

Rating: NC-17 overall

Pairings: X/o, S/X

Category: first time, h/c

Summary: Spike learns something about Xander, and things change. (That summary sucks, doesn't it? Oh, well!)

Warnings: Will contain graphic violence and rape.

Disclaimer: New fandom for me, but darn it -- they still ain't mine! Do we have a union? I need to complain about this...

*Author's notes: Anyway, I've never actually seen the show, so if you happen to spot any glaring plot holes, please let me know. I really don't mind criticism. :) The first part is my interpretation of the scene where Spike is moving out. You'll notice that I fiddled with it slightly. It just gets worse from here. ::chuckles in an extremely evil manner:: Anyway, this is just to set the stage. It **will** get better...I promise!*

Broken

by

Kayla

Part One

Spike peered around the basement, smoking a cigarette as he searched. He ignored Xander, who had limped down the steps a few minutes earlier.

Xander collapsed into a chair, wincing as he inadvertently put pressure on an especially painful bruise. He watched the vampire's actions, closing his eyes briefly in relief. The last two weeks had proved to be a challenge. *No way do I want him finding out about--* He cut that thought off sharply, then glared at Spike. "You own nothing. This shouldn't be taking so long."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Hang on. Let a fella get organized." *Annoying little git. Like I wanted to be here or something.* He snorted. *Only good point the boy's got is he's a right demon magnet, he is. Can't manage to go an entire night without getting himself knocked about by one. Course, that'd be a bit more fun for me if it'd happen when I'm around.* He smirked, contemplating going demon-fishing with Xander as live bait.

He cringed at the slight tingle in his brain. *Soddin' chip! I wasn't planning on hurting him. Well, not really.* Spotting a radio, he bent to pick it up.

Xander sat up straight. "Hey, that's my radio!"

Spike stared at him with a 'duh' look on his face. "And you're what? Shocked and disappointed? I'm evil!"

Xander gritted his teeth. "Not that I care, but where are you planning on moving?"

"I don't know. Maybe a crypt. Some place, you know, dark and dank. But not as dark and dank as this."

"It's not that bad!" *Well, at least not when -- Nope, not gonna think about it!*

"I've known corpses with a fresher smell. In fact, I've been one." He flicked his cigarette on the floor.

"That's it! Let's go!" Xander stood carefully, then marched over to Spike, trying not to jar his injuries too much.

Spike noticed his stiff movements. *Again!? Why can't he ever tangle with a demon when I'm actually **with** him? Inconsiderate nonce.* He backed away. "Hold up!" He darted across the basement and unplugged a lamp, picking it up with his empty hand..

Xander narrowed his eyes. Very calmly, he ground out, "That's my lamp." He snatched it away, replacing it in its former position.

Spike smirked. "Oi, I thought a housewarming gift was traditional!"

"That's among friends. With bitter enemies, I don't give them my lamp."

The vampire shrugged. "It's not gonna have electricity anyway. It's a crypt, they tend not to."

"Aw, no fridge to keep your blood fresh?" Xander asked in mock sympathy.

Spike paused at that. "No." He considered. "Maybe I should just get a hotel room or something. I need fresh blood. If I had a few bob for a room with an honor bar--"

Oh, now that's just too much! "Out! Before I get the Slayer over here to kick your ass out!"

Spike sighed and picked up his duster. "Don't know why she didn't come. Say good-bye, shed a few tears." *Trip down the stairs, break her fool neck...*

Xander couldn't resist. "Well, she has an appointment with somebody who's actually still **scary!**"

"That hurt, mate. It truly did. I am deeply wounded." *Wanker. Just wait 'til I get this chip out...I'll show you and you damned Scooby friends scary!*

"Out!" He ushered the man out quickly, slamming the door shut behind him and leaning against it, heaving a thankful sigh. Then his eyes popped open. "Hey! My radio!"

Part Two

Buffy dropped onto a sofa, moaning. "Geez, you'd think the bad guys would take a night off here and there! But noooo. It's all 'Gotta kill the Slayer'...'Gotta wreak havoc on the population'...'Gotta take over the world!' Gimme a break already!"

"Well, yes, granted. Things have been a little...hectic this past week. But I'm-I'm sure it will calm down. Eventually." Giles cleared his throat and removed his glasses, polishing them absently.

Xander snorted as he took a chair for himself. "Hey, I know! Why don't we just ask the nasty demons **real** nicely if they'd cut us all some slack so the Slayer can get a well-deserved rest. I'm sure they'd be all understanding about it. Not!"

Willow cast a disapproving glance his way. "Ok, so we're all a little worn out." She ignored Buffy's muttered exclamation of "A little!" "We shouldn't take it out on

each other. I mean, what if something big is going on? We need to figure it out before it gets **really** bad."

Tara, seated next to her on the other couch, brushed her hair behind her ear. Ducking her head shyly, she slipped her hand into Willow's, squeezing lightly. "May-maybe we should do some re-research tomorrow. After we get some-some rest."

"I would tend to agree with that course of action. We can get a reasonably good night's sleep, and start fresh in the morning." The Watcher nodded decisively, rubbing his hands together. "Right, then." He stood, staring pointedly at his charges.

Buffy rolled her eyes, but pulled herself up. "Ok, I can take a hint." She glanced around the room. "Anyone need an escort home?"

Willow and Tara shook their heads. Willow stood, pulling her girlfriend up with her. "Nah. We got it covered."

"Xander?"

Xander looked up at the clock on the wall, cringing when he noticed how late it was. At the strange look he received, he swallowed, then forced out a laugh. "Hey, this is me here! I can fend for myself." He gave Buffy one of his patented 'goofy grins' that seemed to work so well.

Buffy shrugged and turned to leave. *And we have a winner! Another dupe brought low by the powers of the Xanman! Stay tuned tomorrow for another exciting episode of 'Throwing off Suspicion in SunnyHell.'*

Saying his good-byes, Xander hurried to the door, pausing briefly by Giles to comment, "Although I gotta say, subtleness was lacking there, G-man. You losing your touch?" Buffy and Willow snickered, and even Tara grinned briefly. *Oooh! Extra bonus points for redirecting attention. Yay me!*

Giles sighed. "I've asked you not to call me that, Xander. And I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Hey, whatever. Later guys." With another grin to ally any lingering suspicions *Yeah, as if!*, he left.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Xander stood outside his house, hands thrust in his pockets as he chewed his lip. *No lights. Maybe they're asleep.* Still, the darkness itself evoked a sense of dread. Bad things tended to hide in the dark. *Duh...can we say vampires and other assorted demons?*

{Uh-huh. So why are you still out here with them instead of going inside?}

Oh, shut up. You know why.

{My point exactly.}

You had a point? Funny, I must have missed it.

{You are aware that you're standing here talking to yourself, don't you?}

You have a problem with that?

{Not at all. Always lovely chatting with you. But...stalling ain't gonna help.}

I know. Just...enjoying this while it lasts.

He stared for a moment more, then took a deep breath. Creeping softly up to the door, he pushed it open gently. He stepped inside, the door closing behind him with a muted 'click'.

Nothing. Ok, so far so good. Moving as quickly and quietly as he could, Xander reached the basement door. Once inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. Flicking the light switch on, he walked down the stairs, pulling his shirt off over his head. Reaching the bottom, he tossed the shirt towards a pile of laundry, then headed for the bathroom.

He stopped.

He stared at the large man sitting on his bed.

He backed up, eyes wide, breath shortening to harsh panting. "Um, Dad. Hey."

His father stood and stalked over to him. Before Xander could react, a hand lashed out and belted him across the face. The force of the blow knocked him off his feet, and he landed on floor at his father's feet.

"What the **Hell** are you thinking, coming in this late? Waking your mother and me up with your infernal racket. Fucking worthless bastard!" He drew back a foot and kicked Xander, who curled up in a fetal ball. He sneered at the cringing figure, taking another swig from the bottle clutched in his other hand. He kicked again, drawing forth a grunt of pain, which made him grin in satisfaction.

It was not a nice grin.

Xander whimpered softly. *Oh, god. This isn't happening...not again.*

The man walked a circle around his son, kicking intermittently as he alternated drinking from the rapidly emptying bottle and 'lecturing'. "Stupid piece of shit."

Pause for a drink. Kick. "Should have gotten rid of ya when you were a brat." Kick. Lengthy swallow. Kick again. "Must've been outta my mind keep ya around." Another drink, kicking at the same time for variation. "Not worth this hassle." He tilted the empty bottle toward his mouth, snarling when nothing came out. Furious, he flung the bottle on the floor, shattering it.

He bent and picked Xander up by the throat, laughing cruelly as the boy struggled for breath. "Aw, poor baby. What's the matter, cat got your tongue?" He squeezed tighter, enjoying Xander's struggles as the boy's hands clawed at his own in an attempt to free himself.

With a final punch to the stomach that drove the air from lungs already deprived of oxygen, he tossed his son to the floor, earning himself a harsh cry as bare skin met broken glass. Drunkenly, he weaved his way to the stairs, starting up them. Nonchalantly, he tossed a final remark over his shoulder. "Don't forget, boy. Rent's due at the end of the week." The door slammed shut.

Xander squeezed his eyes shut, refusing to let the tears fall. He waited a few minutes to make sure his father wasn't planning on returning, then gingerly picked himself up. He took a deep breath, then began coughing

harshly, jolting his bruised ribs painfully. He felt a warmth along his side, and looked down.

Oh...um, not good. Blood there. Definitely a bad thing. He haltingly made his way to his bathroom, hand cupped over the wound, blood running out through his fingers. He got the first-aid kit out of its handy little storage place in the cabinet over the sink. Turning the faucet on warm, he wet a washcloth and dabbed at his side.

His breath hissed out as the fabric caught on the glass still embedded there. He gritted his teeth, then prodded with his fingers, finding the jagged sliver and carefully pulling it out. More blood immediately flowed, and he quickly pressed the washcloth over the cut. A few minutes of pressure, and he cautiously lifted the now-red cloth away. Still a trickle of blood oozing out of the two-inch gash, but no gushing. *Good. Great. Gushing is bad, trickle is...not so bad.*

With an ease and quickness that spoke of great familiarity with the practice, Xander removed a square of gauze and some cloth tape along with some antibiotic cream, bandaging the wound after giving it a cursory washing. He then took stock of his remaining injuries.

Bruises. Lots and lots of pretty new bruises. Yippee. Well, not much I can do about them. He looked in the mirror,

flinching a bit at the sight. *Note to self: swollen cheek and black eye are **not** you.*

{Well, thank you for that terribly insightful little fact of life. Now, can we do something useful, like fix the lip?}

Pushy, pushy. He pressed another wet washcloth against his mouth, where his teeth had split the skin of his bottom lip. Once he cleaned that bit of blood up, he put the cloth down, sighing.

He fingered the welts around his neck. *Turtleneck?*

{This is Sunnydale...as in California. How could you possibly get away with a turtleneck, for crying out loud!?!}

You know, I hate it when you get logical. Scarf maybe?

The snarky voice rolled its mental (and figurative) eyes. {Oh yeah, that look is any more 'you' than the bruises.}

You know, a little help would be nice here! Cut the criticism already!

{Ok. Positive thinking. Um...at least this time he didn't--}

Shut up. Shut up! I am not thinking about that!

A bit sheepishly, {Right. Sorry.}

Xander limped out of the bathroom, sitting on his bed in order to slowly peel off his pants. Mission accomplished, he moved to turn off the light and lay down. Very...carefully.

Ouch

{Major understatement. Why don't you just stay home tomorrow?}

Hello? Scooby gang research fest? They need my help.

There was a conspicuous silence in his head. He tossed in his bed, trying to find a semi-comfortable position. Finally giving it up, he closed his eyes and groaned. *Fine. I'll play hooky tomorrow. Happy?*

{Dumb question.}

A painful gasp, then another moan. *Yeah.*

Part Three

Spike hurried into his crypt just as the first rays of dawn broke over the cemetery. He slammed the door shut behind him, then walked over to the tomb. He stood there, patting down his pockets and pulling out a few wallets and some watches. Tossing them onto the tomb, he sat and began to pick through his spoils.

Junk. Junk. Not too bad. Junk. Oooh, Rolex! Niiice. He flung the rejected watches over his shoulder where they hit the wall with a clatter. Pushing up the sleeve of his duster, he strapped the Rolex on, tilting his head to admire it from an angle. *Suits me.*

He set the other watch back down and picked up the wallet belonging to the former owner of his new watch. He removed the cash, curling a lip at the meager offering, then began leafing through assorted photos and papers. He plucked out a driver's license. *Ouch. bloody awful picture, that.* He came upon another ID, and glanced between the two, comparing the birthdates. *Uh-huh. Someone's been a naughty little boy, haven't they?* He peered closer. *Not even a good fake, at that. Tossler. Had a nice watch, could at least spring for a decent fake ID.* He shrugged. Didn't matter now!

Spike examined the quality of the leather wallet, then set it down next to the watch. He then searched the rest of

the wallets, his 'cash' and 'hock for a few quid' piles remaining pitifully small while the garbage pile behind him grew. Finished, he glared in frustration.

This is pathetic. Abso-bloody-lutely pathetic! Don't these wankers carry actual money around with 'em? Now How'm I s'posed to afford to eat? He snarled at the thought of having to pay - pay! - for blood. Can't get a decent meal like any self-respectin' vampire. God, that's just so...pathetic!

{Wouldn't be so bad if you still had the Watcher's money.}

That poof! Taking advantage of me when I was all injured like that.

{And you'd **never** do that.}

Hey, I earned the cash fair! He stuck his bottom lip out slightly, pouting.

Mental snort. {Right. Keep telling yourself that.}

Oh, sod off!

{And I would go where, exactly?}

Spike shoved his goodies into a pocket and lay down, refusing to acknowledge the snarky voice in his head.

Getting about as bad as Dru here, what with the voices and such. Next thing, I'll be hearing the stars sing to me.

{I can sing.} came the retort.

Spike growled. He pulled a ratty blanket over him and turned onto his side.

{I bet the Watcher still has some blood stashed at his place.}

He perked up a bit. *He's got Weetabix, too.*

{You could...drop by. Maybe Nummy will be there.}

Spike lurched up, spluttering. *Num--! You mean the whelp? Why the fuck would I care if **he's** there!?*

{Yeah, Nummy. Who'd you think I was talking about?}

*/**You**...are outta your bleedin' mind.*

{Actually, I'm **in** yours. What does that say to you?}

It says, you should shut the hell up and lemme sleep! He pounded his head against the stone under him, snarling.

{Two words...demon magnet. You know, demons? The things you can still **hurt**? Ring any bells here?}

Spike stilled. His eyes glowed yellow and he smiled, baring his fangs. *Oh, yeah. Violence. Yessss.*

{See? I have good plans.}

You have your moments. Shut up now. Sleep.

Spike closed his eyes, still grinning.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander woke with a groan. He sat up slowly, stiff muscles screaming in protest. Without thinking, he reached up to rub the sleep from his eyes. As a hand came into contact with the swollen flesh of his bruised eye, he yelped in pain. "Shit!"

He covered his mouth as the echoes died down, staring in horror at the door at the top of the steps. After a few panicky moments, when no one appeared there, he sighed with relief. "Ok. You're...Ok. Just...relax."

He got up stiffly, took a deep breath, then began the painful trek to the bathroom. After using the toilet, he moved toward the tub, getting ready for a nice long soak. Happening to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he turned toward it.

*Oh. Wow. That does **not** look good.* Bruises had darkened overnight, shading most of his chest in an interesting clash of blue, green, and purple. One eye was swollen almost shut, and his lip was puffed up where the cut was. The shape of fingerprints was clearly discernable in the welts around his neck. *Yep. Definitely staying home today.*

He sighed, then filled the tub with hot water, removing the bandage on his side before stepping carefully in, immersing himself in the soothing heat. He closed his eyes, relaxing as gentle waves lapped at his skin.

Xander lay there until the water cooled too much to be comfortable any longer. Regretfully, he shifted forward and pulled out the plug, then got out of the tub, grabbing a towel to dry himself with. He tossed the damp towel on the counter, then reached for the first-aid kit that was still out. Swiftly, he re-bandaged the reddened gash and rubbed some ointment into the worst of the bruises.

Leaving the bathroom, he headed for the microwave, where he heated some tea, adding honey to it. Carrying the drink back to his bed, he sat and sipped at the sweet liquid. A weak smile flickered across the boy's face as the ache in his throat eased a bit. He soon finished the drink, and set the cup on the bedside table, next to the phone.

The phone.

He had to call the gang.

Fuck.

{Ok, just...suck it in. You can do this.}

//Why do I have to? Can't **you**?//

Pause. {That was a **really**dumb question, you know?}

Yeah, well...it's the morning after getting the crap beat out of me by dear ol' dad. I'm not exactly coherent, you know?

{Just...call already.}

Right. I'm calling. He stared at the phone.

He drummed his fingers on his thigh.

He stared at the phone some more.

He -- {Oh, just do it!}

Reluctantly, Xander picked up the phone and dialed Giles' number.

"Hey, um, Buffy? It's Xander." "Uh-huh." "Um, so like, is everyone there already?" "Yeah, I did notice I wasn't there. That's why I called actually." "Yeah, see, there's

this--" "Uh-huh." "Actually, I'm not feeling all that well, so--" "No, I wasn't out drinking, I--" "I see." "Well, do you think you--" "Right?" "So, anyway, I'm not going to be able to make it today, and--" "Oh, really? That's...very interesting. Look, could you just tell Giles and the rest that--" "I--" "You--" At the soft click, he pulled the receiver away from his ear. "Yeah, bye," he said in a whisper, hanging up the phone sadly.

He lay down, pulling a blanket up over his bare skin and rolling onto his (relatively) uninjured side. He hugged his pillow close, curling around it. As he fell back into a fitful slumber, he was unaware of the few tears which had escaped from behind tightly shut eyelids to gather in a moist patch on the pillowcase.

Part Four

Spike stood outside Giles' door. Before he could reconsider, he knocked firmly. It opened to reveal an extremely annoyed Watcher.

"What are **you** doing here?"

Spike smirked, shouldering his way past the man and leaning insolently against a wall. "What, can't a bloke pay a visit to his chums?"

Giles snorted. "Alright, what do you want?"

"I am offended. Truly. To think that you hold such a low opinion of me." He made his lip quiver, and even managed to get a tear to pool up in his eye.

Giles took one look at his expression of wounded innocence and rolled his eyes. "Please. Do you really think I'm going to buy that?"

Spike shrugged. "Was worth a shot, wasn't it?" He shoved away from the wall and wandered into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator. Sticking his head inside, he rummaged around, ignoring the Watcher's indignant protests. With a crow of triumph, he emerged, victoriously holding up a packet of blood.

"Make yourself at home, why don't you?"

"Thanks, I will." He found a mug and poured the blood into it, then stuck it into the microwave. While he waited for it to heat up, he pulled open a cabinet and took out the box of Weetabix.

Giles walked over and snatched it away. "That's **my** Weetabix, thank you."

Spike snatched the box back. "Your point? 'Sides, bet you and your bunch could use a little inside track on what's going down tonight."

"You know what's happening?" Giles perked up, allowing the vampire to get his meal together.

Mouth full of blood-soaked cereal, Spike mumbled, "Yeah, sure, doesn't everyone?"

Giles gritted his teeth together, then spun around, striding back into the den.

Spike snickered, finishing his meal leisurely. He set the mug down on the counter, and sauntered out. Five heads turned as one to stare at him. He frowned, counting. *Giles, Slutty, her boy-toy, and the witches.*

{Hey, where's Nummy!?!}

Would you shut the fuck up!? He sat on the arm of a chair. "So, where's the whelp?" At the blank looks he received, he clarified, "Xander?"

Buffy shrugged unconcernedly. "Why do you care?"

Spike snorted. "Hey, he makes good demon bait. I'm all for that...gives me somethin' to do."

Willow frowned at him. "Actually, he called earlier today. Said he wasn't feeling well, or something."

{Well, shit.}

I said, shut up! He sighed. "Pity. Less fun for me. Ah well."

Riley stalked over to where Spike had made himself comfortable. Glaring down at him, he snarled, "Well? Giles says you have information about the increase in hostile activity the last few nights."

"Yeah? So?"

"You've eaten, now tell us!" Giles snapped.

Spike shrugged casually. "Well, you know...I lied."

Within seconds, Buffy moved in front of him, grabbed his shirt, and thrust an extremely pointy stake against his chest. "What do you mean, 'lied'? Are you saying you **don't** know what's going on?"

Spike looked down. "You're stretching my shirt." He looked back up at her, eyebrow raised.

With a snarl of frustration, she pushed him away. "You know, I am **so** ready to stake you. You have **no** idea." She paced around the room.

Riley grabbed Spike, pulling him upright. "I suggest you tell us what you know. You don't want me to get rough with you."

Spike went into game face, yellow eyes glittering with rage.

Riley scoffed. "What? You're going to hurt me? I don't think so. Talk!"

Spike briefly entertained the thought of roasting the commando alive. *A nice spit through his arse to skewer him, maybe a slash across the stomach to spill his intestines, lovely smell of flesh sizzling, skin all -- ow!* He winced at the throbbing pain in his skull. *Joking! I was just kidding!*

"Um, maybe if you pu-put him down...h-he could t-t-talk better." Willow beamed at Tara encouragingly.

Riley dropped Spike into the chair, but continued to stand over him, arms crossed.

"Oh, for--! Alright, fine. There's nothing going on. Happy?"

Giles assumed a stern, disapproving look. "What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

Spike groaned. "What d'you think I mean? Nothing! As in, not a thing. No demonic gatherings, no evil rituals, no over-ambitious vampire trying to take over the Hellmouth. N o t h i n g. Want it a bit slower?"

Willow shook her head, confused. "Wait a sec. If nothing big is happening, what's with all the activity we've been seeing lately? It **can't** be coincidence."

Buffy nodded. "I agree. I think you're hiding something. Not that that surprises me." She sneered at the vampire. "You'd do anything to get a free meal...especially since you can't get your meals anywhere else!"

"Hey! I came here to help, I'll have you know!" Spike turned a deaf ear to the derisive snorts that met that comment. "Look, you've got a surplus of demons, I'm looking for a spot of violence. Work with me here!"

Riley backed up a step. "So, you're saying you came here so you could have a chance to pound on a few baddies?"

"Well, that and a free feed. And who said anythin' about poundin'? I wanna rip 'em to shreds! Get some nice blood and gore, maybe a few innards."

Willow went to Buffy's side and murmured in her ear, "Might as well take him along. We could use an extra pair of hands, and it's not like it matters if **he** gets hurt."

Buffy scowled, but gave in. "Fine. You can come with us." She motioned to her boyfriend, who left the vampire to help the Slayer get her equipment packed.

Spike just watched as the small group prepared for patrol. *Not exactly the evening I'd planned, but not too bad.*

{I thought we were gonna see Nummy. Why do you want to hang with these losers?}

I can still do a patrol with this bunch. Get some demon hunting in. Who needs the whelp?

{But I wanna see Nummy!}

Fag off! We're going to go pulverize some demons!

{Can we go see Nummy after?}

Spike growled softly.

{You can take him back his radio. It needs new batteries, anyway.}

A pause. *Oh, fine! But just to get more batteries, hear?*

{Yeah, sure.}

"Hello? Spike? You in there?" Buffy waved a hand in front of his face.

His eyes focused on her. "What!?"

"Hey, can it! I do *not* need your attitude. This week has sucked enough already. Let's go!"

Spike snarled, but followed the Slayer and her friends out.

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I can't believe I'm doing this. Spike watched the house, clutching a radio under one arm, and using his other hand to flick a cigarette onto the lawn. He shook his head, then headed around to the back yard and knocked on the rear basement door.

After a couple of minutes, he heard footsteps, and the door cracked open about an inch. A dark eye peered out. "What?" came a scratchy whisper.

Spike grinned. "Gonna let me in? Got somethin' for you."

A heavy sigh. "Go away, Spike. It's three in the morning, and I'm really not in the mood."

He held up the radio. "Brought this back. Thought you might want it."

The door opened a bit farther, and a hand reached out. "So? Give it."

"Aw, let a vamp in, wouldja? Offer me a snack maybe; it's only polite."

"Fuck polite!" came the snarl. "Just give me back my radio and fuck off!"

Spike clicked his tongue. "Tut tut. Such language!" He held the radio out temptingly.

Another sigh, then the door opened. Xander stepped into the moonlight. "Well? Give it here."

Spike stared at him in shock. *What, again!? What the hell did he tangle with this time?* In the faint light, he could make out a dark patch around the boy's neck, and his face looked swollen and bruised. "What happened to you, mate?"

Xander shrugged. "Tough time patrolling with Buffy earlier. It happens. I'll live." With that terse reply, he

again held his hand out, waiting expectantly. "You're not coming in. Might as well forget about it."

Spike couldn't believe. *He's lying to me! Why's he bloody lying?* While he was vaguely willing to accept that Xander had been injured patrolling, he knew for a fact that it hadn't been with Buffy. *And he's supposed to be sick. What's he doing out patrolling anyway?* It didn't make sense. He knew only one thing.

{Something hurt my Nummy. Kill it!}

Don't start that again! Ok, so the whelp was lying to him. Not his problem.

As he continued to just stand there, Xander reached out and grabbed the radio. He then went back inside, and Spike tried to follow.

The door slammed shut in his face. Spike stared at it. He seemed to be doing that a lot tonight. *Something's not right here. Why'd he lie?* He refused to acknowledge the feeling in his stomach at the thought of someone *someone else* hurting the boy. He hurried away, headed back to his crypt to indulge in some deep thinking.

Part Five

Spike paced across his crypt. The sun would be setting soon, and he was still undecided as to what his plans for the evening would include. *Damn it! I'm hungry!* He growled, kicking an unfortunate rat that had made the mistake of skittering across the floor too close to him. *I want blood. HUMAN blood! Want to sink my fangs deep into warm flesh. Taste hot, thick, salty blood as it floods my mouth when I drain my struggling pre--OW!*

He grabbed his head, cursing. *Chip. Chip, chip, chip. Fuck! I wasn't gonna HURT anyone! Just...drain 'em dry a little bit.* He winced at the warning jolt in his brain, standing still until the throbbing died down.

Ok, so feeding directly from humans was out. *Like that's news. An' the bleedin' Watcher only stocks pig's blood.* He shuddered. *Besides, haven't been around Slutty and her little do-gooder lackeys in a couple of weeks now, and I'd like to continue with that trend, thanks!*

{Except for Nummy. Let's go see Nummy. I like him!}

Spike frowned. Something was up with Xander. He was...hiding something. And Spike had the feeling that whatever it was, it wasn't good. That made him scowl harder. *And since when is that a BAD thing? I'm evil--I'm William the Bloody, for crying out loud! I LIKE it when bad stuff happens to people!*

He pushed that thought far from his mind, not wanting to deal with it at the moment. Still...*What to do tonight?*

{Don't worry, I've got everything figured out. Just three easy steps.}

Oh goody. I can't wait. Enlighten me.

{Terrorize some people, steal their money.}

Spike nodded. *All right, good. I know just the place...easy pickings.*

{Then, go get some dinner.}

Liking this. Hopefully I can scrape together enough quid to spring for some human blood.

{Last, go visit Nummy.}

Right. Drop in on Num--what!?

{Oh, come on! You know you want to.}

Bloody annoying little voice. Obviously at least PART of me has gone 'round the bend.

{So, you're saying you don't like my plan?}

No, I don't like your soddin' plan! He paced around some more. *Besides, Num--the whelp probably won't even be at home.*

A little mental snigger. {You could always drop in on Slutty. See if the group is doing the patrol thing tonight.}

Spike considered. He stalked for a bit more, then sighed heavily. *Oh, fine. But only to get some blood from the Watcher!*

{Uh-huh. Whatever you say.}

Shut up.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike glanced warily across the room at Xander. The boy sat alone on a couch, isolated from the rest of the group, who cheerfully ignored him, caught up in their own concerns. Spike frowned.

Xander didn't look near as bad as he had two weeks ago. Still, his movements were careful, measured. And going by the dark circles under his eyes, Spike figured it had been a while since he'd gotten any real sleep.

Bloody Hell! Now I'm WORRYIN' about the whelp? I AM goin' as loony as Dru!

{He looks sick. I don't want Nummy to be sick. Fix him!}

Don't you start! Spike shuffled a bit, then sighed and strolled as casually as possible over to Xander. Sprawling on the couch next to him, he stared intently until the human lifted listless eyes to meet his gaze.

Xander looked at the vampire, then groaned wearily. "Spike. I'm not really up for one of our little verbal sparring sessions tonight, so just say what you want and go away."

Spike just continued to stare, making the boy shift uncomfortably.

"What!?" A spark of life had come back into his eyes, and Spike grinned. The vampire moved a bit closer, and Xander flinched almost imperceptibly.

"You don't look so good, pet."

"Gee, thanks. And here I went to all that trouble primping, just for you." The sarcasm was thick enough to be spread with a knife.

Spike snorted. "No, something's not right with you. I wanna know what it is."

"Nothing, Spike. Nothing's wrong. Now go bug someone else before I stake you."

Spike ignored the half-hearted threat. "I don't think so." He brushed a finger lightly across Xander's arm. "You're hiding something. I'll figure it out eventually."

Xander snatched his arm away. "Look--" He glanced across the room, then lowered his voice. "Look, it's none of your business, ok? It doesn't concern you."

"So there is something," Spike stated flatly.

Xander frowned. "I didn't say that."

"Yes you did. You sad 'it' doesn't concern me. So there *is* an 'it' to be concerned about."

"I--" Xander looked confused.

Spike moved in a little closer. "Tell me about it," he whispered. He watched as a lost expression came over the human's face.

After opening and closing his mouth a few times, Xander asked in a hushed, childlike voice, "Why do you care?" He looked at the vampire, wide-eyed.

Spike groaned softly as he felt himself falling into those dark, vulnerable pools. *Oh, fuck!* Finally giving in to the obviously demented half of his brain, he reached out and laid a hand on Xander's thigh. "Because I...I like you, sod it all!"

"Like me?" Xander gaped at him in disbelief. "You stole my radio!"

Spike let go of the boy, leaning back on the couch. "Gave it back, didn't I?" he muttered petulantly.

"Yeah, because the batteries were dead," Xander crossed his arms over his chest.

"S'not the point. Point is, I gave it back. Anyone else's, and I'd've hocked it."

Xander rolled his eyes, then opened his mouth to retort.

"Hey! Hello? Anyone over here listening to me?"

Both heads whipped around to face the intruder. There stood Buffy, hands on hips, tapping her foot impatiently.

Spike growled. "Slayer. What the bloody hell do you want?"

"Excuse me? Who invited you here, Mr. 'I'm-so-pathetic-I-can't-even-bite-a-human'? Wanna get up close and

personal with my pointy friend?" She held up a stake meaningfully.

"No thanks. Commando-boy's not really my type. Besides, isn't he your toy? And really, anyone with bad enough taste to shag you...gotta wonder about 'em." He looked at the Slayer with feigned innocence.

Buffy glared, lip curling in anger. She took a threatening step forward, stopped only by a meek voice behind her.

"Um, Buffy? We're, uh, getting ready to leave." Willow shuffled nervously, eyes darting between the two blondes.

The tension was unbearably thick for a long moment, until Buffy wheeled around and stalked out the door. Willow gave Xander a half-grin and followed.

Xander rose from his seat, walking slowly after the rest of the gang. He didn't notice when Spike closed in on him.

As everyone else left the room, Spike moved quickly. He snuck up behind Xander and brushed up against him, leaning to whisper in his ear, "We haven't finished our little chat yet. Don't think you're getting out of it."

Not lookin at him, Xander swallowed hard, then hurried out of the room.

Spike followed, leaving enough distance between them so he could have an unobstructed view of the boy's ass, shifting enticingly beneath his baggy pants..

Part Six

"Ouch!"

"Oh, shut up and stop being such a baby!"

Spike snarled at Buffy, eyes flaring golden. "You try having a few hunks of wood embedded in your back, see how you like it!"

The Slayer rolled her eyes. "Puh-lease. I thought you were supposed to be this big bad vampire. What's wrong, can't handle a little bit of pain?" She watched as Giles dug into pale flesh, withdrawing sliver after sliver of brittle wood.

"Hold still. This one's in quite deep." Giles bent over the blood splattered back, using a scalpel to slice deftly, exposing jagged pieces of wood.

Buffy snickered as Spike flinched, his growls increasing.

Giles glanced up at her. "Really, Buffy. There's no call for that kind behavior."

Buffy pouted. "But it's funny!" She sat on the arm of a chair next to her boyfriend, twirling a lock of his hair around her finger. "You think it's funny, don't you Riley?"

Riley's eyes glazed over as a wet tongue darted into his ear. "...um, yeah...sure."

Spike made retching sounds. "Oi, give a vamp a break, wouldja? It's bad enough I got one of you blokes hacking into m' tender self without havin' to be subjected to *that* too!"

Buffy glared. "Well, *you* were the one dumb enough to get in the way of a charging Vithrell demon."

"Right, and that had nothing whatsoever to do with some bint being stupid enough to toss me there in the first place!"

"Hey, it's not *my* fault you ran into me. I just...get a little caught up in my work." She grinned, adding under her breath, "Although, I kinda enjoyed watching it smash you into that stack of wooden crates."

Spike snorted. "I didn't bloody well run into you! I was trying, for some reason that escapes me entirely at the moment, t' keep one of your witches from bein' stuck through by a tentacle. A barbed, *poisonous* tentacle, I might add. You just got in m' way." An un-needed breath hissed out through bared teeth. "Careful, Watcher!" he snarled, gritting his teeth.

"I think--" Giles extracted a blood covered shard, holding it up triumphantly. "Got it! That was the last."

Willow came to stand beside Giles as Spike sat up. She wrinkled her nose, peering into the bucket by the table. "Eew. That's...kinda gross." As they were removed, the bits of wood had been dropped into the container, and now it looked like some morbid fleet of little boats were floating on a tiny sea of blood.

Her stomach churned. "I...think I'm gonna go sit down." She made her way over to the couch next to Tara, who patted her hand sympathetically.

Spike rolled his shoulders experimentally, giving the redhead a quizzical look. "What? Wouldn't think a little blood would phase you. I mean, what with you messin' about with frog innards an' lizard guts an' such." He picked up his now well-ventilated shirt, giving it a critical once over. He shrugged, putting it on.

Willow shuddered. "You're not gonna wear that, are you? It's all...bloodstained -- not that that probably bugs you much...I mean, you are too. But it's kinda...hole-y and...icky."

Spike snapped his head around and fixed her with a baleful glare. "Bite your tongue, missy!"

"What? What did I say?"

Tara leaned over to whisper in her ear, "I think he meant about th-the 'hole-y' thing. Hole-y...holy? 'Cause he's...he's a v-vampire."

"Oh. Whatever." Her eyes sparked. "And I do not mess around with frog innards!"

The vampire let out a snicker. "Didn't deny the bit about the lizard guts, though, didja?" He finished dressing, voice muffled through the cloth. "Not much I can do 'bout meself, either." He patted his duster off, then slid into it. "I'd take a shower here, but..." he shivered dramatically. "Bad memories, an' all that, you know?"

"I'll give you a few bad memories," Buffy muttered, watching the vampire with narrowed eyes.

Spike tossed her sneer. "Got enough of those to last an unlife, thanks." *Yeah, like kissing her...disgusting Buffy*

taste in my mouth...gah! Note to self -- wash tongue off as soon as possible.

Buffy tossed her hair, snuggling closer to the dazed Riley. "Oh, go away! I'd add 'find somewhere you're actually wanted', but this *is* you we're talking about."

"I'm hurt. Really." Spike rolled his eyes. "Hey Watcher!" Giles looked up from cleaning the table. "Think I put enough sincerity in that?"

Giles frowned. "I do wish you wouldn't persist in baiting each other like this."

"Hmm. I'll take that as a 'yes', thanks." Something struck the vampire, and he glanced around the room to make sure. "Hey, where'd the Harris boy get to?"

Willow gave him a strange look. "Why do you care?"

Question is, why DON'T you? "He was hurt, wasn't he? Weren't you going to nurse him back to health?"

All he received were confused looks.

"Um, Spike?" Tara shuffled timidly. "Xan-Xander wasn't hurt. He said he was fine, and w-went home earlier."

"Yeah, when Giles started slicing and dicing. Lucky guy." Buffy pouted.

Willow nodded in agreement. "That's right. I mean, he looked a little tired, but nothing was wrong with him."

Spike was dumbfounded. "Excuse me, but was I the only one who noticed him limping on the way back here?" *No way even THIS group was dense enough to miss that...I don't think.*

Willow smiled gently, like she was humoring a small child. "Of course we noticed. But he told me earlier that he'd pulled a muscle in his leg, so it was kinda stiff."

Spike shook his head, reviewing the evening in his mind. *All right, I'm not completely bonkers, and I KNOW I saw the boy get knocked up against a wall.*

{I could smell blood on him. Not a lot, but it was there.}

An' he had some bruises. Saw 'em when his shirt slid up. So why are these gits insistin' he's ok?

{I don't like them. We should kill 'em all. Rip 'em to shreds. Bloody messes...}

Ow! Stop that! Chip, remember? He backed slowly out of the room, giving the group a scathing look of contempt. "The whole lot of you are blind. You can't see there's somethin' goin' on right in front of your noses. Some friends. Don't know why the boy still hangs around you."

He spun on his heel and strode out, disgusted with the so-called 'good guys'. *An' they wonder why I'd rather be bad!*

Giles winced as his door slammed shut. "If that broke anything..." He moved to examine the frame, muttering softly.

Tara nudged Willow. "Don't you think he was acting a little...strange?"

Buffy stood, stretching. "He's Spike. He's always strange. I find life is much easier if you just ignore those little...annoyances." She coaxed Riley up, rubbing against him. "Well, we're gone. Need to go home and get some, um, sleep." She giggled, dragging the all-too-willing Riley behind her on her way out.

Willow yawned. "Mmmm. Yeah, guess we should get going too." She led Tara away, being careful to make a wide path around the still-present bucket. "Night, Giles!"

"Yes, quite. Good-night." Giles gave the door a last look, then headed up to bed.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander sighed wearily as he followed the group back to Giles' place. *God, I ache! Just...gotta rest a minute. Then I'll go home.* When they arrived, he dropped into a chair, closing his eyes as he tilted his head back.

"Watch it!"

He peeled an eyelid up to watch as an irritated blonde vampire walked carefully in, snarling at Buffy who had just brushed up against his back. Spike removed his shirt and lay down on the table.

"Well? Get on with it."

"You know, Spike. You might not want to be so pushy when you're vulnerable like this." Buffy sneered at the wounded vampire, tossing her stake up and down.

Xander tuned them out, zoning a bit as his body stilled and he sunk farther and farther into a warm, soft, cozy--

"Hey!"

Xander groaned softly, opening his eyes to see a beaming Willow standing in front of him. He forced out a smile.

"Hey, Wills."

"Pretty interesting tonight, huh? Those things had a *lot* of tentacles."

"Yeah. Interesting." He lurched up out of the chair.

"Look, I'm gonna get going. Home calls, you know?"

"You do look a little tired. Go home and rest, ok? I think you need the sleep."

"I'll do that. Later, Wills."

Willow, already moving away toward Tara, didn't hear.

Xander snorted. "Right. Nice talking to you, too." No one paid any attention. Giles was busy over the complaining Spike, while Buffy and Riley were busy with...each other. Tara gave him a small wave, then focused entirely on Willow. He shook his head and left, moving stiffly.

As he stepped back outside, the cool night air struck his face. He inhaled deeply, then started the walk home. Passing by dark alleys, he held tight to his stake with one hand, the other clutching a vial of holy water that was in his pocket. He walked quickly, not wanting to be caught out alone this late at night.

Right. As if actually getting home is any better.

{Look on the bright side -- you may get killed at home, but at least you aren't undead.}

He blinked. *That was the bright side? God, now I'm REALLY depressed.*

{Well, at least I tried.}

Do me a favor. Stop trying.

{Geez, try to help a guy...all I get are complaints!}

Well, if you were ever actually helpful...

{Um...lemme try again. How about -- oooh, got one. Maybe the old man will be so drunk he passed out and we can skip the late night 'entertainment'. How was that?}

Xander just shivered, hunching forward. Gritting his teeth, he quickened his pace.

Part Seven

Xander crept through the yard toward the basement, easing the back door open gently. He slipped quietly inside, waiting with bated breath until his eyes adjusted to the dimness. He scanned the room for anything out of place, sighing with relief when he encountered no looming shadows that might possibly indicate something sinister was lurking.

He flicked on the light and trudged down the steps, eyeing his bed with longing. Then he looked down at himself. *Yick. Why are things with tentacles always SLIMY? And why am I the one who seems to get slimed?* He picked at the crust that had formed on his shirt when the mucus had dried. *Ew...gross.* With a last wistful glance at his bed, he peeled the shirt off, tossing it in general direction of the laundry basket.

Walking toward the bathroom, he paused and leaned against the wall, using it to brace himself as he pulled off his pants. He winced as the muscle in his leg protested, along with his bruised ribs. He examined his calf. The cut there was superficial, but the pants were most likely ruined. *Damn it! I liked this pair, too!*

Xander groaned and dropped the pants on the floor. He scowled at them, then kicked them across the floor. *Don't know how I'm supposed to afford a new*

pair...considering the fact that I just lost my job -again!- and most of what I do happen to make goes to pay for the privilege of living in this dump. Fuck. Too weary to even think about it anymore, he stepped boxer-clad into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He reached into the shower and turned the water on, adjusting the controls until the temperature was just right.

Removing his boxers, he stepped under the almost scalding spray, moaning contentedly as the water coursed over sore, tired muscles, soothing away the aches. He stood and simply enjoyed the sensation for a few minutes. Eventually, he grabbed a washcloth and soap and began to scrub his chest, glad to be rid of the gunk there, which had dried into a very itchy and irritating patch.

His body clean, he soaked his hair and shampooed the dust out. Finished, he remained under the soothing warmth, eyes closed in ecstasy. Caught up in the welcome sensation, he never heard the bathroom door creak open.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike began the trek back to his crypt. As he walked, he

pulled a battered, half-full pack of cigarettes from a pocket, extracting one and lighting it. He inhaled deeply, relishing how the nicotine coursed through his system.

Spike stopped. He looked around, frowning. "Where the-?" *This is NOT the way home.* He took stock of his surroundings, trying to figure out where his feet had taken him. When realization hit, he groaned, thumping his head against a convenient wall.

Bloody rot. I am not doing this. Someone tell me I'm not doing this. He gave another thump.

{What!? I wanna go see Nummy. You promised.}

I didn't! What th' Hell are you thinking?

{Oh, c'mon. You want to see him...admit it!}

Spike's lower lip poked out. *Don't.*

{Do too.}

Do not.

{Do -- look, let's not start this tonight.}

I didn't start anythin'. He folded his arms over his chest.

Mental silence for a bit. Then...{Look. How about you just drop by, maybe see if you can watch the telly. The one at the crypt is busted, and Passions is comin' on.}

Spike hesitated, shuffling his feet.

{And he was bleedin' some. Maybe he'll let you lick 'im}

If he could have, the vampire would have flushed. An unexpected bolt of desire flashed through him, as visions of a naked, wiggling Xander pinned under him and being licked all over paraded through his mind.

{Not quite what I meant, but it'll do. So? How 'bout it?}

Eyes dilated until they were nothing more than blue- and gold-rimmed spheres, Spike continued on his original path -- away from his crypt and toward Xander's house.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander's eyes flew open in shock as a hand latched onto his arm in a vice-like grip. Slipping on the shower floor, he was about to fall when the hand yanked him out, pulling him flush against a large, sweaty body that smelled as if it had been liberally doused in whiskey. He

stared up into bloodshot eyes, panic pounding through his body.

"So, finally decided to show your face, huh boy?"

The sour stench of alcohol blasted Xander's nose as his father leaned in close. Eyes watering, he turned his head away.

"Don' you ignore me!" He backed out of the small room, dragging his son with him.

Xander struggled futilely against the action. He may not have been a small person, but his father was even larger. And even in this drunken state, could easily overpower him. Xander could attest to that fact...repeatedly. He gasped painfully as he was flung down, his knee slamming with jarring force against the hard floor.

Whimpering, he rolled onto his back, curling slightly and pushing himself into a somewhat upright position. Looking up at his father's face, he paled at what he saw there.

Lust. Lust and fury.

Xander felt himself grow cold with horror. He knew what that meant. Frantically, he scuttled backward.

Bellowing in rage, Xander's father leapt after him, grabbing an ankle and hauling him forcibly back. He pinned the boy down, leering into a panic-stricken face. "Y' little whore. Struttin' around here, tauntin' decent folks with yer pretty little ass. Well, lemme show you what that ass is good fer."

Nonononono!! Xander bucked up, struggling wildly, but was unable to break free.

His father laughed wickedly. "Yeah. You wan' it, doncha? Just beggin' fer it." He bent to plant a sloppy kiss on plump lips, hissing in frustration as Xander twisted his head to avoid it. He lurched up, straddling his son, and lashed out. His hand connected with Xander's jaw, the crack of flesh resounding in the relative quiet of the night.

"Don' you toy with me, boy. Know y' wan' it." His hand flew again, and Xander's head snapped back and forth as each strike landed.

Dazed, his head pounding, Xander blinked in confusion as the blows ceased. He could barely focus, seeing nothing but a blur of movement over him. He felt himself turned roughly, his legs spread.

The elder Harris looked down at his son's pale flesh, marred by an assortment of bruises and scrapes. Licking his lips hungrily, he spread the boy's legs and parted soft cheeks, gazing at the tiny pucker revealed there. "Been a while, huh boy? Should be nice an' tight fer me. Yeah, jus' like y' used t'be. Been too long." His breathing quickened as he remembered the first time he'd taken his son like this. "Mmmm. You were such a pretty little boy. So tight an' hot. Never fucked a ten-year-old before. Didn' know what I was missin' out on."

He ran his hands over trembling flesh, pinching cruelly and raising vicious red welts. He leaned forward, using his weight to hold Xander down. Lacing his fingers through dark hair, he pressed the boy's face into the floor, licking lewdly at an ear, then biting down on the side of his neck hard enough to draw blood. He smiled at the hitching breaths Xander was dragging in. "Oh yeah, you wan' it."

He shifted his hips up, still pressing his son's body down with one hand, and using the other to unzip his pants, pulling out his stiff, purpled erection. He held onto Xander through a flurry of renewed struggles, moving his hand to squeeze the boy's throat warningly. Shifting slightly, he plunged inside.

Xander gasped for air as spots danced before his eyes. He could feel something stiff poking at his back before moving down wetly. White-hot pain speared through him as he was impaled, and his hoarse cry echoed through the basement. He howled as something inside him tore, and he could feel a flood of warmth trickling out his ass and down between his thighs.

Xander's father groaned in ecstasy as he felt himself surrounded by tight, burning heat. He looked down at where they were joined, reveling in the sight of the scarlet fluid that rushed out to stain his own skin. He set up a pounding pace, not even noticing as his son's struggles grew weaker, his cries fading away.

As his father's length invaded him repeatedly, Xander began to drift. *Don't...wanna stay. Wanna...go away.*

{Shh. Come on. It's safe in here. No one can hurt you here.}

Safe? He sank farther into himself, blocking out what was happening to his body.

{Yeah. He can't get in here. It's ok. You'll be ok.}

He shut down completely, retreating as far from his father's actions as he possibly could.

Meanwhile, his father continued his strokes relentlessly. The muscles surrounding him went into a series of spasms, trying to expel the intruder. The vibrations merely spurred him on, and his pace increased. He transferred his grasp to his son's hips, pulling them up brutally as he forced himself into the loosening channel over and over.

After what seemed an eternity, he flung his head back, letting out howl of triumph. He spilled his seed deep inside his son's ravaged body, then collapsed on the still back, panting. For a while, that was the only sound in the room.

Having caught his breath, he lifted himself with a grunt, pulling out of the boy with an obscene slurping noise. He stood and stuffed his limp, sticky flesh back into blood-soaked jeans, stumbling up the stairs and out of the basement. Having gotten what he wanted, he didn't even spare a glance for the still, bloody form of his own child.

Xander swam back up through a fog, blinking rapidly to clear blurred vision. *Gone? Is he--?*

{Yeah. He's gone.}

Xander pushed himself up, trying to regain his feet. After several unsuccessful attempts that left him sprawled

back on the floor, he finally managed to make it to his hands and knees, although the one throbbed dully. He stared fuzzily at the sticky mess under him. He shuddered, then began to crawl slowly back to the bathroom, the only thought in his mind a desperate desire to be clean.

Painfully, he levered himself back into the still-running shower, huddling on the floor as icy streams of water pelted him. He sat, knees drawn up to his chest, arms clutched tightly around them. He rocked gently, eyes wide and staring at nothing.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike turned onto Xander's street, steps slowing. He came to a halt in front of the human's house, glaring intently at it as he smoked his last cigarette down to a stub. Flicking it away in disgust, he shook his head. *What the bleedin' Hell am I doin'?*

{Hello? Telly? And maybe a little snack?}

Those're just excuses and you know it. This is pathetic. I'm a 126 year old master vampire, for fuck's sake!

{Well then, have that talk with him you threatened. At least that way you'll come over more like you're in control.}

Spike sighed. He shuffled a bit longer, then made his way around back. He rapped at the door, tapping a foot impatiently. When no one answered, he knocked louder. Still nothing. Annoyed, he was about to leave when something tickled at him. Some...smell.

He sniffed, tilting his head. Curious now, he pushed the door open, reasoning that he'd been invited before, and since the whelp had never bothered with an uninvite spell, he was obviously still welcome. He stepped inside the dimly lit basement, reeling as the scent assaulted him.

Blood.

Blood? Too much...he wasn't hurt THAT bad!

As he moved farther inside, his eyes were drawn to the dark stain on the throw rug in the center of the room. The blood, still wet, beckoned him. The size of the stain concerned him, although he was loath to admit that. And the smell -- blood, yes, but something was...off about it. He looked around the rest of the room.

"Xander? You in here?" No one answered. Closing his eyes, he concentrated.

There. A heartbeat. But...so slow. He followed the sluggish sound into the bathroom.

If he'd still had a beating heart himself, it would have stopped at the sight of Xander curled up on the floor of the shower, eyes gazing blankly out into space, lips tinged blue with cold and shudders wracking his body, as pink-tinged water slowly swirled down the drain.

Part Eight

Panic surged through the vampire, and he rushed forward. Kneeling beside the shower, he forced his voice into calmness. "Xander? Pet? You ok?"

Xander didn't respond, continuing to stare blindly, his battered face taking the brunt of the icy spray.

Spike frowned as cold water splashed out onto his skin. "Pet? That must be cold. Why don't you come out?"

When he still received no answer, he nibbled on his lower lip, then shifted up to turn off the taps. Worried about the human's unresponsiveness, he reached out a hand.

Before it could come into contact, Xander jerked away violently. Spike watched in shock as the boy scabbled at the wall in a desperate attempt at retreat. The wild look in his eyes gave evidence to the fact that he was still mostly unaware of his surroundings.

A fresh wave of scent reached Spike, and he looked down to see a rush of crimson swirl out from under Xander to empty down the drain with the last of the water.

Where...? Where's it comin' from? Suddenly, the odd smell in the blood from the rug registered, and realization swept over him, leaving him stiff with horror.

Semen.

There'd been semen in the blood. That meant...

No! Spike's demon raged, crying out for revenge.

Someone had violated what was his! Someone was going to pay...dearly.

Watching as the terrified boy curled into a bruised, whimpering ball, Spike forced his fury down. Time

enough for revenge later...right now, his Nummy needed help.

Making his voice as calming as possible, he began to croon softly to the boy. "Xan? Xan, look at me. It's ok. It's Spike. You know me...I can't hurt you, right? No one's gonna hurt you. He's not here. The bastard who touched you isn't here. Just me, ok? Xan? Luv? Lemme help you out of there. We'll get you dried off and fixed up in no time."

Tentatively, he reached out toward the cringing mortal once more. He stroked tenderly along a trembling arm, trying not to spook Xander again. "Luv? I gotta get you to a doctor or something. There's too much blood. I...I think you got hurt real bad. Xan? Can you hear me?"

Xander lifted his head timidly, unused to receiving such non-violent contact. *Who--?* His eyes cleared slightly, focusing on white-blond hair and a golden stare that seemed...worried? "s-s-spike?"

The sound was so slight that, even with his vampire hearing, Spike almost missed it. He smiled weakly. "Yeah, pet, it's me."

Xander's mind latched onto this unexpected salvation, not registering the fact that Spike was a soulless,

unfeeling creature of the night, just that he was being gentle and soft, almost like he...cared.

He launched himself out, wrapping his shivering form around Spike, who cradled him gently. "spike...so dirty...c-c-can't get clean. can...feel h-h-him, all over." The small, childlike voice wavered, battering at the vampire's last defenses.

Spike held the boy close. "Shh, it's ok. Spike's got ya now. Gonna get you to a doc, get you all fixed up. You with me, pet?"

Xander gave a shaky nod.

Spike let out a soft sigh of relief and stood, easily hefting the human's weight. He cursed to himself as he felt liquid warmth drip down his arm. Moving quickly, he strode out of the bathroom. Gently prying the clinging limbs away from him, he eased Xander onto the bed. In seconds, he had a blanket wrapped around clammy skin, and lifted the boy once more.

He strode up the stairs and out into the night. Frowning he glanced around, edging out toward the street. An evil grin crossed his face as he saw the pinprick of headlights moving steadily toward them.

He set his fragile burden down, murmuring softly to soothe whimpered protests. He then stepped away from Xander and, timing himself carefully, lurched out into the street, causing the car to screech to a halt bare inches away from him.

The door opened, and the driver stepped out. "Man, what the Hell are you thinking!? I couldda hit you! Geez, some people!" He stalked over to Spike, face red with anger, arms gesticulating wildly. He opened his mouth to continue with his tirade, but stuttered to a stop as the blonde's features seemed to melt, morphing into a fierce mask set off by furious yellow eyes and...Shit! Those were fangs!

Spike growled at the idiot human, displaying those fangs prominently. "Run." His voice hissed out into the night.

Utterly terrified, the driver turned tail and ran down the street.

Spike smirked. Walking around the abandoned car, he leaned inside and across, unlocking the passenger side door, pushing it open. He swiftly returned to the blanked-wrapped figure, hoisting him and moving to lay him inside the vehicle, shutting the door carefully. Getting into the driver's seat, he flipped the heater on full blast and put the car into gear, sparing a quick mental

cheer when he noticed the former driver's wallet laying on the dashboard. *Stupid human.* He snagged it and deposited it in one of his pockets, roaring off down the deserted street.

His mind whirled as he tried to remember were the clinic he'd heard about was. Discrete, no unnecessary questions, and used to dealing with patients who weren't quite human. The location came to him, and he wheeled the car sharply.

Steering one handed, he let the other drift down to the head that had made itself at home against his thigh. Patting the damp hair softly, he frowned as he encountered skin even more devoid of warmth than his own. Stealing a glance, he was met with the sight of pale skin that had taken on a sickly, bluish tone. The smell of blood grew stronger in the enclosed space, and his hearing picked up on the slowing heartbeat.

He slammed his foot down on the gas, tearing through the streets. *Damn it! Where the Hell--?*

He slammed on the brakes as the building he wanted finally came into view. Skidding to a halt, he darted from the car, lifting Xander carefully and marching quickly up the steps with him. He gave a wry smirk at the sign on

the door that proclaimed 'Come In' in bold, stylish script, and took the proprietors up on their invitation.

Bursting into the quiet building, Spike hurried over to the front desk, looming over the young woman there. She looked up at him, startled.

"I need a doc. Quick!"

Taking one glance at the still form in the blonde's arms, the woman rushed out, returning in minutes with two men wheeling a gurney.

Spike carefully arranged Xander on the gurney, moving to follow when the men began to wheel him away. He felt a small hand rest itself on his arm and he spun around, demon raging to the fore as his face shifted to its vampiric planes.

Calm green eyes regarded him steadily, unflinching.

"They'll take care of him, don't worry. But I'm going to need to get some information from you, to help the doctor out."

Clenching his jaw, Spike watched as Xander disappeared down the hallway, then nodded reluctantly. "Right. What d'you need?"

The woman, Karen as her nametag proclaimed, sat down back at her computer. "Just some basic background about the patient. Not too much. First, what name would you like the patient listed under?"

Spike blinked. *Right. Discrete. Um, how about--* "William. You need a last name, too?"

Karen smiled softly. "No, William is just fine. Species?"

"Human."

"Your relationship to William?"

"He's *mine!*" Spike's eyes flashed as he snarled that out.

Karen quirked an eyebrow delicately, merely nodding and typing the information into her computer.

"Could you tell me what you know of William's injuries: when he sustained them, how, where he was at the time, if relevant? Anything you can think of."

"Dunno exactly. We...parted ways about two hours ago, then I dropped by his place and found him like that. He was..." Spike swallowed, then went on shakily. "There was a lot of blood, an' he was sittin' in this freezing shower, an' some *bastard* had ra--" He closed his eyes, leaning against a wall and thumping his head back.

After a moment, he calmed. Very quietly, he continued. "Someone beat him, and raped him, and left him to bleed." A lone tear made it's way down his cheek as he stood there.

A soft brush against his arm made his eyes fly open. He stared at the slight woman, scowling. He hadn't even heard her move toward him.

"It'll be all right. We have a very good doctor here tonight, he'll do everything possible for your William." She stepped away, gesturing to another door. "We have a waiting room available, you're welcome to stay there. Doctor Fredericks will be out to see you as soon as possible. He'll let you know what's going on."

Spike hesitated, then nodded weakly, shuffling slowly over to the indicated room.

Part Nine

Spike hesitated, then nodded weakly, shuffling slowly over to the indicated room.

Spike's head shot up as he heard footsteps approaching. Karen stood in front of him, cup in hand.

"I thought you might want something to eat while you waited." She held the cup out.

Spike took it, sniffing appreciatively. He took a sip of the warm blood, and his eyebrow shot up. "This is human!" He stared at the woman incredulously.

She simply smiled, then left the room again.

Before the blood could cool off, Spike drained the cup, licking his lips. *Damn, been too long since I had any of that!* He placed the empty cup on the table beside his chair. Tapping a foot, he glared impatiently at the clock. The minutes slowly ticked away.

Snarling, the vampire stood and began to pace. After what seemed like ages, he wheeled and fixed his gaze on the clock again. *Five minutes. Five bloody minutes!?* *What's taking 'em so soddin' long? They'd better not be hurtin' my Nummy!*

He paced some more. The door behind him opened, and he spun, yellow eyes burning.

A dark-haired man of about 35 stood there, dressed in blue scrubs, clipboard in hand. "I'm Dr. Fredericks. You're here with William?" he asked, consulting the sheet he held.

Spike nodded tersely. "He ok? You fixed him up?"

The doctor smiled gently. "Not quite yet. I did an initial examination, and he's currently being prepped for surgery."

"Surgery? But...he's gonna be fine, though. Right?"

Dr. Fredericks sighed, rubbing his thumb across his forehead. "William...sustained extensive injuries, and suffered massive blood loss. Plus, with the mental trauma involved in this kind of assault..." he trailed off with a sigh. "I can assure you, however, that I will do everything in my power to help."

Spike growled softly, golden eyes flashing, and flung himself back into the chair.

"William will probably be in surgery for a while, and with the amount of anesthesia he'll be under, it'll be a few hours before he wakes. You're welcome to wait here if you like, Karen will get you whatever you need." He flicked his eyes toward the cup on the table.

"A few hours, huh?" He pictured the basement where he'd found Xander. "I've got some...business to take care of first, [mate](#). Shouldn't take too long, I'll be back before then."

Dr. Fredericks nodded, feeling little sympathy for whoever was going to bear the brunt of the vampire's wrath.

"Can I...can I see him before I go? Don't want him gettin' worried or nothing."

The doctor hesitated a moment, then motioned for Spike to follow him. He led the vampire into a room where the boy lay, pale and shivering.

Spike barely glanced at the IV that was steadily renewing Xander's supply of blood. He moved close, a hand reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair. "Luv? It's me."

Xander's eyes fluttered open, the pain in them clearly discernable. "h-h-hurts. make...stop."

"Hush, pet. It'll be ok. The doc here is gonna give you somethin', make you sleep, an' he'll fix you up. I'll be here when you wake up, ok?"

"promise?"

Spike kissed his finger, stroking it tenderly down Xander's nose. "Course, pet. I'd never lie to you."

Xander sighed weakly, eyes closing. Spike took hold of one of his hands, petting it as the anesthesia was

administered. He then folded the hand gently over Xander's chest. Fixing the doctor with a glare, he hissed, "Take care of him," then turned and stalked out.

Leaving the clinic, he got back into his misappropriated vehicle. He gunned the engine, pulling out with a squeal of the tires. Tearing through near-empty streets, he soon pulled up outside of what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse. Slamming the car into park, he left it running and strode up to a door, knocking loudly.

The door cracked open. "Yeah? What?"

"Open up, mate. Got a prezzie for you."

"Spike?"

"Got it in one. Come on now Gr'thek, you want?"

The door closed and a shuffling sound could be heard inside. Spike got back into the car, edging it forward through the opening that had appeared in the side of the building. Parking it, he got out again.

A light blue, scaly Hk'mel demon was walking around it, examining it in detail. His tail swung back and forth as he pondered.

"Well?" Spike pulled out a cigarette, lighting it.

"Hmm. New. Not very in demand, but the parts could be worth a bit. Good quality." Glowing red eyes peered over at him. "\$200."

Spike snorted. "Not bloody likely! \$650."

Gr'thek sniffed, tapping the trunk with a claw. "Too much. \$250."

"You gotta be kidding me. \$500."

More muttering and tail twitching. "No good. I can maybe give you \$300. That's it."

Spike growled. "Look, \$400 and a ride back to my car. That's as low as I'll get."

Gr'thek snorted, then nodded shortly. "Deal." He sighed. "Only for you would I do this, Spike."

Beaming, Spike walked over and clapped the demon heartily on the back. "Ta, mate. Well, let's get to it."

A wad of bills was pulled from some hidden pocket, and Gr'thek silently counted off the correct amount. Spike thrust the cash into a pocket of his own, then followed the other demon to another car. Getting in, they drove off, with a brief stop to close and lock the warehouse up.

Spike gave directions, then fell to taking deep drags from his cigarette.

After watching Spike work his way through a few of them, Gr'thek asked quietly, "Trouble?"

Spike flicked the butt out the window. "Personal."

"The Slayer?"

Spike snarled, baring his teeth. "Much as I hate the bint and would love to rip her apart and bathe in her blood...no. Not her."

Silence for a bit. Then, "Wanna talk?"

The vampire drummed his fingers on the armrest. Sighing, he tilted his head back against the seat.

"Someone got hurt."

"Someone?"

"A human."

Gr'thek frowned. "That's bad?"

Another sigh. "I claimed him."

The Hk'mel demon turned to stare at him, stunned. He cleared his throat. "A human. That's...unusual."

Spike merely growled.

"Hey, no offense. I mean, if that's your thing." They drove on. "So, how you gonna handle it?"

Spike shrugged, removing the last cigarette from the pack and lighting it. "I'll manage."

There was a rather noncommittal 'hmmm' from Gr'thek in response, then the two were silent once more. After another few minutes of driving, they pulled up near a dimly lit lot that contained a single vehicle.

Spike stepped out of the Gr'thek's car, heading for his DeSoto.

"Spike?"

He turned, quirking an eyebrow inquiringly at the other demon.

Gr'thek offered him a half-smile. "Good luck with your human."

Spike snorted softly. "Ta, mate." *Yeah, you'll need it too, once Xander finds out about this little arrangement.*

Squashing that thought down, he turned and got into his own car, driving back toward the boy's house. Time for a spot of investigation.

Part Ten

Spike parked the DeSoto by the curb outside of Xander's house. Leaving the vehicle, he slipped around into the back yard and crept inside the basement door, still ajar from their hasty departure earlier. He looked around the room, nose wrinkling as the smell overwhelmed him. He growled, eyes flashing yellow.

Moving to the center of the room, he looked down at the rug that bore evidence of the cruelty his Nummy had undergone. Snarling, he bent and scooped it up, walking over to deposit it in the washing machine. He couldn't stand the stench of it...a reminder of the horrible violation Xander had suffered.

He stalked into the bathroom, wetting a towel and using it to wipe up the trail of dried blood from the floor. Rinsing it out, he checked to make sure every trace of the blood was gone, then tossed the towel in with the rug, dropping the lid with a bang.

Searching, he found the clothes Xander had worn earlier in the evening, a lifetime ago. The shirt by the laundry basket he picked up, sniffing it. *Ick! Soddin' Vithrell demons and their disgustin' slime!* Not getting any clues from the item, he dropped it neatly into the basket.

The pants were on the floor over by the bathroom, boxers a few feet away near the toilet. Spike smiled briefly at Xander's slovenliness. But neither of these articles of clothing bore any indication of Xander's assailant. No blood, semen, nothing.

Spike frowned. *That means it happened AFTER he got back and undressed.* He cocked his head, closing his eyes to better concentrate as he sought out some scent, some clue of who it had been.

Nothing. Not one thing that wasn't familiar from the time he'd spent here over those few weeks. Nothing except the semen, and the still-lingering odor of his Nummy's blood.

His eyes popped open. *What the--?* He sniffed again. Yep, blood. But not coming from the closed washing machine, which should contain every drop of blood and semen spilled down here.

He turned his head from side to side, tracking it. Moving slowly and carefully, he followed the barely-there trail up the stairs into the main house. He paused to make sure no one was around, and picked up only a single heartbeat, coming from up the stairs.

Up the stairs. Where the scent trail led. Unconsciously letting out a low, rumbling growl, Spike moved stealthily up the stairway. At the top, he paused to get his bearings. He looked at the end of the hall.

There. That room. Something in *that* room had his Nummy's blood on it!

He pushed the door open, peering into the dark room. In the moonlight streaming in the open window, he clearly made out the form lying passed out on the bed, snoring loudly. Pants half stripped off, a dark blotch covering the area around the zipper.

The dark blotch. Blood. His *Xander's* blood! Flaking bits of it streaking the limp flesh of the penis that was splayed over a meaty thigh.

A thigh belonging to Xander's father.

Spike's face rippled, melting into its vampiric planes. Yellow eyes glowed in the dark, and he rushed the bed,

fingers hooking into claws as he determined to rip this pitiful excuse for a human to shreds.

Before he reached it, he collapsed, hissing and moaning in agony. Hands clutched his head, and he shuddered. *Fuckin' chip!* Apparently, even such a person was considered human enough to activate the chip.

He stood, pacing back and forth beside the bed. Snarling in impotent fury, he glared daggers at the oblivious man. He winced, head pounding.

Fuck! Can't even bleedin' defend what's mine! He backed out of the room, still growling. Once in the hallway, he slammed his fist through the wall, howling his rage. Spike pulled it out and punched again, and again. He sobbed at his inability to wreak vengeance, courtesy of the Initiative. He leaned his head forward against the wall, tears running futilely down his cheeks.

Finally, he straightened, wiping his face harshly. He gave the still-unconscious man a last glare. *You'll pay. I'll figure out some way to do it, I don't care what it takes. And you will die. Very slowly and very painfully. Your last sight on this earth, before I send you to Hell for eternity, will be of me, ripping your heart from your chest.*

Another wave of pain struck at that thought, but he ignored it. Shaking his head, he turned and made his way back downstairs. Back down into the basement, where he grabbed some loose-fitting clothing for Xander to wear later. Then, outside to his car, where he pulled away from the still, silent house.

Spike drove aimlessly for a while, trying to calm himself down before returning to Xander. He didn't want to scare the boy, who would most likely be in a delicate state when he woke. It was just an hour or so before dawn when he pulled up to the clinic again. Parking around back this time, he hurried inside.

Karen looked up from where she was gathering her things together. She flashed him a tentative smile. "Hey. I was just getting ready to leave, my replacement should be here soon. Let me go get Dr. Fredericks for you."

Spike nodded, and she hurried away. Shortly thereafter, the doctor came through the doorway and motioned Spike to follow him. They walked a short distance, coming to a halt outside of a closed room. Spike made as if to enter, but was stopped by a hand on his arm. He narrowed his eyes, growling at the doctor.

"Hey, I'm on your side, here. And you can go in in a minute. There's just a few things I'd like to say, first."

Spike crossed his arms, leaning against the door with eyebrow raised. "Yeah?"

"First of all, I noticed you've staked a claim on William. Considering that he's human, the situation is quite extraordinary, really."

"Is there a point to this?"

"No offense, but I have to ask this. How do I know that, by releasing him into your care, he won't be hurt further?"

Spike snarled, eyes flashing. "You gonna try and stop me from takin' him?"

Dr. Fredericks sighed, holding up his hands. "I'm just saying, he's going to need a lot of care, and extremely sensitive handling. Which is not something that vampires are noted for...at least not with humans."

The blonde huffed, considering. Finally, he decided to be blunt. "Look, I couldn't hurt him even if I wanted to, ok? Which I *don't*! But I got this effin' chip in my brain that fries me if I try something with any human."

"I...see." The doctor made a mental note to ask about that later. For now, he simply began to list his patient's injuries, and the care needed to deal with them.

"Well, the most notable injury, the cause of the extreme loss of blood, was of course the large tear in the lining of William's rectum. Whoever assaulted him used absolutely no lubrication, or preparation of any sort. He could very well have died if you hadn't brought him in." He ignored Spike's angry hiss, continuing.

"I was able to stitch it up without too much difficulty, and the stitches will dissolve in a couple of weeks. But I will have to restrict his diet, to give the injury time to heal. Also, I'll give you an antibiotic salve that will need to be applied to the wound twice a day, as well as some pills that he'll need to take orally. I don't want to risk any infection."

Spike frowned. "You mean, he's gonna have to put this stuff inside himself?"

Dr. Fredericks sighed. "Actually, I doubt he'll be able to. He also has some cracked ribs which have been taped, a dislocated knee that's been bandaged up, and other assorted contusions and muscle strains, mostly minor. I don't want him aggravating anything. That means, no walking, no bending, nothing. Basically, he'll be spending the next week lying in bed with you waiting on him hand and foot." He looked at the vampire challengingly. "Can you handle that?"

Spike nodded tersely. "Yeah. *He* probably won't take to it, though."

"I don't doubt it. However, I have to prescribe what's best for the patient, whether or not he agrees with the treatment. As for the diet...liquids. Nothing that can't be passed easily."

"Not to sound ignorant, but what exactly does that include? I'm sure our ideas of a liquid diet are vastly different." Spike smirked.

"Indeed. Well, essentially, he can have drinks, broths from meat stocks like chicken or beef, Jell-O is always a favorite. Stay away from milk products, though. No ice-cream or yogurt. I can give you a full list before you leave."

Spike nodded again, glancing impatiently at the door. "That it?"

"Basically. I'll write out detailed instructions for you, but that covers the highlights. Oh, and I'd like you to bring him back in a week so I can check his progress."

"Can do. I can go in now, right?"

The doctor chuckled. "Sure, go on in. I took the liberty of placing him in a windowless room, as I figured you'd

want to stay with him, and the sun will be coming up soon."

"Ta, mate." Spike opened the door, stepping inside.

"One last thing."

Spike looked back over his shoulder questioningly.

"You might consider getting him to see a counselor of some sort. This...incident is bound to dredge up some extremely painful memories for William."

The blonde tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"During the course of my treatment of him, it was rather obvious from previous patterns of scarring and fractures that he's been subjected to this type of treatment before, most likely repeatedly and probably over the course of years." Dr. Fredericks hesitated a moment before going on. "Generally, this indicates abuse in the home, usually by a relative, in this case male. He's going to need to deal with the trauma."

Golden eyes narrowed to slits, and Spike bared his fangs. "I'll take care of him. He'll be fine."

Dr. Fredericks just nodded. "He should sleep a while longer. I am going to catch a quick nap in the break

room. I'll be back after he wakes. Any emergencies, just press the red button by his bed, and someone will come immediately." He left, and Spike shut the door.

Turning to the fragile-looking mortal in the bed, he felt his heart break a little. "Ah, Xanpet, I wish I could've stopped him. Or killed him. But don't you worry, I ain't gonna leave, and no one's ever gonna hurt you again. Not while I live...so to speak."

Pulling up a chair, he sat beside the still form, holding tight to a pale hand as he kept vigil.

Part Eleven

warm...safe...who? spike. mmm, spike. safe. Xander fought his way through the fog, not wanting to leave the comfort of unconsciousness, but...*needing* to see...to make sure. With great effort, he pried his eyelids up, searching.

There. He felt... His hand twitched in the cool grasp, and the blonde head lying on the bed by his side stirred.

Xander tried to sit up, moaning sharply as ribs protested.

Spike's eyes shot open, and he sat up, staring intently at the pale boy on the bed. "Pet? You all right?"

Xander whimpered. "hurts. spike...make it stop."

Spike chewed on his lip, torn. "Hush, pet. I'll get the doc, and he can give you something to help." He made a move to stand, but the hand clasped in his tightened.

Panicked, Xander refused to let go, using what little strength he had to tug the vampire closer. "no. don't go. please. don't leave me alone."

"But pet --" Spike stared deep into those sad eyes, finding himself unable to do anything that might bring the boy any more pain...physical or mental. He sighed, settling back down. Scooting his chair closer to the head of the bed, he stroked the thick, dark hair. "Ok, Xan, I won't go anywhere. I'll stay with you." He continued to pet the trembling human until the scent of fear faded.

They remained in silence, Spike gently and carefully running his hands through Xander's hair, down his arms. The boy sighed, inching closer.

Spike leaned in, allowing Xander to press up against his chest. He scowled. *You've lost it. It's over. Exit William*

the Bloody - Scourge of Europe, enter Spike the pushover - complete putty in Xander's hands. Not that I'm gonna let HIM in on that little fact. His expression softened, though, as he felt warm breath trickling through his shirt.

Xander drifted, ignoring the twinges of pain in various parts of his body. As long as he didn't move too much...

Spike was so intent on his study of the boy beside him that he didn't notice the door open and a head poke inside briefly. The hand on his shoulder a few minutes later startled him, and he jerked his head up, gameface on and eyes burning yellow as he snarled at the interloper.

Dr. Fredericks quickly removed the offending appendage, holding his hands up in front of him. "Hey, easy now." He looked at Xander, who had shrunk back against the bed, staring at him wide-eyed. He smiled gently. "Hello William, I'm Dr. Fredericks. How are you feeling?"

Xander gave Spike a confused look at the name, and the vampire just shrugged casually. Timidly, Xander peered up at the doctor. "um...ok. i guess." He tried to huddle closer to Spike without actually having to move too much.

Spike soothed him, purring softly deep in his chest, while at the same time casting a baleful glare at the man who'd upset his Nummy.

"Well, how about I give you a little something for the pain? That knee can't be feeling too good, and your ribs are probably bothering you as well."

Xander winced. "no shots. don't like shots. go 'way."

"If you'd rather, I can give you some pills. No shots, I promise." He waited until the boy nodded hesitantly, then opened a small bottle, extracting two tiny pills. He placed them in Spike's outstretched palm, then poured a glass of water from the pitcher beside the bed.

Spike took the pills, then the water. Carefully lifting Xander's head up, he coaxed the pills into his mouth, then held the glass so he could drink and swallow them down. Not taking his eyes off the boy, he handed the glass back to the doctor.

Dr. Fredericks replaced the glass, then took a seat in a chair on the opposite side of the bed from Spike.

"William? Can we talk?"

Xander looked at Spike, then over at the doctor. "i...i guess."

The doctor held up a couple of pill bottles. "These are some medications I want you to take. One is a painkiller, you just had some of those. The other contains antibiotics. It's very important that you take these until they're gone, ok?" Xander nodded. "Good. The others you can have up to 8 a day, no more. If it isn't helping enough, I can prescribe something stronger, but I think these will do.

"Now, your vampire friend has assured me he'll be able to take care of you until you're well enough to get around by yourself. So I'll put him in charge of these." The bottles were handed over, and Spike dropped them into one of the pockets of his duster. "This," he continued, holding up a sheet of paper, "is a list of foods you're allowed to consume. If it's not here, don't eat it." He gave Spike a stern look.

Spike snorted, taking the list and folding it up, adding it to his pocket. He looked at Xander, noticing the confusion on his face. "What is it, pet?"

Xander's eyes flickered between Spike and the doctor. "what--? i mean, he knows... i don't understand." His weak, plaintive voice struck a chord deep within the vampire, making him want to gather the mortal close and shield him from the world.

Dr. Fredericks chuckled quietly. "Yes, I suppose it is confusing. Don't worry, we're used to dealing with clientele that is a bit...different. You wouldn't believe how many species come through our doors."

The boy gave Spike a questioning look, receiving only a sheepish grin in response. He cleared his throat, gaze back on the doctor. "I didn't know there was any place like this. Never heard anything."

"Yes, well we try to keep a low profile. The ones who need to know about us do. We don't need the kind of trouble that would come about if certain...unsympathetic parties got wind of us."

"Unsympathetic? You're...just a clinic, right? Why would anyone care?"

Dr. Fredericks sighed, closing his eyes wearily. "We get a lot of patients here who've had run-ins with...shall we say, someone who doesn't take kindly to the presence of demons in this town."

A thought niggled at the back of Xander's mind.

"But...aren't demons bad?"

"Saying that all demons are bad is like saying all humans are good. It's just not true. A few nut cases have given

the whole lot of them a bad name. Most just try to avoid trouble and make a living for themselves."

Xander frowned and shifted, gasping at the renewed pain in his chest. Spike shot the doctor a worried look.

The doctor stood. "Easy, now. I don't want you moving any more than absolutely necessary. That goes for the next week." He handed over a few pages of paper, along with a small tube. Looking at Spike, he went on, "There's the rest of what you'll need. I'd also like to speak with you privately before you take William away." He glanced at his watch. "It's almost sunset, you'll be able to leave soon." He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Spike watched as Xander stared around the room, withdrawing from him slightly and pointedly refusing to look at him. He sighed deeply. "There a problem?"

Xander twisted the sheet between his fingers as he tried to scoot away from the vampire. His ribs immediately protested, and he subsided. Finally meeting Spike's eyes, he spoke hesitantly. "What...what did he mean? When he said you were going to take care of me?"

Spike debated internally over whether to tell him about the whole claiming bit, then decided that could wait

awhile. "I can look after you, you know. I mean, seeing as we're chums an' all."

Xander blinked. "We...we are?"

"Bloody hell, would I 'ave brought you here in the first place if I didn't...like you?" He grimaced at how pathetic he sounded.

"Oh." Brown eyes peeked out from under a fringe of dark hair. "So -- we're...friends?"

Another sigh. "Yeah, pet. Friends."

A small nod, accompanied by a barely noticeable grin. Then the boy steeled himself.

Spike could see Xander visibly pulling himself together, a look of stubborn determination appearing on his face. He cursed to himself, wondering what sort of hare-brained stunt the whelp was going to try and pull.

"Spike? I want to go home now." Xander stared at the vampire, daring him to say anything.

Part Twelve

Spike stared at him a moment, then shrugged. "Sure, pet. My crypt may not be too cozy, but it'll do 'til we find somethin' better."

Xander gave the vampire a strange look. "Um, hello? Not your crypt, bleach boy. I mean my house."

Spike's jaw dropped as he struggled for words. "What!? No way in *hell* I'm lettin' you go back there!"

"Geez, what's your problem? Just take me home already! I'll be fine."

Standing abruptly, Spike began to pace the room. After a few tense moments, he rounded on the boy. "Fine? You bloody well don't look fine to me! An' if you think I'm taking you back where your bastard of a father can get his hands on you again--" he broke off abruptly as he saw Xander's face go even paler as the mortal started to tremble.

Xander shook his head. "H-H-He won't be there. He never is right after--" He cut himself off, then began

again. "I mean, he's supposed to be out of town this week. There won't be anyone at home."

"What the--? Xander, I'm bloody well not taking you back there! Not where he can--"

"No! He didn't do anything! He just got mad and hit me a little, that's all. No biggie." Eyes wide, he started breathing faster as he rocked gently back and forth, still shaking his head. "Didn't do anything. Didn't do anything. I'm ok, nothing happened." The tuneless chant was repeated softly, and Spike just stared at the boy in disbelief.

Not knowing what to do now, Spike chewed his lip in indecision. Finally, he stepped back to Xander's side, patting a shaking hand. "Xan? I'm...gonna go talk to the doc for a sec. I'll be right back, ok?" He waited, but Xander just kept on whispering softly, continuing his litany.

Spike backed out of the room, turning and nearly bumping into Dr. Fredericks. "Geez, mate! Warn a guy!" He tossed a glance over his shoulder as he closed the door. "Look, something's wrong with him. You gotta fix it. He's trying to act like nothin' happened!"

Dr. Fredericks nodded sadly. "I thought he might."

"What!?"

"He's disassociating himself. Distancing the event in his mind so he doesn't have to deal with it. If he doesn't think about it, doesn't acknowledge it, then it never really happened. It's not unusual in cases like this." He sighed. "It's something I wanted to talk to you about. This is a defense device, but ultimately, it will end up hurting more than helping. Eventually, he's going to have to face what happened so he can begin to heal. His body will recover quickly, it's his spirit that's going to need the most help."

A hard glint appeared in the doctor's eyes. "Someone certainly did their best to break him. People like that are the reason this clinic is even needed." He snorted. "You know the saddest part? Almost every single one of our patients comes here because of humans. Most of them never even provoke the attacks, but just because they're different..."

"The slayer," Spike muttered. "She'll go after anything that's not human. But you give her someone 'human' like Xa--William's dad, and she's blind." He looked at the doctor with something akin to desperation in his gaze. "He wants to go back there. I can't protect him, and he

wants to go back to that bastard. I...I don't know what to do."

"You mean you know who William's attacker is and he's still alive?"

"I *told* you, can't do no damage to humans. No biting them, no maiming them, no ripping his fucking heart from his chest and feeding it to him." He snarled, eyes burning as pain began to build in his skull. Wincing, he tried to calm himself.

"Because of the...chip?" A nod in response. "How exactly does this thing work?"

"Don't know much, just that it zaps me with some major head pain if I hurt a human, or even seriously *think* about hurting one."

"I'm assuming it's some kind of microchip? Implanted directly in your brain?"

Spike nodded sharply.

"Christ! Who would do such a thing?"

"It was a lovely present from some psycho group called the Initiative."

The doctor sucked in a breath. "I've...heard a lot of stories about them. Thanks to them, we've had an serious rise in the number of patients over recent months." His jaw tensed angrily. "Now there's a bunch the oh-so-exalted slayer needs to take down."

"Hardly, mate. She's too busy shagging one of 'em."

That earned Spike a surprised look. "Know her personally, do you?"

The vampire hesitated a moment, then made a quick decision. "She's a 'friend' of the boy's." He hissed in anger. "Some friend. Never even knew what was going on with him. Never cared enough."

"I...see. Well, if you want my personal opinion, you should get your human as far away from his father *and* the slayer as soon as possible."

"How can I if he doesn't *want* to go? I can't make him!"

Dr. Fredericks sighed. "That's up to you. You've claimed him, he's your responsibility now."

"Yeah, don't I know it."

"Ah please, think about getting him to a therapist. If you need, I have some names. They're very good, and they genuinely care about the people they're helping."

"I'll do what I can. Doc...um, thanks." Spike shuffled his feet, not used to being grateful to a human.

The doctor simply nodded. "Look, whatever else happens, just make sure you keep him still and medicated. Start with the antibiotic pills and salve tomorrow night. Pills once a day, salve every 12 hours, and don't skip!" He handed Spike a card. "That's the number here, and my cell phone. Any emergencies, don't hesitate to call. I'll see you in a week." With a brisk nod, he turned and left.

Spike stuffed the slip of paper into a pocket, then turned and re-entered Xander's room. He could hardly believe he was looking at the same person. Xander seemed so...in control.

Calm brown eyes regarded the blonde. "Spike, can we go now? I don't like hospital type places much."

"I'm not taking you back there, pet."

"Spike, don't be ridiculous--"

"Don't bother arguing. I'm. Not. Taking. You. Back!"

~*~*~*~*~

"I soddin' well can't *believe* I'm taking you back there! How'd you talk me into this?" Spike gripped the steering wheel so hard he was almost surprised it was still intact.

"Don't be so uptight. I told you, no one's home." Xander grimaced as the car hit a pothole, jostling him.

"Sorry, luv." Spike slowed the car down, not exactly eager to reach their destination.

"I'm ok. It's not like I'm gonna break or anything."

Spike just flicked him a glance in the rearview mirror and kept on driving.

From his position reclining in the backseat, Xander was afforded an interesting view of Spike's DeSoto. He frowned at the floor. Was that--? "Spike? Why is there *grass* growing from your floor?"

Spike shrugged. "Ambiance? And don't change the subject."

"I'm not changing the subject, it died. It gasped out its last breath and gave up the fight for life. Even had a lovely funeral, you should have been there."

The vampire ground his teeth as Xander joked, for the first time noticing how the boy tended to use humor to cover his true feelings, his pain. "Xander..." He slowed the car, making one last turn before parking it. He stared at the empty house. *Well, the fucking bastard ain't here. Least the boy was tellin' the truth about that.*

"Great, we're here." Pulling himself upright, Xander bit back a moan as he went to open the door.

Spike vaulted from the front seat, snatching the back door open just as Xander reached for it. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Um, getting out?"

"Not bloody likely. Doc said you don't move, then I'm bleedin' well gonna make sure you don't!" Carefully, he reached in and removed the human, hoisting him gently as he kicked the door shut. He carried Xander inside, the boy protesting the entire way.

"Spike! I'm not a girl, put me down!" Xander pushed at Spike's chest, complaining until he was finally set down.

Spike stood over Xander's bed, glaring down at him.
"Don't. You. Move."

Xander subsided, pouting.

Satisfied, Spike took his duster off, slinging it over the back of a chair after he removed one of the papers the doctor had given him. "You hungry, pet?"

Xander shrugged, then winced, hissing slightly.

Spike rushed over, concern etched on his face. "What happened? You ok?"

Xander rolled his eyes. "I'm fine. Just moved too fast."

"Yeah, well I told you not to move." He watched the boy carefully, then slowly moved away. Paper in hand, he walked up the steps. "I'll get you something to eat, then." Before he went through the door, he glanced back. "And Xan? Just a couple of days, then we're out of here. Got it?"

Sighing, Xander nodded. "Yeah, fine. Whatever."

Leaving the door open, Spike made his way into the kitchen, flicking on the lights. He consulted the list, then began to search the cupboards. Eventually, he pulled out a box of chicken soup mix.

Noodles. Don't see noodles on the list. He frowned, then shrugged. *Well, just won't feed him the noodley bits.*

He read the instructions on the box, then put a large bowl of water in the microwave, waiting for it to boil. Once it had, he added the mix, then turned the microwave on again. A few minutes later, he had a bowl of steaming chicken soup.

Hey, that was easy! He ladled some of the broth into a smaller bowl, trying not to get too many noodles, then placed the bowl and a spoon on a tray he'd found. Opening the fridge, he pulled out a carton of orange juice, sniffing it. It smelled all right, so he poured a glass of it, placing it next to the bowl.

Picking up the tray, he balanced it so none of the soup would slosh over, and slowly made his way back down to the basement.

He reached Xander, who seemed to be resting comfortably, if seeming to be a bit bored. He looked around the room quickly, glad he'd been able to clear up most traces of the...incident the night before.

Xander sniffed the air. "Food? Smells pretty good." He began to sit up, stopped by a warning yelp from Spike.

Setting the tray down, Spike grabbed a few pillows and used them to gingerly prop Xander in a more upright position. He sat next to him, holding the tray in his lap. Dipping the spoon into the soup, he blew on it.

"Um, Spike? What are you doing?" Xander watched the vampire curiously.

"Feeding you. What's it look like?"

"Actually, I can feed myself. It's a talent I picked up as a child, comes in handy when I get hungry."

"No moving, remember." He tested the liquid with his lips, making sure it had cooled off enough.

"I seriously doubt the good doctor meant you had to spoon feed me."

Spike just stared at Xander, not giving in. Eyebrow cocked, he raised the spoon to Xander's mouth.

For a moment, Xander considered refusing. But... *He's...coddling me. It's...kinda nice, actually. No one ever took care of me when I was sick before.* He sighed, then opened his mouth.

Grinning triumphantly, Spike fed him the soup, pausing occasionally to give him sips of orange juice. Soon, the

meal was gone, and he took the dishes back upstairs, dumping them in the sink without bothering to wash them.

Downstairs again, this time carrying a glass of water, he got out a couple of the pain pills, which Xander gratefully swallowed down.

Spike dug out some blankets and a few more pillows. He fussed over the bemused boy, tucking him in. Then he pulled a recliner over to the bed, making up a sleeping place for himself. *Really would like to share the bed, but I don't think he's up for that.*

Lights off, he did his best to make himself comfortable. He wasn't really planning on sleeping, but he might as well be cozy while he kept an eye on his human.

Xander closed his eyes, drifting as the medication made the pain recede. As he slipped off to sleep, he murmured, "Thanks, Spike."

Waiting until the boy's breathing had evened out, Spike leaned close and brushed a kiss on his cheek. "You sleep good, Xan. I'll watch over you." Eyes glowing in the darkness, he once more kept vigil.

Part Thirteen

Spike stretched, working the kinks out of his back. He'd spent the entire night in that bloody uncomfortable chair of Xander's, but no way was he going to move. At every toss and turn, he'd tensed, ready to calm the boy if he'd gotten too restless and begun to strain his injuries. At about 5:00 a.m., he'd awakened the human and coaxed two more of the pain pills into him. He could probably have waited for Xander to awaken, but he figured this way, they wouldn't have to wait for the drugs to kick in.

He squinted at the clock. 8:43. *Should get some breakfast ready, I suppose.* With a last glance at the still-sleeping boy, he quietly tiptoed upstairs, taking the tray and dishes with him.

The remaining soup from the night before still sat on the counter, and Spike grimaced at the sight of it. *Right, gotta stick that stuff in the fridge.* Gingerly, he dumped the bowl and its contents into the sink.

Another search through the cupboards yielded a can of tomato soup and some canned peach slices. *Shop much, people?* He snorted wryly. Looks like a trip to the grocery store was in order.

Since the orange juice was just about gone, Spike poured a glass of water and added some ice. He placed this on the tray after depositing the dirty dishes in the sink.

Hearing a small yelp from the basement, he dashed back down the stairs. Glaring at Xander, who was now sitting on the edge of his bed wearing a pained expression, he crossed his arms and tapped a foot. "And just where do you think you're going?"

Xander grimaced, tossing Spike an annoyed look.

"Bathroom. Must pee. It's a quirk we living people have."

"Yeah, well, you better not be planning on walking there, [mate](#)."

"I see. And how else am I supposed to get there, hmm?"

Spike rolled his eyes, then walked over to the bed. With little effort, he scooped the human up, cradling him gently in his arms as he made his way over to the bathroom. Once there, he stopped. *Now what? Doc kinda forgot to tell me 'bout this part.*

Xander winced slightly as Spike set him down. "Yeah, well thanks. I think I can take it from here."

"Pet, you can't exactly stand. I mean, the knee, and the ribs...how you planning on , you know?"

"I'll manage." This through gritted teeth, and accompanied by a petulant glare.

"Sure? I mean, I can help." *Someone tell me I didn't just say that.*

"That's...ok."

"Right then. I'll just...wait outside."

"Yeah. You do that." He arched an eyebrow at Spike until the vampire backed completely out of the bathroom, then swung the door shut.

Spike stood right next to the door, ready to bust inside should Xander have any difficulties. Shamelessly, he tuned his hearing in on the room, listening closely to the boy's every movement. When the toilet was flushed, he waited a few seconds to allow Xander the chance to get himself 'decent', then opened the door partway. "Xan? You done?"

"Just gotta wash my hands."

Spike entered the room, helping the limping boy over to the sink. "Lean on me, mate. Don't want you messing up that knee again." Once Xander had finished, Spike carried him back to his bed.

"You know, you don't have to do this, Spike. I can manage."

Spike just snorted and continued with tucking the covers back in around the human. Fixing Xander with a serious look, he admonished the boy. "Now, you stay here. No more moving, got it?" He waited for the exasperated nod, then went back upstairs to finish fixing breakfast.

He looked once more at the two cans he'd left on the counter. Not that there was much food in the place to begin with, but that was all he could find that the doctor had included on his list. *Not exactly appetizing.* Oh, well, he'd make do.

Following the instructions on the can of soup, he mixed it with some water and heated it up. A clean bowl was found, and some soup ladled into it. He covered the remainder with plastic wrap and stuck it in the refrigerator, along with the can of peaches.

Another careful trip downstairs, and the tray was set down by the bed. "Xan? Breakfast."

"What is it?"

"Soup. Tomato." He shrugged. "Sorry, it's about all I could find."

"Not a problem. I should have remembered the lack of food around this place. We could always order a pizza." His eyes widened hopefully.

Spike narrowed his eyes, thrusting Dr. Fredericks list in front of the boy. "You see pizza on here, pet? 'Cause I sure didn't."

Xander pouted. "Oh, fine." He hesitated, then obediently opened his mouth for the spoon that was now edging closer.

Spike glanced up from a book, surreptitiously examining Xander. The human had been unusually quiet the entire day. Not that he seemed withdrawn, just...not talkative. Introspective, maybe. He'd answer when spoken to, occasionally toss in a few acerbic comments, and, less frequently, ask for help with some mundane task. But for the most part, he'd either spent his time watching television or reading one of his many comic books.

The vampire was worried. Not that he'd ever admit that, but he somehow didn't think this behavior was indicative of Xander coming to terms with his assault. Really, it was just plain...weird.

"Would you stop that?" Xander glanced up in semi-annoyance.

"Stop what?" the vampire asked in all innocence.

"Staring. I'm starting to feel like a bug or something. I'm fine. Give it a rest."

Spike sighed deeply. "Sure, pet." He turned his eyes back to the pages in front of him, shuffling through them idly. Once he heard Xander flip a page of his comic, he resumed his perusal of the boy.

"Spike!"

"What?" *Bloody hell, he's not even looking at me!*

"I can feel you staring at me! Cut it out already!" Xander set his comic book down and crossed his arms as he glared at Spike. "Look, why don't you go, I don't know, shopping or something. It's almost dark, and I need food anyway. And you should stop by the butcher too, pick up something for yourself."

"I dunno. You think you're up for an outing?"

"Who says I'm going anywhere? I'm gonna stay in bed like a good little patient. Doctor's orders." He grinned, snickering under his breath.

Spike growled softly. "I ain't leavin' you here alone, pet."

Xander sobered. "Look, Spike. We need to eat. And I'm not supposed to move. Try to be logical about this." He rolled his eyes. "I promise I won't go anywhere. But you get to change the sheets if I wet the bed."

"But--"

"Food! Hungry. Feed me!"

After a few more minutes of hedging, Spike finally capitulated. He spent the next half-hour fussing around the basement, making sure Xander had everything he could possibly need within reach. Then he stood uncomfortably by the door, thumbs hooked in his pockets. "Right then, I guess I'll be off. You sure--?"

"*Yes*, Spike. Go. I'll be fine. Oh, and uh, maybe you should see about getting a change of clothes." He cast a significant glance at Spike's shirt, the same bloodstained and punctured article of clothing he'd been wearing since the incident with the Vithrell demon.

"Yeah, ok. Um, guess I'll be off then. Won't be too long." He stalled, waiting for some sign that he should call off the trip, but Xander just stared at him levelly. Finally, he heaved a sigh, and left.

As he drove, Spike drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He was not at all comfortable with having left his Num---Xander home by himself, but the boy was right. They did need food. *Right then. Quick in and out job at the store, snag some blood for me, swing by crypt for*

some clothes, then back to the boy. He nodded decisively. No problem.

The first stop was an all night grocery store. He quickly made his way down the aisles, consulting the doctor's list and tossing every item that fit the criteria into his shopping cart. Lots of soup, soft fruits, juices, and a few boxes of Jell-O. He thought about the popsicles, but figured they'd melt before he managed to get them to a freezer. *'Sides, watching Xan eat 'em would give me ideas, and now is not the time for that!*

After only twenty minutes, his cart was full, and he proceeded to the checkout line, using his ill-gotten gains to pay for the food. Once the bags were loaded into the trunk of the DeSoto, he sped off to purchase his own dinner.

A short drive later, and he pulled into the parking lot of the shop where he normally purchased his supply of blood. A butcher's shop/convenience store to most people, a select few were privileged enough to be allowed...special orders.

"Earl!" He tapped a foot a bit impatiently, waiting until a balding, portly older gentleman came out of the back.

"Spike. I was expecting you. The usual?"

"Nah, got some extra dosh to blow, gimme the good stuff."

Earl nodded, then disappeared into the back once more. Spike could hear him rummaging around in his walk-in cooler, uttering soft exclamations of satisfaction when he found what he wanted.

"Here you go. A dozen human, assorted blood types. Even packed 'em in a carton with dry ice for you."

"Thanks, mate. What'll it be?" Spike pulled out his wallet.

"For you? Well, you don't often shell out for this stuff. How about...\$200 for the lot?"

Spike whistled. "Quite a deal there. You usually charge \$25 a packet for these."

Earl grinned. "Well, maybe once I get you hooked on buying my best, I'll jack the price up."

"You would." Spike just shook his head in amusement, extracting the money and handing it over. As an afterthought, he also purchased a few packs of cigarettes and some matches, adding the requisite amount of cash to the pile on the counter. "Be seein' you, Earl." He dropped the cigarettes into various pockets, and picked up the carton, hefting it easily.

"Later, Spike. Don't get dusted."

Spike pulled up outside the cemetery. He left the car, walking quickly over to his crypt. Once inside, he rummaged through his things, stuffing his few articles of clothing into a duffel bag that he'd nicked a few days previously. He took a last look around the sparsely furnished place, not seeing anything else he really needed. *I can always come back for the rest some other time.*

Back outside, he pulled the door to his crypt shut, then walked back to his car. Idly, he glanced down at his watch. *Under an hour. Not bad.*

He climbed back into his car, revving the engine and tearing off into the night. He had almost made it back to Xander's place when he spied something sharp-looking in the road. Cursing, he wrenched the wheel around, swerving into the opposite lane, but still managed to hit the object. Shortly thereafter, the dull 'thump, thump' of rubber slapping against pavement sounded as the car jerked to the right.

Growling, Spike pulled off the side of the road and stopped the car, flinging the door open and walking around to the other side. He glared down at the offending tire. "Bloody hell!" He snarled, kicking the tire

repeatedly. Finally, he sighed, rubbing his forehead tiredly. He looked at his watch again, then glanced up the street.

He was only about half a mile away. He could change the tire in under 10 minutes, and be back on the road. No big deal.

Fuck. Something was gnawing away at him, and he was feeling extremely uncomfortable. Sure, he didn't want to leave Xander alone for too long, but what was a few more minutes? He shuffled his feet. *Aw, shit.* Something was wrong. He knew it. He had to get back, *now.*

Barely even taking enough time to lock the doors to the DeSoto, he was about to take off running when he heard a rustling in the bushes nearby. Stalking over, he pulled out the vampire hiding there, shaking him. An idea struck. "You know me?"

Eyes wide, the other vampire nodded. "You're S-S-Spike," he gasped out.

"That's right, mate. And that there is my car. See it?" He twisted the fledgling's head around as he pointed at the DeSoto. Another frightened nod was his response.

"Good. Now, you're gonna do me a favor, see? You are

gonna make sure no one touches my car, got it?" More nodding.

Spike grinned. "Great." He let go of the vampire, setting him down and dusting him off. "What's your name, anyhow?"

"Um, it-it's Thomas."

"Well, Thomas. You take care now." He turned, then paused. "Oh, and if you screw up, I'll chain you down and shove sharp pieces of wood into every available inch of your skin, then leave you screaming in agony to await the dawn." He flashed another grin, then took off.

Thomas watched the blonde vampire go, still trembling. *Why me? I just came out for a bit of dinner, and this happens.* Sighing, he settled down to keep watch over Spike's beloved DeSoto, hoping with all his might that the slayer didn't choose this time to show up.

Spike reached Xander's house in record time. If he'd been human, he would have dropped dead from sheer exhaustion. As it was, he was almost panting anyway. Utter panic, or as close to it as a master vampire would ever admit to coming, gripped him when he saw the vehicle parked in the driveway. *Shit, NO!*

Darting around back, he tore the door open, racing down the stairs. The scent of fear assailed him, and he felt himself shift into gameface in an automatic response to the threat against the one he'd claimed. He let out a snarl of pure rage at what he saw.

Xander lay cowering in his bed, cringing back from his father, whose hulking form was straddled over him.

Part Fourteen

The gang was all seated around Giles' table, sifting through stacks of books.

"What are we looking for, again?" Buffy blinked up at the ex-Watcher, boredom clear on her face.

Giles sighed. "For the eleventh time, we are researching any references to the Cimmerii, seeing as the prophecy Tara found this morning vaguely alludes to their involvement in an upcoming demonic ritual.

"Oh. Right." She shrugged. "Sorry, I forgot."

Giles began to massage his temples wearily. *Oh, lord. Why me?* He tried to ignore the sound of Riley's pacing, knowing that snapping at him would do absolutely no good.

"Hey, Giles, think I've got something." Holding up her book, the Slayer grinned. "It says that these Cimmerii things are 'a mythical people purported to live in eternal darkness.' And, um..." she flipped a few pages, then back again. "Actually, I guess that's about it."

"Well, I must say that sounds depressingly like vampires." Giles took off his glasses and began to polish them. "Not terribly informative, but it helps. Keep looking."

The room was quiet but for the rustle of pages and the occasional cough or sneeze as a dusty tome was opened and searched. After long minutes, a squeal broke the silence.

"Oh! I may have found another prophecy!!" Willow traced her finger over the passage she'd come across. "It's in Latin. 'Ecce! Cimmerii vectora luminis adorientur et cooperient. Et os Infernis effringebitur.'"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Ok. And for those of us who failed miserably in our foreign language class...this means what?"

"Loosely translated? Um, gimme a sec." Willow furrowed her brow in thought, then said, "Oh. Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh? What uh-oh?" Buffy sat up stiffly.

"Um, it...seems to be another apocalypsey type of prophecy. It goes, 'Behold! The Cimmerii shall rise up and envelop the bearers of light. And the mouth of Hell shall be broken open.'" She glanced up at Giles for confirmation.

He nodded. "That does seem to sum it up nicely, yes."

"Oh. So...what? We up the patrols and do some major slayage? I mean, we've been through this whole 'evil vampire taking over the Hellmouth' deal before. What's the diff?" Buffy really couldn't see anything to get worked up about. Same old, same old.

"Because...these 'Cimmerii' may not be your typical type of vampire. The usual methods might not be enough to defeat them. As a matter of fact, it's entirely possible that the text isn't referring to vampires at all. The prophecy isn't too terribly clear."

"Whatever. I can take 'em, no worries."

"Be that as it may, it would behoove us to keep looking for more information."

Buffy groaned, then went back to her books.

Tara, who'd kept pretty much to herself the entire evening, looked around the room. In a quiet voice, she asked Willow, "Hey, where do you think Xander is?"

Buffy overheard. "He's probably goofing off. He hates these research fests."

Willow frowned. "I don't know. He usually calls if he can't come, and I haven't heard from him since the other night. I hope he's not sick or anything."

"I'm sure he's fine. He's a big boy, Willow. He can take care of himself." Buffy waved her hand dismissively.

"I know. I just worry sometimes." She started leafing through her manuscripts again. A moment later, she looked up once more. "You know, Spike hasn't been around since that night either. You don't think maybe...he did something to Xander, do you?"

Riley scoffed. "He's neutered, he can't hurt anyone. He's probably off somewhere licking his wounds. Figuratively speaking. It might be kind of difficult to achieve literally, considering their placement."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right. I think I'll call Xander tomorrow, though. You know, just in case."

Conversation pretty much died off at that point, as they all settled back down into their researching.

~*~*~*~*~

The sounds and smells permeating the room assailed him. Through the pulsing waves of fury that washed over him, Spike dimly heard what the man hunched over his human was saying.

"Yeah, boy. Look at you, waiting here for me. Just beggin' for me. You want me, don't you? Always comin' back for more. Gonna fuck you, boy. Gonna fuck you raw." He fairly drooled at the sight of the battered, cringing boy who was frozen in fear beneath him. His fingers began to work at the buttons on his shirt. A low growl sounded in the room, and he paused.

Spike stalked closer, his growls and snarls becoming louder until they echoed in the basement. The one hurting his human twisted around, blanching when he saw what was drawing near. Spike didn't even stop to think about his actions, he immediately pounced. Snatching the man by his neck, he flung him across the room, sending him crashing into a set of shelves by the opposite wall. Ignoring the pain that immediately started

in his head, he followed, wrenching the man's head up and slamming it down onto the floor.

As the body went limp, Spike fell back, clutching at his own head. He rolled on the floor in agony, whimpering as what felt like a jolt of lightening lanced through his brain. He pounded his fist against the floor, grunting as his body writhed and twisted. He barely noticed when his back slammed up against something unyielding, but the timid hand lightly stroking his neck pulled him back to awareness.

Through bleary eyes, he looked up into the tear-streaked face of his human. Xander lay trembling on his bed, panting harshly as he stared at the vampire with wide eyes. "s-s-spike...i-i-i..." He worked his mouth, trying to speak but unable to calm down enough to do so.

Immediately, Spike surged up, fighting off the lingering effects of the chip. He gathered Xander close, holding him carefully as he began to rock. "Hush, pet. It's ok. Shh." He rubbed the boy's clammy arms, trying to soothe his shaking form.

"Is...is h-h-he d-d-d--"

"Shhh." He sniffed the air, glaring over at the unmoving person huddled on the floor. Listening closely, he

detected a faint but steady heartbeat. "No, he's not dead, luv, but he won't be waking up anytime soon."

Xander nodded jerkily, still sending off an acrid scent of fear as he stared at his long-time abuser.

Spike sighed. "Xander, we gotta leave. I don't care what you say 'bout it, we're not stayin' here!" He clenched his jaw in determination.

Xander's eyes fluttered shut as he sank back down into the bed, inching his way closer into Spike's protective embrace. Weakly, he nodded.

Relief coursed through the vampire. He would have taken the boy away no matter what, but at least this way, he knew he wouldn't have to waste energy fighting.

Wrapping a blanket around the now-shivering human, he picked him up easily and carried him up the stairs, coming to a halt in the middle of the kitchen. *Shit! No car!* He thought frantically, then glanced out the window at the vehicle in the driveway. He grinned humorlessly. *It'll do.*

Instead of taking Xander out of the house and leaving straightaway, Spike detoured into the living room. He set the boy down on the sofa, gazing worriedly into glassy eyes. "Xan? I just got a few things to take care of, an' I'll

be right back, ok?" The near-catatonic human just sat there, not responding.

He chewed on his lip, leaving the room reluctantly. Back down in the basement, he dragged Xander's father into the middle of the floor, then proceeded to tie him up with some fishing line that had been stored down there for some reason. *Won't hold up long, but should keep him from interrupting my little...shopping spree.* Nodding in satisfaction, he barely restrained himself from giving the man a few more kicks, wishing he could get rid of the chip and show this human exactly how he'd earned the name of 'Spike'.

Once he had the man safely trussed up, he searched the room and found a rather worn duffel bag. Going through Xander's things, he stuffed in some of the less repulsive clothes. He then went around the room grabbing up anything he thought Xander might want or need from this place, since he had every intention of making sure his human never returned here.

Having finished with that room, he carried his spoils up the stairs and out the door. Fortunately, the car was unlocked, so Spike just pitched his load into the back seat. In the house again, he rummaged through the rooms, piling up anything useful he'd found onto a

blanket that he had spread out on the rug in the living room.

Each time he added something, he took a second to check on Xander. The boy just lay there, huddled in on himself as much as possible, very obviously withdrawing from his surroundings. *Fuck! Gotta get outta here quick!*

He sprinted upstairs into the master bedroom. The sour stench of Xander's father filled this room, and the vampire had a sudden urge to retch. Shaking himself, he pawed through the dresser, grabbing a wallet and a set of keys, along with a few bits of jewelry that might prove valuable enough to hock.

On a whim, Spike dropped to his knees, peering under the bed. A shadowy object lurked in the far corner by the wall, and he reached under to pull it out. Hefting the heavy lock-box, he shook it. Even though he couldn't hear any rattling that might indicate money or jewelry, he decided to take it anyway. *Never know what people keep in these things. Could be something good, and I can always pitch it out.* A last look around the room revealed nothing else he might find worth the effort of stealing, so Spike hurried back down to the living room.

He placed the lock-box in the center of his pile, then folded the edges of the blanket up around it. Hefting it

onto his back, he staggered out to the car, using the keys he'd retained to open the trunk and letting the contents of the makeshift bag spill into the compartment. He slammed it shut, then ran back inside.

There were still no sounds from the basement, no signs that Xander's father was waking up. So Spike took his time about coaxing Xander back into his arms, taking a few moments to simply run his fingers through the boy's soft hair in what he hoped was a calming manner. "Luv, we're gonna go now. I'll just pick you up again, ok? Then we're out of this dump."

Doing his best not to startle Xander and send him into panic mode, the vampire moved slowly and smoothly to slip his arms under the boy and lift him. Something flickered inside him as Xander instinctively nuzzled closer, somehow recognizing a source of safety. *Not love. This is NOT love. I'm just...taking care of what's mine.* He spoke firmly to himself, determined not to succumb.

He settled Xander into the car, then got behind the wheel. He shifted so the boy's head was in his lap, then resumed petting the silky strands of hair under his fingertips. Starting the engine, he peeled out of the driveway, tires squealing loudly.

As they drove farther away from the house, Spike felt as if a burden had been lifted off him. He sighed, looking down at the brunette head pillowed in his lap. *Not love. This is DEFINATELY not love.*

Part Fifteen

Spike parked outside of the rather upscale-looking hotel, glancing down at the boy whose head was resting in his lap. "Xander? We're here, luv."

Xander opened his eyes, blinking disinterestedly.

"I'm gonna go get us a room, ok? I'll be right back." He shifted the boy's head onto the seat, then exited the car, making sure to lock the doors behind him.

Once inside the hotel lobby, he strode briskly to the front desk, ringing the bell loudly. A cheerful, perky-looking young man quickly arrived, and Spike booked a room for him and Xander on the bottom floor. He paid the man, ignoring the not so subtle come-ons directed at him, then took his key cards, hurrying back out to the car.

Shortly, he'd gotten the car pulled around the lot to park just outside their room. Using the card, he opened the door, then went back to retrieve his human. Xander was quickly carried inside and placed on the large bed, and Spike went out to retrieve his spoils from the trunk of the vehicle.

Leaving the majority of the stuff in an untidy heap by the door, he carried the duffel bag with him, unzipping it and rifling through its contents. He extracted the two orange bottles of pills, sighing as he rattled them quietly.

Well, least we ain't gotta worry about these for a while. Good thing I managed to get Numm--Xan to take 'em before I went shopping He felt around the duffel bag again, his hand closing around something smooth, which he pulled out.

Fuck. Almost forgot...

Spike set the pill bottles down on the bedside table, chewing his lip as he contemplated the innocuous little tube. He chanced a look at the boy curled up on the bed, then stared again at the tube clutched in his fist.

Steeling himself, he sat down next to Xander, reaching over to tap his shoulder lightly. Luminous brown eyes turned up to meet his, fairly screaming vulnerability.

"Xan? The, uh, the doc gave me this medicine. To...put on you." He held up the tube.

Xander gave the tube a dispassionate glance, then sort of half-shrugged.

Spike cleared his throat. "It, um...it goes...it goes in-inside you."

The eyes became confused, then suddenly blossomed with terror. Spike could hear the human's heartbeat speed up, as harsh panting filled the room.

Cursing himself, Spike dropped the tube and reached out for the trembling boy, crooning softly. Gathering him close, he whispered assurances to the panic-stricken human. The words eventually died of into a rumbling purr, Spike's chest vibrating with the sound as he continued to gently stroke Xander's hair. "Luv, I don't wanna do anythin' you don't want, but the doc says we have to use the cream so you don't get an infection and get sick. I won't hurt you. Never wanna hurt you. Trust me pet, please?"

Residual tremors still raced through the pale form in his arms, but after long minutes, Xander gave a shaky nod. He then burrowed closer to the vampire, breath hitching a bit.

Spike gave a thankful sigh, then eased Xander onto his side. This earned him more shaking, and he let his hand lay still on Xander's hip, not moving, not threatening. When he felt some of the tension release, he began to move his hand in a circular pattern, doing his best to keep the motion calm and soothing.

Xander shuddered, then relaxed, melting back bonelessly. His eyes drifted shut as he let the feeling of being cherished wash over him. He drew in a quick breath when fingers slipped under the waistband of his sweatpants, tugging a little. Hesitantly, he lifted up enough for Spike to move the material down around his thighs, and he felt his cheeks heat up with shame as the hand brushed across his bottom. It didn't stay there, but moved down to push at his legs, coaxing them up until he lay in a fetal position.

Spike gulped, then reached for the tube again, twisting the cap off and breaking the little metal seal. He squirted a small amount out onto his index finger, then tossed the tub up to the head of the bed. Taking a deep breath, he parted Xander's nether cheeks, bringing the violated orifice into view. He hissed at the condition of the boy's anus, the flesh there raw and swollen. Pushing down a wave of rage, he reached his lubricated finger down to the hole.

Xander sucked in a sobbing breath as the cool digit touched him...there. He couldn't keep from beginning to tremble again as silent tears dripped down onto the bed.

Damnit! Spike could smell Xander's misery, and wished he didn't have to do this...not with the boy so fragile. But the only thing he could do was finish as quickly as possible to end the boy's torment. He pressed his finger into the abused flesh, wincing as he heard a soft, choked-off cry. Being as gentle as possible, he advanced into the tender opening, twisting his finger to search for the spot.

There. He growled softly as he felt the length of the tear, but changed it back to a soothing purr when he detected a rise in the scent of fear Xander was putting off. Taking care, he managed to get some the ointment spread along the length of the wound, then slipped his finger back out. Quickly, he pulled Xander's pants back up around his hips, then settled himself close behind him, not quite touching, but able to feel the body heat given off by the human.

Spike raised the intensity of his purring, once more taking a chance on stroking Xander's hair. Gradually, he felt the tremors ease, and eventually Xander drifted off into a light sleep.

Carefully, Spike crept out of the bed, recapping the tube and setting it down next to the pills. Taking care not to make much noise, he picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Gr'thek? Spike here, mate. Look, got another prezzie for you." "No, I am not going into the business, it's a...special case." "Yeah." "Uh-huh." "Well, could you come get this one?" "Fine. I'm at the big hotel over by 5th and Main." "Yeah, that's the one." "Great. Oh, and could you do me a bit of a favor? My ride got a flat and I had to leave it. Could you get one of your mates to go with you, maybe change the tire and bring the car up here?" "Yeah, yeah, I'll owe you." He gave the location of his DeSoto, then added, "Oh, by the by, I left a minion, name of Thomas, watching it. Just tell 'im I sent you for it and he's free to go back to his fun." "Thanks, mate."

Spike hung up the phone. He checked on Xander, noting the barely perceptible shivering. Frowning at his thoughtlessness, he carefully moved the boy and pulled the covers down, tucking the boy under them. Xander murmured a little, then settled into a deeper sleep.

Spike looked at him, resisting the urge to begin petting him once more. Full of nervous energy, he began pacing the room, waiting for the Hk'mel demon to arrive.

Part Sixteen

Spike's head jerked up, the knocking on the door wrenching him away from his contemplation of the sleeping human.

"'Bout bloody time," he muttered as he stalked over and jerked the door open. He raised an eyebrow at the blue-scaled demon. "Took you long enough, mate."

Gr'thek snorted. "Your 'Thomas' wouldn't stop his whining and it took me forever to...convince him that you sent me for the car. Kept whimpering about chains and sunlight." He rolled his eyes. "Fledglings."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Hey, be a pal an' help me bring in the stuff from the trunk."

Gr'thek nodded, following Spike back out to the DeSoto. Between them, they made short work of the assorted groceries that had been stored there hours before. Spike was glad he'd found a decent place to stay that came

equipped with a mini-fridge to keep his blood. No microwave, but he'd figure something out.

Gr'thek looked around the room curiously, eyes lingering over the pile of goodies still heaped in the middle of the room before eventually settling on the restlessly sleeping figure in the bed. "So...that your human?"

Spike nodded tersely, quickly checking to make sure Xander wasn't waking up.

The demon frowned slightly, sniffing. "I thought you said you claimed him? He hasn't--"

"Hey, look. I'll do things my way, ok? Things are...hectic right now." He glared at Gr'thek until the demon shrugged, holding his hands up defensively.

"Just wondering, no need to get violent." He bent closer to Xander. "He smells like pain and fear." He glanced up at Spike. "What happened?"

Spike gently sat on the edge of the bed, brushing a lock of Xander's hair away from his face. He sighed. "His 'father' happened. And I can't fucking do anything to him!"

"You want I should get some of my boys together, arrange a little...accident?"

The vampire seriously considered this for a minute, but then shook his head. "I want the pleasure of killing him myself. He's mine. " He grinned. "Tell you what, though. You do what you can to make his life a living hell, just make sure you don't kill him."

Gr'thek responded with a toothy grin of his own. "Deal."

"The bastard's name and address should be on the papers in his car out there."

A low chuckle sounded. "That's his car? Spike, you...demon you!" Then he got serious, settling down to business. "It's a piece of junk, Spike. I'd be doing you a favor to take it for free."

"It's yours, mate. I don't want the damned thing." He pulled out a cigarette, about to light it when he glanced down at Xander again. Sighing, he merely rolled the cylinder between his fingers.

Gr'thek was shocked. His jaw gaped slightly as he stared unblinking at the blonde. He swallowed hard. "Um, Spike? You just... *gave* me the car."

"Yeah, so?"

"Woah. This is really affecting you if you aren't even trying to get a few buck out of me." He tilted his head to the side. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fine," he replied shortly. "Why wouldn't I be?" His hand again strayed to the human's head, sifting through the fine strands of hair.

Looking around the hotel room, Gr'thek hissed softly. "This is a pretty nice room, Spike. You got enough money to stay here?"

Spike gestured toward the pile of stuff. "Got some things in there I could hock for a few quid. We'll manage."

"If you're sure." He was about to say more when a muffled moan caught their attention. Spike shushed him with a waved hand, bending over the boy.

Xander's eyes popped open as he gasped loudly, frantically searching the room. When he saw Spike, he visibly relaxed, only to tense again once he noticed the other inhabitant of the room. He shrank back, his breathing becoming erratic.

Frowning, Spike edged closer to the human. "It's ok, Xan. He's a friend of mine. He won't do nothing to you." He slowly reached out a hand, and when Xander made no

move to avoid it, gently brushed it along his arm. "What happened, luv? Bad dream?"

Xander nodded shakily, still glancing warily at Gr'thek. He curled up, wrapping his arms around his torso as he started rocking slightly, never moving his wide eyes from the other demon.

Spike got up, walking over to the Hk'mel. "Think you should go, mate. He don't seem to be too comfortable with you being here."

Gr'thek squinted at the vampire, then allowed a tiny grin to cross his face. Gesturing for Spike to follow him, he made his way over to the door. "You know what you're getting into with him? It won't be easy."

"Like that's ever stopped me."

"You should claim him, you know. Officially. He needs all the protection he can get."

"I will. When he's ready for it." Spike looked over his shoulder at Xander. "He's not exactly in the best of shape right now."

Nodding in agreement, Gr'thek continued. "You should tell him, too. About the claim. He might find it reassuring."

Spike shrugged. "Dunno 'bout that."

"Spike. As a friend, listen to me. Don't try to keep your claim a secret from him; it will only hurt you both when he eventually finds out."

The vampire's eyes flashed yellow for a brief second, then Spike let out a heavy sigh. "I know. And I will. Just...later."

Gr'thek examined him closely, finally grunting in acceptance. Turning, he started toward his newest acquisition.

"Gr'thek."

The soft call halted him, and he turned.

Spike shoved his hands into his pockets, staring at the ground crossly. Scuffling his feet, he lifted his head. "Thanks mate," he said quietly.

White teeth gleamed in the moonlight as Gr'thek grinned widely. "No problem, Spike. Just...don't let it get around, would you? Don't want my reputation shot to hell."

Spike smiled, watching as the demon got into the car and drove off. Closing the door, he crept back to the bed. "Xan?" He could tell by the human's breathing and

heartbeat that he wasn't asleep, but his eyes were now screwed tightly shut.

The blonde thought a moment, then pulled back the covers and slid in behind the boy. Again a hand went out to pet warm skin, soothing the human, trying to banish the smell of fear that had abruptly returned. "He's gone now, pet. Just you and me. Go to sleep, Xan. I'll watch out for you."

Xander quivered, and Spike felt the tension leak out of him. He was surprised to feel the boy's body scoot back until it barely made contact with his own, but set his hand on Xander's hip. He chanced a brief, feather-light kiss to the nape of Xander's neck, resolutely ignoring the angry red bite mark that was so obvious there. Grateful that there was no negative reaction to his touch, he started purring again, hoping the sound would lull the battered human back to sleep.

Feeling oddly safe and protected, Xander barely noticed when his feigned slumber quickly became real as the comforting sound of purring surrounded him.

Part Seventeen

Spike woke from a restless sleep, immediately checking on the boy in his arms. Xander was sleeping deeply,

emitting the occasional snore. Spike gently drew himself away, slowly easing off the bed. He walked around to the other side, kneeling and staring intently at Xander's face. He smiled at the damp patch on the pillow, right under the human's mouth. Suppressing the urge to start stroking those dark locks of hair again, he stood abruptly, moving to the fridge where he'd stashed his supply of blood. Pulling out a packet, he drained it cold.

He tossed the baggie in the trash, then stood facing the covered windows, deep in thought. After an indeterminate amount of time, he heard small snuffling noises coming from the bed, and turned. He watched as Xander buried his head deeper in the damp pillow, then finally pried his eyes open. The boy peered blearily around the hotel room, brow wrinkled in confusion as he tried to get his bearings.

Xander's eyes flew wide when he finally noticed Spike, and a deep flush stained his cheeks. He stiffened uncomfortably, then whimpered softly as flashes of pain flared through him.

Instantly, Spike was by his side, pills and drink in hand. Xander took them gratefully, still not staring into the vampire's face.

Spike sighed. Cautiously, he reached out a hand, cupping it under Xander's chin and tugging the boy's face toward him. "Xan?"

Xander closed his eyes, refusing to make contact. His fingers plucked nervously at the covers, and his pulse was racing.

Spike could smell the embarrassment radiating off him, and he wasn't sure how to make it stop. Taking a chance, he slid onto the bed, coaxing Xander around so the boy's head was pillowed against his chest. "Xan, it's ok, there's nothin' to worry about. What is it?"

Xander shuddered, holding himself tense. He opened and shut his mouth a few times, unable to form words. Finally, he sniffled quietly. "I-I just...last night...and he...then you...I-I--" His breath caught, and he pressed his face into the soft fabric of Spike's shirt.

Spike tightened his hold just a bit, rocking a little as he curled around the warm body in his arms. "I'm not gonna let him near you again, luv. Not gonna let anyone hurt you ever again. You're mine now, and chip or not, I'll fucking kill that bastard if I even smell him within a hundred yards of you. I'll have him turned if I have to, so I can get the satisfaction of torturin' him while he screams and begs for mercy; keep him in pain for days

before I finally dust him." His voice was hissing by now, his eyes burning gold as he dreamed of the moment when he would exact revenge.

Xander listened to this impassioned speech in near-disbelief, his brain locked on one word. "Y-yours? Wha-what do you mean?" *Bad, bad, nobody wants me, so dirty, bad.* He shivered.

Oh, bollocks. Again, the oppressive scent of misery swirled around Spike, and he held back a snarl. *Damn it, I'm really starting to loathe that smell!* He made tiny 'shush'-ing noises as he kept on rocking, and collected his thoughts. *Well, fuck. I gotta tell him 'bout me claiming him.*

{He'll probably freak. Why would he even want to be mine when he just got away from *him*? What'll I do if he wants me gone?}

It'll just be worse if I don't tell him.

{But why now?}

Because I said so, sod it all!

{Aw, bloody hell!}

Spike sighed deeply. "Xanluv? Got somethin' to tell you."

Xander tilted his head up, finally looking at Spike, albeit with a great deal of trepidation. *Gonna make me leave, doesn't want me, can't want me. Dirty, so dirty, can't go back, please don't make me go back!* He could feel himself getting dizzy from lack of oxygen as his breath came in short little pants.

"Breath, Xander. Breath for me." Frowning slightly, Spike rubbed the boy's suddenly clammy arms, wondering what was wrong. "It's just, well the other night, you know, at the clinic?" He winced, realizing he was really not doing this with the greatest amount of tact. He decided to just spit it out and see where things went. "See, I kinda...claimed you. It's, uh, not...official, or anything, but word will probably get around, and it pretty much marks you as...mine." He trailed off in a whisper, hoping that Xander wouldn't take it too badly.

Xander sat in shock, completely stupefied. *Wants...me? His? Not leaving?* His brain whirled, trying to grasp the simple fact that someone actually wanted him enough to be...protective? Because Spike was. Protecting him. Keeping him away from his father...safe. But...

Spike was relieved when there was no outburst, and Xander's terror slowly faded. But there was still

something wrong there... "Xan? What else? I know there's something else. Can you tell me?"

The brunette sniffled, burrowing deeper against Spike. He tried to shrug casually, but it was obvious the vampire wasn't buying it. With a sigh, he whispered, "Dirty."

Huh? "What?" Clearly confused, Spike sniffed at the human, not noticing anything overtly offensive to the senses about his condition.

Biting his lip, Xander made himself explain. "Dirty. I can...f-f-feel him. A-all over me. It...it won't go away. Why won't it go away?"

Spike felt like growling again, but figured that might give Xander the wrong idea. Instead, he settled for holding him as tight as possible given his injuries, and rocking some more. "I dunno. I could -- you want me to wash you?"

Xander hesitated, blushing, then gave a small, almost imperceptible, nod.

Swallowing, Spike nodded. "Ok. Stay here." He eased away from the boy and, grabbing the ice bucket, went into the bathroom. He filled the container with steaming water, adding just a touch of soap. Grabbing a bath

sponge that was by the tub, he carried it, the bucket, and a couple of towels back to the bed.

"The...the sheets will get wet," Xander stated softly when he realized what Spike intended.

The vampire snorted. "Sod the sheets. We'll call for new ones." He shoved the blanket down to the foot of the bed, then gazed at the bruised human lying on the stark white bed. "Um, can I..." He waved a hand at Xander's clothes, absurdly grateful for the fact that he couldn't blush.

Xander had no such good fortune, and his body was suffused by an embarrassed flush. But he shrugged, remembering that Spike had already seen him totally naked that night in the shower-- He forced his thoughts away from that, and answered in what he hoped was a steady voice, "Um, yeah, sure."

With as much calm as he could make himself project, Spike set the bucket down on the stand by the bed, placing the sponge next to it. The towels were tossed to the foot of the bed. Willing his hands not to shake, he carefully removed Xander's shirt. Tossing it onto the floor, he contemplated the bindings around the human's chest, then proceeded to unwrap them very carefully,

hiding a grimace as the violent, purpled mess was revealed.

Moving down, he hooked his fingers into the waistband of Xander's sweatpants, pausing to look the boy in the eye.

Xander blinked a few times, then closed his eyes, lifting up a little.

Sighing, Spike slid the material down, making sure not to jostle the injured leg. Pants off, he gently lifted the wounded limb, using the softest of touches to remove the bandages there. Then he just sat for a moment, looking at the pale, mottled skin of the human he'd claimed.

Not wanting to make Xander any more nervous, he shook himself, reaching for the sponge. Dipping it into the warm water, he got it wet, then began dabbing at the brunette's face, carefully swiping it over every bit of skin. Down Xander's neck, where he paid special attention to the still-livid bite mark. After washing it thoroughly, he hesitated, then, kissing the tips of two fingers, brushed the fingers lightly over the wound.

Xander's eyes flew back open, and he stared at the vampire, who smiled sheepishly, and continued on down

to his chest. He watched, incredulous, as the soulless demon ever so gently washed his torso, then sent his kissed-fingers pattering over every bruise. The arms were next, and each injury, no matter how minor, was gingerly cleaned with the wet sponge, then brushed with fingers that were kissed before each touch.

Then the legs, with special care paid to the swollen knee. When those were done, Spike bit his lip, considering, then softly brushed the sponge across Xander's genitals, moving them about so he could get them fully washed.

Xander made no protest, just watched, amazed. He didn't even pause when Spike nudged his hip, just rolled compliantly onto his stomach. He closed his eyes as the soft sponge moved over his back, sending trickles of water cascading down his sides. The backs of his legs came next, and when Spike reached his feet, he managed not to pull away as the soles were tickled softly before being washed.

The only tense moment occurred when Spike moved up again, letting the sponge dance over Xander's buttocks. He could see the muscles in them clench, then relax as the boy let out a deep breath, trusting himself to the vampire's ministrations.

Spike first washed the pale mounds, then kissed all five fingers and laid them over the five finger-shaped bruises on Xander's left hip. He repeated the action on the right hip, trying to keep his motions non-threatening when all he wanted to do was go find Xander's bastard of a father and rip him into shreds for leaving those bruises.

Then, every sense fixed on the boy so he'd know if this was going too far, Spike swiped the sponge down Xander's cleft, darting into the shadowed area between the cheeks. Dropping the sponge to the bed, he carefully separated the boy's buttocks, then kissed his thumb, letting it rest softly on the bruised, reddened ring of muscle for a heart-stopping second.

Xander drew in a shaky breath, but made no movement to pull away.

Never again, Xanluv. I swear that to you. No one ever hurts you again. Smiling almost sadly, Spike picked up the sponge again and dropped it into the bucket. In total silence, he redressed Xander in clean clothes that he pulled out of the duffel bag, re-wrapping his knee and ribs. Finished, he carried the bucket back to the bathroom, where he emptied it into the sink. That done, he made his way back to the bed.

The sheets had survived without getting too wet, so he pulled the blanket back up, covering Xander again. Dark, chocolate eyes stared up at him, something akin to wonder glowing in them. "Better, pet?"

Giving the vampire a tremulous smile, Xander nodded. "Th-thank you, Spike," he said softly.

Spike grinned, smoothing out the boy's mussed hair. "Not a problem. You rest some more, I'll go get you some breakfast."

~*~*~*~*~

As one, the Scooby gang -- minus Xander -- piled into Giles' car for the short ride over to Xander's house. The ex-Watcher had protested the need for such a turnout, but Willow's worry for her friend had infected Buffy to a smaller degree, and he'd been convinced to lend his vehicle to the cause.

When they reached Xander's house, Willow vaulted from the car, quickly making her way to the back of the house, where she knocked loudly on the door. She cast a frantic glance at Tara, then looked pleadingly at Buffy when the door refused her attempts to open it.

Rolling her eyes, Buffy shooed the others out of her way, then kicked out, sending the door crashing inwards. Bowing slightly, she gestured for Willow to enter.

The line of people made their way down the stairs, staring around the empty basement.

A gasp from Tara drew everyone's attention, and they followed the direction of her finger to a puddle of congealing blood on the floor.

"Oh, goddess," Willow breathed, then dashed into the bathroom, hoping to find Xander there. A low cry of disappointment informed the others that he was not. She came back out, stricken. "I don't understand. What could've happened?"

Buffy shook her head, glaring around the room. She opened her mouth to answer, but was cut off when the inside door to the basement creaked open, and a large figure holding a bat descended. They all gaped at the man, whose face was a collection of bruises.

"Who the hell are all of you? Get out of my house!" He waved the bat menacingly, drawing attention to the thin red lines crisscrossing his wrists.

"Pardon me, sir," Giles said, "but we're looking for a young man, Xander. Would he happen to be home?"

"Xander? Ha! Last I saw of him, he was waltzing out of here after he and that freaky blonde friend of his attacked me and robbed me blind!"

"I--what? Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Ransacked my house, and stole my car, too! And I swear, that blonde guy was on something -- his eyes were all yellow, and he had this deformed face. Not that I got to see much of it before he was on me. If he hadn't caught me by surprise, there's no way he could have done so much damage." He glared. "And why am I even telling you this?"

"Woah, wait a second here. Weird blonde guy? And he attacked you?" Buffy stepped closer to the man."

"Fucking sucker punched me, the bastard, then tried to beat my head into the floor." He jerked his chin over at the blood the gang had noticed.

"Oh, good heavens," Giles breathed, looking faintly ill.

"Well, well, looks like somebody got his bite back," Buffy muttered darkly. Raising her voice, she continued sweetly, "Well, thank you for your time. We'll just be leaving now." She ushered everyone back up the stairs and out into the yard.

Willow looked back longingly. "But...Xander?"

"Don't worry, Willow, we'll find out what happened to him." She patted the other girl's shoulder comfortingly. "Spike, on the other hand" she snarled as they all climbed back into the car, "is dust."

Part Eighteen

Buffy slumped on her stool, expression grim. The gang had retired to the Bronze after a day of fruitless searching. Spike's crypt had appeared to be ransacked, and the vampire himself was nowhere to be found. Even his car was missing from its usual spot, and Buffy had thought it would have been a simple thing to find considering its... uniqueness. But it seemed no one was talking if they knew anything about...anything. Even Willie hadn't squealed, which either meant he really didn't know -- unlikely -- or he was way more scared of talking than getting beaten up by the Slayer. *Not* a good sign.

Giles watched his charge consume yet another drink. He could see how the tension of this situation was eating away at her, but he could think of nothing that might help. The revelation about Spike had shocked them all, and they were all worried that, eventually, the vampire's forcibly repressed violent tendencies would break out, resulting in a bloodbath.

Willow just sat close to her girlfriend, sniffing occasionally. Her eyes were red from crying, and she tried desperately not to imagine what might have happened to her best friend, what Spike may have done to him.

Buffy sat up straight when she caught a snatch of the conversation from a few tables away. She stood abruptly, making her way over to the man who was telling his tale of woe. She tapped him on the shoulder, and when he turned, asked, "What did you say?"

The man looked her up and down. "Excuse me?"

Buffy smiled invitingly at him. "I heard you talking about a blonde guy who attacked you. What happened?"

Eager to impress, the man went into his spiel again. "Well, I was driving home the night before last, and this bleached blonde punk guy jumps out in the middle of the

road. I slam on my brakes and get out to make sure he wasn't hurt, you know? So, there I am trying to help him, when he grabs me. His face goes all weird and, I kid you not, he grew these fangs. Fangs! Well, let me tell you, *that* was freaky enough, but then his eyes start this glowing thing like they could burn right through me. And he shakes me really hard, totally lifting me off the ground, then he tosses me about 15 feet away. He starts coming after me all growling and snarling and shit, and hey, I'm not ashamed to admit it, but I high-tailed it out of there! Yeah, buddy!" He tossed back the rest of his drink, then continued. "Well, I go back a little later, and guess what? My car is gone. That...thing stole my car! What a perfect ending to my day, huh?"

Buffy nodded as if in commiseration. "So, um, where did this happen, do you remember?" she asked nonchalantly. Her eyes grew wide when the man gave her the name of the street that Xander lived on. "Was...was there anyone else with him?"

The man shrugged. "Not so I noticed. Although I looked back once, and he was lugging this big bundle into the street. Probably a body or something."

"Um, well, thanks." Turning, she hurried back to where Giles and the witches were waiting curiously. "Jackpot!" she announced.

"What? What is it?" Willow leaned toward her, almost falling off her stool.

"That guy saw Spike out by Xander's house the other night. Spike attacked him and stole his car, and he was carrying something that could have been a person."

"Oh goddess!" Willow gasped. "You don't think he's...dead?"

Buffy patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Of course not, Wills. His father didn't say anything about Xander being killed. I'm sure Spike just knocked him out or something. Don't worry, we'll hunt down that bleached wonder and get Xander back."

Willow responded with a wavering grin. Then her jaw dropped. "Oh! A spell! Why didn't I think of that before!" She turned toward Tara in excitement. "We can do a scrying spell and find out where Spike has Xander."

"Yes, of course," Giles put in. "I believe I have just the thing in one of my books, it's just a matter of getting the proper ingredients together. Well, that and translating the spell, of course."

Buffy threw up her hands. "It would have been more helpful to think of this *before* we wasted the entire day...but better late than never. Well? What are you guys waiting for? Let's get cracking!"

Willow stood in the doorway, bag in hand. "Ok, good news and bad news." She held up the bag. "Good news is, I got all but the pickled Troglith eyes for the spell. Bad news is, none of the stores have those in stock, so I ordered some, but it will take a few days to get it in."

Frowning, Buffy ceased her pacing, wrinkling her nose. "Pickled Trog--? Never mind, I *really* don't want to know. Damn!" She glanced at her Watcher. "Giles? Are you sure we need the eyes? Maybe you translated the spell ingredients wrong."

Giles removed his glasses, polishing them thoroughly as he leveled a hard stare at the Slayer. "I hardly think you need to call my abilities into question simply because you're frustrated. Blaming me won't help any of us a bit."

Buffy flopped down onto a chair, groaning heavily. "Yeah, I know. But I'm kinda 'take-action girl' here. I *hate* waiting! Besides, who knows what's happening to Xander in the meantime?"

"In that case, I'd suggest we keep up the search for either him or Spike while we wait, since it will be days before we can implement the spell." He replaced his glasses, going over the spell translation a final time.

Grinning, Buffy cracked her knuckles. "Yep. Time to go pound some demons -- and whiney little bartenders -- for more information." She bounced up, moving over to where Willow had seated herself beside her girlfriend. "You coming?"

~*~*~*~*~

Spike sat on the bed behind Xander, running a soft brush through the human's hair in what had quickly become a daily ritual. Each snarl and tangle was gently picked apart and smoothed out, and the vampire delighted in the feel of the silken strands between his fingers. He'd always loved brushing Dru's hair, but the vampiress was usually too impatient to sit and let him play his fill with it. *Hmm. Maybe I can convince the boy to grow it out some.*

"Spike?" The name was said in a tone just barely above a whisper.

Spike frowned slightly. He didn't like how quiet and withdrawn Xander had gotten over the last few days. He rarely spoke, and when he did, it was always in the same soft voice. There had been no inane arguments, no witty quips, no anything. It was like he was simply...existing.

The vampire wasn't used to Xander being so passive. Sure, it might have been amusing before to have control over one of Slutty's little lackeys, but the boy had come to be something more than that to him. And he did *not* care for this change that had come over his Nummy. Not one bit.

The vampire gave himself an internal shake. *Later, dolt!* "Yeah, Xan?" he finally responded.

Xander hesitated, then twisted about in Spike's loose grip. "Are we...are we gonna stay here?"

Spike's brow furrowed. The hotel wasn't cheap, and he'd quickly gone through the money he'd managed to acquire. And most of the junk he'd lugged away from Xander's old place ended up being virtually worthless, providing him with much less income than he'd anticipated. In short, they were almost broke. *Damn! Times like these I wish I'd listened to the pouf's incessant nattering about investing. Could do with a stash of quid about now.*

He smoothed his face out, offering the boy a smile. "Not to worry, mate. Spike's got everything all figured out."
Liar! "We'll look for some other place after we get out of the clinic tonight, ok?"

Xander hunched down imperceptibly. "D-do we have to go?"

Spike set the brush down, twining his fingers deeper into Xander's hair as he began to massage his scalp. "Hey, no big deal. The doc'll do a bit of a poke and prod, and you'll be good as new." He rubbed his nose against the base of Xander's neck. "I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

"How?" He relaxed as those magic fingers seemed to suck his tension away.

Don't say it. Don't even say it you moron!

{I'm not listening...} "Well, you know, once I've claimed you proper, the other demon types won't mess with you."

You idiot! You said it!

{Oh, sod off!}

He's gonna freak when he finds out what you want to do. You KNOW he will!

{If you don't bloody well take a hike, I'll make *you* figure out what to do about our...financial straits.}

Ooooh. Scary though. You know as well as I do that I'd end up handling that anyway. I mean, who's got the brains around here?

{You are *one* step away--}

"Um, Spike?"

Spike jerked out of his internal dialogue. "Huh? What was that, pet?"

"I just...I asked what you meant by 'proper'." Large, liquid brown eyes gazed up at the vampire trustingly.

Oh, it's that look... Tell him!

{Oh my. And who's changed their tune?}

Yeah, like you can resist when he does THAT. Please!

"Well, it's a bit...um, you don't have to do it, not if you don't want to." He sighed. "It's...you know how vamps are made, right?"

Xander nodded, although it was apparent the he was somewhat confused.

"Yeah, the whole exchanging blood thing. Well, the strongest vampires can do something similar without actually turning someone. See, I could take a little of your blood, give you a bit of mine, and it would...mark you. Other demons will sense it, and pretty much let you be."

Xander's breath caught, and he shuddered, eyes growing wide as he stared at Spike in disbelief. "Y-you...you..." He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again.

"You...want to...bite me?"

Spike gulped. "I wouldn't hurt you, luv," he assured the boy. "I would *never* hurt you." He rocked the human gently, purring softly until he felt Xander once more relax. "I'm not gonna make you...it's just...it's an option."

There was silence for long moments, then Xander sighed. "Ok," he whispered. Tilting his head up, he looked directly at Spike. "P-promise there won't be much pain?"

Spike gave him a quick hug. "Swear, Xan. Never any pain." Shifting them around, he lay Xander down on his back, efficiently removing his shirt. He lay next to the boy, hand stroking lightly on his belly. "Shh, luv. Just relax for me."

Scooting in closer, he nuzzled his head into the curve of Xander's shoulder. He scented the boy, nearly moaning

at the lack of fear and the faintest glimmer of perhaps something more. Carefully, he turned Xander's face toward him, brushing a finger over slightly parted lips. He slowly leaned over the human, letting his features settle into their vampiric planes. He noticed the jump in pulse, but still detected no fear, so he lowered his head to the bared neck.

Ever so gently, Spike let his lips press against the tender skin. His tongue flickered out to lave the patch of flesh, and then he brought his fangs close. Mindful of the chip in his head, he sincerely tried to convince it that doing this wouldn't harm Xander, but would prove to be a source of protection. He figured it had worked when his fangs sliced neatly in, parting the fragile skin, and there wasn't the faintest twinge of pain in his head. He didn't bite deep, just lapped at the blood that welled from the twin punctures. He barely even took a mouthful, all told.

Reluctantly, the vampire pulled himself away from the trickle of rich fluid. Sitting up a bit, he made eye contact with Xander and brought his wrist to his lips. He bit down, opening up a small wound. Then, he offered his bloody wrist to Xander, who swallowed hard, then timidly brought the wrist to his mouth. He grimaced at first when the coppery liquid rushed into his mouth, but obediently consumed the liquid. He had only swallowed

once or twice when Spike removed his wrist, unconsciously licking up the remainder of the blood that had escaped.

Relieved that the claim was now a little more binding, Spike lay down again, slinging his arm over Xander's waist. He tenderly kissed the spot just below Xander's ear, murmuring, "Sleep now, pet. Everything's gonna be fine."

Xander sighed, snuggling into the cool body next to him as he quickly nodded off.

Spike watched the sleeping boy for a few minutes, then closed his eyes as well. Smiling almost sweetly, he curved his body protectively around Xander's, joining him in slumber. "What's taking so long?" Buffy whined as she paced around the room, glaring every so often at the witches.

"Almost...done!" Willow beamed happily, making on last check that everything was in the proper position. Buffy bounded forward, kneeling down beside the round mirror that had been placed on the floor. Giles and Riley followed suit, and the five were soon gathered in a loose circle.

Taking a deep breath, Willow began chanting, her voice soon joined by Tara's. Their voices rose in pitch, and when the last word was spoken, there was a bright flash from the mirror. Everyone leaned forward eagerly.

In the mirror, an image was slowly emerging from black fog. It looked like a large building, and as the picture gained clarity, Willow bit back a cry of relief. "I know that place! It's that new hotel out on the north side of town. I just--" her voice hitched, "I went past it to pick up some of the supplies for the spell."

Tara held her hand comfortingly. "Y-you didn't know he was there. It'll be ok, really. You can't blame yourself."

Buffy waved a hand to shush them. "It's getting closer."

They watched as the mirror seemed to zoom in on the hotel, curving around the back and pausing just outside one of the doors. There was a flicker, then the inside of the room was shown. The picture rotated, then showed them an aerial view of the bed.

Buffy hissed when she saw Spike, curled around the missing Scooby. The hiss turned into a gasp of anger when Xander's head turned, bringing the set of fang marks on his neck into full view. "His mouth," she whispered. "There's blood on his mouth."

And there was. Faint drops of red glistening on his lower lip, a smudge of darker color at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh goddess, no," Willow whimpered, burying her face in Tara's shoulder.

Giles sat back, shocked. "It can't be," he breathed.

Jumping up, Buffy tried to suppress a growl of rage. "That bastard!" she spat. "He turned him. He turned Xander! He's fucking dust!"

"Now Buffy," Giles interjected, "We don't know that for certain. It-it could just be that...that..."

Buffy glared at her Watcher. "I know exactly what it is. And I'm going hunting." She grabbed up a couple of stakes, heading for the door. Riley scrambled after her, and the two were quickly gone.

Willow sobbed once, a hand over her mouth. "Not Xander," she cried softly. "Please, not Xander."

Tara held her, shooting a worried glance at Giles. "C-can't we do anything?"

Giles removed his glasses, polishing them absently.

"Well, if it's true about Xander, then I'm sure Spike will shortly be dust."

"But...what about Xander?" she asked softly, patting Willow's head as another sob issued forth.

"I...I suppose we could try a soul restoration spell. If we can gather together the right components."

Willow dashed the tears from her eyes, sitting up with a determined look on her face. "Yes. Yes! Let's do it."

Biting her lip, Tara asked, "What if Buffy gets to him first?"

Willow shook her head. "No. She won't kill Xander. She *won't!*" She jumped to her feet, pulling Tara up after her. "Let's go! We need to find an Orb of Thesulah!"

~*~*~*~*~

Xander sat in bed, staring at the door with trepidation. "I don't wanna go," he whispered.

Spike paused, arms full. Taking a look at the brunette, he unceremoniously let everything drop at his feet, quickly moving to Xander's side. "Aw, pet, I know, but we have to go. Doctor's orders, y'know." He hugged the boy close. "Don't worry, mate. Won't let no one hurt you. Ok?"

Shivering, Xander nodded. "'kay."

Spike kissed his shoulder, then stood again. "Gonna finish packin' the car. Don't move, I'll be back in a sec."

Xander watched as Spike retrieved his deposited cargo, disappearing through the door. Another two trips with the rest, and Spike was back, gently hefting the human and carrying him to the car. He set him down, buckled him up, then got in the driver's side.

"Already checked out, so say goodbye. Got a line on a new place, we'll swing by after your appointment, ok?" Spike put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot.

"Sure," came the soft reply. Xander peeked over at Spike, then inched his hand across the seat. The vampire glanced down, noticed, and dropped his own hand from the steering wheel, twining their fingers together as he drove.

A few minutes after they left, a blond-haired girl rounded the corner, boyfriend in tow. They headed straight for the lobby, and she planted herself in front of the large desk there.

Buffy glared hard at the young man, ignoring the wide-eyed girl by his side. She leaned forward menacingly,

taking a good look at his nametag. "Jason. I'm looking for a friend," she stated.

Jason cocked an eyebrow, not in the least bit intimidated. "Really? Yes, I would suppose you'd be in need of one."

The girl, Leslie according to her tag, giggled.

Buffy struggled to reign in her temper. Through gritted teeth she continued, "It's kind of an emergency. His...brother was in an accident. He told us he was staying here with a friend, but forgot to give us the room number."

"Uh-huh." Jason just continued staring at her, noting how her face was turning an interesting shade of pink. He fully expected to see steam coming out her ears any second.

Riley stepped forward, laying a calming hand on Buffy's arm. "It really is important that we find him," he explained rationally. "His name is Xander. He's about six feet tall, dark hair and eyes, not skinny but not too built. Sound familiar?"

Jason shrugged. "Not in the slightest."

Buffy slapped her hand down on the desk. "Look, we know he's here, now just tell us where!"

Again, Riley spoke up. "Well, maybe you saw his friend. He's a little shorter, bleached blonde hair, blue eyes, kind of slender."

Nodding now, Jason grinned. "Yeah, him. I remember him. Checked in about a week ago. Never saw anyone with him, though."

"Which. Room." Buffy was visibly struggling to control her temper now.

"1742, around back."

"Great. Thanks so much," she said sarcastically, then stalked out of the lobby. Riley smiled apologetically, then followed.

Leslie frowned at Jason. "Why didn't you tell her that blondie already checked out?"

Jason snickered. "Are you kidding? She gave me the willies; she was definitely lying about that whole emergency thing. I don't think she's a friend at all." He grinned widely. "Besides, that guy was totally hot, and you just know he was here shacking up with his boyfriend. Probably trying to get away from her."

Leslie sighed heavily. "Yeah. What a waste. I wouldn't have kicked him outta my bed for eating crackers!"

Moaning in agreement, Jason slumped over the counter.
"Me neither. Damn, why can't I find a man like that?"

Buffy kicked the door in, ignoring Riley's muted protest. She snarled in fury at the barren room, totally devoid of Xander, Spike, or anything else other than the usual hotel things. "Damn it! They're gone!" She kicked a chair, then went to the bed and ripped the ruffled covers off. There were a few small splotches of blood on the sheets, but nothing else. "Just missed them. Fuck! They were just here!" She pounded the bed with her fists.

Riley reached for her. "Hey, we'll find him. At least we know he's still in town."

"Yeah, for now. Who's to say he won't just run?"

"Well, he's always tried for you before. He probably turned Xander to get to you, and now he's just waiting for the right time to use it. You can't let him get you off balance."

Buffy took a deep breath. "You're right. I have to stay calm." Another few breaths, and she straightened. "Ok, back to Giles'. Time for a new plan."

~*~*~*~*~*~

Spike paced outside the room. He wanted to be in there, with Xander. But the doc had asked for a minute alone with the boy. *Fine. But if he so much as makes him whimper, I'll...I'll...*

{What? Glare at him and call him a mean, nasty man? Chip, remember?}

Oh, who asked you? He continued pacing, his path growing until he was treading the length of the hall. His attention was so focused on what was happening inside that room, he didn't notice someone approaching. He simply kept walking, and reached the corner at the same time as the other person.

They collided, and the smaller man went sprawling to the floor. Spike jumped back with a growl, slipping into gameface. "Watch it!" he snarled, wincing at the warning throb in his head.

The man on the floor shook his head, sitting up and brushing himself off. A hand was run through spiky, bright red hair, and he lifted his head.

Spike frowned. He had the feeling that he knew this guy from somewhere. Something clicked, and his features smoothed out. "Dogboy?"

Oz blinked up at the vampire. "Spike," he answered calmly.

Part Twenty

Spike watched impassively as Oz slowly climbed to his feet. "Nice hair," he commented wryly.

Oz nodded. "I was thinking of going with green, but I didn't want to do anything too drastic," he answered seriously.

"Good planning." Spike watched as the werewolf checked himself over to make sure nothing was out of place. "So what are you doing here?"

"I help out here sometimes. You?" Oz cocked his head, leaning closer to the vampire and sniffing. "You smell like...why do you smell like Xander?"

Spike spun around at the loud crashes that suddenly came from the room he'd been pacing outside of. He could hear Xander's panicked breathing, and thought nothing of storming the door, his only thought to get rid of whatever was scaring his human.

He snarled at the sight that met his eyes.

Xander was standing near a counter, holding a glass container threateningly, face red with anger and fear. "Get away from me! Don't touch me!" He threw the container, which smashed spectacularly on the far wall as Dr. Fredericks ducked.

"What the hell?" Spike muttered.

Stumbling back, Xander knocked a few more things to the floor. His back hit a wall, and he leaned against it on trembling legs. "I hate you," he moaned softly. "Why'd you do that to me? I hate you. Don't touch me any more." His knees gave out, and he sank to the floor, huddling there surrounded by broken glass.

Spike hissed at the doctor, then stepped through the glinting mess to gather Xander into his arms. He never noticed Oz following him into the room, eyebrows lifted in what for him was an obvious display of curiosity.

"Xan? Luv, what happened? Did he hurt you?"

Xander just whimpered and buried his head in Spike's shirt.

Spike rounded on the doctor, eyes gleaming. "What the fuck did you do to him?" he demanded harshly.

Dr. Fredericks remained calm, righting his chair and nonchalantly brushing some glass shards off it. "I merely tried to determine how well his injuries were healing, and he...preferred that I didn't." He sat. "If you'd rather, I could give him something to calm him down, but I need to finish the examination."

Spike growled softly. At Xander's tremulous words, he quieted and stared intently at the boy.

"Don't want him touching me there. Why did he do that to me? I was good. Wasn't I good? He shouldn't touch me like that, it's bad to touch me like that." Xander sniffled, tears leaking down his cheeks as he looked up at Spike with glazed eyes. "It hurts. Why did he hurt me? I was bad, I made him hurt me. I'm so bad."

"No, pet. You're not bad. You were good; he's the one who was bad. He can't hurt you any more, ok?"

"I wanted him to," Xander continued to whisper, oblivious to Spike's reassurances. "He said I wanted him

to. He made me like it sometimes. I didn't want to like it. Why did I like it? It hurts."

Spike was at a loss for an answer. He knew Xander hadn't truly enjoyed whatever his prick of a father had done to him, but the man had obviously enjoyed playing head games with the impressionable boy, and his lessons had apparently stuck.

Oz had been listening to this exchange, unnoticed by the other occupants of the room. From what he'd heard, it was clear to him why Xander was here. He slowly moved closer, crouching in front of the entwined pair. "Xander. Xander, look at me." He waited until reddened eyes lifted to peer at him. "Xander, it wasn't your fault. You did nothing wrong. You did not enjoy what he did to you. The human body has strange ways of coping with things, and you had no control over your reactions. The doctor here only wants to help. Ok? Can you let him help you?"

Xander swallowed, then nodded hesitantly. "But why'd he do it?" he asked in a small voice filled with confusion. "I told him to stop, and he never would."

"Because he's a sick man, Xander. But he can't hurt you any more. Spike won't let him." He knew this was true because he'd finally realized what was so strange about Spike's scent, having noticed the same oddity about

Xander's. It wasn't strong, but it was most definitely there. For some reason, the vampire had laid claim to this human.

Xander took a deep, wavering breath, turning his gaze from Oz to Spike. He searched his face intently, seemingly reassured by what he saw there. Then he took in the state of the room, blushing. "Sorry," he muttered in the doctor's general direction.

"That's quite all right. Can I continue now?" He waited for Spike to lead the boy back over to the exam table, hoping the boy's sudden movements hadn't torn or otherwise re-injured anything.

"Can...can Spike stay with me this time?" Xander whispered.

Spike just leveled a look at Dr. Fredericks that clearly challenged the man to even try ejecting him from the room again. The good doctor decided not to take him up on that. "Certainly," he replied blandly.

Oz took this as his cue to leave, and he slipped out of the room. He didn't go far, however. He merely slouched against the opposite wall, hands tucked neatly in his pants. Xander was a friend of his, and he was curious about this seemingly new development between him and

the blonde vampire. Last he'd heard, Spike was pretty much on the outs with the Scoobies.

Not that he was kept in the know about the inner workings of 'Slayer and company' these days. Still, this was a major change...at least he thought so. Then again, it seemed he didn't know quite as much about Xander's life as he assumed he did, considering the little drama that had just taken place.

How come I never realized something was going on with him? I should have been able to tell. He cut that train of thought off before he could get too involved with self-pity.

And now...well, he had planned on keeping his return to Sunnydale quiet, but events were beyond his control at this point. All he could do was deal with the now.

He straightened when the door opened, and Spike helped a trembling Xander out, maneuvering their bodies in such a way as to be carrying the bulk of the human's weight.

Dr. Fredericks followed them out, laying a hand on Oz's shoulder and giving him a quiet 'Thank you' before moving off.

Oz followed the two out to the waiting room, where Spike gently but firmly seated Xander and went in search of a drink for the pale boy. The werewolf caught Spike in the hall on his way back in. "How is he?"

Spike stared at him appraisingly before answering. "Better. He'll be sore for a while yet, but the doc figures he's not in much danger from infection any more."

Oz nodded. "Who was it?"

Spike's jaw clenched, and he stared fixedly at a point somewhere over Oz's left shoulder. "Not my story to tell, mate."

He gave another nod of acknowledgement. "Need help killing him?"

This earned him a snort. "Nah, I'll take care of 'im when the time's right. Want that pleasure for myself."

"Fair enough." Oz cocked his head. "What about the others? Why aren't they here?"

The sound of teeth grinding was audible. "They don't have a clue about anything," Spike gritted out. "An' it's gonna stay that way!"

"Won't be easy. You'll be hiding from a Slayer, some witches, that military guy, and you really don't want to see Giles pissed. Not a pretty sight."

"Yeah, well, guess we'll just have to do a good job hiding. I won't let him be hurt again. Not by them, not by anyone."

Oz drummed his fingers against his arm. "You know, Willow's gotten pretty good at the spell thing. She could probably find you no matter where you went."

Spike swore softly, not having considered this before. The idea of using spells to hunt with was foreign to him, and he wasn't quite sure how he would deal with it.

"Where are you staying?"

The question broke into his musings, and Spike shrugged. "Dunno. Ditched the hotel earlier, figured we'd find someplace else tonight."

"Hm. How's this; I have an apartment nearby, not huge but it has a couple bedrooms. You guys could crash with me until you find something else." Oz glanced back at Xander, who didn't seem to have moved an inch. "He looks like he could use some downtime. And soon."

Spike frowned. "Why would you want to help us?"

Oz shrugged coolly. "Why not?"

"Uh-huh." Spike studied the slight man. "Doesn't solve the witch problem."

An uncharacteristic grin appeared on Oz's face, and he held out his hand. "See this?" He indicated the woven charm circling his wrist. "Got it from an...acquaintance. It distorts your aura so scrying spells can't find you. Like static, only magical."

Spike quirked an eyebrow. "Do tell. And why would you be sporting such a fascinating bit of frippery?"

"Let's just say, you're not the only one who wants to lay low right now. Point is, I have a couple extra of these, if you guys each want one."

The vampire nodded. "Ta, mate."

"Let's get to it, then. You parked out back?" At Spike's nod, he continued, "I'll bring my van around, and you can follow me over to my place. Cool?"

Spike jerked his head in acknowledgement, then moved away to give Xander the glass of water he'd gotten.

Part Twenty-One

Oz was silent as he led the way up to his apartment. Slipping inside, he quietly invited Spike in, watching as the vampire hustled Xander in and shut the door behind them.

Spike held Xander close to him as he examined the place. Sparse, but somehow still managing to put off a welcoming feel. His grip on Xander tightened as the boy's legs gave out, and he scooped him up, shooting Oz a questioning look.

Oz smiled faintly, jerking his head. "Come on, extra room's this way." He walked into the indicated room, switching on the light. Then he snorted lightly, removing the heavy chains and manacles from the chair they were draped over. "Spare set," he offered by way of explanation. He eyed the bed momentarily, then shrugged. "Should be clean enough, changed the sheets the other day when they started smelling too musty."

"It'll do." Spike carried Xander inside, setting him down on the bed. Xander curled up around a pillow, eyes closing, and Spike just sat and watched for a while, making sure he was truly asleep. Once he was satisfied that Xander wouldn't awake, he turned, noticing that Oz had left them alone, closing the door behind him. A pair

of charms identical to one Oz wore had been left on the edge of the dresser.

With a shrug, Spike grabbed them, examining them closely before working to fasten one around his left wrist. He had to use his teeth to help tie the laces, but managed after a few moments. Then he lifted Xander's left arm, gently attaching the other charm to the boy's wrist.

That done, Spike skimmed out of his clothes, leaving on only a pair of boxers. Turning off the lights, he went back to the small bed, shifting Xander toward the other side. He slipped in behind him, enfolding the human's body with his own. As he held the boy gently, he set up a low-level purring, more felt than heard, hoping to ward off any nightmares.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy stormed back into Giles' apartment, Riley trailing in her wake. "Willow!" She whined loudly. "Wills, you have to do the spell again! They were already gone. We looked all over the place, but no Xander, and no Spike." She wrinkled her nose, nearly spitting out the vampire's name.

A worried look crossed Willow's face. "Gone? You don't think...something happened to Xander, do you?" She flushed. "I mean, something else other than what already did, because we know what already did happen, and I'm just gonna shut up now."

Buffy flopped down on the sofa with a groan. "Can you do it again? We need to find them while the trail's still warm."

Willow exchanged a look with Tara, then they both nodded. "We still have all the stuff, it won't take too long."

The next minutes were busy as all the spell components were once again assembled. At the end of the chant, however, the mirror simply filled with swirling blue sparkles. There was emerging picture, no sign of Xander.

"What's wrong? Did you break it?" Hands on hips, Buffy glared at the recalcitrant mirror.

"You don't think he's dead...do you?" Riley looked over at Giles for an answer.

"If he were no longer, er, in this plane of existence, the mirror would have remained simply a mirror." Giles frowned, taking off his glasses to polish them. "I believe this is the work of some sort of obscuring spell."

Buffy growled. "Damn! Spike knows we're on to him now, he must have done something to keep Willow and Tara from finding them." She punched the wall, sending a nearby picture crashing to the floor.

Tara squeezed her girlfriend's hand. "Well, at least w-we know he's ok."

"Yeah, if you call being vamped ok," Willow muttered, sniffing.

"I must say, it seems as if our magical avenues have been exhausted," Giles said.

"Well, if we can't find them magically, it's back to the hard way. I don't care if we have to raid every place in this town, we will find them." Buffy's eyes glittered with resolve.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander woke, snuggling closer against the cool body next to him. He yawned, rubbing his eyes with a fist, then let his hand settle on Spike's still chest. He tilted his head, looking up at the sleeping vampire. He couldn't understand why Spike made him feel so safe. He thought

he should feel threatened by this closeness, but instead, it served to reassure him.

Frowning slightly, Xander sat up carefully. With slow, easy movements, he crawled from the bed, staring around the bare room. Yawning again, he quietly opened the door and walked gingerly out, making sure not to pull any of his still tender injuries. He followed the scent of coffee, coming upon Oz in the kitchen.

He blinked at the sight of the werewolf, torso covered by a pink, checkered apron, standing over the stove frying up some eggs.

Without turning, Oz said, "Xander. Afternoon. Sleep well?"

"Um, yeah, I guess."

"You want some eggs?"

Xander nodded. "Ok. The d-doctor said I was allowed to eat soft foods now. I was getting really sick of soup."

"I can imagine." A slender hand snagged a couple more eggs from the carton, cracking them expertly. Soon, the frying pan sizzled with the new additions. "Wanna get the toast?" Oz nodded to the breadbox.

"Sure." Xander popped the slices into the toaster, buttering them once they had finished cooking. Two plates appeared beside him, and he sliced the toast and placed it next to the steaming eggs. He carried the plates to the counter, where Oz had already poured them each a glass of juice.

"Dig in." With that instruction, Oz practically attacked his meal with a fork, making quick work of the food.

Xander smiled. Looking down at his own plate, he stabbed the center of the eggs, watching as the yolk slowly oozed out. With great precision, he peeled back the white, exposing the runny, golden yolk. A piece of toast was torn off, dipped in the yolk, then consumed. This was repeated until the yolks of both eggs were gone, then Xander sliced up the neglected whites, laid the pieces on the remaining pieces of toast, and made a sandwich out of it.

"That was actually kind of gross to watch."

Starting at the interruption, Xander looked over at Oz, blushing. He hastily finished, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Sorry," he whispered.

Oz snorted. "Hey man, it's your meal. Eat it how you want it."

Xander's hands twisted in his lap as he stared at his now-empty plate. A curious expression came over him, and he lifted his hand, studying the charm he'd just now noticed was on his wrist.

"I gave a couple to Spike, one for each of you."

"Oh." Xander glanced over at the other man. "What's it for?"

"It makes it so no one can use magic to find you." Oz pushed his plate away, then looked directly at Xander. "You and Spike are welcome to stay here as long as you like."

"Thanks," came the soft reply.

Oz took their dishes to the sink, washing and drying them. "You know, if you want to talk about anything, I've been told I'm a decent listener."

Xander stayed silent, picking at the hem of his shirt.

"No pressure. Just so you know." Walking past Xander, he sprawled out on the couch, switching on the television. He looked back. "You're safe here. You've got a werewolf, a vampire, and a majorly warded apartment standing between you and any nasties."

Xander got up, moving to stand behind Oz. "Why are you helping like this?"

"You're my friend," Oz replied matter-of-factly. "I help friends. It's a big thing with me."

"Oh." He crept around, seating himself at the other end of the couch. He looked at the program on the television. "Can we watch cartoons?"

With a snort, Oz tossed Xander the remote.

~*~*~*~*~

The days passed quietly. The three guys soon fell into an easy routine of eating, sleeping, and just generally spending time together. On occasion, either Spike or Oz would vanish for a few hours, returning with a bit of money and some groceries. Xander never questioned where it came from.

Usually, Spike would sleep during the day, with Oz and Xander going to bed in the wee hours of the morning, making an appearance for breakfast sometime after noon. Because of this, Xander was spending more and more time with the usually quiet werewolf, and felt like he was getting to know him a bit better. They still hadn't

spoken of Xander's...situation. But Oz made it clear that he would provide a willing ear for whatever Xander did decide to get off his chest.

"Let's go shopping."

Xander looked up from his book, surprised. "Shopping? Why?"

Oz shrugged. "Well, unless you like wearing the same three outfits day in and day out, we should get you some new clothes."

"Oh." Xander looked at his slightly faded shirt. "I hadn't even thought of that."

"So? What do you say?"

Xander swallowed hard, gaze shifting uneasily away. "I-I don't know. I'd have to...go out there."

Oz blinked. "That is pretty much the idea here."

"I just...I don't think I want to go...out there. Alone."

Oz rose and walked across the room, kneeling next to Xander. He rested a hand lightly in Xander's arm.

"Xander, you're not alone. I'll be there with you. You can do this."

Xander shook his head. "I don't...I can't." His breath was coming in quick little pants now.

Concerned, Oz moved in closer, lifting his hand to Xander's cheek. "Hey, you ok? We don't have to if you don't want to. No biggie." Then he gasped, choking as strong hands fastened around his neck and tore him away from Xander, flinging him to the floor.

Spike's eyes sprang open, and he bolted upright. Something was wrong. When it registered -- Xander's elevated heartbeat and a cloying scent of fear -- he shot from the bed, wrenching the door open. He snarled when he saw Oz touching -- *touching* -- his human. Scaring him. Hurting him!

He flew across the room, pouncing on the werewolf and yanking him back. He threw him down, looming over him as he growled in rage.

Part Twenty-Two

Oz looked up into eyes glittering golden with a promise of death. Realizing that the vampire had interpreted the scene as either a threat toward Xander or an encroachment on his territory, he promptly went limp, baring his neck in obvious acknowledgment of Spike's authority.

Spike knelt over the submissive form, fully prepared to rip this little upstart into shreds for daring to harm his human. He growled loudly, bending forward.

Xander watched wide-eyed, not really understanding what had just happened. "S-Spike?"

Head twisting violently around at the tremulous query, Spike immediately forced his vampiric features back down when he heard Xander's gasp. He sprang away from Oz, smoothly seating himself on the couch and pulling Xander into his arms. "What happened, pet? You ok? Did the little mongrel hurt you? I can kill him for you if you want."

Oz started to get up, then decided the floor really was a nice choice when Spike bared his fangs again, snarling at him in warning. "I didn't hurt him," he told Spike quietly.

"No one asked you, mutt!" Spike hissed in response. He stroked Xander's hair lovingly, the gentle action a direct

contrast to his attitude toward Oz. He felt Xander's head shake against his chest.

"I'm fine, Spike. He didn't hurt me. I just got scared, and he was trying to help." Xander let a tiny grin flicker across his face at the protectiveness Spike was displaying on his behalf.

"You sure?" He continued to rock the human, hands flittering lightly over his body as he searched for any sign of injury. "What scared you then, luv?"

"N-nothing. Not really. I just...got scared." He hedged the truth a bit, not wanting Oz to get in trouble if Spike blamed him for what had happened.

"Uh-huh." Spike clearly wasn't convinced, but he didn't want to call Xander on it. He figured he could always pry it out of the wolf.

Xander relaxed, snuggling up against Spike's lean body. The hands kneading his back were very soothing, and he yawned. For some reason, he felt so tired...

Spike stroked the boy's back as he fell asleep. When Xander began to snore softly, the vampire shifted his limp body up, carefully standing and carrying him back to their room. He'd gotten used to doing this; Xander

tended to fall asleep at the oddest times, as if his energy simply ran out.

He efficiently tucked the boy in, smiling as he snuffled into the pillow Spike had recently been using. He backed out, closing the door quietly. Then he turned and stalked back to where Oz still remained immobile on the floor. He loomed over the werewolf. "Right then, let's get the real story, shall we?" He crossed his arms, glaring.

"Can I--?" Oz very carefully sat up, not making any threatening movements. "I just thought Xander might want to go shopping, get some new clothes. The idea upset him, I tried to calm him down."

Spike waited. "What, that's it?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"So, you weren't touchin' him because you were trying to make a move on him, then? An' maybe that's why he freaked?"

Oz snorted. "Hardly."

Spike's eyes blazed. "Why? You think he's not good enough? Somethin' wrong with 'im?"

Oz blinked. "Um, no." He shook his head, somewhat amused at the vampire's turnaround; first accusing him of copping a feel, then interpreting his denial as an insult to Xander's desirability. Hoping to ward off any untoward incidents that might involve his innards becoming significantly less **in**, he elaborated. "He's not really my type, you know. Besides, I don't think my boyfriend would be too appreciative of me cheating on him."

Spike sat back, genuinely surprised. "Boyfriend? When'd *you* get a boyfriend? I thought you were still stuck on the witch."

Sighing, Oz finally made his way off the floor and into a chair. "I dealt. Getting laid really helped, too." He smiled wistfully, plucking at the fraying fabric on the arm of his chair. "Kinda hard to think about ex-girlfriends when your brains are lying in a puddle on the mattress."

Spike snickered. "I'll say. I remember this time when-- Oh, you...probably didn't mean that literally."

"Ah, no."

"So how come you never said nothing 'bout the bloke before?"

Oz shrugged. "It never came up. He lives out of town; we haven't gotten together since you and Xander moved in."

"That'd explain why I never smelled 'im on you." Spike tilted his head, studying Oz. "He know about the whole werewolf thing?"

"The subject arose early in our relationship, yes. He seemed rather disappointed that my chains had a practical use; seems he just figured I was a bit on the kinky side." He smiled widely. "I had to reassure him that they had...other uses."

Chuckling, Spike wagged his eyebrows. "Likes havin' you at his mercy, eh?"

"Not...exactly." More grinning on Oz's part.

"I see..." Spike shook his head in mock disappointment.

"My, my. What would your mother say?"

Oz cleared his throat. "Let's not go there."

"Have it your way, mate." Suddenly, he looked away, appearing rather embarrassed. "Erm, sorry about the whole, you know, thing. Earlier."

"Not a problem. You're just looking out for Xander, I can understand that." His expression turned serious. "Look, neither of you have said anything about what happened, but I think I have a general idea. And it's probably not healthy for him to stay cooped up in here all the time.

He's going to need to interact with people again sometime."

Spike was stunned by what was probably the longest speech he'd ever heard Oz deliver. Shaking his head to clear it, he asked, "Why? I can take care of 'im; if he stays here, he won't get hurt."

"But isn't the point to help him get better? He'll never see any reason to change if you constantly coddle him."

"Well, maybe he could use a bit of coddling!" Spike snapped, barely remembering to keep his voice down. In a quieter voice, he added, "I'm not gonna let him fend for himself like his so-called friends!"

Oz groaned. "I'm not saying you have to. But you can't bubble-wrap the world for him -- it's too expensive. You *can* make sure he's equipped to handle what life throws at him, because there might come a time when you can't help. Be there for him. Give him support. Encourage him. Make sure he knows that you care, that you're not using him. That you *won't*." His expression softened. "Love him." He sniffed casually. "Unless, of course, you don't think you *can*."

Spike shot up out of his seat. "Hey, watch it, mutt! I'm gonna make him better, you just try and stop me! We'll

show *you* who's got the knackers to take on the whole flamin' planet!"

Oz held back a smirk. "Good. Then you'll convince him to go shopping with me tomorrow?"

"Damn right I will! I---wait a sec." His eyes narrowed as he glared at Oz. "Oh, that was good, mate. That was *very* good."

"Fell for it, didn't you?"

Spike growled, snapping his teeth playfully. "Brat." He heaved a sigh. "How'm I gonna get him to agree, though?"

Oz rolled his eyes. "I have to do everything, don't I?"

"It'd help."

"Fine. I'll take care of it. But only if you promise not to try and kill me again for at least a week."

Spike considered that. "Deal."

~*~*~*~*~

"No."

"But--"

"No." Xander crossed his arms over his chest, glaring petulantly at Oz. "You can't make me."

Oz shrugged. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Guess Spike will just have to get over it."

Xander frowned. "Get over what?"

"Oh, nothing much. He just kind of mentioned that his birthday was coming up next week. But I'm sure he'll understand if you don't get him anything."

Shifting uncomfortably, Xander gnawed at his lower lip. "Can't...can't you get him something for me?"

Oz huffed in amusement. "Yeah, like I know what he'd want. You're the one who's been around him, *you're* the one he's claimed. I'm just the guy who lets you two crash with him." He shrugged again. "No big deal. Like I said, he'll get over it. He's a big boy."

Xander huddled into the chair, thinking it over. "His birthday?" he asked in a small voice.

"S'what the vamp said," Oz confirmed.

His feet scuffed on the floor, heels knocking back against the chair. A sigh. More scuffing, accompanied by

squeaking as he pushed a hand repeatedly at the arm of the chair, wiggling it loose. Finally, he slumped down.

"Fine," he muttered. "I'll go. But just to **one** store, and just for a present for Spike! Fifteen minutes, tops!"

"Fine. That's cool. Not a problem."

"No clothes shopping," Xander warned, giving Oz a look that stated how much he didn't trust his motives.

"Hey, we leave when you say. It's not like I can force you to shop. We'll only go where you suggest."

"Right." Xander lifted his feet onto the chair, arms wrapping around his knees. "Fine."

Part Twenty-Three

Xander trailed behind Oz as they walked into the shop. Oz was obviously a frequent and well-liked customer here. All the employees -- and not a few customers -- greeted him by name when they caught sight of him. Occasionally, Oz paused to exchange a few words with

someone. When this happened, Xander shrank behind Oz, using the smaller man's body to deflect any glances or comments that might be directed his way.

Finally, though, they were left alone to browse, and Xander let out a relieved sigh. He'd had to fight the urge to flinch away every time someone had walked by too closely. It was wearing down his nerves.

Oz laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Hey, it's ok, man. They'll chill out soon, they just get a little friendly sometimes."

Xander nodded shakily. "Yeah, um, it's cool." Still, he peered around as if expecting to be jumped. "Look, can we just get this over with?"

"Sure, no prob." Oz led the other man to a deserted corner of the shop, pointing out some shelves that held a collection of oddities. "Why don't we start here?"

Xander scooted in front of Oz, placing the man between him and the rest of the store. With half his attention devoted to keeping himself firmly ensconced in this position, he began to pick through the assorted items.

Oz watched him, unconsciously giving off an air of protectiveness. With a level stare, he warned off the few people who drifted over to that side of the shop. After a

while, he noticed that Xander seemed a bit more at ease, humming softly as he pondered over the items on the shelves, unable to decide what Spike would like the most.

Xander froze, as if the slightest movement would cause the treasure he'd just uncovered to vanish. Holding his breath, he reached out cautiously, picking up the jumble of leather and metal with reverent fingers. He smoothed his hands over it, laying it out flat on his lap as he crouched beside the lower shelves.

"Find something?" Oz squatted next to him.

"Maybe. I think so." He rubbed a bit of dust off the leather. "If it all cleans up good." He looked up at Oz, worried. "Do you...think he'll like it?"

Oz quirked an eyebrow at the set of ebony-colored throwing knives and spikes that were visible inside their leather casing. "Looks like his kinda thing."

Xander ran a finger over the stylized 'S' etched into the leather. With a look of intense concentration, he removed one of the knives, scraping a bit of grime off to reveal a similar engraving on the thin handle. "They're perfect," he breathed. "Like they were made for him."

Oz smiled gently as he watched Xander caress the metal. "I can help you get them cleaned up, sharpened. If that's what you want to get."

Xander just nodded, still awestruck by his find.

"Cool. I know a guy. We can drop by his shop if you like?"

"Yeah. Ok." Xander stood, holding onto the weapons as if they were the most fragile items in the world. He bit his lip. "What if they're...too expensive? I don't have a lot of money." In all actuality, he had barely any. Just what Spike had managed to appropriate on their flight from his old home. He'd insisted on splitting that with Xander, but the human had refused any further offers of money from Spike's most recent...earnings.

Oz shrugged. "I can get it." Seeing Xander about to protest, he added, "You can pay me back. It's cool."

Xander hesitated, but another look at his find, and he gave in. "All right. But it's just a loan."

"Got it." He held out his hand to shake on it, and Xander took it with a grin. "Guess we're done here then." He prodded Xander toward the front of the store where the checkout was.

Xander paid, pleasantly surprised by the low price; he was easily able to afford it. Out of the store, he kept grinning at the bag he now held, unable to wipe the satisfied expression off his face.

"So, you wanna get 'em fixed up now? Mel's place is close by, just a few shops down."

Xander thought about it. He would have liked to hurry back home, but he **had** to get Spike's present all fixed up, and he really didn't want to have to come out again. At least not any time soon. With a sigh, he agreed, then followed Oz down the sidewalk and into a dimly lit, unmarked shop.

"Yo, Mel. You here?"

A huge, burly man with a cross expression and a seemingly permanent scowl plastered on his face popped out of a back room. "Oz," came the growled acknowledgement.

Xander gasped, cringing into Oz, ducking his head to hide his face.

Oz gave his trembling arm a reassuring pat, then took the bag from his hand and transferred it to Mel's. "Need these fixed up. Can you do it?"

Mel emptied the contents of the bag onto a counter, poking at them with a thick finger. He grunted. "Yeah. Take about an hour, hour 'n a half." He looked up again. "Nice work, these. Shame to see good blades treated this way." He frowned, hearing Xander's quick panting as the boy started to hyperventilate. "Your friend all right?" He watched as Oz immediately turned toward his companion, murmuring to him in a low voice. "Molly!" he bellowed, making Xander flinch as if hit.

A petite woman, as tiny as Mel was large, bustled out, glaring at Mel disapprovingly. "Land sakes, plumcake. I ain't deaf, you know."

Mel grinned sheepishly. "Sorry Molly-m'love. You know me."

"Well, after being married to your cantankerous self for the last 34 years, I should hope so!" came the retort. Still, her green eyes twinkled merrily as she shook her head, sending soft waves of red hair that show just the smallest hint of gray bouncing about her shoulders. "Now, what's all the fuss about?"

Mel pointed out the two young men. "Think that young fellow might be sick or something."

Molly looked over, giving a delighted squeal when she saw Oz. "Sugar!" She hurried over and gave him a hug, clucking her tongue in disapproval. "You're too skinny. You're a growing boy, you need to eat more," she admonished.

"Sorry, Molly." Oz tried to appear contrite, but knew he didn't fool the intuitive woman. He stepped to the side, revealing a still-shaking Xander.

"Oh dear, you do look a right sight, don't you?" Hands on hips, she studied him, then stepped forward to link arms with Xander, coaxing him into the room she'd just appeared from. "Nothing a bit of milk and some fresh baked chocolate chip cookies won't put to rights, I'm sure. Come, come!" She soon had Xander planted in a chair, a glass of ice-cold milk and a plate of steaming cookies in front of him.

Breathing easier now that he was away from the hulking man that seemed to put him in mind of his father, Xander let out a shuddering sigh. "Sorry," he whispered, embarrassed about having made a scene.

"Nonsense. Now you just dig in like a good boy, and I'll go have a word with that big lummoX about scaring customers." She beamed, patting his cheek fondly. "Now, those cookies better be at least half-gone by the time I

come back in here, you hear me young man?" She gave him a stern look, and Xander nodded, hand already creeping across the table to snatch one of the cookies.

"Good." She eyed him until he took the first bite, moaning happily at the sugar rush. With a chuckle, she left him to carry on. When she got back to the main area of the store, she glared at Mel. "For heaven's sake, what did you do to scare the poor child so? He's in a state, that one is."

"I didn't do anything!" Mel protested, hands held up in protestation of his innocence.

"Uh-huh." Molly's foot began tapping as she narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

"No really, he didn't," Oz came to the man's defense.

"Xander just has some...issues. I think Mel's...size may have startled him, I didn't think to warn him."

"Issues? With...large men?" Molly frowned, then gasped, eyes brimming with sympathetic tears. "Oh, the poor dear. Who could hurt such a lovely child?" Tsking softly, she went back in the room, determined to mother the boy while he was here.

Mel eyed Oz. "Issues, huh?" He nodded in understanding. Then, clearing his throat, he got back to business. "So, a

regular customer like yourself, I can give you a good price on this."

"Right. And that would have nothing to do with Molly...ahem, taking you to task if you tried to overcharge us like you do those other naive customers of yours?"

Mel grinned, laughing heartily. "Nothing whatsoever."

~*~*~*~*~

"I liked Molly," Xander admitted as they left the store a while later. In one hand, he held the bag with the newly restored weapons for Spike. In the other, he protectively gripped a tin of leftover cookies that Molly had insisted he take.

"She has that effect on people," Oz agreed.

"She makes really good cookies." Xander blushed slightly as he said this.

"Mm-hmm. Try one of her pies sometime."

Xander's eyes glazed over as he tried to imagine. "That good?"

"Oh yeah." Oz was smiling, glad to see the return of at least some of the old Xander. Taking a chance, he casually said, "You know, there's a pretty good clothing place across the street. Wanna pick anything up while we're out?"

"Um, I dunno." Xander stopped walking, looking across the street at the shop Oz was pointing at.

"We can just grab some of those pre-packaged t-shirts, maybe some underwear. Won't take more than a few minutes." He shrugged. "They gift wrap, too. Maybe we can talk 'em into wrapping Spike's present."

"Oh. I didn't think about that." Xander took a deep breath, then nodded. "Ok. Just for a few minutes." He followed Oz over to the store, letting the other man lead him over to a rack of shirts. With a little coaxing, he was soon browsing the selection of clothes, not even noticing the passing minutes as he happily picked out new shirts, pants, socks and boxers. He even managed to find a couple pairs of shoes, another thing he desperately needed.

Oz watched this bundle of energy, wondering when Xander had changed into some sort of shopping maniac. He snorted, just glad that the brunette was sticking to plain, subdued colors rather than the riotous outfits he

usually wore. Gamely, he made a stack of Xander's chosen purchases, making sure to keep a watchful eye on the bag and tin that had been left in his care. He was straightening the pile when a scent tingled at him. Brow furrowed, he turned.

"Oh!" Tara dropped the dress she was holding, gaping at Oz. "O-O-Oz!" she squeaked. Blushing, she hastily bent and scooped up the dress. "I-I... W-Willow didn't say you w-were in town again."

Oz blinked. "That would be because she doesn't know."

"Oh." Nodding, the witch looked around frantically. Her eyes settled on something behind Oz, and she gasped. The dress landed on the floor again. "Xander!"

Part Twenty-Four

Xander froze, eyes going wide. He took a step back.

"Um...Tara." He licked his lips, glancing nervously at Oz.

Oz closed his eyes momentarily, groaning softly. This was just turning out to be a fantastic day! Calmly, he hefted the pile, dumping everything into Xander's arms. "Why don't you take these up to the register? I'll be with you in a sec."

Xander's glance darted between Tara and Oz, then he backed away and moved quickly to the front of the store.

Oz watched him go, then turned back to Tara, who was following Xander's departure with wide eyes. Once he was out of sight, those eyes were directed to Oz again. He lifted an eyebrow, crossing his arms over his chest.

"That was...Xander." Tara looked very confused, with just the barest hint of being upset.

"It was."

"I don't...I don't understand. We've all...Willow and everyone, we've been looking for him."

"Have you?"

"We all thought something...bad...had happened to him."

"Did you now?"

Her forehead crinkled. "Willow's been so worried about him."

"That's Willow for you."

Tara took a deep breath. "Is he...is he ok?"

"You could say that." Oz just continued to stare at her, not even attempting to be helpful.

Shaking her head, Tara once more picked up the discarded dress. She made as if to step around Oz. "I have to go. I have to tell Willow--"

"No!" Oz grabbed her arm, eyes narrowing. He jerked her back, hissing, "You can't say anything! Not to anyone."

Tara tried to pull away, but was unable to break his grip. Wincing as fingers dug into her arm, she quit struggling. "But she's his friend," she protested. "She needs to know!"

"She needs to know what *Xander* chooses to tell her! And if he wanted to talk with her, he would have. You are going to forget you ever saw him."

"I...I..." Tears welled up in her eyes, and she slumped. "I can't," she said weakly. "You don't understand. I can't lie to her. You don't know how she's been; I have to tell her."

Oz finally released her, and ran a hand through his hair. He sighed heavily. He knew that sooner or later, Willow and the rest were bound to find out where Xander was. It would probably be best if he could figure out a way to get them to meet on Xander's terms. "Look," he told her firmly, "I'll talk to Xander, see if I can convince him to call or something. But..." and his eyes took on a hard glint. "We do this my way. You say nothing, not until you get the go ahead from him. Am I clear?"

Tara gulped at the menace being directed toward her. "Ok," she whispered, nodding her head shakily.

Oz took a moment to determine the sincerity of her agreement, then nodded back. "Fine." Turning his back, he dismissed her and went looking for Xander.

Xander looked up warily at his approach.

Oz grinned at him reassuringly. "No prob, Xan. Let's check out, ok?"

~*~*~*~*~

Willow glanced up from her books as the door opened. "Oh, hey Tara. How'd your shopping go?"

'Um, good I guess." Head down, she walked past her girlfriend, heading for the closet where she began to put away the clothes she'd bought.

Willow frowned. "Are you alright? Did something happen?"

"N-no. Wh-why would you think that?" She tried to hide the shaking of her hands as she pulled out some clothes hangers.

"No reason. You just seem, I dunno, upset."

Tara forced a smile. "I'm fine, Willow."

"Oh. Ok then. Because, you know, you could tell me if anything happened. Because if someone was mean to you or something, I could put a whammy on them. Of course, so could you, because you're just as good a witch as I am, and you know I love you, right?"

Her smile genuine now, Tara walked over to Willow and gave her a quick kiss. "I know," she said quietly. "I love you too...babble and all."

"Well, good then." Willow watched her girlfriend for a moment more before returning to her reading.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike looked from the television. Smiling when he saw Xander coming through the door, he stood. "Pet! You're back! Have fun on your little trip?"

Xander nodded, giving the vampire a tiny grin. "Got lots of new clothes," he told him.

"Good. Your other things were wearing a mite thin." He looked at the tin that Xander was holding. "What's that?"

Xander opened it, offering its contents to Spike.

"Cookies. Oz took me...um, to this shop, and the lady there had made them and let me have some."

"Oooh, chocolate. Nummy." He took one, groaning in bliss as the taste exploded across his tongue. "Bloody hell!" he gasped around the mouthful. "These things are fantastic!"

Xander nodded in agreement. "I know. I ate about a dozen myself."

Spike polished off the rest of his cookie, eyeing the tin lustfully. With a chuckle, Xander handed it to him. As he devoured the cookies, Spike watched Xander carry an armful of bags into their bedroom. Oz also had a package, which he quickly stashed in his room before reappearing.

"We need to talk," he informed the vampire.

"'Bout wha'?" Spike mumbled, mouth still crammed full.

"Xander and I ran into someone today. You might know her."

Spike swallowed, a heavy feeling growing in his stomach. "Who?" he asked shortly.

"Oh, blonde, witch, dates Willow. Tara?"

Spike set the remaining cookies down on the coffee table, flopping onto the sofa. "Bloody hell," he muttered darkly.

Part Twenty-Five

"No!"

Oz glared at Spike. "We've been having this argument for the last two days. It doesn't matter what you think; it's Xander's decision."

"Bloody hell it is!" Spike paced the room angrily. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a cigarette.

Oz leapt up and snatched it away. "Not inside," he told the vampire firmly.

Spike growled. "Y'know, you ain't human. I *can* hurt you!"

"Try it."

Lunging forward, Spike pulled himself to an abrupt halt at Xander's appearance.

"What's going on?" Xander asked.

"Nothing," Spike gritted out.

Oz rolled his eyes. "Xander, Tara knows about you. I don't think she'll be able to stay quiet for long. I just thought it would be best if maybe you called Willow or something."

"No!" Spike rushed over to Xander. "Don't listen to him, pet. You don't have to talk to the chit if you don't want to."

Xander bit his lip, eyes downcast. He flicked a glance at Oz. "T-Tara said Wills was worried, huh?"

Oz nodded.

"I didn't...I didn't even think about, you know, what they'd do. I guess...they're probably wondering about me, huh?"

"Willow's been your best friend for years, Xander." Oz shrugged, leaving the decision up to him.

Xander gave a tremulous grin. "Yeah. So...I guess I should...call."

Spike threw his hands up, stalking over to the couch. He sank down, glowering. "For the record, not that anyone seems to care, but I think this is a fucking *insane* idea!"

Oz just sighed and picked up the phone, handing it to Xander.

Xander stared at it as if would bite. "Um, could...could you call, Oz?"

With a small grin, Oz dialed the number that Xander gave him.

~*~*~*~*~

Tara paced, nibbling at her nails. She couldn't do this any longer. She couldn't! *I'm telling her. As soon as she gets out of the shower, I'm telling her about Xander.* Decision made, she sat down at the counter.

The phone ringing startled her, and she jumped. Composing herself, she picked it up. "Hello?"

She straightened. "O-Oz? Wh-Why are you calling?"
"Oh!" "No, I h-haven't said anything." "No!" "Oh. Ok."
"Uh-huh" "Are...are you sure?" "What time?" "Sure, I'll
have her there." "No, I understand." "Ok. Bye."

She hung up the phone, sitting silently until Willow
finished her shower and came back out.

"Hey babe, whatcha doing?"

Tara looked up. "Willow? I have something to tell you."

~*~*~*~*~

"I'm gone." Oz picked up his keys and walked to the door.

Xander's fingers tapped nervously on the table. "Just
them, right? No one else is coming, are they?"

"Nope. Just the witchy duo. I'll pick 'em up, be back in a
few."

"Right." Xander took a deep breath. "Ok."

Spike lounged against the wall, glaring at the both of
them. "This is a stupid idea," he muttered for about the
47th time.

"Spike. Get over it." Oz shook his head at the vampire's stubbornness, then left.

Spike growled, kicking the wall behind him.

"Spike?"

Spike stopped with a sigh, walking over to Xander. "I don't like it, pet. They'll try to take you away from me."

"Spike, Willow's like my bestest friend. I need her to know that I'm ok."

"Are you?"

Xander shrugged. "Gettin' there. Besides, oz said he'd make sure they wouldn't know how to get here so we don't have to worry about them showing up unannounced, or telling anyone else where we are."

"Yeah. But I still don't like it!"

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was hiding in his room when Oz returned, two witches in tow. The second Willow got inside the apartment, she began looking around frantically.

"Where is he?" she demanded, close to tears.

Spike sauntered into the room, sneering at her. "Red. Fancy meetin' you here."

"You." The word was laced with venom. "What did you do to him?"

"Me? Saved his life most like."

"Wills?"

Willow's head snapped around, and she stared at Xander. "Xan," she breathed. She stood for a moment, frozen, then flung herself toward him. "Xander! You're here! And ok! And alive!" She pulled back a bit. "You are alive, aren't you? You look alive. And you're breathing and have the whole warm skin thing, so you're not a vampire. And why aren't you a vampire? Not that I *want* you to be one, but we saw you with the bitemark and the blood and see, you still have a scar from it. And I'm so happy to see you!" She hugged him tight, gulping in air. Then she lightly smacked his shoulder. "Don't you *ever* worry me like that again!"

Xander endured all this with a smile. "Missed you too, Willow," he said softly. "Guess we need to talk, huh?"

And so they talked. Xander made a few confessions about his former home life. Not everything, nowhere near everything, but enough. He explained that Spike had saved his life, and the vampire was helping him, and no, he *hadn't* been turned so stop checking for a pulse, thank you. He then attempted to convince Willow that none of it was her fault, and she *wasn't* a horrible, rotten friend for not noticing what was happening, because Xander hadn't *wanted* anyone to know.

He let her know that he was happy (well, mostly) where he was, and extracted her solemn vow not to tell another soul about any of this. Or un-souled person, for that matter. He also promised to call, and caved in to her demands that she and Tara be allowed to visit again. He managed not to burst out laughing at Spike's background commentary on the stupidity of humans in general, and a certain whelp in particular. He was used to the vampire's insulting complaints, knowing that he didn't mean half of what he said.

Once Xander found out about the search for him, he also requested that Willow see if she could tone things down a bit. He didn't want Buffy to stumble on to their hideout, especially after the redhead admitted that the Slayer was hell-bent on dusting Spike, dragging her boyfriend along with her on her quest for vengeance.

And so it went. The Willow-surround sound went a long way toward making Xander feel more at home than he had in a while. It was almost as if things were back to the way they were when they were kids. But with a vampire added. And a werewolf. And some witchiness.

After hours of talking, though, Spike finally lost patience and practically herded the witches out, practically shoving Oz after them. He could see that Xander was tiring, a side effect of one of the prescriptions he was still on, and didn't want anything to go wrong with the boy. Especially not with his follow-up appointment at the clinic the next night. And then...there was silence.

"Damn, that Red can chatter! How does she manage to say so much without breathing?"

Xander shrugged. "It's a Willow talent."

"Yeah, I guess. Now you -- sleep!"

"Mmmm." Xander yawned sleepily. "Wow, didn't know we were talking that long."

"Whatever pet. Bed. Now." He fondly watched the boy shuffle away, then made himself comfortable on the sofa.

He was still there when Oz returned from dropping the girls off. He fixed the werewolf with yet another glare. "So help me, if those two spill the beans, *you* are gonna be the one I come after. Got it?" He tried to sound as threatening as possible.

"Yeah, yeah." Oz rolled his eyes, not in the least bit intimidated. With a shake of his head, he walked past Spike. "Oh, while I'm remembering. I'm going out of town for a few days next week. You handle the place while I'm gone?"

"Sure. Can do."

"Cool." With a yawn of his own, he headed for his own room. "Full moon tomorrow night," he reminded Spike. "You know what to do if I loose control."

"Right. Tranq gun in the closet. Just like last time. I'm not stupid, y'know."

"Right." Oz smirked, then quickly ducked into his bedroom.

Part Twenty-Six

Oz and Xander made it back to the apartment just before sundown, only to be met with an anxious vampire.

"What took so bloody long?!" Spike demanded. "It was only s'posed to be a check up, you barely made it back before the moon came up!"

Oz raised an eyebrow. "Nice to know you're so concerned," he remarked. He quirked a grin at the two, then headed for his room. "Don't forget--"

"Yeah, tranq's in the flamin' closet, I know!"

"Right. Well, I'll just go meditate then." The door clicked shut behind him.

Spike snorted, then helped Xander over to the couch. "Well? How'd it go?"

Xander tried not to laugh as he was fussed over. "Doc said I'm doing great. Ev-Everything's healed fine, and I only have to keep taking a couple of the medications until they run out. Then I'm free." He yawned. "Good thing, too, I hate being so tired!"

"Yeah, well, a bit of rest ain't gonna kill you, pet. Do you good." He pulled Xander close to him, stroking the mostly-healed scars on his neck. "That all he say?"

"Well, he asked if I'd thought about going down there with Oz sometimes, help out with the clinic."

"And?"

"Told him I'd think about it." He looked up at Spike. "Would you come with me?"

Spike gave a noncommittal grunt. "Might do, luv."

"Mmm, 'kay." He yawned again.

"You wanna rest up some?"

Xander shook his head. "Not yet. Um, wait here." He got up and hurried to the closet to retrieve the package Oz had snuck him earlier. He walked hesitantly back to Spike, holding it out awkwardly.

Spike frowned. "What's this then?"

"Um, well, O-Oz said it was your birthday coming up, and so I got you a p-present." He shoved the package at Spike, then backed off.

"Oh." *So that's how he got 'im to go out. Wondered how he managed.* He studied the package, then carefully set about unwrapping it. Tossing the paper aside, he looked at the leather casings. *Nice work.* Curiously, he opened them. Pulling out their contents, he grinned, looking up at Xander delightedly.

Xander smiled back somewhat timidly. "D-Do you like them?"

"Like 'em? Love 'em, pet! Bloody perfect they are." He brandished one of the spikes, chuckling to himself.

"They have your initial and everything," Xander explained, coming closer.

"They do at that, don't they?" Carefully, Spike set the weapons aside. He pulled Xander down to the sofa, hugging him. "Thanks, luv. Best present I ever got."

"Really?" Xander's eyes were shining with happiness.

"Really." *An' I know just the bloke I can try 'em out on...bloody fucking little rapist, like to rip 'is--ow!*

"Spike? What's wrong?"

Spike gave a rather sickly smile, covering up the pain.
"Nothin', pet. Guess I got a bit overexcited, had a bit of a chip incident."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Not your fault. Don't worry 'bout it."

Xander nodded, and yawned yet again.

"All right, that's enough. Sleepy time." Spike stood, dragging Xander with him. "Into bed with you. I'll keep watch for the mutt."

"Sure. Night, Spike."

"Night, Xander."

~*~*~*~*~*~

"Spike, where'd you put my spare set of chains?" Oz crept back out from under his bed.

"Hall closet, why? Ain't that time of the month again, that was just last week." Spike walked out of the kitchen, observing Oz curiously.

"Going away for a while, remember?"

"Uh-huh. And you need chains why?"

Oz gave him a grin that was positively wolfish, and waggled his eyebrows for emphasis.

"Oh, that kind of vacation, is it? Gotcha." Spike smirked as he watched Oz root through the closet.

"Hey Spike, this yours?" Oz emerged with a rusty lockbox.

"Oh, yeah. Picked that up when we ditched Xander's old place. Thought it might have money inside, but when I finally got it opened, there was nothin' but a bunch of legal papers or somethin' like that."

"Oh. Lock's broken."

"Yeah, said I opened it, didn't I? Not like I had a spare key."

Oz shrugged and set the broken lockbox back on a shelf. He shoved a box aside and came up with the chains he was looking for. "Right, that's it." He stuffed them into his duffel bag. "I'm off them. Say bye to Xander for me when he wakes up."

"Right. Hey Oz!"

Oz paused in the doorway, looking back

"Don't do anything I wouldn't."

Oz gave a snort. "Just let me know when you think of something for that list, and I'll make sure I don't." With that retort, he left.

Spike chuckled. "Have fun mate. At least one of us is gettin' his leg over."

~*~*~*~*~

Four days later, Oz returned, wide grin plastered firmly on his face, practically reeking of sex.

"Damn, man must be an animal!" Spike whistled as he circled Oz, taking in the man's ragged appearance.

"Didn't he let you sleep none?"

"Spike, we hardly see each other. Why would we waste time sleeping?" He dropped his bag, and it made a clunking sound on the floor. "Where's Xander?"

"Just got out of the shower."

"Good. I call it, because *man* do I need one!"

"You're tellin' me. You reek, dogboy!"

Oz shot a bird at the vampire, then disappeared into the bathroom.

"Lucky dog," Spike muttered.

Xander came out into the living room, toweling his hair dry. He noticed the bag. "Oz is back?"

"Yeah, he's showerin'."

"Cool. I'm gonna make a sandwich or something. You want one?"

"Nah, just ate."

"Hey, when Oz comes out, ask him he'd mind picking up the girls again tomorrow. Willow wants to visit again."

Spike grimaced, but knew he'd do what Xander asked.
Can we say whipped?

"And Spikie?" he added in a singsong voice.

"Yes, Xannie?" Spike answered with oozing sweetness.

Xander laughed. "Be nice to them, ok? Willow's my friend. Besides, I know you really like her. Otherwise you wouldn't deny it so much."

"I bloody *don't* like her!" Spike protested weakly.

"Uh-huh. Sure."

"Oh, sod off!"

Part Twenty-Seven

Spike ignored the ringing of the doorbell, figuring whoever it was would give up and go away eventually. However, when the ringing switched to relentless knocking, he sat up in annoyance. *If it's one of those bloody door-to-door salesman, I'll rip 'is lungs out -- sod the flamin' chip!*

He got up and stalked over to the door, wrenching it open. A man stood outside, hand raised, a shocked expression on his face. Spike looked him up and down, sneering. "Well?" he demanded. "What the bloody hell do you want?"

The man stepped back with a frown, as if uncertain that he was in the right place. He cleared his throat. "Um, I'm looking for Oz?"

Spike snorted. "Yeah, so?"

"I'm...sorry. I guess I must have gotten the wrong place."

"Well, maybe you did." Then Spike frowned and leaned forward, sniffing deeply. The man stepped away, taken aback by this odd behavior. Spike grinned wolfishly.

"Hey, you're that bloke Oz was shaggin' last weekend, aren't you?"

"I don't -- how did you know?"

"Oh please," Spike scoffed. "The mutt came home with your smell all over him! Who the hell else could you be?"

"So...Oz does live here?"

"Yeah, sure. Didn't tell us he was expectin' you, though."

"Us?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, if we'd have known, we'd have fixed you dinner or something." He paused, cocking his head.

"Actually, no we wouldn't have."

"You...live with Oz?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "At the risk of sounding like a bloody teeny-bopper or something...duh! You're not a real quick one, are you?" Then he gave the man a look

that was frankly appraising. "Then again, with looks like that, why would you need to be?" Spike laughed at the man's angered expression. He stepped back, gesturing expansively. "What are you waiting for? Come in already."

The man glared at Spike, but accepted the invitation. Once inside, he looked around the apartment curiously. "So, where is Oz?" he asked.

Spike shrugged. "Out," he replied. "Dunno what he's doin', but chances are, he'll bring back a bit of dosh." He waved a hand at the sofa, waiting for the man to sit down. "Make yourself at home, mate. I'm gonna go fix m'self somethin' to eat." He left the room without a backwards glance.

Xander woke, stretching with a grunt. He yawned, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Crawling from the bed, he stood and dressed quickly. He stretched again, then shot an irritated glare at the rumpled covers. *Man, gotta stop taking all these naps. I'm not a baby!*

Sighing, he pulled open the door and left the room. Judging from the noises in the kitchen, he figured Spike was in there making himself dinner. *Or lunch. Or whatever meal this is for vampires.* He decided to go see if he could help.

He stopped abruptly, noticing the man on the sofa. "H-Hi," he said, backing up slightly. he wasn't used to them having visitors, just Willow and Tara on occasion.

The man looked up at him, a flash of something -- irritation? -- flickering in his eyes. *Great, another one!* Aloud, he asked, "And who might you be?"

Xander swallowed, his eyes darting around the room. "Um, I'm...Xander." He licked his lips nervously.

The man nodded. "Xander. And...I suppose you live here too?"

"Yeeeah," Xander replied. Then he straightened. "Well, who are you?"

The man snorted, coming to his feet and moving to stand in front of Xander. "I'm Lindsey," he said, holding out a hand.

Looking at the hand without taking it, Xander wondered about the thin scar running its circumference.

Lindsey let out a bitter laugh, pulling his hand back. "Ok. Guess not."

"W-Why are you here?" Xander asked.

"Thought I'd drop in on Oz," was the reply.

"Oh. I didn't know Oz was expecting company."

"He wasn't," Lindsey answered abruptly.

The tone of his voice made Xander swallow nervously. Warily, he inched around the man, heading for the vacated sofa. He flinched imperceptibly when Lindsey followed, sitting down next to him.

"So, you and your... 'friend' live here with Oz? He didn't tell me he had roommates."

"Yeah. He's, uh, he's letting us crash here for a while."

"Huh." Lindsey studied the young man, noticing how nervous he seemed in his presence. Hoping to reassure him, he reached a hand out, pulling it back when he noticed the flash of panic crossing Xander's face. "Sorry," he offered. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"No, um, that's ok." Xander twitched uncomfortably, wishing Spike would come out. His hands fiddled with the hem of his shirt, stretching out the fabric. Beads of sweat popped up on his forehead, and he wiped at them with a trembling hand.

A noise from the kitchen captured their attention. After a moment, Spike sauntered out, carrying a full glass in his hand. He frowned at the close proximity between his

human and the newcomer. Noticing Xander's distress, he set his glass down on the coffee table and sat between the two, forcing Lindsey to scoot down. "You all right, pet?" he asked softly, stroking one of Xander's hands.

"Yeah," he answered quietly, then cleared his throat. "H-How long has Lin-Lindsey been here?"

Spike lifted an eyebrow, turning to the other man on the sofa. "Lindsey? That your name? Kind of nancyish, don't y'think?"

Lindsey was only half-listening to him, eyes locked on the glass of dark, ruby liquid in front of him. "Y-Yeah, sure," he answered, distracted. "Um, is that--?"

Spike picked up his glass. "What, blood?" He took a long sip, then flashed crimson fangs at Lindsey. "Course it is, mate. What else you expect a vamp t'be drinkin'?"

"Shit!" Lindsey jumped up off the sofa. *What is it with me and vampires!?*

"Oh, relax!" Spike scoffed. "I'll only bite you if you ask me real nicely."

Shaking his head in confusion, Lindsey stammered, "But-but Oz--"

"What, you're worried 'bout the mutt?" Spike grimaced.
"Please. Can't bloody stand the taste of werewolves."

Lindsey backed up slowly. "This is...this is just too weird."
He'd almost made it to the door when it suddenly opened.

Oz walked in, kicking it shut behind him. "Hey Lindsey," he said absently as he walked across the living room toward his bedroom. "Hey Spike, Xander."

He came to a sudden halt. Turning back slowly, he stared at the man by the door. "Lindsey? What are you doing here?"

"Long story. Quit my job, had to leave L.A."

Spike snickered. "Sounded short enough to me!"

Oz quirked an eyebrow at the vampire. "Shut up, Spike." He heard a pained groan, and again turned his attention to Lindsey. The man seemed to be extremely shaken up. "You ok, Linds?" he asked.

Lindsey just dropped into a chair, gazing at Spike with a sort of pathetic horror. "Spike?" he repeated dazedly. "Spike!?"

Smirking, Spike preened just a bit. "Heard of me, eh?"

Lindsey covered his face with his hands, whimpering softly. "Someone...hates me," he muttered. "Someone really, really hates me!"

Oz frowned. "Ah, Linds? You have a hand. How'd you get a hand?"

"Most blokes are born with 'em, you know," Spike interjected.

"Shut...Up...Spike," Oz said. "Linds?"

Lindsey laughed somewhat hysterically. "Yeah, a hand. I've got a hand. It's an evil hand, but it's a hand."

Spike perked up at that bit of news, and opened his mouth to inquire further. However, he wisely decided to refrain from commenting when Oz shot one of his 'annoyed glares' his way.

"Part of that long story?" Oz asked.

"Oh yeah."

Oz nodded. "You want a drink or something?"

"Sure, whatever."

Oz moved toward the kitchen, pausing briefly. "Spike, you wanna come with me?"

Spike thought about protesting, but gave in when the werewolf just continued to stare at him implacably. He grudgingly followed the smaller man, and again Xander was left alone with Lindsey. He wasn't quite as nervous this time, though, as he realized that the other man seemed even more jittery than he.

Lindsey practically quivered with nervous energy and, unable to remain seated, he soon got up and began pacing across the room. Without really noticing, he snagged the pencil and pad of paper that were kept by the phone, tapping the pencil against his thigh as he walked.

Xander watched. After a few minutes, he let out a brief chuckle. "Um, gettin dizzy here," he offered in an attempt at humor.

Lindsey stilled. "Sorry." He let out a sigh and sat down again. His right hand, still holding the pencil, lifted and began absently doodling on the pad of paper.

Oz walked back into the room, trailed by Spike, who appeared to be suitably chastised. The werewolf came to stand beside Lindsey, and his brow wrinkled. He cleared his throat. "Ah, Lindsey?"

The lawyer looked up at him. "Yes?"

Leaning over, Oz took away the pad of paper, staring at the scrawlings curiously. Spike peered over his shoulder at the shaky handwriting. One word, 'KILL', littered the surface, occasionally underlined as if for emphasis.

Spike snorted. "Frustrated much?" he muttered softly. "Ouch!" He rubbed the ribs Oz had just elbowed.

Oz didn't even bother turning to look at the vampire. "What's all this, man?" he asked Lindsey calmly.

"Shit. I'd hoped that had stopped."

"I'm assuming this is part of that evil hand thing you were talking about?"

Lindsey closed his eyes exhaustedly. "You could say that, yes."

"You look like shit, Linds," Oz commented.

That got him a bark of laughter from the lawyer. "God, I just love it when you whisper sweet nothings to me."

Oz's lips stretched into a grin. "At this point, you'll just have to settle for the offer of a bath and a bed."

"Does that offer of a bed include you?"

"It could happen."

The lines on Lindsey's face softened, and he reached out to take hold of Oz's arm. "Missed you, baby," he murmured softly.

"Ditto." Oz leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. "C'mon, let's get you settled."

Xander watched, wide-eyed, as the two disappeared into Oz's room. "Spike? Oz kissed him. Why'd he do that?"

Spike blinked. "Well, that's his boyfriend and all, you know."

"But he-- I didn't know-- Oz isn't...is he?"

Shrugging, Spike replied, "Nothin' wrong with it, y'know."

A haunted expression stole across Xander's face. "It's bad," he whispered, sniffing quietly.

Spike frowned, sitting next to Xander and pulling him close, holding him against his chest. "Doesn't have to be, luv. Not when both blokes are willin'."

Xander looked unconvinced. "He...he doesn't hurt him?"

Sighing, he squeezed Xander tight. "Luv...there's so much you don't know about this sort of thing.

What...happened to you -- that's not the way it always is." Spike struggled for the words to express himself.

"With the right person, at the right time, it's...intense. And...sexy." He let out a wry chuckle. "It can be the greatest thing ever. It's not always about...pain, or power. Sometimes...sometimes it's about--" Spike took a breath and swallowed hard. "Sometimes it's about love," he admitted.

Xander laid his head on Spike's shoulder, tilting it to look the vampire in his eyes. "Have you--" he started to ask, then stopped.

Spike gave him a sad smile. "Both ways, luv."

"Oh." Xander's hands tightened around Spike's waist. "I'm sorry."

"S'ok, Xan."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Xander yawned. Spike grinned. "Come on, to bed with you."

"Mmmm, not sleepy," Xander said through another yawn. Spike just raised an eyebrow. "I just got up!" came the protest.

"Uh-huh." Rolling his eyes, Spike stood, pulling Xander to his feet. "Well then, best get you fed I suppose."

The boy's stomach growled in approval of this suggestion, and Xander followed Spike into the kitchen, smiling.

Part Twenty-Eight

A freshly showered Lindsey walked out into the living room wearing a clean pair of pants and nothing else. He noticed that Xander was absent again.

Spike whistled. "Well Oz, certainly can't fault your taste."

Oz sighed, shaking his head bemusedly. He handed Lindsey a glass of soda. "Don't have anything stronger," he explained when Lindsey stared at the beverage curiously. "Xander--" he flicked a glance over at Spike, then continued, "Xander feels more secure if we don't keep any alcohol in the house."

"Huh." Lindsey nodded, then sipped cautiously at the drink.

Oz took a seat on the sofa, motioning for his boyfriend to join him. "So...wasn't expecting you."

Lindsey laughed briefly. "Yeah, I think we've covered that."

"You've looked better, Linds," the werewolf remarked bluntly.

"I imagine so," came the tired response. Then Lindsey lifted his right hand, twisting it back and forth as he stared at it with a mixture of revulsion and gratefulness. "But hey, at least I can play my guitar again!"

Oz reached out and captured the newly attached limb, fingers massaging gently. "Wanna talk about it?"

A sigh. "Sure, why not?" But he stared somewhat nervously at Spike.

Nodding, Oz stood, pulling Lindsey up with him. "C'mon." He pulled the other man to his bedroom, and the door closed gently behind them.

Spike sniffed. "Well, a bloke knows when he ain't wanted." With a roll of his eyes, he got up and went to join Xander in their room. He paused in the doorway, smiling at the sight of the boy, long limbs sprawling across the bed. With a fondly exasperated sigh, he

walked over and pushed an arm aside, making room for himself. Stripping, he pulled on a pair of clean sweats, then climbed in beside Xander. He smiled as the boy automatically snuggled in close to him.

~*~*~*~*~

Giles sighed as he hung up the phone. He supposed he should be thankful that no one matching Xander's description had as of yet turned up at the morgue, but it would be nice to get some sort of lead on the boy's whereabouts. Of course, Buffy was still firmly convinced that Xander had been turned, and was dead set on staking Spike...and Xander if need be.

Giles wasn't so sure, though. Something told him that Xander was alive. And that Spike's involvement in Xander's disappearance wasn't some part of a plot to get at Buffy like the Slayer thought. God knows, he loved Buffy like she was his own child, but sometimes the girl could be so...obtuse!

At least Willow appeared to be coping better. He'd thought for a while there that she was going to fall apart at the seams. Then suddenly, a few weeks ago, she'd simply...calmed. Of course, the two girls had taken to

disappearing for odd intervals, becoming remarkably 'unavailable'. He was reluctant to chalk it up to hormones.

Giles frowned as he stared across the room at the two witches, who were chatting softly as they leafed through one of his many books. Actually, now that he stopped to think about it, those two had become remarkably reticent to speak about Xander lately. It was if...they knew something. Something that they weren't sharing. About Xander perhaps? But then, what reason would they have to keep it a secret? Although, if Willow *had* heard something about Xander, it would tend to explain the way she'd tried to tone down their ongoing search for the boy.

Perhaps those two were now involved in keeping him hidden?

Giles shook his head, clearing it of all that idle speculation. He had no proof of anything of the sort. Still...

He studied the girls once more, making a mental note to keep a close eye on them.

~*~*~*~*~

"Wow." Oz blinked in a manner that conveyed his deep awe. "Heavy."

"Tell me about it."

They sat on Oz's bed in silence, Lindsey staring at his hand as he prodded the skin.

Oz watched for a bit, then chuckled. "So," he said suggestively, lying back on the bed. "Why don't you show me what your new hand can do?"

Lindsey's head shot up, taking in Oz's pose. He grinned, crawling up the smaller man's body. Straddling his slim waist, he leaned forward and pressed their lips together. Pulling away, he whispered, "Well, I can do this..." Both hands grasped the fabric of Oz's shirt, ripping it apart violently.

Eyes dilating with extreme arousal, Oz arched his back, grinding his body up into Lindsey's. He reached for his shoulders.

"And then there's this." Lindsey grabbed his hands, pushing them up over Oz's head and pressing them down. He kissed Oz again, smiling as the man began to writhe under him, trying halfheartedly to break free.

When his lips were finally released, Oz murmured, "Both of which are good things, I agree."

"Oh, you ain't seen nothin' yet, sugar." He almost snickered as he said that in a lilting tone, managing to catch himself and instead apply his new hand to the task of stripping them both out of the clothes they still had on.

Once he had Oz naked under him, he simply stared. There was something about the other man's body; so smooth and lean, hiding his deceptive strength. He licked his lips; and it was all his...

Scooting down, he lowered his head to Oz's lap, engulfing the erection he found there. Oz let out a strangled shout, clawing frantically at the bedsheets.

Xander woke, frowning at the strange noises coming from the other end of the apartment. There was a steady 'thump, thump' beating its rhythm on the wall, and it took him a moment to place the sound. When he did, he stiffened.

"Luv, you 'kay?" came the groggy question from his bedmate.

Xander didn't answer, instead listening wide-eyed to the moans and muffled shouts drifting into their room.

Spike came fully awake. "Xan?" A rather loud yell caught his attention, and he suddenly figured out what it was Xander was listening to. *Bugger it. Couldn't they bloody keep it down?* He sat up carefully, pulling Xander to his chest. "Wanna talk about it?" he asked, unconsciously mimicking Oz's earlier words to Lindsey.

Xander took a deep breath. "They're...um..."

"Shagging, yes. An' bein' bloody loud about it, too. Damned rude of 'em if you ask me."

"You...you're sure he's not hurting him?"

"Positive, luv. They're just havin' a bit of fun."

Xander continued listening until the sounds drifted off. He shifted. "Spike?"

"Yeah, pet?"

"That look Lindsey gave Oz before he kissed him..." his voice trailed off.

"Yeah?" Spike coaxed.

Ducking his head, Xander traced random lines across the vampire's chest. "You...you look at me like that sometimes," he whispered.

Hell. Spike cleared his throat nervously. "I do?" He cursed at the slight squeak in his voice. He felt Xander nod. "Oh. I can...stop if you like." *Yeah, like maybe if someone rips my eyeballs out.*

Xander shrugged. "It's ok." He seemed to struggle for more words. "Spike?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Do you...do you wanna...kiss me? Like that?"

Spike sighed. "Doesn't matter what I want, Xan. I won't do anything to you unless you want me to. Ok?"

"Ok." Silence, then, "But Spike?"

The vampire stifled a groan. "Yes?"

"You want to, don't you?"

Just tell him, y'coward!

{Sod off! You and your bossy ideas. Liable to get a vamp in trouble.}

Tell him. Please?

Spike squeezed Xander gently. "Wouldn't mind," he admitted softly.

"Oh."

Spike was somewhat surprised that Xander didn't pull away from him then, but he wasn't going to argue. Instead, he scooted them back down until they were once more lying in bed.

"Night, Spike."

"Night, Xan." He stroked the boy's hair for a moment, then grew still. He had almost fallen asleep again when he felt Xander pull out of his arms. He forced himself to let go.

His eyes flew open with shock, however, when he felt a warm pair of lips brush softly across his own. It lasted the barest instant, then Xander resettled his head on Spike's chest.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep again for a while, Spike was content to hold Xander as the boy drifted off. He stared up through the darkness at the ceiling. *God...or whoever's listenin' up there...don't you fuckin' let this be a dream!* He glared. *Amen.*

Listening to Xander's even breathing, he smiled. *Love you, Xan. Maybe...just maybe, we got a chance.*

The End