervene in some way to prevent actual death. And Spike hadn't had time to kill anyone, because he'd followed Xander into the hotel and was already in the elevator when Xander finished speaking to the desk clerk. He had to be bluffing.

Roger Wyndam-Pryce didn't seem so sure, but he shrugged and moved away from the window, back into the room. "What do you want?"

"You really don't need to put on the accent, you know." Roger said with a sneer. "We are quite aware of what you were." Spike growled, but Roger kept speaking as he continued his casual stroll, towards a desk against the far wall. "A bad poet. A mother's boy. A failure as a man, who was turned in an alley by a mad woman." By the time he got to that point he had reached the desk and flipped open the lid of a small wooden box, grabbing something from inside.

Spike roared. "That's it! You are dead, mate," he yelled as he sprang forward.

Roger Wyndam-Pryce lifted his hand, holding up a small stone. "Expositus via, Ego dico vox, terminus veneficus" he shouted.

Spike stopped dead a mere foot from Roger's outstretched hand. He cocked his head, looking at the object Roger held. "That must be the Anashaman," he observed. Before Roger could react, Spike grabbed hold of his wrist and smashed his arm down on his own knee, which he raised to meet it. There was a crack and Roger screamed. The Anashaman fell to the floor and rolled a few feet before coming to rest against the leg of a chair.
Roger fell to his knees, hugging his arm to his chest.

Xander noticed movement to his right and dragged one of his colts from the waistband of his jeans. He pointed it at Wesley. "Don't move," he instructed. Wesley cringed back against the wall with another whimper. Xander turned to Spike. "Can we have a little less violence and a bit more calm, please? Before room service, or security, or somebody come to investigate. We have some questions to ask, remember?" He gestured with his gun towards the sofa. "Get him up and sit him down over there," he told Wesley. "And you sit down next to him." Then he turned to Spike. "Please? There's no need to kill anyone. We just want to know what the story is with Black Wind and Buffy. Please?"

With a sigh, Spike nodded. "Spoil my fun. Okay, we'll ask questions, pet." He pursed his lips again. "Got to say, I'm a mite curious myself." He walked over to Roger, staying out of Xander's line of fire, and crouched down next to the arm of the sofa. Raising one eyebrow he said, "Black Wind came to see me. You know Black Wind, don't you?"

Roger was glaring at Xander's steady hand on the gun. "You won't shoot. You'll bring hotel security and the police down on us in moments. You're human, too. I
don't know what you're doing with this thing." He sneered as he nodded towards Spike. "But you should know, he's a killer. Help us and I'll make sure you're safe. If you let him kill us, you'll be guilty of murder. You don't want that, do you?"

Xander opened his mouth, but Spike got there first. "He knows exactly what I am. He's with me. Nothing you can do about it." He growled softly. "Now tell us what we want to know. What are you planning to do to the slayer? Black Wind's already told us his story. Let's hear yours."

Wesley was sitting nervously on the edge of his seat, hugging himself and making soft mewling noises. Roger spared him a glance. "Do be quiet, boy. You are disgracing yourself and your vocation." There was a faint crunching sound and Roger gazed up at Spike, seemingly fixated on the suddenly sharp fangs in his demonic face, and as Spike rose and stepped behind him out of his view, he hunched forward over his broken arm. "Alright," he said, attempting to retain some control, even as it slipped further away. "I don't know what that charlatan's told you, but it was nothing that would harm the slayer." He looked up at Xander, pleadingly. "From the first, there've been concerns. She wasn't trained to her task.
Her watcher reported her as wilful and insolent, unable to obey orders and reckless of herself and others. There are some in the Council who feel she might have rogue tendencies. Our own observations have shown that she tried to reject her appointed destiny on a number of occasions. We just want to make sure she doesn't do that again. A little bit of pre-emptive action, but I repeat, nothing that will harm her."

Xander lowered his weapon slightly and took the chair opposite the watchers. "Now why don't I believe that?" he asked, rhetorically. "Oh," he went on, allowing his anger to rise, "I know. Maybe it's because you're lying! You wanted Black Wind to tie her to you with magic. You wanted to cripple her and make her into some sort of tool. Buffy's a person. She's a beautiful, brave, wonderful girl. You keep your magical mitts off her."

Spike's hands came down on Roger's shoulder and he started. Leaning over, Spike brought his face down next to Roger's ear, speaking softly he asked, "And what the bloody hell was that palaver with the stone?" Looking across at Xander he added conversationally, "Go pick it up, there's a love? It belongs in that box on the desk."

As Xander stood up to retrieve the stone, Wesley
whimpered again and Spike casually clouted him with the back of his left hand, before returning it to Roger's shoulder. Wesley fell sideways under the blow and lay still, shaking his head, then he rolled off the sofa onto his knees on the floor and, shuffling around onto his ass, crab-crawled back a few feet, out of reach. Spike glared at him and he froze. "Father, tell him," he pleaded. "Please?"

"Father, is it?" Spike smirked pushing himself upright, but leaving his hands heavy on Roger's shoulders. "Well, maybe it's you we should be asking, eh? I'm sure you know all about it, being Daddy's boy and all."

Wesley let loose a slightly hysterical giggle. "Oh, yes. Daddy's boy." Somehow he managed to inject his tone with a note of heavy irony, in spite of the chattering of his teeth. "I don't know much. I was just there to fetch and carry."

"Where?"

"In, in Reno, when, when we went to see the shaman. He wouldn't help, so the Council sent over the amulet. It, it's supposed to come from Africa, from the time of the first slayer."
Xander bent down and picked the stone up. It was the size of a walnut and cool to the touch. A crude carving, it was impossible to tell what it was supposed to represent. He leant back against the wall, trying for nonchalant, and tossed it up in the air and caught it again, "It doesn't look like much," he observed.

"Be careful," Wes cried. "It's an ancient artefact. It's been handed down through the Council since before records began. It's priceless. Not some cheap tat from we bought from Argos, you know?"

Xander dropped the stone into the padded box and closed the lid on it. He looked up at Wesley as he slipped the box and its contents in his jacket pocket and fastened the zip to keep it safe. "Huh?"

But Wesley took no notice. It was as if, now that he had started talking, he couldn't stop. "It's supposed to neutralise magic. Take a shaman's power and turn him into an ordinary person. They say it was made by the first shaman, in case the magic went bad? I don't know. I'm not senior enough to have that knowledge. Please don't hurt us?" He looked at his father and something he saw finally caused him to shut up. "Don't hurt him," he
"And I'm supposed to believe that claptrap?" Spike observed, leaning back over Roger's shoulder. "You tried to use it against me and nothing happened. Now why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," Roger replied, tightly. "You're a magical creature. It should have killed you."

"You say the sweetest things," Spike said, shifting his hands to Roger's neck, caressing his jaw and cheekbones. Then with a swift twist and another cracking sound, Roger's body toppled forwards onto it's face on the floor as Spike pushed himself back upright.

Wesley let out a gasp and scrambled on hands and knees to Roger's side. He rolled him over and gazed down at him before he lifted his face and caught Xander's eye. "You've killed him," he said. "He's dead."

Xander stared dumbstruck. Slowly his legs gave way and he slumped down the wall until he was sitting in an ungainly heap. He tore his eyes away from Wesley and looked at Spike. "Why did you do that?" he asked.
Spike shrugged. "What do you mean, why? Thought you'd be pleased. He was trying to mess up your little friend. He'd have succeeded too." He gestured to Wesley's hunched form. "Look what a good job he did on this one." Striding over, he grabbed Xander's arm and hauled him to his feet. "Come on. Time to go. Anyway, he insulted Dru. She may have been crazy, but it's not for the likes of him to comment. Let me just kill the son and we'll be off."

"Spike! No! Please. Don't kill him." Seeing the mulish expression forming on Spike's face, he cast around for a reason, any reason. "He might still know stuff. We could take him with us."

Spike nodded. "Good thought. Okay. We take him with us. Easier to only have to carry one body, anyway. Can't leave it here. Police'll find it too quickly." He went over to Wesley and pulled him to his feet too, giving him a shove which sent him stumbling into Xander. He hoisted Roger's body over his shoulder. "Right, pet. Take a look outside, make sure there's no one around and we'll use the service lift. Hop to it."
Footnotes:

One line is taken from the transcript of Angel, episode 5.07 "Lineage" and one from Buffy, 3.14 "Bad Girls"

'Expositus via, ego dico vox, terminus veneficus' is a translation of 'Open the way, I call the power, end the magic' courtesy of the Free Online English to Latin Translator at http://www.translation-guide.com/free_online_translators.php?from=English&to=Latin

30. O' Mice an' Men

Prompt: #46 - Lamia

Spike was glad to get to the car and get the boy and the watcher bundled into the backseat and the body dumped in the boot. Xander was twitchy. He'd kept the gun on Watcher Junior as they made their careful way out of the hotel to where the car was stashed, but Spike had almost been afraid he'd shoot through sheer nerves, the way he
was trembling. Taking his seat behind the wheel, Spike was feeling justifiably aggrieved. He'd only killed the old guy because he knew Xander cared about the Slayer. It was not like it was anything to him what the Council wanted to do. He could have gone in, done the job and got out again, with half the fuss and with one favour to Black Wind paid off. But he'd not only had to carry the body, he'd also had to shepherd two live humans out of the hotel and keep an eye out to avoid the hotel staff.

He looked over his shoulder. The boy was slumped back in his seat, arms wrapped around himself as if he was cold, the gun now hanging uselessly from lax fingers. At least the watcher was being quiet. He was huddled forward, hands gripping his knees and his head bowed onto his chest. Spike flipped open the glove box and rummaged around, finally extracting a length of sash cord and a relatively clean handkerchief. He reached back and nudged Xander's leg. "Hey mate," he said encouragingly, adding more harshly, "want to do the honours and tie this guy up? We don't want trouble here. You insisted on keeping him alive, you look after him."

Xander raised his head and his eyes widened when he saw the rope and handkerchief, but he took them and, after turning them over in his hands a few times with a
puzzled air, he seemed to realise what Spike wanted. He shuffled around so that he was facing Wesley. "Uhm, listen, I need to tie you up. Can you give me your hands?" He'd picked up Wesley's right hand and began to tie a loop of the cord around his wrist while Wesley just watched, as if the hand didn't belong to him. He looked up at Xander, but Xander was avoiding his eye. Wesley lifted his left arm and placed it on his knee, allowing Xander to tie the two wrists together. Spike returned his gaze to the front, started the engine and pulled away, turning left out of the alley into the busy evening traffic.

By the time he turned off onto a quieter street and had a chance to check again, Xander had the handkerchief in place and Wesley had slumped back in the seat. There were tears hovering in the corners of his eyes. Xander, however, was looking a little more alert, although there was a tautness about him that worried Spike in some indefinable way. Shrugging, Spike decided to let the boy stew. He'd get over whatever was bothering him. Meanwhile Spike opened his window wide and concentrated on the road.

Getting rid of the body didn't prove too tricky, weevilers tended to have a limited geographical range, so it was just a matter of tracking them down in the likely places. It
only took an hour or so before he caught the rancid scent of them, down by the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. He glanced over his shoulder. The boy looked a little better. The tightness around his mouth had relaxed, although he still wouldn't look at Spike and his shoulders had slumped even further. With a curt, "Stay here." Spike got out of the car and went to strike another bargain. Then it was just a matter of delivering the body to the mouth of the weevilers' den. He even got a cold snack from the blood pooling in the neck and head, as he delivered it. By morning there'd be nothing but the odd scrap of bone left and those few broken pieces would sink peacefully to the bottom of the Hudson.

On returning to the car Spike decided he'd had just about enough of Xander's sulking. He opened the rear door and pulled the boy out, reached in again, grabbed the watcher's upper arm and dragged him over towards the middle of the seat. Wesley started struggling and panicked eyes gazed up at Spike from above the gag as he shook his head wildly from side to side. "Don't worry, Percy," Spike sneered. "You're not on the menu tonight. My boy asked for your life, so you co-operate and you'll be fine." Wesley didn't look convinced, but at least he stopped trying to fight as Spike shoved his shoulders down so he was lying on his side across the seat. Turning
back to Xander, Spike marched the boy around the car, opened the front passenger door and gave him a shove in that direction. "Get in," he ordered. Xander did as he was told. It didn't do any good. The boy never said a word, the whole way home.

Jimmy was obviously on the watch for them, because the garage doors began to open as soon as they arrived at the factory. Spike pulled the car in and turned off the engine. He got out as Jimmy shut the door and for the first time that evening, he began to relax. Walking over to Jimmy, he clapped him on the shoulder. "You eaten?" he asked. Jimmy shook his head. "Go to the house behind Duke's place. Take your time. Have some fun. I've got a prisoner and I don't need a hungry fledgling round at the moment." He deliberately caught and held Jimmy's eyes. "You did good," he added. "I'm pleased. So go get your reward." He shoved his hand deep into a pocket. "In fact, here, butter them up, pay for it, for once. Make sure they know it's because I'm pleased about how they're conducting their business. That'll get you a fresh one." He allowed his face to take on a sterner expression. "And steer clear of any that're using Orpheus. I don't want you touching that shit. Okay?"

Jimmy nodded and took the proffered note. "Thank you,
Sire. I will, I promise." He paused a moment. "Does this mean you're planning on moving on Flavia again?" he asked.

Spike shook his head. "Nah. Just don't want anyone forgetting that I could, that's all. Don't want them forgetting who won that fight and that she's only Master on my word." He nodded towards the door. "Go on. Have fun." Jimmy grinned and ran, as if he thought Spike might change his mind.

Spike turned back to the car and found Xander standing two paces behind him. "You don't talk to him," he said, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder. "He's not stupid, but he is just a fledgling and I don't have time to teach him. So he's unpredictable. You stay clear. Okay?"

What's Orpheus?" Xander asked.

Spike shrugged. "Drug. Not your concern. You hear what I said?" Xander nodded. "Right. Well. Come on, we'll lock this one up in the storeroom." He walked over to the wall and took a key down from a hook. "And you're cooking for him. I don't want any complaints."

He turned back to find that Xander hadn't moved. "Err.
What about... uhm... bathroom stuff?" Xander asked.

Spike sighed and closed his eyes as he thought that one through. Bloody inconvenient humans. He looked up at Xander again. "Okay. Good point." He came back to the car and opened the boot, leaning in, searching amid the accumulated rubbish. Finding what he was looking for, he gave a grunt of satisfaction and stood back up, dragging a long length of hefty chain and a leg shackle out of the mess and gathering it over his arm. He tossed the key to Xander. "There's some sacks of cotton waste in there." He nodded towards the store room. "Take it through to the toilet block. I'll bring the watcher." Seeing Xander's expression, he added, "And don't start moaning. You want to keep him, I don't want him stinking the place out, so he gets to sleep next to the facilities. If you don't like sharing, I can always kill him and have him off my hands."

Xander shook his head. "No. No, that's okay. No complaints. I am totally complaint free." He hurried across to the store, fumbling the lock in his eagerness, but eventually getting it open. Spike, meanwhile, went to the old staff rest room and began testing the pipes to find the one most firmly attached to the wall, feeling unreasonably relieved to hear the boy talking again. He'd
hire someone to put in a proper fix point tomorrow, if Xander hadn't got bored with having a pet to look after by then.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike clipped the shackle around Wesley's ankle and sat back on his haunches. He'd searched the man's pockets and removed anything that could conceivably be used as a lock pick and Xander had made up a thick mattress of cotton waste for him in the corner of the room and now removed the gag. Wesley looked almost comfortable, if you ignored the way he was grimacing as he got the saliva flowing again and tried to rid himself of the taste of cotton. After a few minutes of this, he sat back against the wall. "What... what do you want from me?" he asked nervously.

Spike nodded towards Xander. "The boy asked me not to kill you." He shook his head. "He reckons you might still know stuff. And I'm thinking he's right. So how about you tell me a bit more about the Anashaman and why it didn't work on me?"

Wesley looked up at Xander. "Thank you," he said. "You
must know... I... I really don't want to die." Xander shrugged. Wesley looked back at Spike. "Uhm... Yes... Err... Of course, I'll tell you anything. Anything. Although... in truth, and I know this isn't what you want to hear... I really don't know much about it. Just what I said. It's not taught at the academy and I have only been working for the Council for a couple of years. Before that I was at university..." Spike gave a low growl and Wesley flinched. "I... I.... I...
" He took a breath, seemed to gather himself together and started again, speaking eagerly. "Errr... It's old and it's been handed down through the Council since before there were records. It takes magic and neutralises it, but it's very focused and has a very short range. So it's not often used in the field. Uhm... I... I never heard of it until recently. So I don't know any secrets." He looked up at Spike, pleadingly. "Please, just tell me what you want to know. I'll help you in any way I can."

Spike smiled. "Why didn't it work on me, then?" he asked.

"Well I think... that is to say... there's a debate, of sorts, in the Watchers Council. Among the more academic watchers... About the nature of vampires..."
Spike frowned, "I know about that. 'M not stupid. I've read the arguments - how you watchers defend your cause with rationalisations about the unnatural nature of demons. Well, we may be unnatural, but we're here. Vampires may be predators, but so are lots of so called natural creatures, so are humans. And not all demons are 'evil' in your definition of the word, or even violent. You watchers just have a need to stand on the moral high ground - you debate and argue and it's all to justify the fact you want to wipe us out. I knew some German scientists and soldiers like that, about 50 years ago."

Xander had taken a seat at the foot of Wesley's makeshift bed, with his knees drawn up in front of him and Spike saw him start at that, his head coming up to stare. But before Spike could catch his eye, he looked away and seemed to concentrate on fiddling with his shoe laces.

Meanwhile Wesley blanched under Spike's sudden vehemence. "Err... Please. I'm sorry. Really, I am. We... we studied it in philosophy. It was an academic debate, like the Angels dancing on the head of a pin." He glanced up at Spike, searching for recognition of the reference and Spike nodded.
"There's a reason for you telling us all this?"

"Yes. yes, there is. Please. My... My father, like most members of the Council believed that vampires are unnatural. That they could only exist through the presence of magic. Evil magic. Wrongly used magic. They argue that the evil has to be destroyed to put the world right again. That when the old ones left the Earth, the act that created modern demons was a misuse of power and needs to be corrected.

"The... the other school of thought, the unpopular one, is that they... uhm... you, are natural. That demons are a natural part of creation. It is a heresy, but we studied it. As an argument it wasn't very strong. It never really held up in debate... "

"Of course it didn't," Spike sneered. "Couldn't have that, could we?"

"But that's my point," Wesley said. "I... I think that the fact that the Anashaman didn't kill you would tend to suggest that the commonly accepted view is, is... wrong." He shrugged, helplessly. "That might be why the Anashaman was never used as a weapon against demons... Or maybe it was, and that's why it was ignored
for so long... because it didn't work...? That's all I can suggest. I really don't know. But it is very, very powerful. Every reference agrees on that. And it does neutralise magic, or so I'm told. I... I heard rumours of it being used against a coven in Devon, who were plotting against the Council. But, what I mean is, if you had been magical, it should have worked."

Spike sat back, leaning on his braced arms and relaxed. The implications of this would be food for later thought, but right now... it felt... right. Not that he'd even felt the need for any sort of validation, but, it felt... nice, to know that demon kind were natural. And especially nice to prove the watchers wrong. He let his head fall back between his shoulders and stared up at the stained and dirty ceiling. "Oh you watchers," he said. "'For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries, Unlawful magic, and enticing lies' you end up proving through experiment what you didn't want to know." He laughed with delight at the concept. "Not that it'll change anything." He lifted his head and focussed back on Wesley. "I think you've proved you aren't interested in truth, for all your posturing." He pushed himself back to sit upright and crossed his legs in front of him, leaning his elbows on his knees. "Well, since we've sorted that age old question out, and since you're being so chatty, how about you tell
me what you know about the Argentum Veneficus too?"

Wesley looked around wildly, as if searching for inspiration from the dingy walls and toilet cubicles, but before he could splutter out any words, Xander interrupted. "Hang on," he said, indignantly. "Can we rewind a moment? Did I just hear you right? Are you saying that vampires are like... like lions, or something? That it's wrong to kill them? 'Cause, that doesn't sound right to me."

Spike smiled as he turned to look at him. "No, pet. He's not saying that. Vampires hunt humans, so humans have every reason to hunt them back. It's just that the Watchers Council has a crusade, a mission, to rid the Earth of all demons and they justify it by arguing that demons are not natural. Even the peaceful ones."

Xander interrupted again, "There are peaceful demons?"

"'Course there are. Lots of demons are peaceful, some even tend to be 'good'. But most are like humans, neither good nor bad." He raised an eyebrow and Xander made an 'okay, carry on' motion with his hands. Spike nodded. "All this stuff." He waved his hand vaguely around the room. "It doesn't make any difference. It answers the
question for the debating society, nothing more. Not going to change anything, except it'll give the minority side some powerful ammunition if they ever hear about it." He grinned. "But the thing I like, is it robs the watchers of their holier than thou justification." Xander's face slowly spread into a grin, too and for a moment Spike thought he was alright again. Then his smile shut down, like the light had been turned off and he went back to staring at his feet and picking at the hem of his jeans.

Spike turned back to the watcher. "The Argentum Veneficus. Talk, or I'll turn you and in a coupla days, you'll be happy to tell me everything you know."

Wesley cringed back "You... you wouldn't."

Looking up Xander said, "He would. He turned Jimmy because he wanted an IT expert."

Wesley turned horrified eyes on Xander. "And you stay with this monster? You condone this by your presence."

Xander went back to concentrating on his shoes and Spike ignored Wesley's last statement. "Yes, I would," he said, with a smug smile and a slight nod. "I'm a very bad
man."

Closing his eyes, as if trying to blot out the room, the world, the whole of reality, Wesley buried his face in his still bound hands. After a moment, he looked up again. "I don't know anything," he said, stiffly.

"Oh, come on. Guy like you, stuffed full of book learning? You know what I'm talking about." Spike allowed a low growl to rumble up from the bottom of his chest and was rewarded with a very satisfying flinch.

"Okay, okay. Yes. I know of the book. I may have even seen it. But that was in London. It's not there now."

"So where is it?"

"It... It... was one of a shipment sent out to Mr, umm, to the slayer's watcher."

"In Sunnydale" Spike finished for him. "Bloody Hell. I'm not ready to go back there yet. Bloody, bloody hell!" He pushed himself to his feet and stormed out of the room, before he ended up doing Xander's pet watcher an injury, out of sheer frustration, throwing back over his shoulder, "Come on, mate. We have a shaman to see."
He didn't look back, but he heard Xander's footsteps slapping on the concrete behind him as he headed for the door. "And make sure you've got that blasted stone with you."

Footnote - The line Spike quotes: 'For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries, Unlawful magic, and enticing lies' is from the poem Lamia, by John Keats (1795–1821). Oh, and the title comes from the line 'The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, gang aft agley' from Robert Burns' (1759–1796) poem 'To a Mouse'.

31. Double six

Prompt: #47 - Conclave

Xander hurried after Spike as he strode down the street, almost managing to catch him by the time he reached the corner. "Spike, wait up. Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

Spike came to a halt and turned to face him. His shoulders were slumped and his hands were shoved
deep into the pockets of his jeans. "I'm not going to do anything. I'm just not happy. I need that book, to find the gem, and your bloody watcher's got it."

Xander calmed down a little, since Spike was actually talking, instead of tearing off and destroying stuff. In fact, he seemed to be sulking, more than anything else. But he was still dangerous. How to calm him down? Maybe if he talked about it. Did that work on vampires? "But why do you want the gem?"

"It's the Gem of Amara. I told you, I've been looking for it, for a long time. Spent years researching and everything points to the book holding the key to its whereabouts." He threw his head back and growled in frustration at the sky. "That blasted watcher. Fucking council. It's a fucking conspiracy."

"But what does the gem do? Why do you want it?"

Spike's voice was resigned, almost weary. "I want my revenge. And the gem was going to help me get it."

"Revenge for what? Revenge on who?"

"Revenge for Dru, of course. The watcher killed my Dru."
You didn't think I've forgotten that, did you? It's why we're here. It's why you're here. With the gem I could go anywhere, any time." His voice took on a note of controlled viciousness. "I could march up to him as he stood hiding in the sunlight and he wouldn't be able to stop me."

Xander felt like he'd been struck. "So all this time, all this time we've been together, you've been plotting revenge? You're planning to use me somehow to help you kill Giles? To kill my friend?"

"That was the plan. Originally. Still is. And after what you have learnt tonight, do you still think he's one of your good guys? Why the hell do you care what happens to him?"

With a sigh, Xander shrugged. "I don't know what I believe any more. You're right, I don't believe the Watchers Council are the good guys. I don't even know if Mr Giles is. But even if he has done bad things, he's still my friend. No, I'm not sure I trust him. I'm pretty sure that I don't always agree with him. And I know for a fact that I don't always like what he does, or think he's right. But he's my friend. And I can't help you kill him."
"Not asking you to help. Never was." Spike paused in thought. "Listen mate, you ended up with me because of an accident. I was after the Watcher that day. But I got you instead. After a bit, it seemed like fate. After all, Angelus gave you to me. Seemed like, when you fell into my hands, that it was more than coincidence." His shoulders twisted, in a move which looked like embarrassment. "And after a while, I kind of got used to you. Company, you know? I like having you around." He shrugged again. "So yeah, I still want my revenge. But I don't expect you to help. I understand about loyalty. I'll even keep you out of it, if I can. Can't say fairer than that."

"But... I don't want you to hurt Giles at all."

"Xander, he killed my sire. He broke a deal and he killed my sire. I let that pack of pathetic, deluded idiots walk, when I had them all at my fangs end, in exchange for Dru's life. And he killed her anyway. She made me. Can you imagine what it's like to love someone for a hundred years? I owed her everything. I'd have traded ten slayers for her. Twenty."

Xander frowned. "I know it wasn't right what he did. Did you know that Angel came back and accused him of it,
and told him that he'd taken you away and let you go? And I understand how Angel felt, how you felt. But I can't stand by and watch you kill him. I won't stand by and watch you kill him. I don't care that I can't kill you. But I promise, if you go after Giles, I'll try and stop you."

Spike nodded his understanding. "Well it's all pretty bloody academic, at the moment. Told you, I'm not ready to go back to Sunnydale yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not stupid, that's why not. I lost more than my sire that night. I lost a lot of face. The demon world isn't very tolerant of failure. To go back to Sunnydale, I need to be sure, because my reputation can't take another failure, not on top of everything else that happened there. The fact that I killed two slayers, when most vampires are lucky to meet one and walk away, means nothing. Except maybe, to buy me a bit of time. I need to know exactly what I'm doing before I go back there." He growled again in renewed frustration. "Especially since my treacherous grandsire is on the side that is ranged against me."

Xander took a deep breath. "So can I relax for now? Or
do I have to do start planning how to stop you?"

Spike sighed "Yeah, you can relax for now." He shrugged again and grinned. "Meantime, hows about we go pay off my first debt, eh?"

Xander patted his pocket. "Sure. I've got the stone. Where are we going?"

"Just round here." Spike spun on his heel and continued around the corner and turned into the alley behind their block. "If you concentrate, you'll feel it."

"Feel what?"

"The entrance to Black Wind's shop. He relocated. And he went and parked right behind our house." He started walking slowly, one hand reaching out in front of him. "Can you feel the thickness of the air?" Xander shook his head. Spike reached down and picked up Xander's right hand holding it out ahead of them. "Feel that?" he asked. "Does the air feel different?"

There was a heaviness, a slight resistance, like the air had turned to treacle. "Yes, yes it does. That's really weird."
"Give it a push, pet. Just a little shove." Xander did as he was told.

A strange rippling feeling flowed through him, like his body was the water at the edge of a lake. And then he was blinking in the sudden light of the inside of a room. A very white and somehow familiar room. He looked at Spike who presented a glaring contrast to the overwhelming whiteness, like a crow on a field of snow. "Wow, that was weird." He looked around, turning on the spot, scanning the glass fronted cabinets and the long glass topped counter. Further around, and he stopped at the sight of three leather covered wing chairs set in front of a fireplace with a bright log fire burning in the stove and a small brass kettle on top. It all looked as odd and out of place as Spike did.

Black Wind stood up from one of the chairs, placing his glass down on a small table by his side and stepped forward to greet them. "Welcome my friends, welcome. You have been successful, I can feel it. You have brought me the Anashaman. Please, come sit." He gestured towards the chairs. Spike shrugged and led the way, taking the seat opposite Black Wind's and accepted a glass of something pale gold and probably alcoholic, while Xander took the one on his right and declined a
similar offer with a polite smile and a shake of his head. Black Wind walked over to the stove and picked up the kettle, pouring hot water into a mug. "So tell me," Black Wind asked, returning to offer the mug to Xander. "The watchers?"

Spike leaned back in his chair and took a sip, seemingly totally at ease. "The watchers won't trouble you any more. "Black Wind nodded, pleased, but Spike continued. "But you didn't tell me the truth, old man. You said the Anashaman was yours. You can feel it?"

Black Wind's youthful face twitched, uncomfortably. "Yes, I can feel it. I know you have it."

"And you admit you lied?" Spike asked. Black Wind grimaced and Spike asked again, "The Anashaman was never yours, was it?"

"No, it wasn't mine. And I don't want it. But neither do I wish to have it hanging like a threat over me. If it remained in their hands, they would never leave me in peace."

"No, they probably wouldn't," Spike agreed. "So what's it worth to you, for me to destroy it, instead of holding it
up and reciting some very interesting words I happened to hear?"

Black Wind gasped. "He tried to use it on you?" he asked, incredulously.

"You don't seem very surprised that it didn't work."

With a snort, Black Wind shook his head. "Of course it didn't work."

"But if I said these words, it would work on you, won't it?" Black Wind nodded reluctantly. "So what's it worth for me to destroy it instead of speaking those words?"

With narrowed eyes, Black Wind assessed Spike. "What do you want?"

"The promise of a favour. A big favour. At any time I ask it."

"I could offer to nullify both your debts?"

Spike grinned. "Nah. I don't mind what I owe you, seeing as how you can't ask me to do anything outside of my nature. I want for you to owe me. Anything I want. No
provisos."

"No. I won't accept that." Spike raised one eyebrow. "There must be one proviso - nothing that would compromise my magic in any way resembling what the watchers wanted from me."

"Fine by me." Spike turned to Xander. "Pass me the box, mate." Xander dug in the pocket of his jacket and drew out the small wooden box and handed it to Spike. Spike opened the lid and extracted the stone. Placing it carefully on the floor he lifted his foot and stamped down hard. When he lifted his foot away the Anashaman was five separate pieces and Black Wind breathed a sigh of relief. Spike leaned down and picked up the bits placing them carefully back in the box. He looked up at Black Wind and observed, "Somehow I don't think that gluing them together again will make it work again?" Black Wind nodded his agreement. "But think this might still be useful." Turning to Xander he added, "Sorry, mate. You'll have to let your pet go. I think it would be useful if young Wesley got to see that it's really gone."

"Wesley?" Black Wind asked.

"Yeah, one of the watchers. The old one, Roger
Wyndham Pryce, he's dead, as is their little band of soldiers. But the young one... the kid here didn't want to see him die. Seems he was mostly an errand boy anyway. So we'll use him as an errand boy and send him back with the broken bits, to show there's no more point in chasing after you and threatening you."

Black Wind's smile lit his face and made him look even more like a young student. "Thank you. That is well thought of." He raised his glass in a toast. "With this act, one of your debts to me is fully paid." He frowned slightly, but it didn't look like he was really displeased. "And you have gained the promise of a favour from me. I would say you have also profited well from this exploit, my friend. Allow me to offer you another drink?"

Spike grinned back as he leant forward, offering his glass to be refilled and Xander felt the atmosphere in the room relax and lighten. Sitting back in his chair, he sniffed his mug. It smelt of honey and herbs. He glanced up at Black Wind, who smiled at his dubious expression. "Never fear. It will do you no harm. It has no properties, other than an enjoyable taste. I promise." Xander took a sip and found that it did indeed taste good.

With the business over, they moved on to general
conversation, what Giles would call 'the social pleasantries', Spike asking if Black Wind was planning to go back to Reno, which he said he was not. He'd decided that city was too big for him and was thinking of finding a smaller town to base his main entrance. Xander sat back and listened as they discussed a number of locations in the mountains, places Xander had never heard of, but which Spike had apparently passed through at one time or another. Once again Xander was reminded of how old Spike was. Yet Spike called Black Wind 'Old Man'. It made Xander wonder.

They discussed different styles of magic, which Spike admitted to not being overly fond of in any guise, although he acknowledged its usefulness, and different breeds of demons. Black Wind told a story about an encounter with a family of Wares, in the mountains and how he got invited to dinner and ended up almost married to the eldest daughter, which had them laughing at his expense. Spike followed up with an account of what he called a true vampire court, the politics that riddled the place and the secret gathering to declare the new master, when the old one had an accident at the hands of one of his children, and how he was afraid at one point that they'd elect him, just because no two members of the family could agree to work together.
And how, if it hadn't been for Dru, he might have been master at 40, although he admitted he'd have been lucky to last a day.

At one point Spike introduced the Gem of Amara into the conversation, but he did it so seamlessly, that if Xander hadn't known his interest, he would have thought it was just idle chit chat. Black Wind admitted to having heard of it and Xander learnt that it gave the vampire who wore it the ability to walk in sunlight. He could understand the attraction of that, for Spike. It was no wonder, he thought, that Spike had been searching for it for so long. It also made him realise the threat that such an amulet could be to Giles and Buffy. It was almost a relief to hear that Black Wind believed it to be lost somewhere in Peru, or thereabouts.

Eventually Spike began to make noises about leaving before the sun came up and put his glass down on the floor by his chair. He glanced over at Xander. "Come on, mate. Time we were heading. Leave the old man in peace, to pack himself up."

Xander stood and passed his mug to Black Wind, who smiled at him, took it from him and placed it on the table. He turned back and took both Xander's hands in a
firm grip. "Thank you for your assistance, my friend. Do not take more responsibility than you should for the actions of this night. You saved a life and in doing so, actually made the outcome even better. Your young watcher will go free. You could not have done anything about the others." He looked into Xander eyes and his own widened slightly. With his left hand he gently stroked the bracelet on Xander's wrist. "An interesting bauble you have there," he observed. Then he turned to Spike. "I owe you both a favour, for what you have done. Yours, you can call in at any time." Turning back to Xander, he added, "And yours I pay now." Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a small leather bag, pressing it into Xander's hand. "This is very like the tea you've been drinking. Use a small pinch in a mug with a spoonful of honey. It is good for concentration, keeps the mind alert without destroying sleep. Write and ask, when you run out, and I will send you more. It will help you with your studies." Xander opened his mouth to say that he didn't think he'd be in school again anytime soon, but shut it again, not wanting to spoil the mood. Instead he smiled and thanked him. Black wind smiled back "There is magic and there is physics," he said, "and in physics there are forces that keep things together and forces that keep things apart, just as in there are in magic. Remember that."
Xander smiled again. "Okay," he agreed. "I'll make sure to do that. Thank you."

Spike shook his head. "Are you talking in riddles, old man? Is there a meaning in all that?"

Black Wind smiled at him too. "I owe you, Spike. I won't forget."

Spike snorted. "Fine. And if you do, I'll remind you. But I'm not worried, because I owe you too and I don't fear you'll forget that." Then he turned towards the back wall. "Come on, pet. Give me your hand. See if you can find the doorway out, eh?"

32. ...except a little life

Prompt: #48 - Horoscope
Note: Dialogue quotes courtesy of http://www.twiztv.com
"I like you at bedtime?" Willow asked, with delighted amazement and some awe, almost tripping over because she was looking at Buffy instead of at where she was going. Buffy's hand flashed out and grabbed her elbow, just in time, rescuing her from an ignominious somersault down the school steps. Willow waited until they were at the bottom and had veered off onto the grass, away from the clamour of students celebrating their release from another day of schooling, before she spoke again, picking up her thought. "You actually said that?" she asked.

Buffy's dreamy expression turned into a mixture of embarrassment and something Willow thought looked like joy. "I know, I know."

She shook her head. "Man, that's like..." Gazing at Buffy, she was both amazed and proud to be the confidant for this news. Somehow it didn't seem strange that Buffy was contemplating sex, when she herself had not yet managed to catch a single kiss. "I-I dunno, that's moxie or something." Why did she always feel so young, when she was actually older than Buffy by a couple of months? Maybe it always went that way - she always felt older than Xander, and his birthday was in October.
Buffy's voice dragged her back from that brink, just as her hand had saved her earlier. "Totally unplanned." Buffy explained, both excusing her words and revelling in them. "It just... came out."

A giggle escaped her, but she concentrated on the important part. "And he was into it? I mean, he wants to see you at bedtime, too?"

"Yeah, I... I think he does." Buffy's voice turned hesitant. "Well, I, I mean he-he's cool about it."

Instinct led Willow to offer what reassurance she could. "Well, of course he is. 'Cause he's cool. I mean, he would never... you know..."

"Push?" Buffy asked and Willow thought she heard a note of doubt.

"Right," she said, firmly. "He's not the type."

But now doubts seemed to have taken their hold. "Will," Buffy appealed, "what am I gonna do?"

"What do you wanna do?"
"I don't know. I... I mean, 'want' isn't always the right thing to do." She turned to face Willow. "To act on want can be wrong."

Willow nodded, waiting to see what Buffy wanted to hear. "True," she agreed.

"But... to not act on want..." Buffy threw her up hands. "What if I never feel this way again?"

Oh, it was the 'go with your instincts' talk. "Carpe diem," she said. "You told me that once."

Buffy's memory was obviously not as good as Willow's "'Fish of the day'?" she asked in a puzzled voice.

Willow sighed. "Not carp. Carpe. It means 'seize the day.'"

"Right." Buffy nodded. "I... I think we're going to. Seize it. Once you get to a certain point, then seizing is sort of inevitable."

"Wow..."

"Yeah."
"Wow..."

"Yeah." Buffy looked down at her watch. "Oh..." She looked back at Willow. "I have to go. Giles wants to see me. But, hey...." She was looking over Willow's shoulder and Willow started to turn to see what had caught her attention. "Speaking of 'wow' potential, there's Oz over there. What are we thinking, any sparkage?"

Accepting the change of subject Willow smiled. "He's nice." Seeing that that didn't satisfy, she cast around for something to add. "Hey, I like his hands."

Buffy grinned. "Mm. A fixation on insignificant detail is a definite crush sign."

With a grimace, Willow attempted to demure. "Oh, I don't know, though. I mean, he is a senior."

Buffy gave her a look. "You think he's too old 'cause he's a senior? Please. My boyfriend had a bicentennial." She gave Willow a friendly pat on the shoulder, which was almost a shove. "I've gotta go. Why don't you..." And she was off, striding across the grass, heading for the Library. Willow turned towards Oz.
Willow threw down her pen in exasperation, five times she'd read that passage and still the sense was eluding her. She checked the time and saw that it was nearly one o'clock, no wonder she was tired. But she'd never been late handing in her homework. Never. And she wasn't going to start now. Even in the first days of worrying, after Xander disappeared, she'd been able to use study as a way of taking her mind off the things she could do nothing about. Even in the days when she'd harboured a bitter and unrequited, unnoticed, crush on Xander himself, she'd always managed to concentrate on her homework. But there was something about Oz...

The muted jangle of the telephone on the bed sidetable jerked her from her unproductive, but enjoyable daydreaming and she got up and went over to the bed to pick it up, thinking it must be Buffy, because who else would call at this hour? She settled back against the pillows, ready for a good gossip about boys and dates and love, or at least the possibility of it. "Hello," she said.

But the voice that answered with a "Hello?" of it's own,
wasn't Buffy.

"Xander!" she cried. "Oh, Wow! Xander!" This was wonderful. Fantastic. "It's really you? Are you okay? Where are you? Are you coming back? Are you back already? No, because if you were, you'd have come to see me, so you can't be back." She took a breath as it finally penetrated her brain that what she was hearing, was Xander laughing. She laughed herself, trying to be firm through the feeling of overwhelming relief. "Hey mister, I'm talking to you. Are... Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Will. I'm alive and I'm fine."

"Giles said you rang him a few times. I wish I could'a talked to you. Why didn't you call me? It's so good to hear you. Are you really, really sure you're alright?"

"Yes Willow, I'm fine, I promise. I just rang, because..." He hesitated and Willow held her breath, but he sounded so normal when he asked, "Tell me how you are. I want the news. And who would I call to get that, but you? Tell me everything. How's tricks in Sunnydale? What're you guys up to? Have you been doing the defeating of the evil? I just want to hear some normal stuff."
Her heart wrenched. "Normal? This is Sunnydale."

Xander's laugh sounded a little strained. "Normal, Sunnydale stuff. Tell me, please?"

"O-Okay. Normal stuff. I can do that. Well, let's see... There was a demon came after Giles. Because it turns out, when he was our age, he wasn't all tweedy at all.... In fact, it seems he was a bit of a rebel. And the demon came back and it got into Ms Calendar and we had to get Angel to draw it out, into him, and his demon killed it, and it was really scary for a moment. But Ms Calendar wasn't happy and it looked like Giles' romance might be on the rocks for a while. Oh, oh, and last week there were possessed eggs. And they got the whole class." She shuddered and she knew her voice was a bit shaky. "And, and if that's what it was like for you, when you got possessed at Halloween, all I can say is: Yuk! It was like I could feel it seeping it's evil into me." Realising suddenly that this probably wasn't the kind of thing Xander wanted to hear about, but not wanting to be too obvious, either, she went on. "And you'll never guess, but it was Cordelia who helped Buffy save us." In response to the disbelieving choking sound in her ear, she continued, "Yeah. Cordelia! She went to Buffy because John Lee
ignored her in the corridor." Willow warmed to the task of telling the story at Cordelia's expense. "He just walked past her. So, she decided something had to be wrong. Of course." She paused to consider that. "Except it turned out she was right. But Buffy worked it out and killed the mama bezoar. That was what it was called. And all the baby bezoars died and fell off and we were okay again. Giles told everyone it was hallucinations caused by a gas attack. And Buffy's Mom believed him, even though she's still mad at Buffy, because of the killer robot killage."

Xander's voice was loud and clear. "The what?"

"Oh, well, Joyce got a boyfriend and he was a computer software salesman and had all these really cool applications, and he gave me some for nothing and gave me loads of great advice for improving the speed on my computer. But it turned out he was a robot. Really advanced. I mean the programming, not to mention the servo motors."

Xander interrupted. "But Buffy killed him? I mean, it?"

"Yes, yes, she did. Just after he tried to kill her and kidnap Mrs Summers. And we got rid of him in pieces at the city dump."
"I know you, Will." Xander sounded stern. "Please tell me you didn't keep any parts."

"Err... Not any big ones."

"Willow. You have seen The Terminator. And Terminator 2. I know you have. Promise me, you'll destroy those bits."

It was so good to hear him and to know he was concerned about her. "I will," she promised. She'd got all the information she was going to get out of them, anyway.

"Ms Calendar's been trying to find you," she added, in an attempt to distract him from the robot parts. "She's been asking all her contacts about any magic workers in Reno, after your first call. Angel's been helping too. And Buffy and Angel..." She sighed. "It's so romantic. Like Romeo and Juliette. Except not, because that was a tragedy and Buffy and Angel... aren't. But they're not a comedy, either. Maybe a romance? Anyway, they've been looking for you too."

The voice of the operator interrupted, telling Xander he
needed to add more money and there was some frantic whispering at the other end, then Xander returned. "It's okay, I'm still here."

Willow sighed with relief. It would have been awful if they'd been cut off, when she had been hogging all the conversation. "What about you, Xander. What's up where you are? Wherever that is. Where are you, anyway?"

"I'm okay, Wills. But I need to tell you something. Listen. We had a run in with the Watcher's Council today."

"Today?"

"Well, last night. You have to listen. There was a man called Roger Wyndam-Pryce. He was blackmailing a shaman. He wanted this shaman guy to do a spell on Buffy."

"On Buffy?"

"Yes. Listen. They're not the good guys. You can't trust them. Don't trust any of them. Not even Giles."

"But, but, Giles is Buffy's watcher."
"Yes, I know. But Pryce was talking to Giles on the phone when we arrived at his hotel, to confront him."

"Xander? Who's we?"

"Me and Spike. The shaman came to Spike for help. And I went along to make sure the story was true, and to make sure he couldn't do anything to Buffy."

"Oh my goodness. What... what happened?"

"He's dead. Buffy's safe."

"Dead?" She knew her voice was too loud and high pitched for this time of night. It would be really bad if her parents woke up and came to find out what was going on, so she lowered it. "Xander? You didn't? No, you didn't.... kill him?"

There was a silence, which seemed to last forever. Then Xander's voice again, sounding tired and depressed. "No, I didn't kill him. But he is dead. There was a thing. It was called the Anashaman. He was blackmailing the shaman to do some magic which would tie Buffy to the Council. So she'd always do what they said."
"But that's crazy. She already does do what they say...." She considered that. "Well... she does what Giles says... Sometimes... Umm... If she wants to."

"Look, Willow. Listen to me. I don't know why they wanted to do it, but he admitted it. He didn't think it would do her any harm. But Bla... er, the shaman did. He said it would cripple her. I couldn't let that happen. I didn't kill him. But I'm not sorry he's gone and can't try and do it again. Okay?" That sounded almost like a challenge. What had happened to her Xander in the weeks he'd been gone. "Xander? Is Spike there now?"

"Yes, Spike's here."

"Is he forcing you to say these things?"

"No. He's not even particularly happy I'm calling. He's not making me say anything." He paused for a moment and there were muffled sounds of speech, as he apparently put his hand over the mouth piece. Then he was back. "I've gotta go. The sun'll be up soon and Spike needs to get inside. Just remember what I said. Don't trust Giles. Don't trust the Council."
"Xander, please?"

"I'll call again. Sometime soon, okay? But I have to go now. Goodbye Willow. Take care."

The line went dead with a click and Willow sat, clutching the handset and stared blindly across the room, as the tears ran down her cheeks.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike pushed himself away from the wall with his shoulders, as Xander placed the handset carefully down in its rest. He waited as the boy stood, head bowed, leaning heavily on the telephone, before flexing his shoulders and standing up straight. He turned to Spike. "I suppose we'd better go and give these bits of stone to Wesley, then?"

"Yeah. Sunrise in half an hour or so. Wouldn't mind getting inside."

They turned together and began to walk back to the factory.
Suddenly Xander spoke. "I didn't understand her."

"You what?" Spike asked in surprise.

"Willow. All the things she was talking about. I didn't understand her." He looked across at Spike. "Sure, I understood the words. I haven't forgotten English, in spite of having to live with your constantly shifting accent for weeks."

"That would be my English accent?"

"Yeah, all of them." He paused, obviously thinking hard. Spike decided not to interrupt, wouldn't do to disrupt such hard work. He smirked to himself.

"I've always known Willow," Xander said eventually. "All my life. And I think I must have changed. Or she has." He seemed to be talking to himself now, rather than to his audience. "No, it must be me. She looks at the world and it's all so clear to her. And... it was like we were just friends."

Hazarding a guess, Spike suggested, "You are friends."

"No! She was more than that. She was my safe place, my
home. But she doesn't feel like that anymore." He fell silent, staring at his feet as he walked along. They were almost home when he spoke again. "I killed him," he said.

Spike looked up. "No, you didn't. I did."

"Wesley said I killed him. And it's true. I helped you get in. I held them at gun point. I might as well have killed him."

The boy sounded like he almost believed that crap. "Don't care what watcher boy said." This kind of stupid wallowing got on his wick. "I didn't need you there," he said in a deliberate voice of sorely tried patience. "I'd have killed them both, if you hadn't been there. Glass half full, mate. You saved one."

Xander looked along his shoulder at Spike and his mouth twisted into a half smile. "Stop being logical, it's creepy"

Spike smirked back. "Creature of the night. S'posed to be creepy."

Xander sighed. "I'm really not cut out for this, you know?"
"Cut out for what?"

"This." He swept his arm in an all encompassing gesture. "This, questioning. And not being sure what's right."

"Oh, that." They were almost at the door and Spike stopped, forcing Xander to stop, too, by grabbing his arm. He stepped around in front of Xander and studied him. "So which bit's giving you the trouble? The moral ambiguity or the basic uncertainty about y'future?"

"Er, both?" Xander ducked his head and became fascinated by the pavement between the toes of their boots.

Spike reached out with his right hand and pushed Xander's chin back up, so he was looking at him again. "My Dru," he said. "She was a seer. Could see the future, could talk to the stars and tell your fortune from them. She read the cards, too. And she said..." he froze as a memory, clear as day, played across his consciousness, like a film on a screen: Dru, sitting at a table. Him, stepping up behind her and putting his arms around her, looking over her shoulder. She was staring down at a card with a picture of a man on a horse with a goblet in
his hand. She tapped the card. "You keep missing him," she said. "Squandering your chances for the promise of more."

Xander's voice broke the image. "What did she say?"

Spike shook his head to clear it. "Nothing, mate. Doesn't matter. Come on, let's get that watcher on his merry." He turned away, pulled out his key and opened the door. Xander trailed in behind him.

~*~*~*~*~

Wesley stood ramrod straight, a very tight smile on his lips. "Thank you Xander." He hesitated glancing across at Spike, who was standing by the door to the stairs, watching. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper and leant forward towards Xander. "Listen, why don't you come with me? The Council can protect you. Get you home safe."

Xander lifted his left arm, showing Wes the bangle. "Can't," he said briefly. "Magical handcuffs. I can't leave. And, no offence, but I think the Watchers Council is the last place I would run to, if I could run. You go. Go back
to England and tell them what happened. And don't send anyone after me." With a flash of inspiration, he added. "If you kill him, it kills me too. Just leave us in peace. Spike won't come after any more watchers, as long as you leave him alone. I'll see to that."

Wesley gave a smart nod. "Good man. Okay. You have my word. And the word of a Wyndam-Pryce is not lightly given."

Xander smiled "Great."

*Notes: The title comes from a poem by Lord Byron, another one of the romantic poets. Dru's tarot card was the Knight of Cups - The Grail Knight and the scene Spike remembers happened in part 7, The principle of the thing.*

33. Close to the grain

*Prompt: #49 - Aladdin*

*Note: I've played fast and lose with the prompt - from Wikipedia - Aladdin - an adaptation of the Arabic name Ala' ad-Din, literally "nobility of faith"*

Spike woke to the sound of hammering from below. He poked his head out from under the blankets. Yep, that was definitely hammering. Climbing out of bed, he blinked his way across the room to the kitchen and
heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of the coffee pot, half full. Xander had been silent and withdrawn for days. Polite enough if spoken to and perfectly happy to discuss practical things like what he needed to buy when he went food shopping and more than willing to spar, or run the shooting range, but at other times he'd seemed heavy-hearted and unwilling to relax and enjoy himself. The habit they'd developed of long, rambling conversations over the kitchen table at dawn, as Spike drank a beer or six and Xander ate his supper, and they set the world to rights, had ceased entirely, as the boy retreated to his bed at the first opportunity. Spike had missed that and as he retrieved a large mug from the cupboard, he chose to interpret the coffee as a peace offering. Maybe the boy was getting over his snit at last, he thought.

Taking a couple of reviving gulps and topping the mug up again, Spike headed downstairs, to see what Xander was doing. It was still early, the sun would be only just setting and Jimmy was still dead to the world on his pile of rags, blankets and cotton waste in the corner of the garage. As a new fledge, he hadn't learnt yet how to sleep with one ear open. Spike doubted an explosion in the street outside would wake him. He shook his head at the vulnerability of the young and continued to the cellar,
pushing the door open with his foot as he concentrated on not spilling his coffee.

The side of the room with the shooting range was in shadow, but the lights were on above the exercise mats. Xander was kneeling on the edge of one of the mats, and appeared to be hammering at a chisel embedded into the edge of a small block of wood, about five inches across and an inch thick, on the concrete floor in front of him. He also seemed to be making heavy weather of it, since it took a number of heavy wallops to make any impression on the wood. Spike wandered nearer to get a better view, but he still couldn't work out what hell was going on. The boy wasn't carving the wood. In fact it looked like he was bent only on destroying it. Maybe he wasn't over his bad mood and had decided to divert his energy into pointless destruction? Well, that was a reaction Spike could identify with, although Xander's air of concentrated deliberation didn't really go with such an aim. Nor did the small, carefully gathered pile of wood chips at his side.

The top of the small work bench against the wall beyond Xander was scattered with other tools: a couple of saws, some clamps, a mallet, another, larger chisel, as if he had previously attempted to destroy his block of wood by
other means. Spike stopped a few feet away and took a long drink from his mug as he contemplated the hunched figure before him.

Without looking round, Xander said, "Did you bring me a coffee?"

Spike looked down at his mug. "Er..." Folding his legs beneath him, so he was sitting cross legged next to Xander, he handed it across. "Here, have some of this."

Putting the hammer and chisel down, Xander sat back on his heels and stretched. He reached for the mug with a tentative half smile, took a sip and passed it back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thanks."

Hugging the mug between his hands, Spike contemplated the lump of wood. It was small with a dense black and green grain. "So, watcha doing?" he asked.

With a sigh, Xander picked up the chisel again. "Trying to break this up into small bits."

Spike grunted. "Can see that. Why?"

"It's lignum vitae," Xander said, as if that should explain
everything. Spike got the distinct impression he was being played with, but it was nice to have the boy talking again, so he just narrowed his eyes in contemplation. "So?" he asked, cautiously.

Xander looked across at him and grinned. "It's really hard. I learnt about it in woodwork class. I was going to make my Dad an ash tray, after the bowl I was making for my Mom, 'though that was just maple. The day we broke into the university, I did some research on the web. I figured that I could maybe make wooden bullets, if the wood was hard enough. And Lignum vitae is kind of oily, so I thought it wouldn't mess up the gun barrel." He hesitated, as if embarrassed. "The Sarge didn't think it would work." In response to Spike's raised eyebrow, he explained. "The soldier in my head? It's not like he talks to me," he said. "I'm not crazy. But like I just know how I should move when we fight? I know stuff about guns, too. I call that 'The Sarge'." He looked up at Spike, as if searching for understanding, so Spike nodded and Xander, reassured, continued. "So, the Sarge said the bullets would ruin the gun, but I could make pellets for the shotgun. Then I'd just need to shoot a vampire in the chest and, 'poof'. See?"

"I'm impressed," Spike said, and it was true, he was. "You
could be really dangerous, especially if we got you one of those pump action things." He picked up one of the chips. More of a splinter really. Approximately an inch long with a squareish section of about an eighth of an inch each way at it's widest. "So, what you going to do with these? Stuff them in a shell?" Xander nodded. "Do they have to be round?" he asked. "'Cause, I don't think you'll manage that."

"No, I don't think so. I'll have to cut them in half to fit, but I thought I'd try it out a few times. See how it worked." He picked up the block, hefting it casually. "That's why I just bought a small bit. There's a craft shop in the Village. They got it for me. But there's a bigger place in Brooklyn, if this works out."

Tossing the splinter back on the pile, Spike stood up. "Okay. I've gotta job for Jimmy to do, so I'll go kick his arse out of bed and get him moving, then I'll come back and see if we can't make this work."

He took his empty mug and headed for the door. Behind him Xander picked up the hammer again. "Will you bring some more coffee?" he called, as Spike opened the door.

~~~*~~*~*~
Given the nature of the ammunition, Spike elected to stand behind Xander when he was finally ready to take his first shot. They'd propped one of the floor mats up against the wall, Spike shrugging off Xander's protests about destroying perfectly good equipment with the observation that if it worked, it would be worth it. He watched cautiously as Xander raised the gun to his shoulder and took another step backwards.

As always, the shot was deafening in the enclosed space and Spike found that he had instinctively closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked over at the mat. At first sight it didn't appear any different, then he realised that there were scattered tears all over it's surface, from floor level, right to the top and across it's whole width. As Xander carefully placed the gun on the bench, Spike walked forward to inspect it more closely. The wood splinters had scattered everywhere. Xander joined him, his shoulders slumped with disappointment, and began digging the broken splinters out of the foam. "Damn," he said. "So much for that bright idea."

Spike pulled his flask out of his back pocket and took a swig, before offering it to Xander. "Never mind, mate. It might have worked." He looked over when Xander didn't
Xander was standing staring at his hand as he rolled a splinter between his finger tips. He looked up. "Stupid!" he announced. "Of course! How could I be so stupid?" He turned to Spike, holding out the splinter. "Paper aeroplanes." he said. Spike ignored the splinter in favour of another drag on his flask and just looked at him, waiting. "They don't fly straight if you throw them too hard," Xander explained. "These things must have tumbled when they were shot." He dropped the broken piece of wood and rushed back to the workbench, calling over his shoulder, "You said it. You asked if they had to be round." He picked up an unused splinter and laid it on the bench. "Well, they don't, but we need to make them square. This shape, it's no wonder they scattered. I'm, I'm thinking about bits the size of rock salt. You know? Like those stories about people shooting burglars with rock salt instead of lead pellets?" He grabbed a small saw and started cutting the end off the splinter. Spike sighed and went over to help him.

An hour later Spike stood back and put down the tenon saw he'd been using to cut the slivers Xander chopped off the main block into rough cubes and loosened the
clamp that had been holding the last tiny bit in place. Beside him Xander was pouring the shot out of a shell and carefully replacing it with wood pellets. The biggest was an eighth of an inch or so, but many were smaller. "I think I can get about twelve or fourteen bits in each," he reported.

Spike grunted. That'd be enough to do some damage, as long as they hit the target. He looked at Xander's rapt expression. "Tell you what," he said, as he shook feeling back into his sore finger tips. "If you can prove this idea to me, I can maybe get some proper pellets made up. Can buy anything if you've got the contacts. Let someone else do the labour. Someone with the proper tools."

Once again Spike stood well back and watched carefully as Xander took aim on the centre of the mat and fired. This time there was no need to walk forwards to see the damage. Beside him, Xander let out a whoop of excitement at the large hole in the middle of the foam and turned to Spike. "It worked! Look at that! It worked!" he broke the breach of the shotgun, put it down on the bench and grabbed Spikes biceps, jumping up and down in front of him, like an excited puppy.

Spike felt a grin spread over his own face, infected by the
boy's excitement. "Yeah, pet. It worked. Congratulations," he said, as his own hands came up to grip Xander's arms in return, steadying him when he looked ready to bounce himself into tripping over the edge of the mat on the floor by their feet. "You got another one, just so we can be sure it wasn't a fluke?"

Xander pulled away and reached for the shotgun. "Yeah, one more made and enough pellets to try another two." He shoved his second shell in the breach and snapped the gun closed. Holding it out to Spike he offered, "Do you want to try it?"

~*~*~*~*~

As dawn broke outside, Spike sat back in his chair at the kitchen table. Altogether, it had been a very interesting night. Three more test shots had proved that Xander's idea worked, the square pellets did very satisfying damage and the Lingnum vitae was hard enough to penetrate nicely. Then they'd gone out and negotiated a pump action shotgun for Xander and Spike had made a call to his lawyers and arranged a meeting with one of their gofer contacts, who had proved very happy to assist in providing small balls of Lignum vitae, even though he
had tried to winkle out of them what spell they were wanting to use the wood of life for. In fact, once the idea had taken hold in Spike's mind, he'd seen other possibilities and had also specified a set of pointed cylinders of a specified diameter. He had a few ideas of his own about disposable handguns, because if they did the job once, it didn't matter if they were ruined for future use.

By the time the business was done, it was too late to visit the blood house, so he'd sent the boy home and gone for a short prowl down the back alleys, trading some cash for a half pint from a number of the crazier members of the cardboard city population. No bodies to cause problems, and no reliable witnesses, whose stories would be believed, if they did happen to talk to the law about the strange puncture wounds on their arms. And on top of that, Jimmy had been successful too, coming back from the 24 hour computer warehouse, with a machine he swore would provide both fast and secure access to the net.

Taking a sip from his drink, Spike watched as Xander finished his supper and tidied away the dishes. Then Xander grabbed a beer of his own, sat down, took in a long breath and let it out again. "So I've been thinking,"
he said hesitantly, cracking the lid off his bottle and taking a swig, like a man trying to bolster his courage, avoiding Spike's eyes. "I... I hate that you killed Wesley's father and I hate that you kill other people. But... that's because I'm one of those other people." He looked up quickly and away again, just as fast, back to staring at his bottle. "But the Anna thingy didn't work on you. And although I probably shouldn't trust him, because he must be the guy you got my handcuff from, Black Wind says vamps aren't unnatural and I believe him." He began to pick at the label with his thumb, shooting quick glances up at Spike, but mainly keeping his eyes down. "And if I was a gazelle, I'd hate lions. But if I was a gazelle that got brought up by lions, I'd probably feel different." Spike blinked, slightly overwhelmed by this rush of words, but they hadn't ended. Xander went on, "But I'm not a gazelle, and I wasn't brought up by you, so I do hate it. And I guess... what I'm saying is... do you have to kill? I mean, you have to take precautions not to be found out. So why do you have to kill?"

Spike nodded thoughtfully, giving the boy's logic the respect of consideration. He took another swig of his beer then placed the bottle carefully on the table, cupping his hands around it. "I've been thinking, too," he said. "Trying to remember what it feels like to be human
and how humans feel." He looked straight into Xander's eyes, which were now fixed unwaveringly on his face. "I was human once. Or at least this body was. I'm not sure how it works." He shook his head regretfully. "But I can't remember. Its not even like I'm trying to remember what it was like to be a fledge. I just don't remember feeling human." He shrugged. "But I'll explain something to you, pet. Apart from Sunnydale, we don't always kill when we feed. Fledges, sure. They'll do it, because they haven't learnt better. But any vampire who survives their first decade, they learn to hunt carefully. We take the weak and the sick and the ones who've been left behind. And the blood houses exist for more than to give the humans their thrills." He grinned. "Or to satisfy their religious faith in our nobility." He gazed upwards, attempting a look of holiness. "We are after all, 'The Lonely Ones', 'The Exalted'." He shrugged again. "Basically, the blood houses are our main source of safe food in any big city. There's always one or two around, if you know how to find them." Xander's face was losing it's tightness and Spike realised he really had been worried about bringing this topic up for discussion.

"You could even say we serve a purpose when we do kill - we thin the herd." He frowned. "But mostly I do what I did tonight. I went and took the blood from ten separate
homeless folk. And paid them for their trouble. They've each got enough for a bed in a hostel, if they choose to use it. Or enough for a good meal and a sit down in a warm caff, for a couple of hours."

Xander let out a huff of breath, in a huge sigh of relief. "So, you don't kill?"

Spike weighed the truth against comfort and shook his head. "Sometimes. But not usually. Not often, in some places. And yes, that last exhilarating drop is so good." He smiled and winked at Xander. "But you can't live on caviar, everyday of the week."

"I wouldn't know," Xander observed, dryly. But he was smiling too.

34. There is no disguise

Prompt: #50 - Thin Line Between
"What else are lawyers for," Spike asked, "if not to handle the boring stuff?" But that didn't change the fact that the 'telephone installation specialist' the lawyers had organised was human and worked normal daytime hours, so Xander, who wasn't a lawyer was stuck doing guard duty, while Spike retreated to the basement dragging Jimmy with him, as soon as he'd pointed out where he wanted the phone to sit on the new desk.

It wasn't that Xander didn't often get up in daylight. He had to if he wanted to eat, after all. It was just that he usually got to do it when he was actually awake. And 9am was too early to be up and about. It was only when he'd put the cushions back on the sofa and had finished arranging the blankets strategically, so it looked like he slept there, that he realised he was embarrassed. That was crazy. Why did he care what a telephone repairman would think, walking into the apartment with its one big room and its one big bed? Didn't mean it was the only room in the building. He was hardly going to give the guy the guided tour. Glumly he picked up the cleaning supplies and trudged downstairs to scrub out the rest room, get rid of the evidence of Wesley's brief occupancy and try to make it look more like a deliberate design choice and less like the accidental survivor of the previous human inhabitants of the factory.
And of course it was nearly midday before the technician actually turned up, by which time Xander was hot and bothered and even more tired, as well as embarrassed. Glancing round one last time, before going to answer the knock on the door, he gave a nod of satisfaction to his camouflage. The paint can and drop sheet were a nice touch, he thought. Made it look like a renovation in progress. But he still found himself babbling as he led the man upstairs, explaining how his friend was out at work, but was in the process of renovating the factory into studio apartments and how he, himself, was visiting for a few weeks, while his folks are away in Europe.

Thankfully the guy seemed pretty laid back and friendly and he didn't laugh at Xander's nervousness. He said his name was Steve and he promised he wouldn't take too long. Once they got upstairs the absence of any windows stumped him for a moment, but he soon figured out where he could bring the cable in and got to work, while Xander perched on the edge of the sofa, trying to keep out of the way. But it was odd, having a stranger in the factory, with Spike not around. Xander found himself fidgeting, trying not to watch Steve at work, but also trying not to ignore him. He felt awkward, like he was the interloper, afraid Steve would think he was spying on
him. In desperation he grabbed his backpack and went over to the kitchen.

Sitting down at the table, Xander pulled out a pad of paper and a pencil and began noting down what he knew about the book Spike was looking for and the Gem of Amara it was supposed to lead them to. Black Wind had said the Gem was in Peru. He considered that. That might be good. But the book was in Sunnydale. That was a potential problem. Even worse, Giles had it. It was possible Spike had got this internet connection so he could set Jimmy off searching, to see if there were any other copies. But if there weren't, then wasn't he likely to want to head back to Sunnydale, anyway, regardless of what he'd said that night about needing to be sure his plan would work this time? And if he decided they were going back to Sunnydale, what would Xander do? The telephone cable stretched like a thin line between New York and Sunnydale, promising the possibility of phone calls from Willow, at times she chose. Promising news and gossip and warnings delivered. Trying to pull him back, like a giant elastic band, with false promises of safety and certainty. And if they went back to Sunnydale, Spike would face not only Giles, but Buffy too. And Willow. Face to face. And so, inevitably, would Xander.
And Buffy and Willow would face Spike.

A voice broke through his obsessive musings. "Done," it announced. "The rest's an outside job." Steve was standing in the middle of the room, looking around. "Nice place," he observed. "Shouldn't be too difficult, opening out those bricked up windows. But your friend's going about this job backwards. Should've had the big stuff done before he got into decorating. Shame, it'll make a real mess when he does it." He began packing away his tools and gathering up the snipped off ends of wires and insulation from the top of the desk. "Tell him to be careful when he opens that one up. The cable goes through the wall at the corner. Okay?"

Xander stood, glad of an excuse to start moving and stop thinking. "Sure, I'll, I'll be certain to tell him that... about the cable. So is that it?"

"Yeah. The inside job's quick. I've still gotta connect it outside, though. The line should be live by this evening. Just call the operator to activate the account. They'll tell you the number, too." Picking up his tool box, Steve headed for the door and Xander followed him down to the ground floor.
After watching Steve leave and making sure he got into his van and drove away, Xander locked up securely and turned back to the stairs. He was going to retreat to the sofa and catch some more sleep, but it occurred to him that Spike and Jimmy might be glad to move too, so instead he went down to the basement. Opening the door carefully, he peered into the darkness, trying to locate the vampires by the light spilling in from behind him. There was a lump of bedding on the practice mats, so he tiptoed towards it, not wanting to disturb Spike if he was sleeping and not wanting to disturb Jimmy at all, if it was him. He was about three feet away when he froze. The lump was far too big to be only one vampire. It had to be both of them. Together. Sleeping. Under the same blankets. He gasped and almost against his will, found himself leaning forwards for a better look.

The two glowing yellow eyes that suddenly appeared out of the gloom sent him stumbling backward in shock, but Spike's voice sounded more groggy than annoyed. "Fuck off, will you, mate?" he growled. "It's too early to be waking up."

Grabbing at a shelf to steady himself, Xander edged back towards the door. "Umm. Sure," he whispered. "Yeah. I just thought.... But it doesn't matter. I'll, umm, I'll leave
you in peace. Er... I'm going to get some sleep too."

Spike must have blinked and the disappearance and reappearance of the yellow spots of light was totally unnerving, but his voice, though soft, was clearer and it was still calm. "You do that," he advised. "We'll see you at sunset." Xander reached the door and grabbed the knob. As he pulled it to, he turned in the doorway and saw movement in the darker shape on the mat and heard Spike's voice whisper, "S'okay, pet. I'm here. Go back to sleep."

Xander fled upstairs and into the living room. He grabbed the cushions off the sofa and threw them into his corner along with the blankets. Then he climbed in, still fully clothed, and buried his head under the covers.

35. Just another word

Prompt: #51 - Your sign
It was, Xander realised, the first time Jimmy had been allowed up to the apartment. Ushered in by Spike, he entered hesitantly, his eyes scanning around the room, fixing for a moment on the bed, then moving on to the desk, the kitchen and the table where Xander sat with his notebook open in front of him, before switching back to Xander's nest in the corner. Seeming to relax slightly, he stepped away from the door and went over to the desk, taking hold of the back of the chair.

Spike followed. "Go on then," he instructed. "Get it up and working. I've got a job for you. Need you to do another one of those search thingies."

Glancing back over his shoulder, Jimmy nodded. "Sire." He took a quick inventory of the hardware and started untangling the mass of cables lying next to the monitor, separating them and laying them out on the desk. Then he took a seat and began plugging them into the various sockets on the machine. It didn't take him long before the mess was replaced by an orderly arrangement of monitor, mouse, keyboard and main box. Xander wandered over to watch, compelled by the efficiency of his movements. Jimmy pushed the 'on' button. "I just need to set up the connection. It won't take long," he explained as the screen came alive - white text flashing
across it, too fast for Xander to make sense of, even if he'd known what it all meant. The brand new Windows 98 logo appeared for a moment, before it was replaced by more white text on black. Then an electronic fanfare burst out and Jimmy reached forwards, twisting a knob on one of the speakers, as the screen settled on white clouds on a pale blue background. "Do you have a user ID you want to use?"

Glancing at Spike, Xander saw that the question meant nothing to him. "How about 'bigbad'," he suggested, with a grin.

Spike's eyebrow went up. "You mean, like a name?" he asked. Jimmy looked round, but Spike's gaze was fixed on Xander. Xander nodded. "Okay, yeah, 'Bigbad', that'll do. Go for it." They watched as Jimmy began to type and click his way through the set up procedure. After a moment, Spike appeared to get bored with his role as observer. "Well, pet," he said, nodding towards the table. "Watcha doing over there?"

Xander scowled. "Don't call me 'pet'. I don't like it. I'm not a pet."

Grinning, Spike put a hand on his shoulder, turning him
back to the kitchen. "Okay, Xander" he said, with ironic emphasis. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. It doesn't mean you are. 'S just a term of affection. Be grateful, I could call you 'ducks' or 'mon petit chou'. If you knew what that meant, you'd probably like it even less. He gave Xander a gentle shove. "Come on, show me what you've been playing at while we were asleep."

Scowling harder, Xander led the way to the kitchen table and flopped into his chair. "What is it with you and the way you talk?" he asked. "You don't speak like you used to."

Spike looked nonplussed. "Y'what? 'Course I do." He picked up his cigarette packet and pulled one out, then started searching around the table top in a distracted manner.

Xander reached across to the counter and threw him the lighter from next to the stove. "No you don't, except you are now. Why?"

Frowning, Spike sat back and took a drag on his cigarette. "Guess I forgot." he admitted eventually. He slouched further down in his chair, adding thoughtfully, "Dru had a real strong accent. Don't know why, since she was
brought up well when she was human, but she did. I picked it up from her. Became a habit." He looked at Xander from under his brows. "It's useful anyway, being able to play different parts. Helps you get access to all sorts of parties and stuff. I can be upper class posh or guttersnipe as the occasion demands." He shrugged. "Depends on the company." He took another drag and absentmindedly blew the smoke out over the table.

Xander flinched back, waving his hand in front of his face. "Hey! Human here. You know there's this theory about second hand smoke?"

"You won't die of cancer, pet. Don't worry."

Somehow that sounded more like a promise than empty reassurance and for some reason it worried Xander. In an attempt to escape where that thought may take him, he stood and picked up the kettle, taking it across to the tap to fill. As he turned back to put it on the hob he remembered what Roger Wyndam-Pryce had said. "So were you really a poet?" he asked.

Spike looked up sharply, then turned to glance at Jimmy, but he seemed to be engrossed in the computer. "Don't go there," he warned. "I'd have to kill you, and you don't
"I've been thinking," he said, taking a sip of his drink and grinning as he caught Spike's sceptical expression. "I think I may have a lead on that book you want." At that, Spike's expression sharpened, so he continued. "Last year, we did a project at school. We scanned all Giles' books into the computer. It was a whole big mess with a demon in the internet, so we kind of forgot about it. But that didn't happen until after we'd finished. So, I'm thinking your book might have been one of the ones we scanned in...." He trailed off, uncertain if he was making promises that would come to nothing. "I mean, I'm not certain. But it might be. If Jimmy can hack into the auction house records, I'm sure he can get into the high school library. I don't think Willow put any fancy protection on it, or anything."

Spike was back with Jimmy in seconds, peering over his shoulder and urging him on to 'get it sorted now!' And eventually Jimmy did get it sorted. By 10pm he'd not only got the computer working and connected to the internet, but on Spike's instruction and with Xander's help, he had
also hacked into the Sunnydale High School library server and located the scanned images of the Argentum Veneficus, saved in a folder called 'Giles Personal'. It then took over an hour to download the files to their own computer, but eventually they were saved and Jimmy began printing them out. Each page seemed to take an age to print and Spike snatched them, one at a time, from the printer as they appeared, running his eyes across the tightly printed words and throwing each one down as the next came out. Xander, realising there were no numbers on the sheets, gathered them up and stacked them neatly, resolving to go and buy a folder the next day, to keep them safe. After all Jimmy's hard work, it only seemed fair to treat the results with some respect.

Sometime near midnight Spike gave a growl. "Yes!" he cried. "Here it is: The Gem of Amara." He continued to read for a bit longer, his pleasure turning to frustration. "Sorcerers! Why do they insist on being so bloody obscure? This is going to take days to work out." Slapping the page down on the desk, he turned to Jimmy. "But you've done good and you deserve a reward. Come on, lets go out to eat, before it's too late and all the houses shut for the day." He turned to Xander. "I need to check it out anyway. Heard some rumours of trouble last time I was there. Whispering and plots. Need to go take them
down a peg or two. You stay here."

"You think there's trouble at the house?" Xander asked. "But, I'd better come. Jimmy can't fight." He ignored the glare that got him from Jimmy.

Spike laughed, slapping Jimmy on the shoulder. "Maybe not, but he's a vampire. You're not. A human in a place like that? Asking to get bit. You stay here, okay? We'll be back before dawn."

Realising any protest would be useless, Xander nodded sulkily and watched them leave. He looked at the printer, still slowly churning out the pages of the precious book. They'd be safe there, now that Spike wasn't doing his best to mix them all up. He looked back at the door. Then he went and got his shoes.

It took him longer than he thought to get out of the factory and by the time he reached the street, Spike and Jimmy were out of sight. But he had a pretty good idea where Duke's place was, so he set off at a run, certain he'd catch sight of them shortly. He didn't. Even though the streets were fairly empty, there was no sign of a white head of hair, or a long leather duster.
He ended up wandering, certain he'd spot them eventually, unwilling to admit that he had no idea where they'd gone. Every time he considered turning back, the thought that they might be round the next corner, tempted him on. But eventually he had to admit he was not going to find them. At about the same time, he also realised he'd not eaten since breakfast at sunset and he was starving. Spotting an all night burger joint, surrounded by parked up taxi cabs, he crossed the road and went in. He didn't intend to stay long, but the place was crowded and he had to wait, then he got talking to one of the drivers, when he asked to share a table. And the burger was good and the fries were just right and the chocolate shake was perfect. The taxi driver was talkative and it was easier to sit and chat and pretend to be human, than it was to contemplate the possibility that Spike was in the middle of a fight. It wasn't until his companion eventually left, mumbling about getting his cab back to the depot, that he glanced up at the window and saw the lightening of the sky and realised just how late it really was. As the thought struck him, he braced himself for the not-quite-pain of the spell, already beginning to stand, knowing that once he was heading back home, the discomfort would soon pass. Nothing happened. He sat down again.
His shake was sitting in a pool of condensation on the formica table top, and after a moment he picked it up carefully and stuck the straw in his mouth. It was still thick enough to make it difficult to drink, but the cold chocolate milkyness was a comforting flavour from childhood and he needed all the comfort he could get, as the implications of his lack of discomfort sank in. He thought about the early part of the evening and was surprised to recognise how relaxed he'd been sitting across the table from an old and powerful vampire. It had felt familiar, friendly, comfortable. He had, he realised, become accustomed. But now he was faced with a choice, and he didn't know what to do.

So he sat and watched the sunrise brighten further, trying to work out what it meant. Sunnydale or Peru? Peru or Sunnydale? The question circled his mind, leaving him more confused than he could ever remember being. Considering his life so far, that was saying something. And that was assuming Spike and Jimmy got back safe. For a moment, he considered Canada. Taking another pull on the straw, the sound of the dregs of his shake echoed around the cup and up into his mouth. He chased the last traces of chocolate noisily around the bottom, then set it down. Wearily, he got up and gazed around the diner at the last few customers. He thought about
walking away. Walking until he reached a bus station. Walking right up town to Grand Central. Walking anywhere and finding a bank, like Giles had said all those weeks and months ago. He stepped out onto the sidewalk and turned his feet towards home.

Climbing the rickety fire escape was child's play. When he reached the roof access door he used his key to unlock it, but he didn't go in. Instead he sat down in his camp chair, where he sat when he woke up early enough and didn't need to go shopping. Turning his face to the sun, he basked.

Eventually there was a shuffling sound behind him and Spike's voice from the dark of the stairs. "Here you are. I've been looking for you."

Xander rolled his head to the side and squinted into the doorway. "Yeah, here I am."

Spike settled himself down on the top step, well out of the way of the light. "You been sulking up here all morning?"

"Guess so."
"Huh. Right. Well, we both got back safe, thanks for asking. Jimmy's a bit beaten up, but I settled him eventually. He'll be good as new by tonight." He paused and Xander saw the flare of a flame followed by a thin puff of smoke which clouded the air, before it disappeared in the brightness of the morning. "So, you coming in, p... Xander?"

"In a moment. I just want to enjoy the fresh air and sunlight for a while."

Spike grunted with apparent displeasure, but he didn't say anything else, just got up and disappeared downstairs, grumbling to himself. Xander turned his face back to the light.

An hour later he hauled himself out of the chair and went down to bed.

36. A dateless bargain
"Spike was awesome." Jimmy's voice carried a mixture of excitement and awe. "He was all kicks and punches and, dude, you should have seen the bodies flying all over the place." As he talked, he mimed out some of the moves, but when he came closer and seemed about to try and drag Xander up to join in, Xander picked up the fully assembled gun from his side and cocked it. Jimmy drew back and whether it was a natural movement on his part, or a response to the gun, almost but not quite pointing at him, Xander didn't know. Regardless, he continued his tale, "He got me out because I wasn't in such a good way by then. But I tell you, man, it's not over, not by a long chalk, it's not."

Returned to his task of cleaning the other gun Xander nodded. "Yeah, he can fight." He wasn't too sure why he had Jimmy's company. It had not yet been dark outside when he came downstairs and Jimmy had never been up and about before Spike, at least, not as far as Xander had noticed. Xander had been in the basement making up some more shells for his shotgun, but he'd soon been distracted by his new Colt 45s. They were beautiful. They felt so right in his hands. Prettier than the Smith & Wessons they'd seen, he was looking forward to testing
them, once Spike was awake. Waking a sleeping vampire by shooting at targets in his basement was probably not such a good idea. But why Jimmy had joined him and why he seemed to want to talk, had Xander puzzled.

He kept one wary eye on the young vampire as he reassembled his weapon, but Jimmy didn't seem interested in snacking off him. He paced back and forth across the mats, arms waving with more enthusiasm than Xander could ever remember seeing, although his contact with Jimmy had been strictly limited and always under Spike's watchful eye. "I tell you, man, I'm not going to stand around and let them behave like that to my Sire. Scum like that should think themselves lucky he even goes to their house. They should be treating him with respect. He deserves that. I mean, he's old, man. And any master who lives that long... He's like the oldest vampire ever."

Xander smirked to himself, remembering the real Master with his wrinkly skin and piggy face. And Angel. Hell, even Drusilla had been older than Spike was now. It was obvious Spike was not teaching Jimmy any vampire history. He remembered the soft tone in Spike's voice, when Xander found them asleep together. Maybe he'd been doing other things. Maybe he didn't see Jimmy that
way, whatever way that was. Studying the vampire, Xander had to admit that Jimmy was pretty. His face had fined out in the weeks since his death, so his cheekbones were more visible, like he'd lost his puppy fat. He looked like the grad student he had been in life, with a fresh faced innocence, in spite of his pallor. Xander hefted his reassembled gun. Personally, he preferred being able to fight for himself. He placed the Colt carefully in it's box but kept the other, loaded one, close.

Picking up the remaining one of his original pair, he began dismantling it. Jimmy had moved on to a description of the fate deserved by anyone who didn't grant Spike his due respect. Xander wanted to laugh and luckily Jimmy mistook his snort of amusement for approval. "Well, you know how it should be, man. I mean, you follow him. You fight for him. Because you recognise how strong he is, how he deserves your respect." The gun was pretty badly carboned up, but it didn't look like it had been damaged by Spike's experiment. Xander set to cleaning out the barrel. "He must trust you, too." Jimmy's voice was wistful. "I mean, he gave you those guns and he lets you sleep upstairs." His tone brightened. "But I tell you, man, I'm going to be up there too. Soon as I prove myself. I'll be up there in that fancy room," he smirked at Xander, "and maybe
you'll be down with the car, like that guy Spike took prisoner for a while." His forehead creased thoughtfully. "What happened to him anyway, did Spike eat him?"

Sighting down the barrel, Xander decided it was clean enough. He glanced up at Jimmy as he picked up the breach mechanism. "No, we let him go."

Jimmy's face fell. "Oh. Oh well, I'm sure Spike had good reasons for that. He must have." He paused in thought and apparently came up blank. "Er, do you know what they were?"

Taking pity, Xander smiled. "He took a message back to the people who sent him. And we needed him alive to do it. But I'm sure if it hadn't been for that, your Sire would have drained every drop."

Bouncing back to happiness, Jimmy grinned. "Yeah, yeah, that's right. He would. If he'd had more time. Because Spike would never let a watcher escape with his life, normally. He's death to them. The slayer of slayers. Did you know he's killed two?"

Xander nodded his recognition of that fact as he began to snap the gun back together. Maybe he'd mount it on the
test rig they'd built for Spike's experiment. The Sarge objected to a potentially unsafe firearm lying around. It should be okay now it was clean, but better safe than sorry. He looked across at the rig.

In that way he did, that involved no word, the Sarge had insisted that Xander not actually hold the gun, when Spike pulled out his wooden bullets. So they'd mounted the guns in a vice and activating the triggers by means of a length of wire and a few pulleys. The first shot had been a success, the wooden bullet doing commendable damage to the target, before splintering against the wall behind and Spike had been gleeful. But the second had resulted in the breach exploding, scattering shrapnel across the room and putting a big dent in the wall behind the workbench, about where Xander's head would have been, if he'd been holding the gun himself. So that had been the end of that and the Sarge had sent him a smug sense of vindication. Xander had strung some of the remaining, unused rounds on a leather thong and now they hung around his neck like the lion tooth necklace he had envied Jungle Jake having, as he fought the poachers and treasure hunters in Xander's childhood comic books.

Reassembling the cleaned gun and putting it down, he picked up the loaded one and, getting up carefully,
walked over to the ammunition shelf. Grabbing a box, he went back to the workbench and turned to face Jimmy as he loaded the clip with standard, non wooden rounds. Jimmy watched him. "What you doing, man?" he asked, tilting his head as he considered the gun in Xander's hand and the one on the bench by his side.

"Just going to take a couple of test shots. See if the wooden bullets did any permanent damage. See if the breech is still solid. It looks okay, but I think the wood expanded too fast and blocked the barrel in the other one. I've cleaned this one now, but I want to be sure it's good." He placed it in the special mount he'd fashioned, in the vice, and attached the trigger wire. "Go stand over there, out of the way," he instructed. Once Jimmy had withdrawn to the far side of the room, Xander climbed behind the wall of the firing range, wire in hand. Bracing himself, he gave a tug and the explosion reverberated around the room. It was only after he shook his head to clear the echoes that he remembered that Spike was still asleep upstairs. Probably not any more. However the gun looked to be okay and the bullet had even hit the target. Xander grinned to himself and stood up as Jimmy started to move. "Let's try that again," he suggested.

Jimmy backed up. "How many bullets does that thing
"Eight," Xander replied. "Seven in the clip, one in the chamber. Now, get back." Five more shots and the gun was still in one piece. He picked up his own gun as he watched Jimmy approach the workbench.

"You know what?" Jimmy asked, rhetorically. "I think that might be just what I want." He reached out and began to unwind the vice, pulling the gun free.

Xander raised his own weapon. "Leave that alone."

Jimmy smiled. "You can't kill me with that," he pointed out smugly. Xander lowered his gun, recognising that he really didn't want to shoot, not even to maim. Not Jimmy.

Turning the gun over in his hands, Jimmy worked out where his various fingers went and struck a pose, feet apart, knees slightly bent, arms stretched out in front of him, pointing it right at Xander and Xander felt a sudden conviction that Jimmy didn't share his own scruples about shooting someone he sort of knew. He straightened slowly, both hand raised, palms facing outwards, his gun hanging loosely from his fingers. "Err,
gently now, put the gun down." Jimmy didn't move. "Put
the gun down, Jimmy. Spike would really not be pleased
if you hurt me. So, just put the gun down."

Jimmy's smile was hard and feral. "But if you have an
accident... I'll get to move upstairs even sooner." He
didn't shoot though, instead he grabbed the box of
ammunition off the bench and began backing up,
towards the door. "I just want the gun, man. I won't hurt
Spike's pet human. But I'm going to prove to him that I'm
as good as anyone." He nodded in approval as Xander
stayed still. "So I just want the gun." Reaching the door,
he fumbled behind his back, searching for the knob, then
pulled it open and backed through, never removing his
aim from Xander's chest. When the door finally closed
behind him, Xander collapsed to his knees in a heap of
panting breaths and released tension and buried his head
in the crook of his arms, his fingers flexing through his
hair.

By the time Spike wandered downstairs, still blinking
sleep from his eyes and hugging a mug of coffee, fifteen
minutes later, he had pulled himself back together. On
hearing what Jimmy was up to, Spike sighed, then
shrugged. "Better go find the stupid bastard, I suppose.
You wait here," he said as he headed out. "When I find
him, I'm going to skin him alive and chain him up in the store room for a week." Since Xander believed that might well be the literal truth, he was glad he hadn't mentioned Jimmy's delusions of moving upstairs. If they were delusions and not promises made late at night. Shaking his head to clear it of that image, he took his new pump-action shotgun and his beautiful new Colts, and went to spend some quality time in the garage with the car, the front door and too many thoughts.

Spike returned six hours later and was talking even as he walked in and slammed the door shut behind him. "That bitch is boasting about taking out the watchers," he fumed. "As if she even knew they were in town before I told her. As if she thought it up herself." He began to pace around the garage, picking things up from the shelves at random and putting them down again, without looking at them. "Presumptuous, undisciplined, under-educated nonentity. Wouldn't know a watcher if he walked up and kicked her in the shins. Blasted woman! She's got something to do with it. I know it. Can feel it in my water."

Xander let him pace, piecing the story together from Spike's half sentences. Eventually he interrupted, "So you didn't find Jimmy?"
Swinging to face him Spike growled through fangs and pulled back lips. His eyes glowed yellow under heavy ridges and his voice distorted by the change. "No. He wasn't at Duke's and hadn't been there. I tried the other houses, too. No sign." He shook his head and his face shifted back to human. "He obviously didn't come back on his own?" Xander shook his head. "Bugger!" He stopped suddenly and took a long, deep breath which appeared to calm him. "After trailing around town half the night, I'm not best pleased," he announced. "Tomorrow night... we're going out. And you can bring your guns and give them a proper test drive. Meanwhile, I need a bloody drink. You eaten?"

They had turned away towards the stairs when Xander froze. "Do you hear that?" There was a scratching sound coming from the door. Then it bust open and Jimmy flopped in and fell to the floor, on his face.

Xander wheeled around and rushed back towards Jimmy, while Spike ran for the door. Coming to a halt by catching the sides of the opening, he hung out and peered up and down the street. "Damn!" he growled.

Meanwhile Xander had come to a cold stop, a foot from
Jimmy's body. He felt the gorge rise in his throat at the sight. The back of Jimmy's head was missing, blood and matted hair framing a hole which left part of his brain exposed. One arm lay stretched out across the floor, terminating in a bloody stump at what should have been the wrist. Behind Xander the door slammed. "Bloody bastards!" Spike growled. "Picked the lock and ran." Xander found himself sitting on his ass, knees bent in front of him, his hands on the oily floor behind him the only things stopping him collapsing completely. "Not a chance of seeing them, let alone catching them." Spike's voice trailed off as it got closer.

Xander's head tilted slowly and he looked up at Spike's face. "Is he dead?" he asked.

Spike frowned. "He's not dust, is he? So, no, he's not dead." He strode away to the stairs where Xander had left his shotgun and Xander followed him with his eyes. Anything rather than look at Jimmy. Breaking the breech, Spike checked the shells and snapping the gun closed, marched back. "Left a letter on the pavement outside. Wankers!" Frozen, Xander watched as Spike walked towards them, wondering how he could ignore Jimmy's injuries, when he had admitted that whoever had dumped Jimmy's body was long gone. So when the shot
roared out, he was totally unprepared.

As he watched the dust settle, he dimly heard Spike's voice echoing and roaring above him. "Looks like they work for real, then. Guess you've got your test drive." Xander tilted his face upwards and saw the hard line of Spike's mouth. "Jimmy was okay," Spike said. "Give him fifty years and he'd have made something of himself. He was smart. Well read, too." He paused and sighed. "He liked poetry."

37. Nor law, nor duty

_Prompt: #53 - Ayers Rock_

"I told you. It's one on one. It has to be. That's the lore. She's called Wergeld and I'm going to oblige. You, stay here! If I'm not back by dawn, you get out. Right out of New York. You get on a plane or a bus, or you bloody hitch a ride, but you get out! Understood?"

Xander's expression was, for once, unreadable. "Are you
planning on getting beaten, Spike?"

"'Course not." Spike snorted his derision. "That overblown minion? Not a chance." He looked down at the knife and sheath in his hand and spoke to them, rather than to Xander. "But, just in case. If I trip over or get hit on the head by a meteorite... if anything happens to me, you're free. If you're there, she'll get you." Now he did look up, emphasising his final point. "So you stay here!"

"And what about the bit where it's a trap?" Xander grabbed the letter off the table and shook it in Spike's face. "Flavia, destroyer of the Watchers Council declares herself Master of New York, beholden to no one," he recited the first words of the letter he'd spent most of last night reading, over and over, once he'd wrested it from Spike's charge. "Anyone who writes like that has got to be up to no good. It's too flowery. And it's not even true."

Sighing, Spike shrugged. "It's a formal challenge, of course it's flowery. But she can't break the lore. It has to be one on one. And one on one, I can beat her with both arms tied behind my back."
"So, I'll come and watch. Just to make sure."

Bloody humans, with their complicated feelings and their inconsistent thinking. They didn't understand that there were ways of acting, there were forms of behaviour, that had been in place for centuries. Unchanged through the long life spans of the members of the society that founded them. "No you won't." Spike's patience was beginning to stretch to breaking point. "I'm not arguing, I'm telling! You promise to stay here, or I tie you up and leave you here anyway. Which is it going to be?"

Xander stopped then, and stared at Spike. "You're stubborn," he exclaimed, his own exasperation colouring his voice. "You're like some rock. You're like the biggest rock in the world. You're like that big rock in Australia." For a full thirty seconds, he glared at Spike, but seeing no softening in Spike's expression eventually he rolled his eyes. "Oh, why do I bother?" he asked the ceiling. Looking back he apparently recognised that Spike was quite capable of doing exactly what he threatened and his crooked smile twisted his lips as he lifted his arms in resigned defeat and took a couple of steps back. "Okay, okay, I get it. But since the reason you don't want me to come is so I can run if you don't come back, I'd rather not be tied up and left helpless, if you don't mind."
With one last glare Spike nodded, picked up the whetstone and went back to sharpening his knives, while Xander withdrew to the other side of the room and sat on the floor in front of the coffee table, picking up one of his Colts and beginning to dismantle it. Spike guessed he was going to clean it, again. Boy seemed to love those guns more than anything else in his life and caring for them did seem to calm him.

Silence reigned for fifteen minutes as they both concentrated on their tasks, but when Spike slid his second knife into its sheath Xander spoke again. "How are you going to approach?"

Spike pursed his lips in apparent thought. "Er, the overpass next to the bridge?" he suggested with a sly shrug, snorting his amusement when he saw Xander's shocked expression. "I'm not stupid mate. I'll head through Corlears Hook and cut north once I cross FDR."

Xander nodded. "Yeah, that's a good route. At least there's a bit of cover, until you get close. Better than coming in from the north - the tennis courts make that way too open." He gave a faint smile. "Just be careful, okay?"
Spike raised an eyebrow as he fastened the knives, in their sheaths, to his wrists. "I didn't know you cared."

The smile was swallowed by a scowl. "I don't," Xander said, emphatically.

Grinning openly now, Spike strapped a couple of stake sheaths to his thighs before walking over, picking up his duster and pulling it on. "Right." He paused, looking down at the boy, resisting the urge to reach out and give Xander's shoulder a squeeze, contenting himself with a half hearted punch as he turned away. "I'll see you later," he said, as he walked to the door.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike knew he was being watched long before he stepped out onto the tarmac'ed area under the Williamsburg Bridge. He'd known when he passed Flavia's look out's and he'd felt them close in behind him. Automatically, he logged the shadows, noting which were big enough to conceal a guard, as he scanned the immediate area. Flavia was standing arrogantly in the centre of the open space, so Spike approached carefully,
but with enough swagger to ensure she didn't mistake his natural caution for fear.

"Don't you get tired of this, Flavia?" he asked. "Why are you so determined to die?"

Flavia stiffened. "I won't be Master of this city by anyone's leave," she announced, pompously. "I am the strongest here and I owe you nothing."

"Yeah? Like you don't owe me for the tip that those watchers were in town? Like you would have dared take them on, if I hadn't shamed you into it?"

Flavia's head jerked and the followers he had known were there, detached themselves from their dark corners and approached, surrounding Spike on three sides.

"Thought you'd issued Wergeld, girl. That means one to one, and you know it."

Laughing, Flavia stepped forward into the final position, directly in front of him. Her mouth twisted into an ugly sneer of assured supremacy. She wasn't going to attack immediately, she wanted time to gloat and possibly time to convince her acolytes that this course of action was
acceptable. Spike turned in a slow circle on the spot, eyeing each of them in turn. He noted the silent signals that passed between them as their eyes flicked back and forth between him and each other. An established group then, a street gang maybe, turned together and knowing no better than to follow their sire. That made them very young. He didn't doubt they knew how to fight. The only questions were, did they know how to use the additional strength and speed of the demon and did they know their new weaknesses? He cursed himself for not keeping a closer eye on Flavia's court, but he'd really not wanted to waste his time on her. All he wanted was for her to leave him alone and get on and rule the city, not set the cops onto his business and keep the streets clean and tidy. But she couldn't leave it at that. She couldn't bear to know she'd been bested. That kind of stupid pride led to a short life. Unfortunately, he'd underestimated her when he'd assumed she wasn't too stupid to know that. She was overdue a lesson in common sense and he was going to make sure it was him who delivered it.

Relaxing his face, he allowed it to change and bringing his hands together, he drew the knives from inside the cuffs of his duster and moved into a fighting stance. Across from him, Flavia smiled and a flicker of disquiet entered his brain, which swiftly coalesced into a kernel of dread
in the pit of his stomach as Flavia drew a gun from the back of her waistband. "It won't kill you," she agreed with his unspoken thought, "but it'll hurt like hell. And with both your kneecaps gone, you won't be doing any of that fancy dancing." Laughing she continued, as she pulled back the hammer with her left hand and repositioned the grip of her right, "You didn't really fall for it, did you?"

From behind her came the strange 'chunk-chunk' sound of a pump action shotgun being primed and a voice agreed, "Yes, he did, actually," as Xander stepped into view. "Spike's always been a bit of a romantic." He held his shotgun loosely, but it was pointed squarely at her back. "But I'm not!"

Flavia spun to face him. "Good, I wanted you, too," she growled, raising her own gun. It was the last thing she said, as the shotgun spoke and her body exploded, leaving only her ashes to settle slowly to the ground.

Dropping his knives, Spike grabbed his stakes and with a backward thrust, took out the minion behind him before he could react to the shifted power dynamic. The shotgun fired again, claiming the one on his left and he spun fast to face the last, just as his target burst into
furious action and charged. Together they tumbled over, with Spike on his back underneath, but using the momentum he continued the roll, throwing the furious fledgling over his head and clear, while he snapped back to his feet and swung around to face where the body had landed. His opponent was scrambling to his feet, face twisted in furious denial. "You bastard! I'm going to get you!"

Laughing, as he bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, Spike held his hands out in front of him, palms up and twitched his fingers towards himself. "Come on then, what're you waiting for?"

The fledgling growled at the taunt and charged again. But this time Spike was ready and well balanced. He absorbed the force of the untutored attack and used it to swing his attacker into the base of the nearest bridge pylon, where his head made sharp contact with the concrete. Before he could shake whatever small modicum of sense he normally had back into his head, Spike closed and staked him through his back, feeling the minor resistance of his ribs give under the blow, before he too was dust on the breeze.

The sudden quiet was broken by the sound of a late night
train, as it rattled it's way across the river to Brooklyn above their heads and the 'chunk chunk' of Xander's shotgun, as he pumped a new shell into the chamber. Spike turned to face him. "It's over, mate. They're all gone." Xander's face was a frozen mask, a mixture of horror and something else that Spike couldn't identify. Suddenly he felt nervous. "Xander? Pet? Are you okay? Come on, you know you can't use that on me, so why don't you put it down? It's alright. You can relax, they're gone now."

He took a few steps forward, but stopped when the shotgun swung towards him. They stood unmoving for whole moments, then Xander shook his head, as if to clear it. He lowered the gun and broke it, removing the shell from the breech and walked past Spike to the base of the pylon. Placing his arm against the concrete he raised the shotgun like a stake and brought the butt down sharply against his wrist. Spike started forward with a cry, but stopped as he saw that it was not his wrist Xander had hit, but the bracelet. The bracelet which now broke neatly into two parts and fell to the floor. Xander bent down and picked them up, slipping them into his pocket with the shell.

"How...?" Spike gasped. "How did you...? You broke it?"
Turning to face him, Xander looked like he was going to cry. "It's been broken for weeks," he said wearily. "I think it was the Anashaman."

"And... And you knew....?"

Xander shrugged "I knew." He swung the shotgun up, so it rested over his shoulder. "I'll see you at home," he said, as he began to walk away.

Note: The title is from a poem by Yeats, written in 1919. Something about it seemed to fit Xander at this point:

**An Irish Airman Foresees His Death**

*I know that I shall meet my fate*
*Someday among the clouds above;*
*Those that I fight I do not hate,*
*Those that I guard I do not love;*
*My country is Kiltartan Cross,*
*My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,*
*No likely end could bring them loss*
*Or leave them happier than before.*
*Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,*
*Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,*
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

38. To thine own self...

Prompt: #54 - Cry Havoc

Spike's walk home through the late night streets was a confused tangle of reassessment as he called up every available memory from the last three weeks and examined them in the light of his new knowledge: the boy's sulkiness in the days following their confrontation with the watchers, but his determination at the same time to learn all that Spike could teach him of hand-to-hand combat, the fact that he'd volunteered the secret to finding the book, but his coldness in the days that followed. Suddenly Black Wind's words to Xander as they left his place took on stark new meaning.
On reaching home, he climbed the stairs and hesitated at the door, almost afraid to enter, not sure if he wanted to find Xander there, or not. It became moot, anyway - the flat was empty.

For a few moments he stood, shoulders slumped and arms hanging uselessly at his sides, staring at the bed, before he realised that sleep was far beyond him right now. Instead he shrugged off his duster and flung it over the back of the sofa as he made his way to the kitchen, where he grabbed a glass and the bottle of Jack Daniels with one hand and a fresh packet of fags and the ashtray with the other. Turning to the table he set the bottle down, allowing the glass to skitter from his fingers at the same time. Slamming down the ashtray and the packet of cigarettes next to it, he fell into the nearest chair. He slumped forward, elbows resting on the table, as he ran his hands back across his head and lacing his fingers together at the back of his neck. For a while, he stared sightlessly down at the golden grain of the table then, with a sigh, he reached for the bottle, unscrewed the top and sloshed a large measure into the glass. Raising it to his lips, he took a long gulp, gasping as the spirit hit the back of his throat sending fumes snaking up into his sinuses. With his other hand he awkwardly tore open the
cigarette packet and extracted one. It was only as he was
digging in his pocket, searching for his zippo, that he felt
the intellectual centres of his brain re-engage and begin
to shove possible motivations, reasons, explanations into
his consciousness.

Xander had said he knew that the bracelet wasn't
working, but he hadn't said for how long he'd known.
And suddenly Spike was sure it wasn't immediately after
it broke down. The boy's behaviour in the days following
Roger Wyndham-Pryce's death and Wesley's release had
been sullenly hostile. If he'd known then that he was
free, Spike had no doubt he would have run.

Everything Spike knew about the boy, told him that
Xander should have left anyway. So why didn't he?
Taking a drag from his cigarette, he thought back to that
eventful night. They'd done the job, retrieved the
Anashaman, found out what Black Wind wasn't telling
them about it, locked Wesley away safe, gone to Black
Wind's shop and stayed to barter and to reminisce, then
they'd gone home. Hang on! Telephone call. On the way
back from Black Wind's shop Xander had made a phone
call to his little friend and afterwards, he'd talked about
change. Spike had been so caught up by the sudden
memory of Dru and her blasted tarot cards, he'd
forgotten about Xander's confidences. But thinking about it now, the boy had seemed lost, bereaved almost.

Spike lifted the glass to his lips again and emptied it. Slamming it back down, he picked up the bottle and refilled it. "You keep missing him," she said. "Squandering your chances for the promise of more." What the fuck was Dru talking about? What the hell did that card mean? Lurching to his feet, he crossed the room and switched on the computer, returning for his supplies as he waited for it to do its booting up thing. The internet seemed to be the twentieth century equivalent of the British Library Reading Room, there had to be something about tarot cards in there.

~*~*~*~*~

The sun had long risen and the bottle was three quarters empty before Spike caught the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs. He stiffened in his chair and swung around to watch the door handle, waiting for it to move. Nothing happened. The footsteps continued past and on up to the floors above.

Picking up the bottle, Spike threw it across the room
where it smashed against the brick wall scattering shards of glittering glass across the floor and leaving a dripping stain of pungent liquid, marring the smooth perfection of the paintwork. He got to his feet, walked over to the door, opened it and trudged up the stairs.

He found Xander, as he expected, on the roof, sitting in his deck chair out of Spike's reach, but there all the same. "You came back," he observed, speaking to Xander's profile.

"As you see."

Sitting down on the top step, Spike tilted his head back against the wall and gazed at the picture of boy and chair and sky, framed by the limitations of the doorway. "Why?"

Rolling his head against the back of the seat, Xander turned to look back at Spike. "Because I have nowhere else to go."

In spite of knowing it was a stupid thing to say, Spike opened his mouth and said it anyway: "You could go back to Sunnydale."
Xander's smile was bitter and twisted. "No. I really can't." He closed his eyes and a frown formed between them. "What's it been," he asked, "three months? Four? It feels like longer." He opened his eyes again. "I'll be 18 in a couple of months," he added inconsequentially. "Right now, the High School's closing down for the summer. Soon it'll be the start of a new school year. Senior year. I'm not supposed to grow up until after that." He shook his head. "I never thought I'd get out of that place alive. And I certainly never thought I'd get out of it like this. I know it was you that cried havoc, not me, but the idea of going back..." He turned his face away from Spike and gazed up at the sky as he trailed off.

"So you staying?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Right then," Spike announced cheerfully. "We'd best see about you getting your GED then."

*Note: For those outside of North America, the GED is the General Educational Development test, for people who don't have a high school diploma for some reason and acts as proof of equivalent achievement.*
39. Power and influence

Prompts: #55 'Hello Darkness, my old friend'

Placing the folder containing the carefully collated pages of 'The Book' down on the bed next to him, Spike looked up at Xander. "I have no problem with you going out," he said. "Just so long as it's broad daylight and you stay away from the shady side of the street." He squinted thoughtfully. "And don't talk to anyone," he added firmly. Xander felt his face flush at the memory of almost being dragged into a dark alley by a young girl who'd claimed she was lost, but was now mixing her ashes with the dirt in the gutters up on Lafayette. With a faint smirk, acknowledging the hit, Spike continued, "The thing of it is, I killed Flavia." Xander stared at him flatly. "Okay, you killed Flavia, but then we killed the witnesses. So, as far as the general population are concerned, I killed Flavia, okay? Just get accustomed to being overlooked." He grinned. "More overlooked," he corrected himself.
Xander folded his arms across his chest and upped the wattage of his glare. "But I'm not being overlooked, am I? We've been ambushed every night this week."

"Which would be why I don't want you going out alone."

"Except in broad daylight?"

"Yeah," Spike agreed. "And S'long as you stay on the sunny side of the street and away from alleys." He picked up the folder again, but lay it face down across his thighs. "Look," he sighed. "I've nearly got this done. Give me half an hour, then we'll go out. Where do you want to go?"

That was the question. Xander didn't know where, he just wanted out of these four walls. He wanted, if he were truthful, to find another ambush and feel the power of his shotgun disperse the vampires into clouds of meaningless dust. It seemed every vampire on the eastern seaboard had decided that with Heinrich and Flavia gone, New York was open season for challenge. And this lot played by the rules about as much as Flavia did. Spike had spent most of that morning complaining about the lack of tradition in the younger generation, until Xander thought he could sit an exam on 'the lore' set by Darla herself. But right now, he just wanted out of
the factory. He turned away from Spike and went over to the computer, switching it on. "I don't know," he muttered. "Just out."

"Don't sulk!" Spike called from behind him, before going back to his interrupted reading. Xander offered him one last glare and went to the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove.

He'd just pulled the sugar out of the cupboard and was putting some in his mug when Spike gave a whoop of triumph. "Here it is!" he cried. Xander turned to look at him, spoon suspended in midair, sugar slowly trickling off onto the floor. "It says here that the Gem of Amara resides in the Valley of the Sun." Spike continued reading. "And it's hidden in a sealed underground crypt.

Pursing his lips, Xander considered that. "And the Valley of the Sun would be....?"

Spike tossed the folder down. "It doesn't bloody say," he growled. "Sorcerers! Always got to be so bleeding obscure." Then he brightened. "Why don't you ask the computer, pet? Seems you can find anything on there. Go on, do a search."
"What for, 'secret crypts of the world'?' Xander turned back to the counter and stirred the remaining sugar into his coffee.

But Spike's enthusiasm was undimmed. "No, you twit! 'Valley of the Sun'. Search for 'Valley of the Sun'."

Nodding, Xander picked up his cup and went back to the computer. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I suppose that might work." Sitting down he logged in and waited while the computer went through the rest of its start up procedure then, once the sky and clouds had settled, he opened the browser. After ten minutes he turned to Spike. "Okay," he said cautiously, "there's a Valley of the Sun, in Arizona, but that seems to be most of Phoenix." A thought occurred to him. "Hey, there's probably graveyards in Phoenix. I mean, lots of people live there and that means they die and have to get buried." He trailed off in the face of Spike's sceptical expression.

"I doubt it's a human crypt, pet. Try again."

"Alright already. Sheesh!" Xander shoved his hair back from his face. It was getting long, he observed, he should get it cut. Out loud he said, "Hang on," and concentrated on the screen, scanning the list. "Okay, there's a Sun
Valley in Idaho. And another in Nevada, but that one looks like it's just a suburb of Reno."

"Not interested in Reno, mate, not if we can avoid it. Where else?"

"Um, Sun Valley, Los Angeles, in the San Fernando Valley and Sun Valley, El Paso in Texas. And that's it." He sat back. "Nothing in Peru, at least not on Yahoo."

Rolling smoothly off the bed, Spike crossed the room to stand behind Xander, peering over his shoulder at the screen. "Why the hell would it be in Peru?" he asked.

"Um, because that's where Black Wind said he thought it was?" Picking up his coffee Xander swung around in the chair and looked up at Spike. "So whatcha want to do?"

Spike scratched his chin. "More research," he decided. "Need t' find out if any of them places have more demonic activity than the rest." Xander rolled his eyes at Spike's constantly shifting accent. "If we can't find anything, we'll go to Texas first, then Phoenix, then Idaho. Leave Reno t'last." He nodded in satisfaction. "You know how t'do that, don't you?"
"Yeah, sure. I spent hours searching for demonic activity with Willow, last year. That's one search I do know all the tricks for. I'll see what I can find out." He paused and looked up at Spike. "But tomorrow, okay? Can we go out now?"

Spike nodded again. "Sure, pet. We'll go wherever you like." He looked around the apartment and smiled when he located his duster, draped over the back of the sofa. "I need something to eat, anyway."

That sounded suspiciously like Spike back-tracking. "I thought you didn't want me near the blood houses?" Xander suggested, cautiously.

"I don't. We'll go down to cardboard town and I'll show you how the poor make a few bucks to keep body and soul together when there's no welfare state." He crossed to the sofa, picked up his coat and pulled it on, ignoring Xander's puzzled 'huh?'

They had just reached the bottom of the stairs and Spike was suggesting they check out Film Forum after he'd eaten, while Xander calculated the chances of any film showing there not having subtitles, when they were interrupted by a loud knocking. Xander pulled his colts
out of his pockets and moved into position next to the small man-door set into the larger garage doors. Spike meanwhile, walked around the back of the car and positioned himself in the open space on the other side, facing the man-door. "Doubt it's a challenger," he observed, conversationally. "They wouldn't be stupid enough to request entry." He shrugged. "Or they might." Seeing that Xander was in position he jerked his chin. "Okay, open up." Xander flicked the latch, swung the door open and stepped back behind it.

For a moment, nothing happened, then a man stepped arrogantly over the threshold. He was black and better dressed than any vampire Xander had ever seen, except maybe Angel, and he walked into the room with his arms held away from his side, either in welcome or to show he was unarmed. Xander didn't care, he had his colts aimed at the back of the guy's head. The stranger came to a halt facing Spike across two yards of concrete. With a quick glance around, he concentrated his attention on Spike and his voice was rich and smooth and somehow musical. "Hello darkness!" It also dripped irony. "My old friend, it's good to see you."

Spike was unimpressed. "Darkness may be your friend, mate, but I'm not. I don't know you."
The vampire bowed slightly from the waist. "The name's Trick, and I feel I know you. You're quite the celebrity. Hits all over the 'Net." Spike caught Xander's eye behind Trick's back. 'Told you,' he mouthed with a grin, before looking back at Trick, who continued his spiel, "You have quite a rep-u-tay-shun, know what I'm saying?" Looking over his shoulder he saw Xander, guns trained on him, and took a step to the side, keeping both Spike and Xander in view. "I don't think we need to resort to violence." He flicked an imaginary spec off his sleeve and pulled his cuffs down over his wrists. "I've come to you with a proposition."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Have you indeed?" he asked sceptically. "And what might that be?"

"Well, way I hear it, you find yourself master of this fine burg." Trick paused, as if waiting for some acknowledgement which Spike didn't give, so he continued, "And if I'm not mistaken, that is not where you want to be."

Spike snorted "And you think you can help me with that, do you?"
"I'm sure of it. Things are changing, man, and we need to change with them, or be left behind. I'm a 20th century vampire. Live local, shop global." His smile suddenly broke free and lit his face, making him look younger, although Xander knew well enough that that meant nothing, and his eyes widened with excitement. "And there's large parts of this city... wired for fibre optics." He lifted his arms in an expansive gesture of shared delight. "I jack in a T-3, um, twenty-five hundred megas per, and I'm on the 'Net and I have the whole world at my fingertips."

"So why come to me? Sounds like you could do that anywhere."

Trick's smile turned predatory. "But this is New York. The trade centre of the country, of the world. It needs a firm hand, to keep the fledges in line, you know what I'm saying?"

"And you want to be that firm hand?"

"My friend," Trick paused at Xander's scowl and the slight lifting of his gun barrels, and he gave another small bow. "Master Spike, we really don’t need to attack each other." Spike raised an eyebrow as if to say 'why would I
bother' and Trick swallowed before he went on. "What I'm saying is that as long as I pay my taxes and keep the streets clean... as long as I make sure no one makes waves... Well, a peaceful New York, is a prosperous New York and everybody wins. The way I see it, I'm doing you a favour."

"And you're just delighted for me to stay here, minding my own business. It would never occur to you to try and take me out?"

With a careless shrug, Trick smiled again, more warmly this time. "Why would I want to? What I'm offering is mutually beneficial. I take all the administration off your hands and you, you carry on your peaceful life. And if we have some trouble that I can't handle, I come and ask for your assistance and bow to your greater experience in battle."

There was silence for a full twenty seconds as they stood watching each other, then suddenly Spike laughed. "Do what you like, mate. I'm off anyway. Leaving tomorrow. I've got business to attend to, somewhere that isn't here." A furious expression flashed across Trick's face, but was gone so fast Xander wasn't sure he'd really seen it. Spike smiled. "But you're the first challenger with the
good sense to talk, instead of trying to ambush," he said. "So yeah, you get what you want - all of New York, with my blessing." He glanced over at Xander. "Show the nice man out, pet. And lock the door behind him."

They gave Trick twenty minutes to clear the area, then the trip to the movies was replaced by a round of the local haunts, to announce the succession and make sure it was known that Spike approved. After that they went home to pack and for Xander to see what more he could discover of demonic activity in Texas, Arizona, Idaho and Nevada.

40. Selling it cheap

Prompts: #56 - 'St Peter'

Stalking through the streets of Cleveland, Spike felt the rush of the hunt again, like the first taste of good wine and as addictive as cocaine. This first night out from New York he'd checked them into the best hotel in town, rather than one of the fleabag motels, like those they'd
stopped at on their last cross country trip. They'd got in just short of dawn and, for the right inducement, the manager had been persuaded to give them a room and not disturb them all day. As evening fell, he'd woken and soon they'd be on their way again. He'd left Xander in the hotel restaurant, boggling over the prices, but determined on steak and chocolate mousse for breakfast. Now it was Spike's turn.

The sun had been down for less than an hour and the streets were still quite busy, but Spike had marked his target twenty minutes ago, recognising the type: tattered clothes that no amount of washing would ever get clean again, a shuffling gait that indicated bone weariness and ill health and a tatty and overfilled duffle bag dragging from one hand. It was just a matter of following and his prey would lead him somewhere where they wouldn't be disturbed. This man had a map of such places in his head, probably had one particular favourite - a place where he could curl up and sleep and guarantee not being moved on.

Sure enough, another forty five minutes of patient following and the old man bent stiffly down, pulled a bulging black sack out from under a pile of pallets against the wall of some commercial building and began to crawl
inside the hole he'd exposed. Spike walked up to him. "Hey, Grandpa," he called. His mark started in surprise and shuffled around on his knees to look up. "Want to make ten bucks?" Spike asked. The old man looked confused, so Spike squatted down in front of him and allowed his face to change. "You know what I am, granddad?" he asked.

The tramp crossed himself. "St Peter and all the Saints, preserve us," he gasped.

Smiling, Spike nodded and pulled out his wallet. "You know what I am. So you know how this works. I give you ten bucks, you give me some blood, yeah? You want to deal?" Spike held out the ten dollar note and waved it in front of the man's face, watching his eyes follow the movement as he thought. Eventually he nodded and reached for the money, but Spike stood up and held it out of reach. "Blood first. Then the money. Come on, up you get." He reached his hand down to help his meal stand, glad of his superior strength, since the old guy relied on him more than on his own legs to do the job. Not that he weighed much for all his apparent bulk.

Once they were facing each other Spike jerked his chin and the man slowly shed his coat. Underneath, his arms
and shoulders were relatively clean which was an
unnecessary, if pleasant, relief. The muscles of his arms
were wasted away, indicating a long term, poor quality
diet that failed to replace the energy he used in just
surviving day to day: chronic low level starvation. He
shivered and although it wasn't really cold, it was likely
his old bones felt every chill and whisper of wind.
Hunched in on himself he peered up at Spike, his
expression wavering as he glanced quickly up and down
the alley, as if he was actually considering his chances of
escape. Spike grinned at him, took hold of his upper arms
and pushed him back against the wall.

"My, my arm?" the meal stuttered.

Resting his right hand against the old man's chest to keep
him in place, Spike lifted his left and gently stroked the
tired face. "Not this time," he said soothingly. "This time,
we do it quick." He grabbed a sparse handful of hair and
forced the head to the side, exposing the neck. The old
body jerked, reflex action easily stilled and Spike bent his
head, slicing neatly into the jugular, and began to drink.
He took his time, enjoying the sensation, making sure he
dragged out as much as possible before the old heart
stopped. Relishing the sweet piquancy of the final
struggling breath and beat, feeling the life rush into him
as it left the body of his food, that last drop more potent and more satisfying than any quantity of blood bartered for from the top of a donor's supply, he revelled in the euphoria of the kill.

At last, when the body hung, a limp weight from his hands, he pushed it back against the wall and used the knife from the back of his belt to slash through the bite marks and disguise them. Pulling back he allowed the old frame to sag and caught it over his arm, so some last drops of blood drained out, staining the neck and dripping into the remnants of hair. Then he stuffed it into the cave of pallets, shoved the black sack of scrunched up newspaper in after it, to block the gap, and walked away humming happily under his breath. One more task to complete, then they could be on their way. He found a phone box and made a call to his lawyers.

Back at the hotel he was mildly surprised, and relieved, to see that Xander was not still in the restaurant. He wanted to be on the road. Now that his goal was almost in sight he was impatient for an ending. An ending that would also be a beginning. An image of the watcher struggling under Spike's fangs, as Spike took that precious last drop of life, played across his imagination. He could almost taste it. For a moment he considered
Xander; the boy had said he would try to stop Spike, if Spike did go after the watcher. Well, there were ways of dealing with that too. Xander was still young, but he wasn't too young. Not a huge problem: spending eternity looking like an eighteen year old. A child turned was an abomination - forever dependent, forever weak. But at eighteen Xander was tall and strong, and in the last few months he had grown up significantly, the workouts and sparring having toned his boyish muscles. He could probably pass for a few years older, with the right clothes and haircut. He wouldn't need to spend his entire existence being carded in bars. And if it looked like he might, well, they could always go back to Europe. Spike shrugged the thought away. There was time for that later. For now, he just wanted to get them across this damn country again and find the demon who seemed to have his gem.

Taking the stairs at a run he burst into the room already talking. "Did you have a good meal, pet? Come on, lets be off. We have a demon to find." He trailed off at the sight that met him.

The boy was sitting on one of the beds; he looked like he was waiting. Spike let the door close behind him and took a couple more steps forward, and Xander looked up,
his eyes dark and solemn. "You killed, didn't you?"

Spike shrugged "'Safer, now we're on the move. No one left to talk. I hid the marks."

Xander shook his head, dismissing Spike's precautions. "Who was it?"

"Best you don't know, love."

"I have to know."

With a sigh, Spike gave in, wondering if this was going to be a regular thing. "Some old homeless guy."

"And because he was homeless, he deserved to die?"

That was enough! "Deserving's got nothing to do with it," Spike growled. "Or if it does? Well, I deserve to eat. He was old and sick. We thin the herd. It's what we do."

For a full minute Xander sat still, staring at Spike, until Spike wanted to squirm under the assessing gaze, but then he nodded and when he spoke his voice was neutral. "I packed," he said. "I figured we'd best get out of town quickly. Your bag's by the bed. Come on." And
with that, he picked up his own bag from the floor by his feet, stood up, walked past Spike, opened the door and left the room.

41. Joining the dance

Prompt: #57 - Barophobia

As Xander started unpacking his bag, Spike opened the large, bulky envelope that had been waiting for him at the front desk and spilled the contents out onto the bedspread. Pushing apart the papers and a couple of shotgun cartridge boxes, he picked up a map and spread it out. Xander left what he was doing, wandering over to watch and Spike looked up from his seat on the bed. "Having good lawyers on tap, who understand the dark side of the force, does make things easier. Bit of luck, we won't have to go hunting through back streets and bars." He paused, thinking about what he'd just said. "If a place like this even has back streets." Then, reverting to his original thought, "They can find anything for a good client."

Xander pushed some stray papers out of the way and sat opposite Spike, with the map between them. "And you'd be one of those?"
"Yeah, pet. I've brought them good business over the years. They look after my money and invest it for me. I get good returns, they get their cut off the top, everybody's happy. Acted for me since Dru and I left Darla at the Old Master's Court, during the war." He looked across at Xander. "That would be the Great War, the first one," he added with a smirk. And Xander was again struck by how much Spike must have seen and experienced in his long life, and in spite of having known it - suddenly he knew it. Spike was older than his great-grandfather, probably older than his great-great-grandfather.

Plucking an envelope from the mess, Spike turned it over in his hands and studied the writing on the front. "This is for you," he said, tossing it over to Xander who caught it by instinct.

Cautiously Xander broke the seal and pulled out a distinctive green credit card and a slip of paper with a number on it. Spike took in his open mouthed expression of shock and nodded. "Memorise the number. That'll give you access to sufficient funds to set yourself up, if you need to. Don't spend it all at once, eh?"

Pulling himself together Xander asked, "Will I need to?"
Spike shrugged. "Nah, pet. 'Course not. But this isn't a two bit fight with a nondescript, would-be-master like Flavia. This could be a real battle. Don't underestimate the gravity of the challenge, but don't fear it either." His rare smile spread across his face before it transformed into the more usual smirk. "I can beat this bastard. Been around a long time and I've not met my match yet. And I plan to be around for a lot longer, don't worry."

Giving the edge of the map a twitch, he pointed to a spot in the valley "We're here."

Xander looked at the credit card one more time, then stuffed it in his pocket along with the slip of paper, to consider more carefully later. He turned his attention back to Spike's discourse as Spike ran a finger along a dotted red line, while reading what was written on another typed page from the mess. "This is the footpath up to the tourist lookout point."

"Trail," Xander interrupted. "It's not a footpath, it's a trail."

Spike shrugged. "Call it what you like. We go up to here." He jabbed a point on the map. "According to the lawyers'
pet shaman, this Khalroth guy you found the reference to has a den in a cave at the source of this stream."

"Creek. Did you tell them why you wanted to find Khalroth?"

"I'm not stupid, mate. No, they're there to do what I want, I'm not giving them any details of why I want it." He looked back at the map and put his finger down on a point in the middle of nowhere. "So I reckon the cave is here."

Xander studied the map as a whole and the area Spike wanted to get to. "That's not exactly in Sun Valley," he observed. "And it's a long hike. We'd have to set off early." He cast his eyes around, following highway 75 north. "But if we drive up here," he suggested, trailing his own finger over the map, following the line of the highway, "and take this service road, it would save us a lot of time. From there we could strike off south? And if we approached this way," he ran his finger across the map towards where Spike was still marking the position of the cave, "we have the ridge to the east, so the sun will take longer to get over to us. We might still need to camp out for the day, but it looks like an easier route. There could even be tree cover. And one of those space
blanket sleeping bags would keep the sun out, if we don't make it in one night."

Spike looked at him, an expression like admiration in his eyes. "Right," he said. "That's good." Gathering the map back up and folded it he added, "So we'll do that, then. Good to have you at my back, mate."

Xander ducked his head. "Nowhere else to go, so yeah, I guess I've got your back. What about ammo? What do I need?"

Spike picking through the rest of the papers, reading some sheets, tossing others aside at once. "Your wooden ones'll be no use, but take some anyway," he suggested, "it's called the Wood of Life for a reason, and you never know." He picked up the two boxes. "Here's a variety pack: more lignum vitae, silver, iron, copper, lead, rock salt; take the lot, we'll play it by ear. There doesn't seem to be any Intel on killing this thing and this note says he's a traditionalist, so formal challenge is probably the order of the day. That's my job. You hold back and keep out of it. Anything you take is for personal defence only, you can't interfere."
"Where have I heard that before?" Xander asked innocently.

~*~*~*~*~

They set off well before dark, with Spike doing a dash for the car when Xander brought it as close to the shaded back entrance of the hotel as he could, and the service road took them further into the mountain than the map suggested. When it did eventually end Xander was able to pull up under a stand of trees, out of sight of aerial spotters, and the trek up the mountain was almost pleasant. The full moon was already in the sky by the time the sun set, so Xander hardly needed his flashlight, even though the first part of their route was along the gully floor. Once they began to climb in earnest, the trees were well spaced, so there was no fighting through undergrowth and they made good time.

For three hours they slogged up the slope, resting occasionally for Xander to take a drink from the water bottle in his pack. There was no wind at all and the air smelt clean and heavy with moisture and a hint of wood smoke. Xander stood for a moment staring back down the mountain, up at the stars, so much brighter here
than in the town, and at the craters of the moon, trying to see the rabbit instead of the face on it's surface.

The distant cry of a wolf hardly disturbed the peace of the night, but it did pull him out of his dreaming and sent him hurrying to catch up with Spike, who looked back over his shoulder. "Not much further," he said, pointing towards a rocky outcrop silhouetted black against the dark blue of the sky. "I reckon it's just over that rise."

Xander made a show of looking around. "I don't see any crypts, sealed or not."

With his face in shadow, Xander couldn't be sure of Spike's expression, but no doubt Spike could see Xander's face more clearly than he could see Spike's because there was a definite smirk in his voice when he answered, "Might be inside?"

Xander spared him a glare on principle and jerked his shot gun, indicating that Spike should lead the way.

~*~*~*~*~

The cave entrance, once they located it, turned out to be
a narrow crack in the rock which opened out into a passage, almost wide enough to negotiate two abreast. They dropped their packs and Spike took the lead with Xander directing his flashlight down onto the sandy floor between them, so he could avoid the fallen, scattered rocks which Spike stepped over so effortlessly in the dark.

The unexpected grasp of a hand on his hip caused him to jump, but Spike's breathy, "Shhh," told him that Spike had simply reached back with an order to halt. He switched off his flashlight and crowded up to Spike to find out what had caused the warning. Gradually his eyes adjusted and he became aware of a diffuse golden glow ahead. "Torches," Spike whispered. "Round that bend. Come on."

They edged forwards, the light getting brighter, and then they were in a huge cavern with real Hollywood style torches in brackets around the walls, their flames sending crazy shadows dancing over the uneven surface of the rock walls and causing the cave paintings of men with spears hunting strange beasts to contort, as if they were alive.

From the darkness on the far side, near where a small
altar stood, a deep gravely voice addressed them. "Trespass! Who disturbs me?" Out of the shadows two balls of fire appeared, much bigger and brighter than Spike's demon eyes, but eyes none the less. A darker shadow began to form below them as their owner came towards the light. "You seek me, vampire?" the voice boomed.

42. To beard the lion

*Prompt: #58 - Straight from the dead guy's mouth*

Xander could see the moment Spike threw caution to the winds - he straightened, threw back his shoulders and strutted forward. There was no other word for it, that was definitely a strut. "Yeah, I seek you. William the bloody," he announced loudly. "You have something I want. I've come to get it." Stopping in the middle of the open space, he looked around as if taking in the decor for the first time and 'hmmm-ed' with measured approval. "You do the finger paintings?" he asked. "Nice work."
The demon stared down at Spike and, ignoring the artistic criticism and the attempt at provocation, addressed the meat of Spike's statement. "And what would that be halfling?" His voice was like the sound of a landslide, crashing and echoing around the cavern.

If anything, Spike puffed himself up even more. "I want your gem. And I challenge you for it."

The demon, Khalroth, laughed and it was as if the roof was caving in. "You have the audacity to crawl in here and demand challenge?"

Spike seemed all of a sudden to deflate and he sounded slightly doubtful, but indignant, when he answered, "Yeah!"

Khalroth considered him, then he took another step forward and Xander got a clear view of his legs, torso and arms, although his face remained in shadow. He was not as huge as he had appeared at a distance, but he still towered over Spike. His skin was brown and crusted, like the rock in which he lived, his hands were tipped by long talon-like nails that curved into vicious looking hooks and his legs ended in huge goat-like hooves. A stray flicker of light caught and reflected off what looked like long horns
that swept around from the top of his head, down towards his shoulders. As silently as possible Xander operated the release button on his shotgun and began to expel the lead loaded shells, replacing them with lignum vitae, silver and iron from his pockets. Khalroth's eyes swung towards him, before shifting back to Spike. His voice was clearer now, although it still carried the undertones of earthquake. "I am Khalroth, known to the untutored as 'The Beast'. I may not refuse Challenge, halfling. You will face my champion and my gem will be my stake. While you, like all other challengers before you, will die on the first pass."

Spike threw a glance back at Xander, his face alive with vindication and the anticipation of victory. "Right! Champion to champion," he crowed and his face shifted.

But The Beast continued, "You have set my stake for me. What do you propose for your stake in this contest?"

That caused Spike to redirect his full attention back up at the demon in front of him, and he bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, rolling his shoulders. "What do you want?" he asked. Immediately his face screwed up and he turned his head aside, realising what he had said. Xander only just heard his muttered, "Shit!"
Khalroth also seemed taken aback by Spike's carelessness, but he answered quickly. "I will take the thing you value most."

Spike looked down at himself. "You want my coat?" he asked dubiously.

This time Khalroth's laugh was derisive. "That is not the thing you value most. The coat is just a coat. A memento, nothing more."

Turning his back on the demon, Spike began to dig through his duster, as if searching for something, anything, of value, looking everywhere except at Xander. Eventually he ran out of pockets, straightened and seemed to come to a decision. He threw back his head and gazed up at the dark roof of the cavern, speaking over his shoulder. "Okay!" he agreed. Turning around and stepping forward, so he was squared up, chest to stomach with his opponent, he glared up at the fiery yellow eyes suspended in the shadows, his own eyes a dim reflection of their burning malignancy. "I've got a favour from Black Wind," he said. "A nice big favour. How'd you like that? Is that valuable enough for you?"
"My thanks," Khalroth replied with ironic courtesy. "I accept the gift, offered straight from your mouth, but it is not your stake in this challenge." Spike took a couple of steps back and appeared about to burst into indignant argument, but the demon pre-empted him. "You took it upon yourself to name my stake, so I will name yours." The glowing eyes swung towards Xander, who closed his own eyes and shook his head in despair. Trust the dead guy to sound off, without considering the consequences. Even Xander knew better than to play chess with the devil; all the fairy stories and comic books agreed that demons could twist anything to suit their own ends. Where was John Constantine, when you needed him? The Beast's voice was heavy with contempt as he continued. "You reek of humanity, halfling, and the human who fights at your side; you share pain and anger with him. He will be your stake."

"No!" Spike shouted, while Xander felt his own body jerk with shock.

The Beast's eyes remained trained on Xander and he ignored Spike's punch to his stomach, which didn't even cause him to sway, although it left Spike staggering backwards, clutching his fist in his other hand. Recovering himself, Xander decided that he needed to be
in on this conversation. "Hey!" he yelled. "Standing right here!" He took a few unguarded steps into the cavern and collided with an invisible wall. 'Fucking, tricky, bloody demons,' he thought angrily. Although unable to get nearer, he figured he could still make himself heard from where he was. "I'm not a possession! " he shouted. "I can't be gambled!" He tried to step back to go around the obstruction, whatever it was, but was brought up short by another solid wall of air behind him.

Stretching out his left arm parallel to the floor and swinging it in a circular motion, the beast demon laughed yet again. This time it sounded almost like a snigger, with a hint of giggle. If Xander hadn't been so terrified, he might have found it amusing, to hear such a sound come from such a body. "You have admitted your status," The Beast said, as a silver disc appeared, hanging in midair in front of them. It rippled, like the surface of a pond when a stone is thrown into it's centre and a picture appeared there, gradually expanding out to the edges, and they were looking through a window into the past:

Xander sat against a wall on the floor of Spike's old lair in Sunnydale, ropes and shackles around his wrists and ankles. Spike was on the sofa opposite, leaning forwards as he pulled a cigarette out of his pack. "My Sire gave you
to me, the other day," vision-Spike said conversationally.

The picture flickered with interference, like the fast forward of a VCR, before it settled again. The scene was unchanged, except that vision-Spike was now smoking. Xander watched as vision-Xander opened his mouth. "Or you could just give me back to Angel. Think of me as a Sire's day present, or something," he said.

The disc disappeared taking the picture with it and The Beast focused his glowing eyes on Xander. "Condemned with your own words. You are the stake for which the vampire will fight." He turned back to Spike and the sneer was back. "You! A legendary dark warrior? Look at you now! You care for this human man-child."

"I am a warrior-" Spike began to protest.

Khalroth interrupted, "Yours is the lowest of all the half-breeds and your short ascendancy, beyond your natural status, is long past. You are a pathetic excuse for a demon, vampire. Half-breed!"

Shucking off his duster and allowing it to fall carelessly to the floor, Spike braced himself in a fighting stance and growled, "Yeah? Insult me, would you? I'll show you
pathetic! You want champion to champion? I'll give you champion to champion. Just give it your best shot!"

Xander lifted his shotgun and using it as a battering ram tried to hammer at the invisible walls that confined him, yelling, "Let me out! You bastard, let me out!" The gun's butt didn't actually hit anything, it just stopped. Xander turned and tried another direction with the same results. He was well and truly trapped. Spike didn't even glance over and Xander got the distinct impression that although he could see and hear everything, Spike could no longer hear him. He dropped his arms and Khalroth's gravely voice whispered in the air behind him, "Yessss."

From behind The Beast, a new dark shadow appeared. Rushing into the cavern it charged at Spike, who only just managed to dodge to the side to avoid it. As he turned to face the threat, the creature appeared to bounce off the wall. In fact, Xander could have sworn that it actually climbed up the vertical face of the rock before it sprang back into the cleared central space. There it halted, pawing the sandy floor with one front hoof, its huge tusks dripping saliva on the ground in front of it. It looked like a cross between a wild boar and a small buffalo, but with long, needle-like spines protruding from around its neck and along the length of its back. It also looked
annoyed. Spike was bouncing again.

"Bloody hell!" Spike cried. "What the fuck happened to introductions? This your champion?" He glared at the creature. "You bloody attack without warning? I could get seriously annoyed, here." With the edge of his foot, he kicked his duster out of the way and settled into a fighting crouch.

Xander stood hard up against the wall of his invisible prison, hands braced on nothing, as the creature charged again. It was fast and Xander couldn't see how Spike would combat it. It didn't seem to have any obvious weak spots and its tusks were pointing straight at Spike's stomach. He gave an involuntary cry, useless warning or dismay, as it registered that Spike wasn't going to dodge this time. He just stood there, his slight bouncing the only sign that he was ready.

With his heart in his mouth Xander watched as everything slowed down, he could almost see the individual drops of saliva hitting the sand. Then with a rush the scene accelerated and Spike fell backwards to the floor, just before the creature reached him, grabbing at and gripping the vicious two foot long tusks as he pulled his knees up his chest. As the creature loomed
above him Spike allowed himself to roll back onto his shoulders with the momentum, straightening his legs at the same time. He planted his feet straight up into the creature's soft underbelly, and the tips of the tusks hit the ground next to his shoulders and their tips dug into the sand, while the rest of the creature went over in a crazy summersault, crashing onto its back with a squeal of indignation, shock and pain. Spike rolled away and scrambled to his feet, wiping saliva from his face and Xander took a deep steadying breath.

While the creature was trying to get all four of its legs underneath it, Spike backed away instead of closing for the kill and Xander winced as he realised the reason. Spike's left shoulder was dislocated. Spinning quickly round in a circle, scanning the cavern, Spike ran to the entrance, braced himself for a moment, before crashing his shoulder into the rock wall. He screamed, but when he pulled back the joint looked like it was back in place, although he seemed to be cautious about moving it.

Meanwhile the four legged beastie was back on its feet and was already charging. This time Spike jumped, legs bent and clearing the creature's tossing head by a scant six inches, before crashing down to plant both heavy boots squarely in the centre of the creature's back bone,
regardless of the needle sharp spines. The creature staggered under the blow, lurching to the side while Spike retained his balance on the unstable surface, bent his knees and sprang free, dripping blood from a long gash in the leg of his jeans. He landed awkwardly and tried to turn, but this time the creature had not gone down, its hooves scrabbled in the sand, but retained enough purchase for it to swing around and one tusk tore another gash across Spike's side, just above his belt, before he was able to lurch out of range. His feet were peddling madly, trying keep themselves under him as he staggered backwards and crashed into the rock wall.

The creature followed and while Spike's body was still reverberating with the shock of impact, it closed and Xander watched in horror as one tusk skewered him through the stomach pinning him in place. Spike screamed again and the creature backed up, tossing its head. Spike, still skewered on its tusk and flapping around like the proverbial rag doll, eventually came loose and flew across the room to land in an ungainly heap of arms and legs a good fifteen feet behind the creature.

Xander closed his eyes, thinking that he couldn't bear to watch, but snapped them open again when he realised that hearing without seeing was even worse. Spike was
still on the floor, apparently struggling to get his hands under him, to push himself up and the creature approached cautiously, tusks down, ready to scoop him up and throw him again. It was within inches of slipping its tusk under Spike's body to do so, or possibly slipping them into Spike's body, when Spike's right arm came free from behind his back, the knife blade catching the light. He lashed out at the creature's face, scoring the point of the blade across its right eye and for a moment Xander thought it had penetrated, but the Beast's champion merely squealed again, pulled its head back and kept coming, knocking the hand and the knife away with its tusk and planting its left forefoot down on Spike's arm, pinning him down to the sound of cracking bones. It had already lifted its right leg above Spike's ribcage, when Khalroth interrupted its actions with a word of command in some guttural and probably non-human language. The creature froze, glanced back at its master and placed the foot down anyway, but more gently, just pinning Spike down, not crushing him. Another string of incomprehensible orders and the creature backed reluctantly away from Spike, to Khalroth's side. Khalroth lowered one hand and gently stroked its snout, before walked forward to stand over the fallen vampire. The creature followed, like a dog walking at heel.
And now The Beast's face came into the light. Somehow, in spite of the rotting flesh populated by maggots that took the place of the nose and left cheek bone Xander had expected, Xander could still read the expression of triumph and the sneer he directed at Spike. "Did you really think you'd win?" he asked. He glanced at Xander and smiled. "I claim your stake." Turning back he looked down on Spike and cocked his head in thought, and the smile turned sly. "But for all your lowly status, you have been a worthy adversary and in recognition of that, and in thanks for your earlier gift, I will allow you to live. I'll even do you a favour. The removal of all memories of humanity will free you, to be a true warrior for the cause, a real demon, fully and without pollution. No more halfling, in future you will fight for the darkness with an unclouded heart." His eyes flared, bright as fire, seeming to cast shadows of their own over Spike's pain-contorted face. "I will make you whole!"

43. More grievous torment
Spike raised his head weakly and glared at The Beast, his right hand twitched where it lay across his chest, two fingers straight while the others were curled into the palm, but the effort appeared to be too much and he collapsed back to the floor.

Walking away to face the altar, from where he had first appeared, Khalroth raised his voice and cried, "I call on Black Wind. With the favour granted by this halfling, I call. Come and fulfil your promise. Make this warrior whole."

Turning to Xander, who was leaning against the invisible walls that confined him, he added conversationally. "He'll be here soon."

Xander snarled, "Let me out. Let me out of here, right now!" The walls disappeared before he had even finished speaking and he staggered forwards, only preventing himself falling flat on his face by the use of his shotgun as a prop. Recovering, he rushed across the cavern to Spike's side, falling to his knees by Spike's shoulder and putting his ear to the still chest, stupidly searching for a heartbeat before he came to his senses. "Spike?" he
whispered, his hand hovering above the bloody mess that was Spike's stomach, afraid to touch, afraid to leave him be. "Spike, open your eyes. You're not dust, so you're not dead. Come on! Wake up, damn you!"

Slowly Spike's eyes cracked open and he gazed up into Xander's face. "I knew," he breathed. "I knew it could be. William was right." He stifled a groan behind tight lips and took another shallow breath. "I'm sorry, pet. Run! Run now, because I won't remember this, once..." His eyes closed again and his head fell back limply on the sand and this time he stayed still.

Xander turned to look up at Khalroth who smiled. "You can't run anywhere, you're mine, human."

In spite of the fear that ran like an icy chill down Xander's spine, he gathered his courage and stood, gripping his shotgun and holding it ready in front of his hips. He swallowed to moisten his dry mouth and gritted out, "You've made a mistake. Everybody makes a mistake sometime, and this was yours." The Beast cocked his head to one side questioningly and Xander took a deep breath. "You forgot something - you declared your champion, but you didn't give Spike a chance to declare his. I'm a soldier. Do you know what a soldier is?" Inside
he was terrified, but he concentrated on keeping his voice firm and his hands steady. "I am Spike's champion!"
he announced as he raised his shotgun and fired straight into the face of the creature at Khalroth's side, backing up as he fired: one of silver, one of iron and two of Lignum vitae. The creature squealed again, more violently than before and began to shudder, the spines on its back vibrating as it reared up, its forefeet lifting a foot off the ground and its head tossing from side to side. With a final ear piercing whistle, which ended in a guttural wheeze, the creature sank to the floor and rolled onto it's side. Frantically, Xander tried to remember what the next round was charged with as he pumped it into the breech and the spent shell casing fell to the floor.

Swinging the shotgun away from the mess that was the pig-creature, he pointed it at Khalroth, who stared down at his fallen champion with shock. "What have you done?" Khalroth gasped.

Xander shifted to stand astride Spike's unconscious body. "It's called the 'Wood of Life' for a reason, mate," he said viciously. "So, champion to champion, I'd say my side wins, wouldn't you?"

The Beast knelt and laid a craggy hand on his champion's
still flank, almost petting the bristly hair. He looked up at Xander. "This changes things."

Whatever else The Beast may have been about to add was interrupted by a deep, warm laugh and a slow clap of hands. Xander spun to face the sound, shotgun raised, and there was Black Wind, wearing a knitted wool beanie which caused the ends of his hair to stick out sideways from beneath it, faded jeans, battered sneakers, a shapeless brown coat with huge sagging pockets and a smile. Xander lowered his weapon and turned back to The Beast, speaking over his shoulder to Black Wind, "Hello, old man, sir," he said and, in spite of everything, he found himself smiling at the sound of Black Wind's appreciative chuckle. "Can you help Spike?" he asked.

There was a rustling sound behind him, but he didn't look back, keeping his attention fixed on The Beast and trusting in Black Wind to do whatever was necessary, although he did relax slightly when Black Wind replied, "Yes, I can patch him up, so he won't bleed out. He'll live, so to speak. You carry on with your negotiations, I'll look after your friend here."

Right, negotiations. What the hell did that mean? Xander looked at The Beast, who, while still ugly as sin, didn't
seem so all powerful, now that his champion was dead. He shrugged. "So, I guess that means I'm not yours after all, huh?" he said. "And if I'm not mistaken, we win a gem. Want to bring that out here?"

"Come," Khalroth instructed as he turned and walked over to the altar. Xander followed and watched as Khalroth pressed one of the carvings on its side. There was a grinding sound and slowly a small pedestal raised itself above the surface of the altar, exposing a large diamond to view. Khalroth picked up the gem and held it out on the flat palm of his hand.

Xander gazed at it in awe. It was almost an inch across at its widest point. "Wow," he gasped as he reached out and took it. An almost sensual quiver ran up his arm to his shoulder and settled in his chest. Suddenly he felt smug and happy. "This is the Gem of Amara? It's impressive."

The Beast's hands twitched, as if he wanted to snatch it back. "No, stupid mortal. It's the Gem of Endless Being. The gem your master wanted and challenged me for."

A shiver of dread snaked down Xander's spine, dislodging the warmth from the gem. "Er, no," he said, hoping that
this was just a case of mistaken baubles. "We came for the Gem of Amara. So why don't you quit stalling and pull it from where ever you have it hidden?"

It was strange hearing exasperation coming from such a pug-ugly face. "The Gem of Amara is in the Valley of the Sun, not here, mortal. This is my gem, which your Master has now won."

Feeling somewhat out of his depth, Xander cast a quick glance over his shoulder, but Spike was still out and Black Wind was busy working a bandage around his middle. Xander turned back to Khalroth. "So, what does this one do then?"

"This is the gem that balances the world," Khalroth announced, and what was it with demon types that they had to be so pompous all the time?

"And I've won that?"

"Your master has won that, through your efforts." Khalroth corrected.

Xander nodded slowly, he had a bad feeling about this. That was a pretty big name to go with a pretty impressive
bit of crystal and Xander's spider senses were tingling like crazy. "And what happens when we take it?" he asked cautiously.

"You don't take it," The Beast said. "The responsibility of the balance is now yours. Now, I have to leave and you become its guardians. Eventually a challenger will arrive and defeat you. Or not. Until then, you will stay here. When you are finally defeated, you will still stay here, but your master will be in my place and take his leave."

Sometimes Xander wished that his spider senses weren't so freaking accurate. Placing the gem carefully back on its stand, he took his shotgun in both hands and glared up at The Beast's face. "Oh no!" he declared. "That can't be right! That's not what we came for. We don't want that."

There was flicker of something in Khalroth's eyes as he gazed back. "You have no choice. You challenged for the gem and this is the gem you won."

With a groan Xander turned away and walked back the few yards to Spike's side, checking how Black Wind was getting on with his bandaging, before he turned back to The Beast. "But there must be a way?" he said.
"Something we can do. Some other thing?"

Khalroth's smile was not reassuring. "Do you cede the victory to me then?"

Xander narrowed his eyes. "And what happens if I do?"

"You can leave," The Beast said with a careless shrug.

But Xander figured that anybody who proudly announced that their name was 'The Beast' and threatened to turn Spike into a pure, evil demon was unlikely to suddenly become a straight talker, so he decided to get as much information as possible and hope he didn't miss anything important. "And I take Spike with me?" he asked.

"Ah, no. If you cede victory, I keep the gem and your master dies. But I'll let you go."

Xander pursed his lips in thought. He hated being this responsible, but Black Wind seemed to be deliberately keeping out of it, leaving him the only candidate still standing. "We need a compromise," he said, staring straight up into The Beast's eyes. "At the moment, we have the gem, but it turns out we don't want it. You
seem to want it back. So let's think about this and see if we can't work it out?"

"Umm, excuse me," Black Wind interrupted the staring contest and stood to address Khalroth, "Fascinating as this dilemma is for you," he agreed, tentatively, "I have a shop to run. You called me here to do a job. Maybe we can get to that first?"

The Beast, shifted his gaze to Black Wind and nodded. "Yes, I called you to fulfil the favour you owe me, but things have changed, I have a different call."

With a shake of his head, Black Wind knelt back down on one knee and finished tying off the bandages that covered Spike's torso. Xander noticed that Black Wind had straightened Spike's limbs and that Spike's eyes were now open. He appeared to be listening carefully to the exchange and his face had relaxed, so hopefully Black Wind had been able to do something for the pain, as well.

"You have already asked your favour," Black Wind explained, without looking away from his task. "You asked me to make Spike whole. You cannot now change your mind."
Spike rolled his head on the ground in denial. "No, Black Wind," he whispered. "I can't be that." From where he stood, Xander couldn't see Black Wind's face, but Spike suddenly fell silent, his face going blank and Xander felt like a glass wall had formed between him and the intimacy of their communication.

"There is an alternative." Black Wind suggested. "The call was to make you whole. I can make you whole by giving you your soul."

The Beast interrupted "That's not what I asked for. You play tricks, shaman."

Black Wind's expression of contempt would have withered Xander on the spot, if it had been directed at him. "As did you. And like you, I break no rules." He turned back to Spike, placing a calming hand on Spike's shoulder, as if holding him down. "In fact, I would claim to stay closer to the spirit of the rules than you did when you gained the favour from the vampire in the first place.

Spike's face twisted in anguished denial as he groaned, "It's that or lose my memories of William?"
"That's what Khalroth wants."

Spike raised his head and gazed at them, all gathered around him. He looked desolate, like there was nowhere further he could fall. He focussed on Xander and a strange series of expressions flitted across his face: sorrow, regret, wonder, pride. Finally he turned to Black Wind. "So I get to be a poof like my grandsire, or some sort of work slave to the higher powers of darkness?" He closed his eyes for a moment and when he reopened them there was a new determination there. "Okay, you old bastard. Do it! I'll live with the consequences. Give me my bloody soul!"

Khalroth roared. "Stop! This is my call. You don't get the choice on which direction you go." He pointed at Black Wind. "I demand he be made pure. Take his humanity!"

From feeling like he was standing on the edge of the conversation, Xander suddenly felt it rush back at him with the impact of a freight train. "Hang on!" he cried. "Taking his memories, you can't do that." He looked at Black Wind beseechingly and added quietly, "You can't, can you?"

Black Wind looked thoughtful. "I could," he said.
"Technically, I could." A smile curved his lips and lit his eyes. "But there were terms attached to the favour I granted - nothing that would compromise my magic in any way resembling what the watchers wanted from me. And to take such a big part of Spike away from him, would be to compromise his integrity as a vampire. You should always check the details of a contract, before you cash it in. By definition vampires are what you call halflings." He noticed Khalroth open his mouth and continued quickly. "But you asked for me to make him whole." He grinned. "And that I can do. I can give him his soul and the favour is paid."

Xander stared at Black Wind, aghast. "But, but, you're going to drag William out of heaven? Just so you can be free of a debt?"

Black Wind shook his head "No, boy!" He threw up his hands, then took a deep breath and it seemed that he decided to explain. "You know the word 'ego'?" he asked.

Xander nodded cautiously.

"Well, know this: 'soul' and 'ego' have nothing to do with each other! It is a Christian thing, to believe that the soul carries the personality, because you can't imagine the
concept of 'you' without your self image, your 'ego'. William is dead and long gone to his reward. I'm going to give Spike his own soul." He must have read Xander's incomprehension from his face, because he tried again. "The closest term you Christians have for what it is, is 'conscience', but even that is woefully inadequate. It is a soul and it will be Spike's soul!"

Xander felt as if the world had started spinning backwards "But the only vampire with a soul is Angel, and his was a curse. You're going to curse Spike?"

With a grimace Black Wind opened his mouth to answer, but Khalroth interrupted, spluttering with indignation. "I take it back! I'll keep the favour."

Shaking his head in mock regret, Black Wind disagreed, "I'm so sorry," he said, sweetly, "but you can't do that. You asked and I will fulfil your wish. I couldn't take William out of Spike and leave him whole, but giving a soul will not destroy the vampire and, as the boy says, there's a precedent." Forestalling The Beast's repeated objection he added, "Nor can you cancel without my agreement. And since I don't want the shadow of a favour owed to you hanging over my head like a bad smell, you get the favour you asked for, or you grant it
back to me, unpaid.

"You've been hiding in here for centuries. You wanted to turn Spike free as pure demon, to curry favour with the powers you offended. So, how's this as an alternative? Instead you turn him free with a soul. Wouldn't you prefer to stay here? If I give Spike his soul, he can't be the gem's guardian. So, he'll have to return it to you. If I don't, he will stay here, and you will leave.

"I know it's not usual, but it's not actually against the Lore, if you," he pointed at Xander, "on behalf of your, er, on behalf of your vampire, cede the gem back to Khalroth here, while you," pointing at The Beast this time, "cede the vampire back to the Champion and let them leave. The only downside I can see is that you," still pointing at Khalroth, "will have to be your own champion from now on, unless you can persuade some other dumb beast with a love of gore and glory to join you?"

By the time he'd finished, Khalroth was wearing a small smug smile, although he did add one more token protest. "It will disturb the balance too much."

Black Wind waved a hand dismissively. "Nah, not a bit of it. It might be a small act of magnanimity on your part,"
Khalroth winced, "but it's balanced by an act of pure selfishness on the part of the human." He shrugged. "It all balances out." He studied the demon. "And you don't really want to be back out there, do you, with all the politics and intrigue?" Khalroth shuddered, but probably for a different reason this time.

Xander gazed at Black Wind in shock. "It's that easy? It can't be that easy."

With another shrug Black Wind spared him a glance, but immediately returned his attention back to The Beast. "No, it's not easy at all, but it is not complex."

Reluctantly Khalroth nodded and Black Wind placed his hand on Spike's chest. There was a pause, then the air seemed to crackle and the torches around the walls spluttered, before flaring brighter than before. Xander saw a clear blue-white glow form around Black Wind's hand. It seemed to burn through his flesh, so Xander could see the individual bones stand out dark against the glare. Spike stiffened and his back arched away from the floor as the light sank into his chest, and he screamed.

Rising shakily to his feet, Black Wind swayed as he turned and nodded to The Beast. Xander reached out to catch
him and for a moment the shaman braced himself against Xander's strength, resting his head on Xander's shoulder. His chest and back heaved with the effort of breathing.

After a moment that felt like an hour, Black Wind looked up. "Come child," he said, "let me help you get this poor creature out of here." He stepped away from Xander and together they hoisted Spike onto his feet. Taking an arm each, across their own shoulders, they half supported, half dragged Spike to the entrance of the cavern.

They staggered out into the passage way, heading once more for the open mountainside. At the entrance Black Wind paused and with Xander's help, propped Spike up on a rocky outcrop. He reached into his pockets and pulled out a couple of bags of blood. "Here," he instructed. "You open these, while I check that the bandage held, so it doesn't pour straight out again."

Xander retrieved their back packs and dug in the side pocket of his own for a pen knife. "Was that true?" he asked. "What you said about Spike with a soul not being able to be guardian of the gem?"

Looking back over his shoulder Black Wind winked
"Maybe," he said. "Or maybe I was creative with the truth." He laughed. "Demons! You know what? Once you get past all the pomp and ceremony, they're still unprincipled, tricky bastards, but they're much more natural about it. That gem is powerful and it will infect a soul, if there's a soul nearby." He shrugged and took the first opened bag from Xander and held it to Spike's mouth. "It doesn't matter. I knew being stuck in there for eternity would drive Spike crazy and anyway, he still owes me a favour."

Spike was still only half conscious, but he could apparently drink on autopilot and the blood mostly disappeared down his throat on the inside. Once he had emptied both bags, Black Wind shouldered Spike's pack and between them they hauled him up and dragged him out of the cave mouth, into the night.

As the fresh mountain air hit his face, Spike roused. He shook his head, as if confused, looking along his shoulder at Xander. "You gotta stop doin' this, y'know?" he slurred.

"Doing what?"

"Rescuing me, like I'm some bleeding damsel in distress. I
told y'to run."

"Well, you were bleeding," Xander pointed out. Off Spike's exasperated expression he added, "So you want us to leave you here to fry, do you?" He glanced at his watch. "Sun's up in just over two hours. Or do you want a hand?" he asked, as he took a stronger hold on Spike's wrist.

Spike attempted to answer, but all he could manage was the raising of one finger in salute.

Note: The title is another quote from the poem Lamia, by Keats, although the application of the context is doubtful. *g*

Question: So, have I solved the problem that I've come across in a number of stories, about how a vampire can get a soul without an injustice being perpetrated on a dead human soul? Not to mention the fact that I do believe Angel and Angelus were the same creature and the sins committed by Angelus were Angel's to atone for.
44. Epilogue

Prompt: #60 - Leathery

The phone rang five times before it was picked up and Willow's voice framed a tentative, "Hello?"

"Wills?" Xander asked, although he knew it was her. "It's me," he added.

His introduction was also unnecessary, because she was already gasping a surprised, "Xander? Oh God, Xander! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, yes. I'm still alive." Such a crazy thing to have to say, but so necessary given the world they lived in. "I'm coming home. Are you alright? Is everyone okay?" He couldn't ask if everyone was alive, but it was what he meant and they both knew it. It was over a month since his last phone call from New York, on the night of the watchers and Black Wind's shop, and anything could have happened in that time.

But Willow was still caught in the amazement of his first
news. "Oh Xander. You got free? How? When? No wait!" She paused and took a breath. "Where are you? How are you getting home? Can we come and..." She trailed off and Xander felt a lump of worry form in his throat. "Are you really alright?" she added, instead of finishing her previous thought.

"Yes," he assured her, "I promise." It wasn't just the hesitation, there was something about the tone of her voice. There was no doubting the real relief, but something was clouding her honest joy at hearing from him. Almost afraid of the answer, nevertheless he asked, "What's wrong?"

But instead of answering, she launched into string of explanation and suggestions. "I was going to say that Giles would come and collect you, wherever you are. He was ready to fly anywhere, if we only knew where to find you, but now, I don't think he could. Maybe Jenny, Ms Calendar, could come? She has a car, if you're not too far away, I'm sure she wouldn't mind. But I don't think Giles could leave Buffy right now, not with everything..." Again, she didn't finish. There was a long pause, then she whispered, as if afraid she'd be overheard, "It's not good here." Xander almost felt the 'huff' of her sigh against his ear. "Angelus came back."
"Angelus?" From the deep reaches of his memories, Xander pulled up the reference. "You mean Angel?"

Willow's sigh was deep and heartfelt and, for some reason, it irritated him. He tried to shake off the impression that she was disappointed in him, but her next words didn't help. "You've been gone so long," she said. There was a momentary pause and if Xander hadn't already been listening carefully to the tone and rhythm of her speech, he would have missed it. "Angel lost his soul and became Angelus," she explained. "It happened last week. We really don't know why. But the curse broke somehow." Another pause and when she spoke again her voice was firmer. "When will you be home?"

Looking across the room of the basement apartment that Black Wind had helped him find in Las Vegas, to the vampire curled up and shivering, wedged into the corner, hugging his knees and muttering quietly, Xander thought about madness and the cures for madness, and pinned his hopes on Black Wind's prediction that this would pass. "A couple of weeks?" he suggested, tentatively, unwilling to make promises at this stage. Spike's mutterings were becoming clearer and he knew what came next. "Sorry Wills, I've gotta go," he said. "I'll call
again when I'm back. I need to find a place to live. I'm not going home to my parents." He took a deep breath "I'm bringing Spike. I'll explain when I see you, but he's got a soul now. I know it sounds crazy, but it is true. Tell Giles and Buffy, I'll see them soon. But I have to go now. Bye, Wills. Bye."

He put the phone down before she could protest and sat back in his chair. Angel had lost his soul. Xander wanted to kick something. Angel was supposed to help him. Help Spike. Angel, who had had a soul for a hundred years. And he went and lost it the very week he was needed!

Spike stirred again and he looked up, straight into Xander's eyes. "I had a speech," he said clearly. "I learned it all. Oh, God. He won't understand, He won't understand." Xander slumped, knowing that Spike wasn't actually seeing him. "If I don't move, if I don't think, if I don't listen to the voices, then I won't hurt...much," Spike wailed. "No! Don't! I can't!" He fell silent for a moment, but it didn't last. His eyes shifted away from Xander's so he was staring blankly down at the floor in front of his bare feet. "I'm a bad man. William is a baaad man. I hurt the boy, can't blame him for being skittish. But making him understand... is a totally different matter." He looked up and caught Xander's eye again.
"No manners is the problem. Proper breeding. Lack of etiquette. All of it lacking." For a moment Xander wondered if Spike was talking about him, but his next utterances were back to being nonsense. "Stop! Please, mum! Begging now! Make it stop! Oh, God!" Xander thanked heaven that he had managed to find and confiscate all the knives Spike kept secreted about his person. At least, he hoped he had.

In his waking hours, Spike alternated between quiet but rational, and totally incoherent, and during those times Xander had to sometimes fight him, to prevent him ripping his own chest open, redirecting Spike's hands so they held onto Xander, instead of clawing at his own body. The slashes and scratches were deep and painful looking, but Spike ignored them as if they were nothing. His sleep was always shallow, and troubled by dreams, and over the past week Xander had learnt that once he started dreaming it was not safe to be too close. The first night after Black Wind left them in their hotel room and disappeared with a promise to be back, Spike had slipped into a fitful, healing sleep, just as Black Wind had predicted, and Xander had relaxed in his hopeful ignorance. Curling up in his bed he had fallen into the deep, dreamless sleep of too much exercise after an adrenaline crash.
It had been the sound of breaking glass that dragged him out of his exhausted stupor and he'd opened bleary eyes just in time to see Spike, standing in the middle of the floor, suddenly bathed in sunlight streaming in through the broken window. Spike had yelped and jumped back, dropping the smashed up room service telephone in the process and Xander rushed to him, to check he was not burnt and to try and calm him down. That proved to be beyond his powers and he spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in a patch of sunlight on the carpet, nursing a black eye, while he watched Spike first tear the room apart as he cursed and ranted, then gradually still and retreat, until he was curled up in a tight ball between Xander's bed and the bathroom door, his rants reduced to wails of sorrow and loss, as the tears streamed down his face.

It hurt to see this proud, scary guy curled in upon himself, like a broken doll. It scared the fuck out of him, almost more than the previous manic fit, although for totally different reasons.

But by evening Spike seemed lucid again, complaining about the loss of his coat - his leathery comfort blanket. He even managed to do some deal with the hotel so that
they didn't actually call the cops and have them both arrested. They had however been asked to leave and never come back.

It was as they drove out of town that Xander brought up the idea of going home and finding Angel. Spike refused point blank, at first, but Xander argued his case, pointing out that Spike didn't have to model himself on Angel, but reminding him that Angel had helped him before, when he'd needed his sire, and he would surely help again. But in the end, it was Xander's admission that he wanted to go home that had swung it. It seemed that Spike with a soul could be swayed by emotional blackmail, where rational argument had no effect.

They stopped for the day in Salt Lake City and for a few blissful hours Xander had thought it would be okay, but then Spike's condition had begun to deteriorate. As he gradually slipped into a world of incoherence and the nightmare of memory, his moments of normality becoming fewer and further between. That was when Xander knew that they couldn't go straight back to Sunnydale. Angel would have to come to them. There was no way Xander could expose Spike, or his damaged reputation, to the Hellmouth. Not until he figured out what was wrong and how to fix him. When Black Wind
rejoined them that night, Xander enlisted his assistance, playing on the fact that Spike was only in this state because Black Wind had wanted rid of a debt. Whether it was his increasing skill in playing the blackmail card, or whether it was in Black Wind's own interests to have Spike safe and sane, Xander didn't know, but at least Black Wind had helped find them a place to stay for a while.

So here they were, holed up in Las Vegas on the strength of Xander's credit card, and Angel had failed them. Xander was exhausted. For the last two days he'd been almost too afraid to sleep, for fear that Spike would try to leave during the day. And tying him up was really not an option, unless he co-operated, which he wasn't about to do. Xander had almost lost him on their first day in town. He'd started awake just as the motel door closed, rolled out of bed and pulled on his jeans, rushing out into the dusk without shoes or shirt, thankfully managing to catch up with Spike before the end of the street and persuade him to return to the room with promises of blood.

If for no other reason, the need to keep Spike fed made it impossible to go back to Sunnydale. He'd walked the streets for hours, dragging the muttering vampire with
him, in search of down-and-outs willing to do a deal for a few pints. That wasn't a problem in a city like this, but he really wasn't sure it would work on the Hellmouth. That meant Willy's and he couldn't take Spike there, where his face was known. The danger from the local demon population finding out what a mess he was, was too great.

At least there had been no more wrecking of rooms, because Xander had finally discovered a means of keeping Spike calm. He scrubbed his face, braced his hands on the arms of the chair and pushed himself up. Walking slowly towards Spike, like a wild beast trainer approaching a lion, he began to whisper soothingly, "Spike? It's okay. It's me. Xander. I'm here. Hang on in there, it's alright, you're not alone." Crouching down he laid a tentative hand on Spike's knee.

For a moment nothing happened and Xander wasn't sure if the vampire was aware he was there. Then Spike's hand shot out, grabbed Xander's and clutched it to his own chest, pulling Xander off balance, so he had to place his other hand on Spike shoulder to prevent himself falling straight into the vampire's lap. "Don't, don't leave me. Stay here, and help me be quiet," Spike whispered.
Unable, and unwilling to even try, to free his left hand from Spike's grasp, Xander shuffled around so he was leaning against the wall next to the huddled figure. He slipped his right arm round Spike shoulders and pulled the stiff body in towards his chest. For a moment the vampire seemed to resist, then he slumped into Xander's side and laid his head in the crook of Xander's neck. Xander tilted his head so his cheek rested against Spike's hair and gazed across the room, thinking about the phone call to Spike's lawyers in LA and the instructions he had given, that they find accommodation suitable for a vampire and a human, in one of Sunnydale's better neighbourhoods. It had all been bluff, but it seemed to work when he insisted that Master Spike had given him very specific instructions about payment. Remembering Willow's reaction, he spent some time trying to figure out how he was going to explain both his return and his protective feelings towards Spike to her, and to Giles and Buffy. But eventually he gave up, if they could accept Angel when he had a soul, they'd just have to do the same for Spike. The Scoobies and Angelus were a problem for another day. He'd face that, with Spike, when they got back. In the meantime, he held Spike close and kept the nightmares at bay.
The End