50ftqueenie made a request that really tickled my muse. So, rather than spoil you by telling you what she requested, I just present her story...

Spike/Xander (pre-slash)
Warnings: A bit of blackmail and manipulation
Rating: Teen
Episode Spoilers: Once More with Feeling
187,000 words

Summary: Xander's been a bad boy, and Spike is about to figure out how to make the most of it.

The Cost of Butterfly Kisses

by
Litgal

Part One

"Right then, you get all your singing out, then?" Spike asked. He lit a cigarette and looked around the Magic Box. Slayer wasn't around. It was just the sad little
puppy-boy behind the counter.

"What do you want, Spike?" Xander demanded, bristling with anger. Well, if Spike had to wait around for the slayer, he might as well entertain himself. If he was being honest with himself, he wanted to make a little trouble. If it weren't for the chip, he'd likely go out and gut some bloke and do something creative with the intestines. Days like this made him miss Drusilla.

"Just thought I'd check in and see if ya were stupid enough to summon any more demons lately," Spike commented as he leaned against the counter. Xander flinched back from the question, but then, he should. It was bloody stupid. Harris had been around long enough to keep his mitts off magical amulets, and making a wish was even more idiotic than usual.

Surprisingly, Xander didn't blow. "Go away, Spike," he said, his voice quiet, even if it was trembling with emotion. Now this was interesting. People sometimes got that same controlled tone when they were trying to hide their fear. Usually Spike saw it right before he started torturing them. That same tone, half bravado, half terror, inspired Angelus to some of his finest work.
Spike cocked his head and considered Xander. If the git was showing a soft underbelly, far be it from Spike to not take advantage of the chance to spread a little misery. Of course, Spike normally preferred to do his torturing with railroad spikes, but the chip had taught him to be flexible. Besides, if he killed one of the slayer's friends, he definitely wasn't getting shagged again. Spike took a deep drag on his cigarette and remembered the slayer's hands over his body. She was a soddin' demon in bed. The memory made him smile, but the thought of the emptiness in her eyes when she'd walked out of his crypt without even saying a word chilled him. Oh well, it wasn't like Spike hadn't dealt with difficult lovers before.

Spike took another drag on his cigarette and considered puppy-boy. American boys were so predictable. He could torture the boy a whole lot before Xander's manly pride let him go running to the slayer for protection, and it was better than just standing around doin' nothing. He waited until Xander started unloading little knicknacks and what-nots from a box.

"Did ya see that one bloke explode? Bloody waste of good blood, that was, but it was a soddin' beautiful death, especially since he was an innocent and all. I figure since I can't kill, I'll stick around and watch you do
something stupid enough to get some other git killed."

Xander's fingers closed around a small pouch of something so hard that the thing burst and little green leaves tumbled to the floor. "Have I shown you the new stakes that came in?" Xander asked, his body stiff with contained fury.

Spike sniffed. Stupid git wouldn't be able to get a stake in him before he could get out the door, anyway. "More interested in any demonic amulets you might want to make a wish on." Spike dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it with his boot, ignoring Xander's frown. "So, thought Rupert and your squeeze were running this place. Did everyone else have somewhere important to go? Leave you behind?"

Xander started putting the little pouches under the counter again. A phone vibrated, and Spike frowned. The children didn't have cell phones, even if it was bloody stupid of them. At first, Xander ignored it and just kept putting things away. Spike leaned on the counter and raised an eyebrow.

"You plannin' on answering that?"
"No," Xander said, his lips thin with anger. Oh yeah, puppy hiding something. "A customer left it here," he snapped when Spike kept on looking at him. Trying to explain himself, that was a sure sign of guilt.

"Probably the customer callin' then, innit?" Spike pointed out. "They want to know who has their phone shoved in a pocket. Spike watched as Xander turned a darker color.

"Are you going to go away?" Xander asked.

"Wasn't plannin' on it. Not like I have anywhere to go, is it?" Spike asked, giving Xander a sweet smile that he knew would drive the boy crazy. Sure enough, Xander clenched his jaw tight. "Besides, if I want to keep the Bit safe, I need to keep an eye on you, maybe hire a babysitter. After all, you nearly got her taken for Sweet's new queen, didn't ya?"

That took the color right out of Xander's face. Spike didn't normally see a person turn pale that fast unless they had a vampire attached to their neck and sucking the blood out.

Spike pressed his advantage. "He would have raped her, spread her wide and raped her until she was screaming."
Demons aren't generally all that careful with human bodies either," Spike stopped, so disturbed by the image that he could feel his own demon roar in anger. Xander had just about sent Dawn to a horrible death because he'd made a fucking wish. Stalking around the counter, he closed in on Xander. Xander was busy ignoring him, and that made Spike even more angry. "He would have broken her ribs with every thrust, broken her legs as he spread them. You soddin' piece of shite, don't you have anythin' to say about that?" Spike stopped right behind Xander.

Boy was silent now, motionless with his hands braced on the counter. "Go away, Fangless," he said quietly. The phone in his pocket started vibrating again. Spike reached out and grabbed Xander and shoved him face down on the counter hard enough to make the chip spark but not hard enough to set it off.

Xander exploded into motion, bucking and flailing, kicking his legs back in an attempt to take Spike down. Without the chip, Spike could have ended the fight in one second. A quick snap of his neck, and the boy'd be quiet. With the chip, and with his own desire to avoid brassing off the slayer, Spike had to work a little harder, grabbing Xander's wrists and pinning them behind his back,
leaning his body in to trap Xander, kicking Xander's legs apart and then standing between them. Eventually vampire strength and a century of bar fighting won out and Spike lay on Xander's trapped and panting body.

"Get off," Xander gasped. Spike pushed down a little harder. If the boy had to fight to catch his breath, he couldn't say anything stupid. Reaching into Xander's jeans, he pulled out the small gray phone. The tiny green screen said "Harris" in small, black block letters.

"Seems like this is yours, mate," Spike pointed out. Xander squirmed, but he'd lost the fight and he knew it. Spike waited out his struggles and soon enough, Xander quieted back down.

Only then did Spike consider what he was doing. Slayer was going to be right pissed at him if she found him manhandling one of her crew, and pissing her off after he finally got a good shagging from her just didn't seem smart. On the other hand, Harris was hiding something, and a man with secrets would do a lot to keep 'em. So, until Spike figured out whatever secret Harris was keeping, he just had to make sure that he kept control of the situation.
Spike put the phone on the counter and grabbed Xander's wrists in one hand and his neck with the other. "Ya just about got Dawn killed. If I had my way, Sweet woulda taken you, would have broken your body and used you until you begged for mercy you never got. You're a bloody liability, wishing on a demonic trinket like that. You and Red, pulling a demonic power into the world with Buffy. The lot of you are dumb as soddin' rocks. Spike could feel Xander react to the words and shrink in on himself.

"We saved Buffy," he said softly, but he didn't sound as sure of it as he had before.

"You pulled her out of heaven. You ever try ta figure out where she was first, or did you just go charging in there like a pillock and do what you wanted? You didn't save her, you were so bloody terrified of having to live your own fucking lives that you pulled her back into the muck with you, you selfish bastards." Xander was holding his breath, and Spike suspected that he was trying not to cry. Git.

The phone vibrated against the counter, the glass amplifying the sound, and Xander gasped, his body going stiff. "Be a good boy," Spike warned before he let go of
Xander's neck to grab the phone. He wasn't surprised when Xander made a last, desperate attempt to get free, kicking with all his might. Spike kicked Xander's leg, and when the human's knee hit the counter, he rode through the pain his own chip caused him. It wasn't bloody fair. He was actually trying to not hurt the moron.

Ignoring the pain, Spike thumbed the cell phone on and braced it between his ear and shoulder so that he could grab Xander's neck again. "Yeah?" Spike said.

"Um... Xander?" a woman's voice asked.

"He's right here, but he can't talk right now. Can I help ya, luv? Spike's the name." Spike turned on the charm. Xander made a strangled, panicked noise, and Spike tightened his hold on Xander's neck enough that the chip was tingling in warning.

"I don't know..." Spike could hear the high-pitched coughing of a child in the background. The tyke wasn't sounding healthy at all.

"Is something wrong with the little one, Missus?" Spike asked. He could feel Xander go stiff under his hands. Oh yeah, the boy had a secret here alright, and Spike was
about to figure out what it was.

There was silence on the other end of the phone, and then the coughing child started coughing so hard that it ended in the sound of vomiting. "Missus, sounds like your little one needs to go to the hospital," Spike offered.

"Bonnie has been coughing like this for two days now, but Curbat doesn't know what's wrong with her." For a second, Spike was too shocked to even react. Curbat. Curbat was the local witchdoctor who tended most of the demonic community, at least those who bothered with medical treatment. Plenty of demons just killed the sick and wounded. But the cough Spike could hear over the phone sure wasn't demonic in nature.

"How much human blood does Bonnie have?" Spike asked carefully, well aware that lots of demons would kill him for even asking that about their spawn. The woman on the other end didn't answer right away, but Spike could hear a hand patting against flesh, so he figured she was patting the little one on the back.

"Um," she finally answered, "I'm half human. How much is Xander?" Spike looked down at the puppy boy. Xander's eyes were closed, and Spike could tell from the
body language that Xander had surrendered. Spike had imagined many things, but this wasn't even on the list of possibilities. Slowly, Spike let go of Xander's wrists and backed away.

"I figure Xander's the real deal, a hundred percent human, which makes the little one more human than not, mum," Spike offered. "From the sounds, she has a good case of whooping cough. It'll take a human doctor with human medicines ta fix that."

"Oh." The woman sounded worried. "I hate to bother Xander, especially after all that mess with the amulet, but could he..."

"We'll be right over, mum. You just get the little one ready, and we'll get her to the doctor," Spike promised her.

"Spike, thank you. I know this is awkward, but I really appreciate your help. I'll tell Bonnie that her daddy's coming."

"Sure enough, mum, Bonnie's daddy will be there in no time," Spike offered. Taking the phone away from his ear, he hit the disconnect button.
"So, you spend much time diddling demons, do you?" Spike asked. Dropping the cell phone into a pocket, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it. This was soddin' unbelievable. Then again, Anya was always complaining that Xander was bad with money, that he never could account for his whole paycheck. If the man was paying for a tyke on the side, it would explain a lot. It would also explain Sweet.

"Can I have my phone back?" Xander asked, his voice tight. He was still laying on the counter exactly where Spike had put him, a situation which made Spike's demon preen. Boy might be a moron, but he bloody well knew how to surrender.

"You got a car?" Spike asked. Xander pushed himself up from the counter and looked at Spike, fear and confusion and outright panic in his eyes. Oh yeah, that was a look Spike was right fond of.

"No."

Spike nodded. "Then we're takin' mine. Your girl needs a doctor, Harris, so shift your arse."
Xander didn't move. He stared at Spike with that same look of panic.

"It was your little one who made the wish for Sweet, wasn't it?" Spike blew a cloud of smoke out into the air.

Xander nodded.

"And you would've gone with Sweet before you told him about your girl, right?"

Xander nodded again, this time more slowly, more suspiciously.

Spike took a deep drag on his cigarette. "I have needs. I figure you have a good job, a nice flat, cable. So, we're going to go help your little girl, and then you're going to do everything you can to help me, got it?" Spike leaned against a shelf and watched Xander swallow nervously. It was a big opening bid for Spike to make, but he figured Xander would counter with a straight-up offer for money or blood. Spike just needed to wait out the silence and see what counter-offer Xander came up with.

"Any..."
"Dump her," Spike suggested without mercy. It wasn't like those two were going to make it anyway.

Xander swallowed more, his eyes darting to the door, and Spike wondered if he was thinking of running for it or just worried about his girl. Finally Xander nodded. "Okay."

Spike raised an eyebrow.

Xander stood up straighter. "But only if Bonnie's okay. We have to leave now."

Spike dropped his cigarette and crushed it. The lack of negotiation was a surprise, but Spike had never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Right then, let's go get this little one of yours. Is she going to pass for human, or are we going to have to snatch a doctor and have him treat her privately?"

"She'll pass," Xander said shortly. The lack of a name or insult surprised Spike, but the way the boy had capitulated without even negotiating made his demon howl with pleasure. Yeah, the slayer might treat him like shite, but having a human stink of terror and creep around, trembling with fear, made him feel like a real
vampire again. When Xander walked out from behind the counter, Spike dropped a hand on the boy's shoulder and smiled as Xander jumped in surprise but didn't react.

"So, what type of demon is the mum?" Spike asked. He had to push Xander to get him moving, but that felt good, too. For the first time in a long time, he was in control. Xander obeyed his push silently.

"Half kwaini," Xander said before he reached up and flipped the sign on the door over to 'closed.'

Spike nodded. They were a harmless enough race, stronger than the average human but not quite as strong as vampires. And they were ugly buggers with deep-set eyes and heavy eye ridges that made them look like a sad dog, but then the mother was only half, so who knows how many demonic traits she had. "How old's Bonnie?" Spike asked.

Xander stopped with the door open. Spike could almost feel his need to argue, but if he did, Spike would be taking this straight to the slayer, and he had to know that. Buffy had a very narrow world-view when it came to demons, even the fairly harmless type like kwaini. Of course, if there was a kwaini clan around, they weren't all
that harmless. They'd fight as fiercely as any parents to protect the family.

"When I was fifteen, I was infected with the spirit of a hyena," Xander said quietly. "I got K'wana pregnant then. Spike, just don't pull Bonnie and K'wana into the middle of this, Buffy isn't...." He stopped.

Spike knew exactly what he was thinking. Buffy wasn't at her most reasonable right now.

"You be a good little boy, and we'll take care of your family," Spike promised. He gave Xander a push, and Xander headed out into the night, locking the door behind them. "Right then, got the DeSoto over by Rest Hills, we'd better hurry up and get your little girl to the hospital, pet," Spike suggested. Xander hurried in the direction Spike indicated, and Spike let his senses stretch as he strode behind Xander, feeling very much like a demon for the first time in a very long time. Oh yeah, sex with the slayer allowed him to pretend to be a demon again, but manipulating and feeding off human fear made him a real one.
Rated: TEEN (we're still in the manipulation stages here)  
Summary: There's nothing Xander wouldn't do for family

"So, your little friends never figured out that you'd knocked up a demon?" Spike asked as he got in the DeSoto. Xander was busy hugging his own stomach like some sort of kicked puppy. He shook his head. The boy had grown up a lot in the last few years, but now he was back to looking fifteen and lost. It was a good look for him, all big wounded eyes and trembling.

"You lot are so close, and if you diddled your demon chit back when you were fifteen, that's a fair bit of time to hide this second life of yours," Spike mused. "Maybe I just haven't given you enough credit when it comes to your ability to lie." Actually, right from the start, he'd thought it was pretty queer that Xander would make the wish. The boy was thick as pig shite on some subjects, like the way Anya would dump him like yesterday's
rotting trash when he stopped being useful. Yeah, the slayer was using Spike, but at least he knew it. He knew it, and that gave him the power and the time to bloody change her mind. The boy was just blind when it came to birds. However, when it came to demons, he'd survived more than most humans. The second Sweet had vanished, suspicions had circled around in Spike's head, but Buffy and the others had just immediately believed that Xander had really been that stupid.

"You using magic?" Spike demanded. Xander had gotten in the car, and he just stared at Spike blankly. Bloody fucking hell, if he had spelled the Buffy and the Bit, chip or not, Spike was going to pull his intestines out. Reaching out, he caught Xander's hand and used it like a leash to yank the boy closer. Xander gave a squeak of surprise, but he didn't fight. "Did you use some bloody spell to cover up for yourself?"

"What? No. I’m huge with the avoiding of spells." Xander smelled terrified, but he didn't sound like he was lying.

"Then why the fuck did they buy that rot about you being stupid enough to summon a bloody demon?" Spike neatly left out the way he had put his own suspicions aside the moment it was clear that Buffy and Willow had.
"They just did."

Spike let his eyes turn yellow.

"We have to go get Bonnie." Xander pulled against Spike's grip, but Spike didn't budge. The chip might not let him hurt Xander, but it sure didn't stop him from holding him tight enough that the boy wasn't going anywhere.

"Then convince me you haven't done something just as stupid as summoning Sweet," Spike said, his voice silky with danger. That was the voice that told smart little prey to run for their lighted homes and their crucifixes and lured foolish prey right into his arms.

"Spike, my daughter was in town. My daughter. I would not be summoning demons with my daughter in the path of the destruction. Putting myself in danger, sure, but not Bonnie."

"And Buffy and Willow? Are you using some sort of spell to cover up your dark little secret?"

"No." Xander put on his stubborn face—either that or he
really was panicking. Bonnie would wait until Spike got this sorted, though. If he was going to take control, that meant he had to bring Xander to heel now, before Xander had time to try and think through some way to get out of their deal.

"Convince me," Spike said firmly, tightening his hold on Xander's wrist.

"I didn't. I don't need to." Xander voice grew louder and strained, like a guitar string about to snap. "Spike, we have to go get Bonnie. Please."

"Still not convincing me, pet. Maybe we should take this to the Watcher... tell him about your demon lover and your little girl and my suspicions that you're dabbling in a bit of black magic to smooth over your friends' memories."

"I don't need to!" Xander's voice broke like an adolescent boy's. "They look at me and they think, 'Oh, Xander's just sick and tired of being the normal one, the one without brains or powers or skills, and that's why he does all this stupid stuff. That's why he puts himself in danger. That's why he was willing to send the entire town to hell because he wanted a fun day with a singing demon.'"
Xander's voice took on a hard, mimicking edge that Spike had never heard from him before. "'He thinks we're overlooking him,' they think and they whisper to each other just loud enough so I can hear. 'So we just need to pay more attention to Xander.'" His voice had a desperation to it, a mocking, self-hating desperation that Spike didn't think the boy could fake. He wasn't that good of an actor, and the pain was too raw.

"Any of that true?" Spike asked quietly.

Xander answered with a half sob and an impotent struggle to reclaim his hand. They silently fought for several seconds, Xander twisting and writhing and Spike simply holding on and waiting for the boy to wear himself out. With a heaving sob, Xander finally stopped and sort of sagged into the seat. "Maybe when I was fifteen. When I was fifteen and this all seemed like some comic book, I wanted to be the one with the cape and the secret identity, but I've seen too much Spike. I don't want that. I'm okay being the normal one, but they still think I'm Dawn; they think I'm too caught up in jealousy to see that being special is huge with the sucking side-effects. Enormous, life-altering, happiness-sucking, never-ending side effects. I'm not Dawn, and they just never noticed that I grew up at the same time they did."
Xander stopped and turned to stare out into the night, and Spike held his wrist captive and waited. Boy wasn't done yet. Normally Xander wasn't one for speeches. He would make a quip or a bloody stupid comment and then bugger off to the back to clean some weapon, but this had been building for a while.

"They never really noticed much, so keeping Bonnie a secret wasn't exactly hard. I thought it would be. Senior year I pretty much lived in terror of Buffy finding out. I practiced speeches about not judging a demon by its cover. I worked mowing lawns on weekends so K'wana would have money to run for it if Buffy found out. Turns out, I didn't need to worry." He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the headrest. "Spike, please. Whatever you want here, I'll give it to you, but I have to go get my daughter." The whispered plea seemed to mark the end of Xander's talkative period and he fell silent.

"Whatever I want?" Spike asked, waiting for the stuttered caveats and the quick denials. Xander just sat with his eyes closed and his body limp like a doll that someone had only half-stuffed full of sawdust. A half-dozen good insults darted through Spike's brain, but it seemed unfair to kick a man when he was down, not that
Spike had any compunction about fairness, but he didn't need a broken Xander serving him. "Just keep in mind that you made this deal," Spike said. He'd have to test the boundaries of just how far Xander would go later. Right now they needed to get to his little girl. "Which street?"

"Candlewood," Xander said, and Spike started the car and headed out into the night.

The DeSoto roared before Spike turned it off outside the small house where Xander had sent him. Other than giving directions, the boy had turned unusually quiet. Spike hadn't heard him this silent since the demons had stolen everyone's voice.

Xander gave him a quick and suspicious look before he got out of the car and hurried up the tattered lawn. The house looked normal enough, including a little ceramic garden gnome sitting in the middle of a brown lawn. Kwaini Demons generally tried to blend, even if they did look like the bloody ugliest humans ever. With a good glamour, they could trick most people into looking past the heavy eye ridges and the elongated nose that blended into their upper lip.
Xander knocked, and a demoness opened the front door. Spike got out and leaned against the warm hood, a lit cigarette hanging from one hand. The one at the door was full demon and obviously didn't think much of Xander. Xander stood, his eyes down and his shoulders hunched, but his feet shifted constantly, nervously. Boy was a moron. Demons would never show him any respect unless he stood up and took it, preferably by rippin' their arms off and beating them about the head with 'em. Maybe another day he might have had the energy to work up to a decent glare or an insult or two, but today he didn't even seem to have the energy to bloody stand up straight. Idiot.

Throwing his cigarette into the street, Spike headed up the walk with all the swagger and arrogance he had at his disposal. Immediately, the demoness ignored Xander and focused on him.

"Right then, what's the problem. Don't have all day," Spike said, ignoring the demoness and focusing on Xander. Nothing showed your superiority like ignoring the bloody enemy. The demoness shifted nervously and wisps of fear curled into the air; Xander lost every bit of color out of his face.
"It'll just be a second, Spike. I need to get Bonnie."
Xander sounded desperate. Wanker. They'd come for the girl, so it wasn't like Spike was going to drag him off without her. The whooping cough was nasty shite, and a little one didn't need to suffer through that when they could just take her to hospital. However, the fear from both Xander and the demoness made Spike's demon bask under on the feeling of power. This was familiar. This was comfortable.

"Please, Spike," Xander asked, his voice cracking like he was some fourteen-year-old kid. Spike shook his head. This one didn't just have a soft-underbelly, he ran around showing it to anyone who stopped and looked at him for more than two seconds. It was a wonder no one had eaten him. Actually, it was a wonder Spike hadn't eaten him. If Spike hadn't been distracted by Drusilla's illness, he would have considered Angel's little ploy a bit of a challenge.

"Simple enough," Spike said as he finally turned to the demoness. "I won't have Bonnie die of some fucking human disease. So, either you bring her out here so her da can take her to hospital, or I'll fucking burn the house down."
"You'd kill her too," the demoness said, but she looked worried.

"Yeah, but it won't be of some cough, will it? And I won't have to listen to my boy frettin' because some wanker kept him away, because he'll be visitin' her grave every day." Spike smiled. Now it was the demoness who was shifting nervously, her eyes going from Spike to Xander. Leaning against the rusting railing along the front steps, Spike ran his tongue along his lower lip and considered the demoness. She was full kwaini, her heavy brow ridges and bald head would never even pass for human. So, she was an aunt or grandmother, this one.

Taking out his lighter, Spike flicked the top open and allowed the small flame to flicker up.

"Spike," Xander said desperately, and the way he strangled the word and the fear pouring off the git must have convinced the woman that Spike wasn't kidding.

"K'wana!" the woman called. Another appeared behind her, and this one was definitely a half-breed. A crown of long black hair circled her bald head and her eyes were almost human, ugly by human standards, but almost normal, and she clutched a wiggling bundle in her arms.
The deep kwaini wrinkles were softened so that she looked old, not deformed. Still, she wasn't what Spike expected puppy boy to go for.

"Xander," she said, her voice soft with hope and appreciation. The full kwaini demoness hissed her disapproval and turned back into the house.

"Is Bonnie okay?" Xander asked. He stepped forward and held out his arms. K'wana gently handed over the blue bundle of blankets in her arms. From the size, Spike was guessing the tyke was four or five.

"I don't know."

"She will be, mum," Spike offered. "The cough is bad, but the demon blood will keep her strong, and human medicine will make her well."

K'wana looked over at him, her dark eyes studying him up and down for a second. Spike didn't move from his spot leaning against the rail. If she wanted to check him out, it didn't make any difference to him. "My family doesn't like that she's growing so human." She ducked her head, clearly embarrassed by the fact that she had a spawn that didn't exactly fit the demonic mold. It had to
be hard, not only having a child so weak, but having the family know that she'd chosen to mate with a full human. For demons, life was power, and linking yourself to the powerless was as good as declaring your own powerlessness.

Spike shrugged. "Seems like puppy boy wasn't all human himself when you two made her. Didn't any of that come through in the blood?"

She glanced over at Xander and then shook her head.

"We need to get her to the hospital, she's hot," Xander said, looking from Spike to K'wana with a sort of helpless anger.

"Right then, we're off," Spike said as he turned and headed back to the car. Xander followed without a word to the mother of his child. There was a story there, too. Spike started wondering if he'd been wrong about Xander sending money over to her, but that was the only thing that made sense given Anya's many vocal complaints about Xander and money. The git sure didn't have any other vices that would have claimed large chunks of money.
The bundle in Xander's arms started to cough as Spike started the car.

"Spike, hurry, please," Xander asked, his eyes on the child inside the blanket. Nodding, Spike floored the accelerator. Despite three near-wrecks and a hubcap lost on a curb, Xander didn't say anything until Spike pulled into the emergency lane at the local hospital.

A nurse in white came out. "You can't park here!"

Spike opened his door and stood by it as Xander scrambled to get out. "I think the little one's dying," Spike lied.

Xander made a noise like he was the one dying and froze right there in the drive as the nurse hurried over.

"I need a gurney!" she called as she pulled back the edges of the blanket. "Call pediatrics!" Spike got his first look at thick, dark curls spilling over the edges of the blue blanket.

"And get this car out of the ambulance lane," the nurse barked at Spike. Spike got back in and looked for a place to park. If this Bonnie was going to be his meal ticket, the
least he could do was show a little interest in her recovery--and make sure the idiots knew it was whooping cough. If the girl died, the whole deal was going to go tits over arse.

Part Three

Spike stretched, arching his back and kicking his boots out into the aisle where he would trip any nurse who tried to pass through. Bright green eyes were watching him, inhumanly green. "You better then?" Spike asked.

The girl didn't answer. Instead her eyes traveled the room, taking in the bright cartoon characters painted on the walls and Spike. She might look human, but she sure as hell hadn't been raised by them. Her eyes were all suspicion and calculation. Most humans didn't learn that kind of wariness until they were grown.

"Asked ya a question, pet. Don't make me ask you again," Spike warned when she was silent too long, his voice
soft, but his eyes flashing yellow. Didn't seem fair to go intimidating a tyke, that was more Drusilla's game, but Spike wasn't going to have her running out of here either. Like it or not, she was his meal-ticket, and he had a vested interest in keeping her safe and healthy.

"My chest doesn't hurt as much," she said slowly and carefully.

"The medicine should have you right as rain in no time," Spike nodded.

She seemed to be thinking for a second, and Spike watched her, not sure what to expect. Eventually those stunning green eyes found him. "Where's my mother?"

"No fucking clue. Probably back at the house," Spike answered, leaning back against the chair. It wasn't like she posed any danger, and having demon blood, he could snatch her up if he had to.

She swallowed, her hands clutching the pale yellow blanket. "My father?" she asked.

"At work. He wanted to sit here and watch you just keep breathin', but I pointed out that he had responsibilities."
Spike stretched. "Had to really work to get him out of here. You have him wrapped around your finger, don't you?"

She considered him silently for several seconds. This one might look human, but she wasn't going to pass for human if anyone really looked at her for long. "You're a vampire," she finally announced.

Spike blinked. The girl had inherited her father's tact, that was for bloody sure. "I am," he agreed.

She tilted her head at him, and he could see the shadowed half-circles around her eyes where a full-blooded demon would have those ridges that made 'em look like mutated sheepdogs. But when she moved just a fraction of an inch, the shadows disappeared and she was a little girl with a round face and piles of long dark curls that she had clearly inherited from her father. Only her eyes stood out as inhuman.

"Grandmother says vampires aren't real demons. They're too much like humans because they take over human bodies and get their memories and everything." Her tone of voice made her admiration for her grandmother clear, and Spike had to control a growl that threatened to slip
Running his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, Spike leaned forward. "I figure you lot have families and grandmothers and give live birth, so you're more like humans than vampires are. We know better than to create offspring who are too small and weak to protect themselves."

She blinked and looked at him, but either she wasn't afraid or she didn't have the human scent glands. "I never thought of that," she said with a little frown. "You bite people and make full grown, don't you?"

"If I feel like it," Spike answered, suddenly not sure that he was controlling this conversation as well as he thought he was.

"My cousin said that I'm too much human," she told him in a sudden change of topic.

"You've got a lot of human blood," Spike said cautiously, not really sure why she would talk about that.

"He said I'm so much human that a vampire would probably eat me. He said I would taste good. Do you plan
to eat me?" She blinked up at him. Despite the question, there still wasn't any fear in the air. Either the girl was a little touched in the head or she didn't have any human glands at all.

"I figure your da would throw a wobbly if I did that."

"Are you my dad's new owner?"

Spike blinked. Clearly he had been spending too much time with humans because that was a logical question and yet, he hadn't expected it at all. "Complicated question, pet. That's something you shouldn't be talking about." She pressed her little lips together so that her mouth got so small that she looked like one of Dru's little dolls propped up on the white sheets.

Without warning, she stuck her hand out toward him. "Can you taste me and tell me if I taste human? Co'reck is really annoying and I want to tell him that he's wrong about me tasting like a human."

Spike took her small hand in his. "You shouldn't ever offer your blood pet, not to anyone."

She frowned. "But you came with Daddy."
"Yeah, but your da has some dangerous friends. You don't offer them anything, not even if they ask. Understand?" She got that doll-like frown again and then pulled her hand back slowly. Bloody hell, she wasn't supposed to be upset just because he wouldn't bite her. "Besides," he added, "you don't smell anything like a human. Smell always reveals the truth, and you smell so much like a demon that I'd have to be bloody starving before I'd touch you, and if I were starving, I wouldn't care what the blood tasted like; I'd eat Co'reck or any other full-blood demon to keep from turning to dust."

She giggled and pulled the sheet up closer.

"Bonnie?" a timid voice asked.

"Mommy!" Bonnie threw herself forward, but then she started coughing and ended up on her hands and knees in the middle of the bed, gasping for air.

"Bloody hell." Spike caught her as she just about ripped her own IV out with the force of the coughing.

"Bonnie!" The woman darted forward, and the headscarf she'd pulled over her head slipped back. Spike wasn't
surprised the mother had come, but she was a bloody idiot for not using a glamour. She couldn't pass for human, not unless she ran into a blind man. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

Bonnie coughed as her mother helped her back into the bed.

"She'll be fine, mum. Just a bit of a cough, but she's demon enough to fight this off." Spike ran his fingers along the IV line, untangling the sheets from the delicate line.

K'wana made a little unhappy noise, something between a sob and a whine.

"Momma?" Bonnie asked between coughs.

"You're my girl. You're going to grow up as strong as a kita beast, aren't you?"

Bonnie nodded, and K'wana sank into the chair Spike had left, bending down to rest her forehead against the bed in a pose of perfect despair.

"I'm getting better, Momma. I promise." Bonnie's voice
had just a little tremble in it.

"I know, Sweetie." K'wana sat up. "Granddame wants us to move back to hive."

Suddenly Bonnie looked a lot more demon. The curved patches around her eyes darkened into an imitation of an eyeridge and her eyes brightened. Spike moved closer to the door and kicked it closed with his boot. The last thing they needed was some screaming nurse. K'wana turned to look at Spike. "They won't accept Bonnie. They don't understand why I chose her father." Her face darkened, and Spike was guessing that meant distress.

"Xander's tougher than he looks," Spike offered. Didn't feel right to let the mother suffer so much. Spike liked torture as much as the next demon, but he preferred victims who weren't already quite so damaged. "I've seen him go up against Angelus and stop the wanker from finishing off the slayer when she was down and nearly out."

K'wana tilted her head. "How?"

"Damned if I know," Spike said with a shrug. "But he was in the battle for the high school against vampires and the
mayor's minions, and he bloody survived. He helped the slayer fight a hellgod. The slayer died, and Xander was still there. I tried to kill the wanker. I knocked him upside the head with a microscope when I grabbed up one of his little friends, and he still survived."

"You didn't kill him?"

Spike shrugged. "Got distracted. But what I'm saying is that Xander might not be as bad of a choice as you lot seem to think. He wears that helplessness like a tiger's stripes, but if he were as helpless or as bumbling as he looked, he would have been some vampire's dinner a long time ago."

K'wana stood up, her hand still holding Bonnie's. "Bonnie won't do well at the hive. Xander needs to take care of her until we get back." K'wana's voice was steady, but Spike could read the lie like it was painted across her forehead. She wasn't coming back. The world lost its blues as his true face came out and his eyes yellowed. "Xander loves her. She loves Xander, even when everyone tells her that she shouldn't. Bonnie isn't even her name. Granddame named her Bo'yanea, and Bonnie was the closest Xander could come to saying it, and now she won't answer to anything else. He'll take
care of her. I can't." K'wana's voice was high and sharp, her eye ridges in deep relief as they turned almost black. "They're going to be coming soon. Our house, it has a ghost and she likes Bonnie, so she agreed to hide the keys until I could come here, but they're going to come for me. Granddame is going to ask me to either bring Bonnie or renounce her. Please. They'll kill her. Please." K'wana's voice finally broke, and she gave a very human sob.

"Mommy?" Bonnie asked, her voice so small that Spike wasn't sure a human's ears could have heard. K'wana flinched.

"They say it's my fault a vampire knows where the house is. I've violated the rules. I'll live with that. Bonnie shouldn't." Her words came out in short gasps as she tried to catch her breath.

Spike looked, and Bonnie had pulled her hand out of her mother's grip. She was clutching the blankets around her, and she looked fully demon with dark ridges around her eyes swelling up and turning a deep bruise-purple. Spike moved to the end of Bonnie's bed. Bloody hell. Puppy-boy should be here to deal with this. It was his stupidity in shagging a demon that led to the whole mess, and
now he should see the fallout when you went sticking your dick in where it wasn't wanted.

K'wana looked up at him. "Please," she whispered, and it was pretty clear she expected him to answer for Xander. Moron.

"The house... you have that magically off the grid?" Spike asked. This could still turn to his advantage.

K'wana nodded.

"How long?"

She hiccupped. "A century spell. It was just redone in the seventies."

Spike nodded. "The ghost... any problems with that?"

She shook her head, but the black was fading from her eyeridges.

"Who's taking over?"

"A clan of helpherin."
"Get back there and tell them they have one day to clear out before I show up and slaughter anyone who's left, got it?" she nodded. Turning she looked at her daughter, helpless despair still etched into her face.

"I'll protect her, mum, and Xander will love the stuffing out of her. Probably spoil her rotten by the time you lot get back."

K'wana looked at him and opened her mouth, and maybe she was about to tell him the truth—that she wasn't coming back. Maybe she was even going to die for her poor judgment. Maybe she was just going to be safely married off to someone with a kink for human hair. But Bonnie didn't need to hear any of that.

"Go on then, get out." Spike opened the door and waited as K'wana slowly moved out of the room, her eyes still on Bonnie until Spike finally let the door drift shut again.

Part Four

He stirred, sleep lifting from him sluggishly. A warm body rested next to him, which felt familiar. He looked over and there was a beautiful, pixyish woman with red hair and stunning eyes looking at him. "Hey," he offered in his most seductive tones. She returned his 'hey' with one of
her own, but she had a confused look on her face, and he could understand the confusion because he didn't know her or himself. Definitely time to cut back on the drinking.

"Hello?" an older man with an English accent asked. A girl answered. "Who... who are you people?"

Well crap. Clearly he wasn't the only one with memory problems. A sexy blonde knelt down beside the girl, trying to comfort her, and his cup of weird was runnething over. "Okay, who are you freaks?" he demanded. If someone slipped him something in his beer, he was pressing charges.

The redhead looked at him. "You don't know me?"

For one second, he considered bluffing. Telling a beautiful woman that you didn't remember her was all kinds of stupid. However, the next question she was going to ask him was her name, and getting caught lying to a beautiful woman was even more stupid. "Not a clue," he admitted.

"But you were just all like, 'oh hey,'" she said in a very insulting tone. Suddenly she wasn't looking quite as
"Yeah, 'cause I thought you were a girl," he pointed out. He could see his mistake the second that came out and he tried to recover, "and I'd remember, but—"

"Well, I am a girl!" She grabbed her own breasts like she needed to check, and something was definitely wrong with this whole picture. She stuttered on. "I'm ... not sure ... who I am exactly, but—"

He didn't wait for the redhead to finish; he blew up. "Okay, why was I on the ground? And why are you all staring at me? Is this some kind of psych test? Am I getting paid for this?" He had a vague memory of sitting in a small room with a monitor and a man in a tweed suit. He had to answer questions in order to get paid for test results, and he'd needed that money badly. He felt a vague sort of panic at the idea of money.

The English man got up. He looked a little like the man from the small room with the monitor, like he was a college professor or a university researcher or something. "It's not just you. Does anyone remember anything?" he asked in a tone that made it clear he was used to dealing with emergencies calmly and responsibly.
Unfortunately, everyone answered with a shake of their heads.

"Well, maybe we all got ... terribly drunk and this is some sort of, uh, blackout," he suggested, which seemed not so responsible. The girls looked a little young for drinking, all except for the blonde with the straight hair that went all flippy at the end—the one standing near the English guy. She looked old enough to drink.

The youngest one, the brown-haired girl answered. "I don't think I drink."

"I don't see any booze," flippy-hair pointed out. She felt her head. "I don't feel any head bumps. I don't see Allen Funt."

"Who?" the English guy asked. He had been about to ask the same, but the flippy-haired girl waved English off, and he didn't want to get dismissed like that, so he kept his mouth shut.

If his weird cup runneth over before, it was now running over and threatening to flood the whole house. What the hell was going on? "Okay. I'm not panicking. I'm not. I'm not," he firmly ordered himself. Everyone turned to look
at him like he was doing something strange. He was the only one having a normal reaction to waking up without any memory. "Stop looking at me like I'm panicking!" he snapped.

"Hey, hey, take it easy, guy," the blonde bombshell reassured him. "Okay, no one's hurt, right? And, and none of us look all hatchety-murdery, so ... we're probably safe. Here. Wherever here is." That was probably the worst case of reassuring he had ever heard.

The redhead wandered the room, her fingers brushing over jars and vials lined up on the shelves. "Look at this stuff on these shelves. Weird jars of weird stuff," she said. "Weird books with weird covers, like 'Magic for Beginners.'" Her face lit up. "Oh!"

"This is a magic shop. A-a-a real magic shop." A woman he hadn't noticed before stood up. Her light brown hair was pulled back and she had large doe-like eyes. Even without his memories, he was starting to feel just a little lucky because waking up in a room full of beautiful women was not the worst thing that could happen.

Blonde bombshell spoke up. "Well, maybe that's it. Maybe something magic happened—" she started, and
clearly she was the dumb blonde. Before he could say anything, the English dude was all over that.

"Magic! Magic's all balderdash and chicanery. I'm afraid we don't know a bloody thing... except I seem to be British, don't I?" he asked like that hadn't been obvious already. "Uh, and a man. With ... glasses. Well, that narrows it down considerably." The blonde bombshell wasn't the only dumb one in the room.

The young girl turned to the bombshell. "I don't like this."

"It's okay, don't worry. We'll take care of each other," she promised, brushing the hair back from the girl's face. He had a memory, but it couldn't be real. The woman he remembered wasn't human; she was some sort of alien. She smiled, and a little girl with dark curls rose up in his memory. She ran toward him with chubby arms and legs, and he swept her up into his arms and he felt.... he felt whole. He looked around. Where was his little girl? What if something happened to her? But something warned him to not tell these people he had a little alien child somewhere. He couldn't trust them, not with that. Maybe they'd threatened to turn his alien child over to Area 51 government goons and he'd put some sort of memory whammy on all of them. Maybe he had a
memory ray gun somewhere.

The English man was nodding now. "We'll all get our memory back, and it'll all be right as rain," he said in a tone that made it clear he was hoping that would happen.

Flippy hair gave a little squeal. "Look!" She held up her hand and he could see an engagement ring on her hand. "I'm engaged." She looked at the English man, and he blinked at her, but he didn't offer any denials. "It's a lovely ring," she told English like she was congratulating him on his taste in jewelry.

"Nothing like a little cradle-robbing in the morning," he muttered as he watched the two of them. English really was a little old for flippy-hair.

"Old?" English demanded. "I'm young enough to still get carded."

Before he could apologize, at the very least apologize for talking loud enough for anyone to hear, the redhead clapped her hands. "Carded! Driver's licenses!"

Thank god. Clearly the redhead had the brains in the
group. He felt through his pockets and pulled out his identification. "It's me," he offered them a look at his card. '"Alexander Harris.' Cute picture. Hey, I exist," he finished with a cheeky grin.

The redhead smiled back. "I'm Willow Rosenberg. Heh, Willow. Funny name.

"I think it's pretty," the doe-eyed beauty said shyly.

Willow smiled back. "Whadda you got?"

"Tara, and look, I'm a student at U.C. Sunnydale."

"Me too! Hey, maybe we're study buddies."

"Jackpot," Alexander said as he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. That was even better than a memory erasing ray gun. "Anyone want to find out who's on the saved number list?" He pushed memory 1 and the little screen showed the word 'home' in block letters. "I'm calling home."

"But you're here," the blonde-bombshell who didn't have a name yet pointed out.
"I'm... I'm called Rupert Giles," English continued with the introductions as Alexander listened to the phone ring.

Flippy hair smiled at him. "Rupert," she said in a tone of voice that made it clear to Alexander that she was the sort who was going to be practicing saying her first name with his last name just as soon as she figured out her name.

"Oh, hey, I have a name on my jacket. Harris," Willow said about the same time a voice answered the phone.

"Wot?" an English voice demanded.

Alexander frowned. Were they in England? "Is this the home of Alexander Harris?" he asked politely. He suddenly realized that he didn't know what he was supposed to say.

"Harris?" the voice asked. The aggression was still there but so was confusion.

"I believe so," Alexander answered.

"You... believe so?"
"Are you able to do anything other than parrot back my words?" Alexander asked in frustration. He wasn't sure why, but the voice from the phone created a general feeling of anxiety and frustration. Surely that wasn't a good sign.

"Bloody hell. What the fuck has gotten into you, Xander?"

"Xander? I go by Xander?"

"Xander?" Rupert echoed. Clearly he did not approve, but a man with a name like Rupert had very little room to complain about others' names.

"Yes, you bloody well go by Xander. Who else is there with you, mate?" the voice asked.

"Rupert and Willow and Tara and two others," Xander said. The youngest one held up her necklace.

"Dawn!" she provided.

"Dawn's there?" The voice on the other end sounded truly concerned now. Maybe they were friends. "You lot
"Stay there!" he said firmly. "None of you set one bloody foot out the door. In fact, lock the door and make sure no one sets one foot inside, either. I can sort this mess out when I get there."

"Do you know what happened?" Xander asked.

"Bloody fucking magic is what happened. I don't know how many times I have to point out that magic always goes tits over arse, and still Red has to go stirring that pot. I'm on my way." He hung up before Xander even had a chance to ask him his name or point out that he didn't know where they were. Hopefully the man on the other end knew.

"Well?" Rupert asked.

"He says that Red always stirs the magic pot and that he'll fix it when he gets here," Xander said absent-mindedly. "He sounds upset."

"Do you think he's a brother?" Willow asked. "Because
the coat I'm wearing says 'Harris' so it might be yours or your brother's. Maybe I'm dating one of you." Xander looked around. Willow was the only one who fit the name "Red" and the thought that she had erased his memory made him just a little uncomfortable. "We did wake up all snuggly-wuggly," she concluded.

"He was English, so I don't think we're brothers."

"I'm Anya!" The woman with flippy hair announced loudly. "My key fits this lock. And, uh, the forms ... next to the cash register say that," she paused as she read, "Rupert and Anya own the shop together."

Rupert looked at her in surprised. "This is our magic shop?" he asked. Xander felt for the man. Anya wasn't exactly tactful, and being both engaged to and working with her was going to wear thin pretty quick. "Uh, well, that's very, uh, uh, progressive of me," he finished weakly, clearly trying to recover from any horror that he might have shown.

"Did he say what my name was?" the blonde bombshell asked.

Xander shook his head. "No, but he was not at all happy
that I didn't seem to know myself. And he acted like he knew exactly where we'd be. I really hope he's right because if none of us are where we're supposed to be, then he's going to be running around looking for us in places where we aren't."

"In which case he can simply call you on the portable phone," Rupert said dismissively, and something in Xander's memory nagged him. He didn't like being dismissed.

"Yes, but it might slow him down too much," Xander said defensively. "And he said we should lock all the doors and not go outside, so there may be some kind of danger we don't understand."

"Da-danger?" Tara asked. Willow edged closer to the woman like she wanted to reassure her but she wasn't sure how.

"Did he say what kind of danger?" Anya demanded even while she moved to the door and threw the locks. This place did have some pretty impressive locks. "Is this running for our lives danger or be careful because the IRS could take away everything you and your loving fiancé have spent a lifetime building up?"
"I don't know, but I get the feeling he's coming here as fast as he can," Xander moved to the counter and leaned on it.

Dawn moved to his side. "That's so sweet. He's rushing over here to be by your side. I bet he's your lover."

"Dawn!" Bombshell hissed in a horrified voice. Xander only managed to squeak out a weak, "what?" that was totally lost under the sheer volume of the bombshell's shocked response.

"I bet they are!" Dawn defended herself.

"That is so rude."

"Boy, you're a pain in the posterior," the bombshell said at the exact same time Dawn offered an equally unhappy, "Boy, you're bossy!"

Both froze and stared at each other for a second.

"Do you think we're—"

"Sisters?" The blonde finished Dawn's sentence. They
smiled at each other and then threw themselves at each other in a hug.

"Still not gay," Xander protested. Both girls turned to look at him with a sort of fond exasperation that was somehow familiar.

"There is nothing wrong with being gay. Many great men were gay like Liberace and that guy who painted things." Anya's version of support was not exactly supportive. "Besides, it's not like you even know. We won't know you're gay until your gay lover shows up, scoops you into a hug and then offers to have comfort sex on the counter."

Xander immediately started choking. Over-share. Serious over-share.

"Now, dear," Rupert said. He was cleaning his glasses and looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"It's just the truth. People should not be so afraid of the truth," she defended herself. "If magic did this, I wonder if magic could undo it." She walked over and pulled a book off the shelf.
"Maybe we can tell when his roommate shows up," Dawn offered. "If he's wearing pink or purple or ruffles, that would mean he was gay, right?"

"Way to be insulting," the bombshell muttered, and this time, Xander agreed.

"Maybe we should just all do a whole lot of nothing until the man with the memories shows up," Xander suggested as he looked around the room. Tara nodded, immediately on board. Willow and Anya both had stubborn expressions, but both of them nodded when he kept looking at them.

"Good idea," the bombshell agreed, pulling her sister off to the side. Xander had called them freaks earlier, and he wasn't sure that was a strong enough word. An awkward silence fell on the room. Willow wandered the aisles looking at the strange supplies lined up on the shelves, and Tara's eyes followed her. Anya searched under the counter for record books and then seemed to get sulky when Rupert demanded equal time to look them over. And the bombshell and Dawn were having a whispered argument in the corner, complete with guilty looks in his direction. Clearly, Xander was the odd man out here, and somehow that was a familiar feeling. Damn. Did his life
really suck so much that feeling miserable was somehow comfortable?

A pounding at the door jarred him out of his morbid thoughts.

"Open up!"

"We're closed!" Anya yelled back.

"It's Spike!" Inside the shop, everyone looked at each other in confusion. "Bloody hell, I'm the one Harris called for help!"

"OH!" Anya hurried over and unlocked the door.

Standing with the streetlight behind him was Spike. He had bleached hair slicked back and a long, leather coat that billowed out to show a deep purple shirt and well-worn jeans. Purple, Xander thought, why did it have to be purple? If the man was wearing all black, he would be less gayed up, but with his black nail polish and purple shirt, he was definitely on the gay side. And he lived at the number Xander had labeled 'home.' Oh he was so very, very gay. But at least he had some taste in men. This Spike was easily as beautiful as all the women in this
room, and this room was definitely overloaded with beauty. Was he wearing eyeliner?

"Oi, nice job with this mess, Red," Spike said as he came in and pushed the door shut behind him. "Bit, you alright?" Spike asked, looking at Dawn. Xander walked closer and studied the man. He was older than Xander, maybe 25 or 30. At least there wasn't an age gap like with Anya and Rupert. Spike turned to look at Xander, his head tilted to the side in confusion.

"Mate, you alright?" he asked quietly, like the question was intimate.

"Freaked out," Xander answered honestly. "I'm just glad you were home to answer the phone." Xander patted the pocket with the cell phone. Spike's eyes darted down the pocket and his eyebrows went up. One was scarred, bisected by a line that looked like a tiny river dividing the brow.

"Sure enough." Spike sounded distracted and he studied Xander so closely that Xander could feel himself squirm under the gaze, his body reacting to the interest. Clearly Spike was the sexual aggressor in this relationship.
"They're so gay for each other," Dawn announced grandly, "I told you so."

"You told them he was gay?" Spike looked around like any of them had answers.

Dawn nodded. "Yep, with a lover who was at home and scared because he was hurt and who knew exactly where Xander was going to be. That's not a hard one to figure out." Spike's eyebrow did a dip and dance before going up even higher. The man was expressive.

"Right then, time to get the memories back," Spike said without actually answering Dawn. He turned to Willow. "You're going to have something on you—a piece of paper with names or a small branch with tiny pink flowers or a crystal or orb. We need it."

"Me?" Willow's voice went up an octave.

"I would think that if someone would be powerful enough to cast a spell this big, it would be me. After all, I own the shop," Anya pointed out. Then she sidestepped and caught Rupert's arm, hugging it closely, "Rupert and I do, anyway. But then, I'm sure I'm far too mature to make a mistake with a spell, isn't that right, Rupert?" she
looked at him, and Rupert had a deer-in-the-headlights look.

"Yes, I'm sure it is," he offered vaguely.

Spike looked suddenly thoughtful, and the expression worried Xander for some reason. He hated not having his memories.

"So, you're attracted to Rupert? No one else?" Spike asked.

Anya looked at him oddly. "Rupert is very ruggedly handsome."

Spike pursed his lips. "You're not attracted to Tara or Xander over there?"

Anya barely gave either of them a glance. "I like older partners."

"Older?" Rupert demanded with some offense.

"No worries, you aren't old," Spike offered him without taking his eyes off Anya. "So, you're setting your cap for Rupert?"
"Why?" Anya let go of his arm and looked at Spike suspiciously. Xander had to admit that he was feeling a little suspicious himself. "Oh god," Anya breathed as she turned on Rupert, "we're breaking up, aren't we? Are we getting a divorce? I bet you took back my wedding band, and I'm wearing the only piece of jewelry I have left from you. What? Did you have affairs with other women? Were you bringing them into our bed?"

"I... I..." Rupert turned so red that Xander was concerned for him, and the nameless bombshell stepped forward, clearly about to get involved. "For all we know, you could have been acting like a tart, sleeping with every git who walked through that door," Rupert finally gathered the words to counterattack.

"If I did it's because you drove me to it!" Anya pulled off her ring and threw it at him. "I'm not giving up the store, I don't care what you do. It is half mine, and I will work here and make you miserable every day for the rest of your life."

Rupert looked stunned.

"That was bloody amusing. I hope you remember that
here in a second, pet," Spike said. As he walked past, Spike gave Xander's arm a pat.

"Pig," Anya said to Rupert, her eyes shining with tears.

"So, you find what we need?" Spike asked Willow. She opened her hand and a black crystal lay in the middle of it. "I've never seen it before."

"You'll remember it in a second," Spike promised. He took the crystal and dropped it on the floor. Bringing up his boot, he brought it down with a sharp crack. Xander staggered back as all his memories slammed into him. Bonnie, the house with the demon spell that exempted it from mortgage or electric or water bills, the ghost that would float toys in front of Bonnie to try and cheer her up. And now they all knew... they knew that he had a home that he shared with Spike. Xander couldn't breathe. His chest ached with fear.

Tara started crying softly.

"Tara." Willow said the word with such helpless desperation that it pulled Xander out of his own fears. Oh god. The conversation. They were talking about trying to fix what they had done to Buffy, and Willow had
promised to not use magic.

Tara shook her head and headed for the back room. Willow made a little sob, but she didn't follow.

"Buffy," Xander turned to her, "we wanted to help, to make it easier, but none of us agreed to..." Xander waved his hand.

"Do the brain whammy?" Dawn filled in. Buffy looked too shell-shocked to even answer. She sat on a stool and just stared into space as time returned all her memories—including where they had ripped her out of heaven.

"I'm telling you, pet, that is one disaster waiting to happen," Spike said, bumping Xander's shoulder and poking a thumb toward Anya.

"Hey!" Anya protested. "My ring!" She went diving under the counter in search of it.

"Speaking of 'hey,' why was Spike at your apartment?" Dawn asked.

Xander froze. It was all about to fall down around his ears. If he had to choose between his friends and his
daughter, he would choose Bonnie—no question. But he didn't want to lose his friends.

"I wasn't," Spike answered for him. "Xander's been working his arse off to put a down payment on the shittiest little house I've ever seen. He let me stay there in return for keeping the demons from thinking it was condemned and abandoned." Spike shrugged. "Have to say, though, this is not the most loving relationship." Spike looked from Xander to Anya.

Xander flinched, well aware that Spike only wanted to get Anya out of the way. With Anya gone, Xander would be totally under Spike's thumb. Xander and his paycheck. But Xander had to admit that a little part of him was okay with that. He was tired of trying to be all things to all people. He wanted to go home to Bonnie. Three nights now, he'd laid next to Anya while she wheezed herself to sleep, and he'd worried about Bonnie, about Clem's babysitting skills, about what Spike would do in order to take control, because Xander did understand that Spike needed control. The more creative Spike had to get in order to assert his control, the more danger they were all in.

"I wanted to bring something to the marriage," Xander
whispered, feeling like a heel. "But..." he stopped. Anya was looking at him with a slowly growing dismay. Xander knew he had to do this. He had to protect Bonnie, and there was a little part of him that wanted to escape from the trap he'd built for himself when he proposed. He loved Anya. He did. He just couldn't marry her. He'd really thought he could propose and then get killed by Glory, and no harm done.

"You bought me a house?" Anya sounded confused.

"He bought a death trap for rats," Spike corrected her. Xander glanced over. The house looked rough outside, but inside, it was beautifully kept with carved beams that told the story of Bonnie's demonic ancestors. But if the girls thought he had rats, they were less likely to drop by for coffee.

"Xander?" Anya called.

He looked at her, desperate for the world to just open and swallow him whole.

She gave a little hiccup. Xander let his gaze fall to the ground. He couldn't do this; he couldn't hurt her.
"Bloody hell. Even I can smell disaster coming in this relationship. Let it go before you two end up hating each other," Spike counseled.

"Spike!" Buffy objected. Spike walked over to her side, and he looked at her with this longing that Xander couldn't understand. How could Spike, as evil as he was, want someone as pure as Buffy? Or maybe getting pulled out of heaven had made Buffy something less than pure because she wasn't pulling away from him. God, what had they done? And the worst part was that Xander still couldn't bring himself to be sorry. He was a selfish bastard who wanted Buffy alive.

"Face it, pet, when she didn't have her memories, she wasn't attracted to him at all," Spike said with brutal honesty. Xander flinched away from that truth.

"Xander is a very good provider, and very good in bed," Anya said, but even she wasn't sounding sure now. This was Xander's cue, his chance to simplify his life. He had to. Bonnie needed him now like she never had before, and all her mature comments about understanding why he had to leave didn't change the fact that he should be there.
"You should keep the apartment," Xander said quietly. "I'll leave you with two month's rent."

"Xander." Anya whispered his name, but Xander didn't look up. He just headed out into the night, his heart aching and guilt like a stone in his stomach because, god help him, he was relieved.

Part Five

"Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg. Batmobile lost a wheel and the Joker got away, hey!" Xander sang as he pulled the heavy duct tape off the box of Christmas decorations. Bonnie laughed and reached out to pull on a plastic pine needle sticking out the corner of the box.

"Jingle bowels, jingle bowels, Daddy lost a..." she stopped.

"Peg," Xander sang. Bonnie giggled. "And you have been spending too much time with Spike. You are too young for bowel jokes."
"I'm not a baby," Bonnie said. She pulled on the needle, and it broke off. "I'm a growing girl."

"You are growing, but you're still a little girl," Xander disagreed. Sometimes it bothered him just how fast she was growing up. He'd looked up kwaini demons not long after he'd found out that his night of primal wildness was going to have some long-term consequences, and according the book, Bonnie was going to grow up fast... faster than a human, anyway. Xander had never had a chance to really talk to K'wana about it because any discussion seemed to come back to the family's despair that Bonnie was turning out more human than demon. Xander reached out and caught one of Bonnie's dark curls, and she smiled at him. Sadly, he didn't remember much about his night with K'wana. It was a long night stained with lust and fleeting memories of sweating flesh and sharp teeth. The last of the tape ripped away and the box came open, surprising Xander.

"I declare victory!" Xander said as artificial tree limbs popped up. His Christmases always sucked, but now that Bonnie was in a mostly human home, he was determined to give her some happy memories of the holiday.

"You're silly. The box isn't dangerous enough to defeat,"
Bonnie told him seriously.

"Oh yeah? Wait until you see how hard this is to put together," Xander pointed out. He pulled a branch out. "Every branch has a little bit of color on the end. We have to put up the big pole in the center and then match all the colors, and if we're wrong, we're going to have the ugliest Christmas tree in the whole world."

Bonnie pulled the first branch out, and then she froze, her eyes darting to the front door. Xander twisted around, watching the yellow streetlight shine in through the narrow slot window set into the door for a second before the lock turned and Spike came thumping in the room. It was early for him to be home.

"Hey, Spike," Xander said cautiously. If he was being honest, Spike was pretty easy to live with... easier than Anya anyway, but every time the vampire walked into the house, Xander could feel his guts knotting inside him. Bonnie was here, so damn vulnerable because her demon blood made it possible for Spike to hurt her, and Xander was intensely aware of the fact that he wasn't fast enough or strong enough to protect his daughter—not from Spike and not from all the other nasties that went bump in the night.
"Pet," Spike said, an endearment Xander was quickly growing to hate. It wasn't even that he hated the name itself. Anya's pet names for him tended to be on the therapy-inducing side. But Xander wasn't sure if Spike was showing some sort of weird, twisted sort of affection where he appreciated that Xander kept him in beer and smokes or if Spike was calling him a lower life form. And even worse, Xander couldn't do a damn thing to stop him.

Spike collapsed into the recliner looking absolutely exhausted. There weren't any big bads on the horizon, just some random harassing from the idiot triplets, so Xander wasn't quite sure what had left Spike looking like he'd just got beat on by his bookie friend again. Xander never would have guessed that a few Siamese kittens would have cost so much, but that was still less than one of Anya's spa days.

"Anything wrong?" Xander asked. He pushed himself up and moved to the center of the room.

Spike looked up. "Yeah, I don't see you getting me a fucking beer."
Xander flinched. He had always insisted that he was not going to grow up to be his father. So instead, he grew up to be his mother. Xander glanced at Bonnie, worried, but she was just sorting branches with the same intensity she used for everything. Rather than risk a fight in front of Bonnie, Xander headed for the kitchen.

When Xander had first moved to the house, he'd had nightmares about just what Spike would demand. Instead, Spike was way less with the demanding than Anya had been. If the refrigerator was stocked with human blood and ale and there were Jack Daniels, cigarettes, and Wheatabix in the cupboards, Spike was usually pretty damn content. Clearly not tonight.

Xander hurried through the carved mahogany arch that led into the kitchen. This was the one room that definitely wasn't human designed. Every inch of wall space was covered in carvings and the stove was a heavy iron monster built with wood-burning warmers to use for spell-making. If Willow wasn't already so far gone into the spell-making and if Xander wasn't trying to hide Bonnie from his friends, he'd love to show it off to her. But those medieval touches did look a little strange next to the full-sized modern refrigerator tucked into an inconvenient corner where you couldn't open the door
all the way without hitting a stone pillar.

Going over, he pulled out beer and human blood, putting the second into a mug and then heading for the microwave. Spike was generally in a better mood after feeding, so if Xander wanted some happy Christmas memories, he was going to have to get the bloodsucker happy. His mother had always gone for the beer, but Xander figured if he brought Spike too much beer without some blood, they really were going to recreate the Harris household Christmas.

It was weird, sometimes Xander hated Spike, and other times he almost felt something almost sympathetic. He could weirdly understand Spike's frustration. Actually, he remembered the frustration because he'd spent all of sophomore year in a fruitless chase of Buffy. But still. Ick. As a vampire, Spike should be chasing vampires or demons or something. Not Buffy. There was wrong and then there was 'oh this is so going to end with someone's eviscerated guts in a steaming pile at their feet' wrong.

The microwave dinged, and Xander grabbed a box of Crawfords Garibaldi biscuits and stuck it under one arm before grabbing the beer in one hand and the mug of blood in the other. If the beer and the blood didn't cheer
Spike up, hopefully the really crappy English cookies would.

Turning the corner, Xander found Bonnie standing at Spike's knee. His first instinct was to grab her away because if Spike was channeling Tony Harris, this was not going to end well. But instead of lashing out, verbally or physically, Spike smiled at whatever she had said and ran a finger over her cheek.

"Killed a Mohra once, poppet. Nasty buggers, those. Face like they just crawled out of their graves, those."

Xander opened his mouth, but then he snapped it shut again. Yeah, he would be happier if Bonnie never, ever heard about another big bad, but with Spike in the house, that wasn't going to happen. Instead he headed over and put the various treats on the table next to Spike's chair. Looking at the blood and the cookies, Spike's scarred eyebrow twitched, but Xander just headed back toward the Christmas tree. Bonnie had started pulling out the branches and organizing them by the color on the end, but she had all the red and and orange-red together. The colors looked the same, but red branches were long things for the bottom of the tree and orange-red were short and stubby.
"Bonnie, Spike looks really tired. Maybe we should leave the living room to him and we could go play with your video game," Xander suggested.

"How did you kill it?" Bonnie asked, crawling up onto his lap. Shit. Whatever he didn't want Bonnie to do, Bonnie pretty much did. Up until a month ago, Xander had really spent a lot of time blaming his parents for being unparental, but at this point, he figured they probably had done the best they could because getting a kid to listen obviously required talents that were not in the Harris gene pool.

Spike leaned forward. "It attacked Dru. It didn't even wait until she was looking, and it took an ax to her. Caught her right above the hip." Spike pointed to Bonnie's side. "She went down caterwauling, and I didn't have anything bigger than a knife on me, so I ripped one of the beams off the side of this shed and started swinging." Spike's got a gleeful look in his eye as he picked up his blood.

Bonnie's eyes got big. "You're strong."

That made Spike smile even more. "Bloody right I am, poppet. And I caught him right in the back of his knee."
That's the trick, pet. If you don't know exactly how to kill 'em, make sure you disable them so they can't come after you."

"Spike, this really isn't child-approved conversation," Xander tried to protest. Spike looked at him and gave him a look that might have been a grin or a sneer, Xander wasn't sure which.

"Not like Bonnie doesn't know about the things that go bump in the night, pet. I figure you lot only survived as long as you did because you bloody educated yourself. We don't want our girl ending up demon kibble because she doesn't know how to handle herself." Spike reached over and opened the cookie box.

"I'm going to grow up to be as strong as you," Bonnie announced firmly. Xander could feel hot jealousy turn his stomach sour, but then it wasn't like he had a whole lot of strength for her to admire. Bonnie's mother and grandmother had pointed that out often enough, and sometimes Xander could hear echoes of those women in Bonnie's voice. Spike tilted his head.

"Not likely, pet. Kwaini aren't as strong as vampires. But vampires aren't as strong as Mohra, and that big bastard
that touched my Dru died, even if he was stronger than me."

"Because you disabled him," she said happily, pronouncing the new word carefully.

Spike laughed. "Didn't even come close, poppet. The wood broke, and there I was with a big, nasty demon with an ax and all I had was a bit of wood. And my sire was still down, crying out that I should rip the wanker's head off, like I hadn't already been trying to do exactly that. I bloody loved Dru, but sometimes she did tend to dwell on the obvious."

Spike offered Bonnie a cookie, and she took it and nibbled on it as she watched Spike. While Spike watched her, his expression softened. For a brief second, he wasn't the big bad.

"What did you do?" Xander asked, curiosity getting the best of him.

Spike let his hand rest on Bonnie's leg as she nibbled on her cookie. "I drove the broken end of the beam right into his stomach."
"Okay, please let's not get into descriptions of guts," Xander begged. Bonnie was eating, and Xander did not need to see any of her dinner or that cookie make a return appearance.

"What's the matter, mate? Weak stomach?"

Xander looked down toward Bonnie. Spike followed Xander's gaze and then rolled his eyes when he realized that Xander was concerned about Bonnie's stomach. Xander had no doubt that Spike cared about Bonnie, but his version of care and nurturing was not exactly child appropriate.

"Wanker," Spike said softly. He gave Bonnie a little slap on the back, and she came over and crawled onto the couch, laying on her stomach with her top half in Xander's lap. He rested a hand on her back.

"I don't mind evisceration stories," she offered, and Xander really didn't want to even think about the fact that she didn't have to sound that word out. Disabled was a new word, evisceration she'd heard often enough to say comfortably. Sometimes Xander was sorry that he didn't just take Bonnie and run when she was a baby. He could have protected her from all this, but he'd been an
idiot and he thought he could be a good father without giving up his life.

"Did that kill the demon?" she asked Spike.

"Ask your da," Spike said. Xander blinked for a second.

"What?"

"You spent the last six years mucking around with the slayer, fighting all the big bads. Did a broken bit of beam in the stomach kill the Mohra?"

Xander thought about that for a second. "Red crystal thingy right here?" Xander asked, tapping his forehead.

"That'd be it."

"You have to break the crystal or they just come back bigger and badder than ever," Xander said. "Not that they're exactly warm, fuzzy kittens the first time you try to kill them."

"True enough." Spike nodded. "Bloody wished someone would have told me that the first time I met it. I killed that git three times before Dru managed to tell me to
break the stone. Every time it came after me, I thought the demon's bigger, badder brother was back for revenge."

"Wow." Bonnie's eyes were all big. "But a Mohra isn't going to come back from the dead and come in here, is it?" Bonnie looked at the front door with sudden suspicion. Given her age, the idea of demons breaking into the house should have terrified her, but Xander guessed the rules were different since she was a demon.

"No worries, poppet. No demon is coming through that door without my permission." Spike picked up his beer and took a big drink.

"Maybe we could start putting the tree together," Xander suggested. If Spike's mood was improving, he definitely wanted to be busy doing something other than aggravating him into getting pissed again.

"I bet I can put my half together faster!" Bonnie sang as she darted for the box. "Red, yellow and blue are on the bottom."

"I guess that leaves me with all the branches at the top," Xander agreed.
"I'm going to beat you, Daddy," Bonnie said joyfully. Xander smiled and grabbed the center pole, setting it in the base so they could start putting the tree together. Yeah, Spike was stronger. Spike had all the cool demon stories that obviously impressed Bonnie's demon instincts, but Spike couldn't put a Christmas tree together with her or be her father or read her a story when he was trying hard not to cry about her mother. Those were Xander's jobs. And this was one job Xander was determined to not screw up.

Part Six

Xander yawned. The tree was looking definitely... odd. Bonnie had put almost all of the decorations on the bottom, and when Xander tried to move them, she got that bright-eyed stare that meant she was going to silently endure whatever you did even if she was miserable. So Xander had left most of them there. The living room twinkled with the Christmas lights from the
tree, and the television droned so softly that Xander couldn't hear what it was saying, but the guy on it was happily chopping vegetables.

Spike took another drink of his beer.

"She's got you right round her finger, pet," he said mildly. Bonnie was asleep on her stomach under the tree. Xander's attempt to explain Santa Claus had been met with enthusiastic plans for traps and dungeons and stealing the reindeer until Spike had finally stepped in and explained that it was all some human rot to cover up for spoiling their children. Xander hadn't been able to tell if Bonnie was disappointed or amused, but she'd fallen asleep not long after that.

"Yeah, and you're just completely unaffected," Xander said sarcastically. Bonnie had spilled her milk over Spike's knee, and his jeans were an odd sort of gray from the dried stuff. Spike just shrugged.

"Spike?" Xander asked when the vampire stood up.

Spike stopped and looked down at Xander. Xander had long ago figured out that Spike was in a better mood for answering questions when he was both full of blood and
standing over Xander. It was either a Spike thing or a vampire thing. Although actually, now that Xander thought about it, Larry had this weird way of being nice to Xander after knocking his face into the dirt in sixth grade, so maybe it was a bully thing.

"Wot?"

"Is there some sort of big bad in town that's got everyone stressed?" Xander hated that he had to ask Spike this. Spike was supposed to be the outsider, and he was one of the insiders, one of the three musketeers, only lately.... Xander refused to let his thoughts wander too far down that road. If he did, he was going to end up angry with Buffy for shutting him out or angry with Willow for thinking that Tara and her friends weren't enough or angry with himself for being too stupid to notice they were all falling apart.

Spike looked at Bonnie for a long time before he answered. "Just the human kind, mate."

Xander nodded. He wasn't even sure if Spike meant the idiot trio and their stupid techno tricks or Willow herself.

"Besides, not like you could do shit about it either way, is
"It?" Spike demanded.

Xander reached out and rested his hand on Bonnie's back as he looked at her. He didn't need to answer because Spike already knew the truth. Xander wasn't good at fighting, and after what had happened since Buffy died, he was starting to think he wasn't very good at friendship either. Xander got to his knees and gathered Bonnie up into his arms.

"She needs to be in bed," Xander said softly as he stood. Spike stood in his way for a second, just to show he could, and Xander waited. He was too tired for these games to even bother him anymore, and maybe that's why Spike stepped to the side and let him pass.

Shifting her onto his shoulder, he opened the basement door and headed downstairs. Most of the house was in two levels below ground. When the clan had lived here, Bonnie had shared a large room with her year-mates—family members born in the same year. But when Xander took over the house, he didn't want her in there alone. Sometimes she asked Spike things that made it pretty clear that her year-mates had been pretty cruel, and Xander wanted her to think better thoughts when she was in her room. Instead he had redone the smaller
room next to the one he had claimed.

He went in now, flipping on the light. Bonnie had picked the color—a vivid turquoise with yellow trim that made Xander's eyes hurt and led to Spike commenting that the girl had clearly inherited her father's fashion sense, but Bonnie loved it.

Xander settled her into the bed, but before he could leave, she reached out and caught his shirt.

"Daddy?" She sounded sleepy.

Xander knelt down next to her bed. "It's late, honey. You should be asleep."

"Are you really going to buy presents and put them under the tree?" she asked.

Xander frowned. "Of course I am. I've gotten you presents every Christmas."

The way she stared up at him told Xander that she hadn't gotten any of them. He closed his eyes and cursed K'wana and Bonnie's grandmother and every other demon who'd ever lived here. Yeah, maybe Xander
hadn't been able to get the best presents, and maybe he got her things that were a little weird from a demon's perspective, but they were his presents to his daughter.

Xander opened his eyes when Bonnie slipped her hand inside his. "It's silly to say they came from Santa," she told him seriously.

Xander ran his fingers through her curls. "I just want you to have a good Christmas."

"I will," she said seriously. "If Santa Claus is just a story, then is Jesus just a human story too?"

Xander stopped. Oh shit. She was six; he shouldn't have to deal with the big meaning of life stuff yet. He wasn't prepared for this. As much time as Xander spent thinking about hell and hell dimensions and curses, he really didn't spend much time thinking about God and Jesus. She just laid there and silently watched him. The weird thing was that he could walk out. He could leave without answering and she would never complain. Xander hadn't realized how odd that was until he really thought about what ten-year-old Dawn had been like when she first came to town.
Xander got up and sat on the edge of Bonnie's bed. "I don't know," Xander finally admitted. Yeah, he sucked as a father, but his goal was to do everything the opposite of his own father, so the very least he could do was admit when he was clueless. "I know he was a great man—someone who died trying to get people to see that they should be good and nice. I know that he was someone who I would have really liked, but I don't know if he was a God or just someone really, really good."

Bonnie nodded. "Someone who makes people..." she tilted her head, "not really happy, but helps them be not so sad," she finished.

"Gives them hope," Xander suggested. She nodded and pushed herself up on one elbow.

"Can I ask for something for Christmas?" she asked, and then she sucked in her upper lip and chewed on it, shadows appearing under her eyes and her face markings darkened.

"Of course you can," Xander rushed to reassure her. "I can't always promise to get it, but you can always ask, honey."
The shadows faded and she gave him a smile, but it was a sly one that she seemed to have picked up from Spike. "Can I have snow for Christmas?" she asked.

"Honey, it doesn't snow in Sunnydale."

"It did one year!" Bonnie crossed her arms, very willing to debate this point, and Xander had to admit that she was right. It had snowed. He'd been laying outside in a sleeping bag, and the snow had drifted down. According to Buffy, it had been a miracle sent to keep Angel from dusting himself. If Xander was going to make a miracle, he wouldn't do it to save Angel, but that had been Buffy's story, and her and Willow had swooned over it.

"I don't know how to make it snow, then," Xander told her.

"Have you done a snow dance yet?" she asked.

"A snow dance?"

Bonnie nodded, and her dark curls danced around her face. "Yeah, you know..." she looked at Xander like he should know, but he could only shrug. He could do Snoopy dances, but snow dances or just dancing in
general were not really his thing.

"You dance outside naked around a bowl of ice to make it snow the next day," she explained. Xander opened his mouth because he was not getting naked in front of his daughter. The world could come to an end, and that was one rule he was not budging on. Spike could tell his evisceration stories and he would even bend on the whole letting Bonnie have raw steak, but he was not getting naked in front of his daughter. Maybe she recognized his expression, because she hurried to keep going.

"Seriously. My family did it all the time!" she promised him. "Mommy started it."

"Your mom?" Xander frowned. K'wana usually just did what her own mother told her to do. It was one of the many reasons why they spent so much time fighting. Xander looked at Bonnie, confused. Her lower lip started to quiver, and he narrowed his eyes. Then she started giggling. "You little liar," Xander said, scooping Bonnie up and holding her upside down. She squealed and grabbed his belt. Xander tickled her, and she screamed some more. Upstairs, boots moved across the floor, stopping at the top of the stairs.
Xander dropped Bonnie back onto the bed where she lay gasping, holding his hand in her two small fists. "You loon," Xander called her. She smiled up at him, but then her smile slowly faded.

"So, if I ask for something really big, you won't get mad?" she asked again.

"I won't get mad, honey. I don't have a lot of money, so I can't promise you that I can get it, but you can ask." Xander could only hope she was going to ask for something he could afford. Around Christmas, he could always pick up a couple of extra shifts at the construction site. Clem was a cheap babysitter, and the guys at the site loved having someone to pawn all their unwanted kittens off on. Xander was just going to try very hard to not think about what happened to those kittens.

Bonnie looked up toward the ceiling. "Every time Spike comes home smelling like that woman, he's unhappy. Can you make her stop being mean to Spike?"

Xander frowned. "Woman?" An unhappy little bubble was forming in his chest.
Bonnie nodded. "Whenever they have sex, Spike gets unhappy. It isn't nice to make people unhappy, and you're really good at making people be nice." Bonnie sucked her lower lip in and chewed on it as she looked at him. Xander wished he could pretend that Dru was back in town or that Spike was lusting after the waitress down at Willy's—not that Willy had one. He wished he could come up with any explanation other than the obvious one. That, and he wished Bonnie didn't know what sex was.

"Maybe you're mistaking the smell. Maybe Spike only wants to have sex." Xander cringed even as he said it. First he had to have the Jesus talk, and now he was going into sex with his six year old. He was breaking even Tony Harris' record for number of inappropriate comments in one night. All Xander had to do was threaten to sell Bonnie to some Romanians, and he could call himself a proper Harris man.

Bonnie shook her head. "Human sex smells really strong," she said, wrinkling her nose. Xander made mental note of that one. Oh shit. He'd come over after having sex with Anya on Bonnie's first day out of the hospital. Xander's cock went on full retreat and insisted it wasn't coming out for the next twelve years. "She has
lots and lots of sex with him," Bonnie kept right on going.

Xander patted her leg, not entirely sure how he was supposed to tell his daughter that she was completely creeping him out.

She got a thoughtful look on her face. "Maybe the sex makes Spike unhappy, but grandmother said that humans and vampires and primal were all funny about having sex all the time and really, really liking it. She said it made them slow and stupid because they got all worn out, and she said mommy wasn't thinking right because her reproductive organs were too human."

Yep, Xander was officially into therapy-land.

"I'll see what I can do, sweetie," Xander promised, getting up and giving Bonnie a quick kiss on the forehead before he retreated.

"Good night, Daddy!" she called happily. From her tone, it was pretty clear that she expected Xander to wave some magic wand and make this all better.

"Good night, Bonnie-girl," Xander answered from her door before her turned her lights off.
Well fuck. Spike and Buffy were having sex.

Part Seven

Xander stood in the middle of his room trying to decide exactly what he was supposed to do. Oh yes, he'd just stop Buffy from making Spike sad with all that sex. Fuck. Xander was actually a little more concerned about Buffy. If the great evil, blackmailing one was getting his feelings hurt, that wasn't exactly a great tragedy in Xander's book, but what was Buffy thinking?

Xander had no idea what to do. In the past, he would have called Willow and she would have come over and they would have talked, and in the end Xander still wouldn't have known what to do but it wouldn't have mattered because Willow would have done something. His job would have been done the second he put Willow on the trail of the emotional bad. But now. Shit.

Distracted by his own thoughts, Xander didn't notice Spike until the vampire slammed into him from behind, putting Xander face first into his own orange satin comforter. Xander cried out, but Spike's hand caught him by the back of the neck and pushed him into the mattress. Flailing, Xander tried to free himself, but Spike
was too strong, and since Spike was only technically holding him and not hurting him, the chip was not big with the helping.

With his face pressed to the bed, Xander's lungs started to ache, but still Spike sat on him, either ignoring the pain of the chip or crowing about the fact that he had finally found a way to kill Xander.

"Think about Bonnie, mate," Spike hissed in his ear, and Xander went still. Bonnie. Every bone in Xander's body wanted to fight. His lungs were burning with a need for air, but Xander forced himself to relax his muscles. If he fought, Spike was going to feel a need to prove to Xander that he had the upper hand, and he could do that entirely too easily. After a couple of seconds, Spike moved the hand on his neck, and Xander turned his head to gasp in air. Black and orange dots floated in his vision.

"Right then, we need to talk." Spike shifted, but his weight was still on Xander's back, pinning him to the bed, which was pretty much reminding Xander of every nightmare he had when he'd found out that Spike was going to live with him. But Xander's daughter was still sleeping in the next room, so Xander didn't complain. "I heard what Bonnie said, mate."
"She's a little girl, she doesn't know what she's saying," Xander tried, desperate to defend his daughter. When Spike's fingers came to rest on Xander's lips, he shut up with a shiver. He was so very screwed.

"That's where you're wrong, pet. Your little girl's a demon, isn't she? That means she's not some blind chit who can't tell a vampire from a zombie, and you need to start giving her a little more credit. It also means that the slayer is not going to be amused if she finds out about your little secret, is she? She'll be even less amused if she finds out that Bonnie's the one who summoned Sweet and nearly got the Bit taken off as a demon queen." Spike's voice practically purred in Xander's ear, and Xander knew when he was beat. It was actually a pretty familiar feeling. He closed his eyes and just waited on whatever Spike was going to say or do.

When Xander didn't answer, Spike sat up, his hand back on Xander's neck, but at least this time he wasn't pushing Xander's face into the mattress. "I won't let you hurt Buffy," Spike said.

Xander had told himself to just submit and hope this was over fast, but that made him snort. Yeah, like he was the
one who was going to hurt Buffy. Spike's fingers tightened on Xander's neck until Xander gasped and Spike threw himself off the bed with a low growl, his hands going to his head. Clearly Spike had reached the limit of the chip's willingness to let him physically intimidate Xander.

Spike turned and looked toward Bonnie's bedroom, and the brief flare of gleeful vengeance Xander had felt died in his chest.

"Please, no. Spike, I'll do whatever you want. Don't hurt her. Please. Just tell me what you want, and I'll do it." Xander scrambled up so he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He could survive whatever Spike wanted because he was human. The chip wouldn't let Spike kill a human.

Spike's eyes narrowed and yellowed, and fear was an animal crawling around in Xander's stomach and scraping at his ribs. Spike straightened up, his spine rebar straight as he glared hate at Xander. "You bloody knob. You really think I'd go in there and hurt her because her father is a fucking moron?"

Xander frowned. Clearly he had missed some important piece of information because Spike was saying that like it
wasn't possible, and that was pretty much exactly what Xander had been thinking.

"I was making sure she was still asleep, ya nit." Spike walked over and grabbed Xander's arm, yanking him to his feet, and Xander tried to keep all his limbs to himself. He didn't think Spike would be amused by protesting and flailing, and he definitely did not want to annoy Spike. Not now.

"Move," Spike hissed, pulling Xander out into the hallway. Biting down on insults and fears that wanted to crawl out his mouth, Xander let Spike manhandle him down the hall, down another set of stairs into the second basement and then to the end of the corridor where Spike had claimed the grandmother's room. It was a smaller room, but the lavishly carved woods and high-end electronics were definitely better than the rest of the house.

Spike pushed him into the room and then put himself in the doorway so that Xander was trapped. Yep, there were all Xander's nightmares right on schedule. First Angelus and then Dracula and now Spike—Xander was actually getting pretty tired of having every local vamp try its hand at intimidating him. It wasn't like he was
even particularly hard to intimidate. For example, right now he was totally intimidated. Xander hugged his own stomach and just waited.

Spike pulled a pack of cigarettes out. "Go on then, get it out of your system."

"Get what out?"

For a second, Spike glared at him, and Xander fidgeted under the glare. Clearly Spike was not amused by the 'play dumb' strategy. "Whatever shite you have to say, you say it here, to me, not to Buffy." Spike pulled out a cigarette and poked it in Xander's direction.

"Okay, first, I really don't want to talk to you."

"Didn't ask if you wanted to, pet," Spike cut him off, and this time Xander was totally sure that 'pet' pretty much meant that Spike was calling him a lower life form. "I'm telling you have to."

Xander opened his mouth on the verge of saying "or what." But he knew the "what" already. He didn't answer because he really didn't have anything to say, not without putting his foot in his mouth or his daughter in
the middle, and those were things he would rather avoid.

Spike huffed in disgust. "And what she said isn't true. The slayers got a lot on her mind, but I'm not bloody unhappy and I'm not walking out on her. Not like you lot who put yourself first over and bloody over again."

"Hey!" Xander might have said more only Spike was slightly right. Buffy had died, and their first thought was for their friend, but thoughts two, three, and four had turned pretty quickly to themselves. How were they supposed to survive? How could they go on knowing that the white hats didn't always win--that good and strong and beautiful didn't mean you were going to survive? And where did that leave the rest of them who weren't as good or as strong? Xander sat down on the edge of Spike's bed. Shit and more shit. He'd give anything to just not have this conversation right now. He fingered the black silk sheets and wished he could just rewind his whole life and try it over again.

"Spike, I don't know what's going on between you two," Xander said wearily.

"You want diagrams?" Spike's lewd words didn't really match the tightness in his body or the way his fingers
nervously flicked at his pack of cigarettes.

"Okay, just no." Xander stood up, and he would have started pacing only Spike took a step forward so he commanded the center of the room and Xander retreated back to the side table where an overflowing ashtray and a bottle of Jack Daniels covered the inlay pattern. "Spike, maybe we can just pretend this isn't happening."

"Right, so you can go try to talk Buffy into staking me?"

Xander sighed. Okay, maybe a little part of him was thinking that, but a bigger part was wondering how he could avoid the issue all together, and mostly he was just worried about Buffy. "Spike, I'm not going to tell her to stake you."

"She wouldn't anyway, ya know. The slayer likes what I can do for her." Spike leered gleefully, and Xander tried to not think about what Spike might mean by that. Looking Xander up and down with disgust, Spike made a noise that made it pretty clear he found Xander lacking in more than one department. "A great bullock like you can't make her feel like a real woman the way I can," Spike announced grandly.
"Do I even want to know what a bullock is?" Xander looked up and tried to paste on a stupid grin. It always worked to distract the girls. Spike was not one of the girls.

"A bullock. A ruddy steer. A bull with the testicles cut off to make him nice and malleable. That's what you are, and the slayer doesn't fucking need a half-man." Spike moved forward, his body liquid grace that made every little prey instinct in Xander's body scream for him to run, chip or no chip. Instead he stood there caught between wanting to verbally strike back and wanting to just curl up and hope Spike finished with the verbal not-fun so Xander could go back to his room and start working on pretending that none of it mattered. After a second, Spike snorted and then turned his back on Xander, stalking over to the other side of the room where he finally lit his cigarette. "Not your business, mate."

And Spike was right on that one. Xander didn't exactly have a whole lot of room on the 'don't sleep with demons' self-righteous train.

"So, last chance. Say what you have to say right here and
you get it out of your system." Spike blew a long plume of smoke up into the air.

Xander wanted to just shut up. This whole night could be over if he would just shut up, but shutting up was one thing that he really, really sucked at. One of many, actually, but it was pretty near the top of the list. "This is so going to end badly," Xander blurted.

Spike snorted again. "Right, and she'd be better off with you?" The disgust in his voice slapped at Xander.

"Okay, I'm weirdly agreeing with you that I wouldn't be good for her," Xander admitted. At least that short-circuited Spike's anger and made his hand drop down to his side. He cursed and pounded at his leg when he almost set his jeans on fire. Xander waited until Spike finally turned his attention back to Xander. "She doesn't want me. She's always gone for big and impressive, and I'll admit that you're on the impressive side. Impressive and lithe. But this... this is not ending well, Spike."

Spike was almost preening at the compliments now, and Xander sighed. He wasn't sure if Spike was the most arrogant or the most insecure vampire in all of history, but he really did have issues. And Buffy issues did not
need Spike issues to deal with right now.

"Buffy is not really okay with the whole losing heaven thing." Xander stopped. Shit. He was too tired to have this conversation or to deal with his own guilt over conspiring in that bit of stupidity. The night after he'd figured out that their spell had forced Buffy to dig herself out of her own grave, he'd gone out and gotten so drunk that he threw up all over himself and woke up in an alley, half-surprised to find the majority of his blood still in his body. A few bruises and a nose bleed suggested he'd channeled some Tony Harris at some point during the night and picked a fight with someone, but at least Xander had managed to avoid picking a lethal fight with a blood-sucking demon.

"You mean the way you lot ripped her afterlife to shreds because you were wankers who didn't know how to stand on your own bloody feet?" Spike demanded with a sort of cruel glee that made Xander want to curl up and die.

"Yes, that," Xander agreed wearily.

"If you lot would have kept your word and gotten this bloody chip out, I could have taken over the hellmouth
and protected the Bit."

Xander didn't point out that Spike's version of protecting Dawn would have included killing large numbers of people in order to make minions. Yeah, that was not exactly on the Scooby "to do" list.

"She's not okay, Spike," Xander said, struggling to make his point, which wasn't easy when Spike was being a giant pain in the ass.

"Bloody noticed, mate. But she has me, and that's more than she had when you wankers first pulled her out of heaven."

"Okay, that's the thing. Spike, she could have Willow and me..." Spike's eyebrow went all the way up. "In a non-sexual way. She could have us friend-wise. We're here for her."

Spike snorted again.

"And she doesn't really want us here for her." Xander kept right on going. "Pretty much anything and anyone she loved, she's pushing away as fast as she can. She pushed Dawn off on Giles until he thought he had to"
leave just to get her to pull her head out of her ass."

Spike's eyes yellowed, and Xander figured that he had a few seconds before he got tossed out of the room or possibly just tossed around. Spike was reaching a breaking point, and Xander really didn't want to test how far he could push the chip, so he hurried to make his point so that he could just flee. Fleeing would be good.

"She's pushing away anyone she cares about, so if she's pulling you close, that means that she doesn't care about you. You're like the anti-love relationship. Spike, Angel was her first love. Angel. The big, stupid, doe-eyed idiot. The man who thinks that a daisy he picks out of a cemetery is a romantic gift. The big man of mystery who made it snow in Sunnydale and has the big quest to be, I don't know, a saint or something. You remember Angel, the dude who avoids any invention after 1920 with the exception of hair gel and hair spray? That guy? The guy who is pretty much not you? That's who she loved, and I'm pretty sure that's who she still loves, so she's going for pretty much Angel's opposite, which is you. It's like it's backwards day in Buffy's brain so she's hugging what she doesn't love and pushing away what she does."

Xander finally stopped and really looked at Spike. He was
in full gameface and furious yellow eyes glared at Xander.

"Which might be why she's so happy making you miserable," Xander finished weakly. He should have just kept his big, stupid mouth shut. Who was he to call Angel stupid when clearly he had far fewer working brain cells?

"Right, and you're worried about my feelings," Spike said sarcastically.

Xander opened his mouth, prepared to make a smart-ass comment, but then he closed it. He sighed. "If I were a good person, maybe I would be. I know you were there when we needed you. You love Dawn, and that's creepy and slightly horrifying, but it counts for something." Xander took a deep breath and tried to gather thoughts that were scattering away from him.

"But I'm not that good of a person, Spike. I'm watching my world pretty much fall apart. Dawn is turning into Robin Hood only with less giving to the poor and more taking from everyone. Willow is..." Xander stopped. He had no words for Willow. "And Tara is hurt and Giles has exiled himself, so he's off doing the falling on his own sword thing trying to save Buffy—either that or he's
trying to protect himself because she was emotionally draining him, I don't know which. And my daughter is trying to pretend she doesn't miss her mom and that she isn't hurt, and that is totally freaking me out.

"Spike, I don't have the energy to care about anyone else. You're right. I don't care about you. But I care a lot about Buffy, and when she figures out that she's having sex with you because she doesn't love you, that is not going to be pretty."

Spike moved so fast that Xander didn't have time to retreat before he was backed up against the wall, Spike's forearm against his chest pinning him as neatly as a butterfly to a collector's box.

"You got it all out now?" Spike asked. Xander's stomach did a few summersaults, ended with a half-twist and then curled into the smallest space possible. This close, Spike's yellow eyes and long fangs were pretty much entirely fucking terrifying, and Xander had seen enough demons that he was not terrorized easily anymore.

"Yep," Xander agreed. Little baby nightmares started crawling through Xander's brain.
"Don't want to hear a word out of you ever again, pet. You don't say shite to me, you don't say fuck-all to Buffy, and you don't say anything to anyone else you can think of with that tiny little brain of yours." Spike tapped Xander's forehead.

Xander opened his mouth and then closed it again. This was his deal. Bonnie was safe as long as Spike was happy, and if he wasn't, he was going to bring Xander down into the misery with him. Closing his mouth, Xander nodded. He was just going to have to pretend that he didn't know.

Spike pushed a little harder, pressing until Xander had trouble breathing. And then he turned and walked toward the connected bathroom.

"Get the fuck out of my room, Harris," he snapped.

Happy to obey, Xander darted for the door. Yep, it was definitely time for some avoiding of the vampire. Xander and Bonnie were going to be spending some long hours at the park, and this conversation was going into Xander's top ten list of stupidest moves ever, right after sneaking into a frat house and before facing down a soulless Angelus armed with one stake. Xander really honestly wasn't sure how he'd lived this long, but he'd
better figure out how to play nice with Spike or he wasn't going to last much longer--chip or no chip.

Part Eight

Xander picked at the hem of one of his few good shirts. He'd had meetings at work today--the foreman had asked him to explain to the boss why they were having problems with the materials. Xander still wasn't sure whether Frank really trusted him or whether he was afraid the boss was going to fire someone on the spot and he just didn't want to be the one standing in the spot at the time.

"I can't do this," Willow sobbed. Xander scooted closer and put his hand on her back awkwardly. He wasn't sure the proper words of comfort when your friend was the one who had totally screwed up instead of the one getting dumped on because of someone else's screw up. He had lots of practice with that last one. It seemed like Willow was always taking the blame for him or Jesse in
school, and then Buffy had shown up and Willow had suddenly become half of the Buffy-and-Willow team of destruction. If it weren't for the fact that Willow's test scores made the whole school look smarter, Snyder would have put Willow in detention right along with Buffy. But now... now it was pretty much Willow's fault.

"She doesn't love me anymore." Willow's voice trembled with emotion. Either that or withdrawal from dark magic looked a lot like withdrawal from heroine. One of the guys on the site had come to work all shaking, and Frank had chased him off with an order to get into a clinic and not touch a power tool until he could stop shaking.

"I know that's not true. She loves you."

"She hates me," Willow sobbed.

"Maybe a little," Xander admitted. When Willow flinched back, he mentally kicked himself. Good job with the not-so-comforting. "But she loves you too," Xander hurried to add. "There's lots of love there. If Tara didn't love you, she wouldn't be so angry."

Anya looked up from the box of supplies she was counting in. "He's right," she said, shocking Xander.
They'd never agreed this much when they were dating. Then again, when he looked back, he'd spent a whole lot of his time telling her how bad she acted, and she'd retaliated at pretty much every turn, publicly and privately. Yeah, his technique in bed had definitely improved, but no man appreciated bullet listed critiques of his performance.

"Like I am really angry with Xander right now," Anya said in a voice that didn't actually sound angry. "If I didn't still love him, I would say that we should have broken up a long time ago because our life goals are incompatible and every time I took a quiz in a magazine I would have to lie about Xander's traits in order for it to tell me that my relationship was healthy. If Tara didn't love you, she'd just move out without caring." Anya delivered her little speech, and then closed the box. "Xander, watch the front while I go to the bathroom, and if a customer comes in, try to keep them from seeing Willow. Crying is bad for business." Before Xander could even gather a thought, Anya was striding away.

Willow sniffed, and Xander scooted closer to her. "That was actually Anya's version of comforting," Xander pointed out.
"Fifty percent less comfort," Willow said quietly, the joke falling flat. Her hand was still trembling, and Xander reached out to take it in his own.

"Tara adores you."

"She doesn't trust me." Willow stared down at her lap, and Xander had the feeling that she wanted to pull her hand back away from him. He held on tighter, in part because he really didn't know what to say. Tara had good reason for not trusting her after all the lies. Xander was feeling a little of the not-trust himself. After Willow had wiped all their memories, Xander thought she would go cold magic turkey. Instead she seemed to be making bigger mistakes. He couldn't figure out why she had gone to Rack for the big magic upgrade because her normal magic was enough to get her in big trouble.

"She just needs time to learn to trust you again," Xander finally said. At least, he hoped that was true. That's what he was feeling.

"You don't understand. You've never loved anybody like I love her." Willow stopped and chewed on her lip, her eyes darting to the back where Anya had disappeared. "I'm sorry," she said softly, "but it's not the same. You
and Anya were never going to make it. Not really." As soft as Willow's voice was, that was her stubborn tone.

"I know," Xander agreed. Willow's eyes darted up to him, probably checking to see if he was lying to make her feel better, but Xander had pretty much came to the same conclusion. He loved the idea of Anya, the idea that someone needed and loved him. He really liked the sex. But no matter how much he tried to be okay with her choices, he couldn't. He never stopped resenting her for wanting money and every time she said something horribly demonish, he cringed. It was funny, Spike was demonish all the time, and that didn't bother him, but Spike was safely lodged in the demon part of his brain. Anya was in the human part of his brain, so he wanted her to act like a human. That was probably not fair... not fair and not nice.

"Tara looks at me, and I feel so bad." Willow whispered as she finally moved toward him, leaning into his shoulder. "You can't know what it feels like to have someone you love look at you like you're the biggest screw up in the world."

Xander closed his eyes. Shit. He did know that. From the time he was five years old, he'd known what it was like to
have someone look at you like you weren't worth their time because you were the little kid... the geeky kid who wasn't good at sports and clearly wasn't going to be a chip off the old block.

And now... now sometimes Bonnie stared at him with this blank expression, like she was trying to hide her feelings to avoid upsetting him, and Xander just felt like the worst father in the world. Bonnie probably wished Xander wasn't her father at all. Spike was big and impressive, and Xander was just the stupid human who brought home the groceries, and when his daughter asked him for something, he couldn't do anything. Not anything at all. It would all be so much easier, he thought despairingly, if he could just be honest about who and what he really was.

He was a father who was terrified that he didn't know what he was doing. He was the blackmail victim who brought his paycheck home to Spike and then tried really hard to not notice the human bitemarks on Spike's shoulders or arms. Spike with his vampy senses might think that was love, but now that Xander was paying attention, he was more and more convinced that Buffy was losing it. And yet, he couldn't be honest about any of it. He didn't trust Willow, not with her addiction, and not
now that her own fears were swallowing up her life. He didn't trust Buffy, not around his daughter. Buffy was being unBuffyish, and Xander didn't know what to expect. And with Giles gone...

Xander sighed. It left no one. Spike wasn't someone he could rely on and Dawn was too young to burden with this and Anya.... Xander looked in that direction. Anya seemed pretty happy to be out of the personal relationships. She didn't even pretend to care about Willow or Tara or Buffy, not anymore. Even when Xander was engaged to Anya, he couldn't trust her to keep his secrets, and now that they were broken up, he really couldn't tell her about Bonnie or the Spike and Buffy wrongness.

And so, he was left muddling around through the confusion. He'd never been good with this part. He was the comic distraction, not the one who fixed things—that was supposed to be his girls. So he slipped his arm around Willow and sat there in silence.

Willow sniffed. "I put Dawn in danger."

"Which is huge with the bad."
"Tara moved out." Willow whispered so softly that Xander almost didn't hear her.

"Oh, Willow." Xander stopped, not sure what to say. Tara had a reason for wanting a little space, but Xander still ached at the thought of Willow alone through this. Well, not totally alone because she was living with Dawn and Buffy, but still.

Willow pushed away from him, and Xander moved his arm to let her. His side felt cold. "I shouldn't be in here. You know." She waved toward the shelves. "There's a lot of magical stuff in here. Buffy and Dawn are going to demagicfy the house tonight and tomorrow. I promised that I wouldn't do even little spells."

"I can walk you home," Xander said, standing up. Willow was already shaking her head and walking backwards.

"You don't need to."

"Ah, but my self-esteem is tied up in my ability to play the part of the white knight protecting my girls."

Willow ducked her head. "I'm okay."
"Door to door service is my middle name, which is still weirdly better than the middle name my parents picked." Xander took a step forward and then stopped as Willow flinched back. "Unless you want some space," Xander finished weakly.

She looked up at him. "I really need some. It's not you," Willow hurried to add, and there wasn't a phrase in the world more likely to make Xander feel like it was him. However, he plastered on a fake smile.

"No problem. I'll just annoy Anya for old times' sake." Xander took a step backwards. Willow nodded again and then turned and darted out the door without looking to either side.

"Ahn!" he called.

The door to the employee area opened and Anya sighed loud enough for him to hear her all the way across the room. "Since we are no longer dating, I have revoked your right to yell at me from across a room. It's rude. And as you have spent much time and effort to explain to me, others do not appreciate rude behavior."

Xander cringed. "Sorry, Ahn. I just wanted to let you
know I was leaving. You know, so if there was a customer, you'd be out here. I won't yell at you again."
Xander headed for the door. He was just screwing up all over the place.

Anya stepped out and called his name. When Xander turned, he almost thought he saw pain on her face. "You're an idiot," she said, and Xander didn't contradict her. With a huff, she put her hands on her hips. "Tara has got to be feeling at least that bad."

Xander frowned. This was just a giant mess, and after striking out with helping one half of the Willow-Tara disaster, he wasn't sure he wanted to get called useless again. Of course, his other option was to go home, and while he loved Bonnie, he tended to distract her from her lessons. He didn't need to have Clem give him another crap look. According to Clem, Bonnie was a genius, which clearly meant she had not inherited Xander's brain genes; however, her mom's family had not been big with teaching her about human culture and the human world. She'd learned more demony things... things that made Xander wonder if he shouldn't find a good demonic therapist, either for Bonnie or for him. Clem, who adored all things human, had made it his project to teach her about humans.
"I could stop by the dorms," Xander said. He supposed it wouldn't hurt. He turned and headed for the door.

"Xander?" Anya called when he had the door open. Xander turned to look at her. "Do you still hurt?" she asked, her head tilted the way she sometimes did when human ideas confused her.

Xander thought about that for a second. "A lot," he agreed.

"Good." Anya looked pleased as she turned and went back into the storeroom, closing the door with enough force to tell Xander that he'd been dismissed.

Great. If Xander could just get himself rejected by Tara, he'd have a perfect hat trick without the hat. Maybe he could show up at Tara's dorm room claiming that he needed to know what 'hat trick' actually meant. Yeah, like that wouldn't be pathetically transparent. Then again, Xander was starting to think everything he did was some variation on pathetic.
Part Nine

The sewers under the Sunnydale campus smelled of beer and hormones, so by the time Spike came up into the shadows of one of the main buildings, he was horny and feeling loose. His plan to retrieve his lighter from Buffy's house and talk to her had backfired when Buffy had taken off to talk to Tara, but he was flexible. He was flexible in all sorts of ways; Buffy could certainly testify to that.

The archways created weak pools of light as the sun started sinking in the sky. In morning, this area would be bathed with light, but right now it was nicely shadowed. A young woman walked past and gave Spike an appraising look, and Spike offered her a quick leer. Another day he might have pursued that. Back then, he would have made her into a quick meal, but even if he could get rid of the soddin' chip, a coed looking for a big bad couldn't compare with a slayer.

No, he had other prey, and goals that didn't include killing. He just had to wait until Buffy came through here.
Stretching, Spike lit a cigarette as he settled in to wait. One of the stone half-walls had a little round pot, cat's eye green with some sort of carving along the edge. Curious, Spike strolled over and ran a finger along the sun-warmed rim. The pottery was cooling now, but it had been out in the sun quite a while. It looked empty, but white sediment suggested something had evaporated.

Picking it up, Spike suddenly realized what it reminded him of. Joyce had once shown him a green pot with stylized hunters and lion, all inscribed with swirls and lines. She had touched it lovingly, explaining how the Arabs had used alkali, lime, and silica to make their special pottery so hard that it survived three thousand years just to end up in her hands.

This pot could be the twin to that one Joyce had showed him. It was smaller, but the color and the carvings were so close that Spike remembered Joyce's smile as she'd explained the process. Sitting in her kitchen as she unpacked one artifact after another, Spike had felt something he'd been missing for a hundred years: acceptance.

Joyce hadn't wanted him to be a better killer or take a whip to her back while pretending to be Angelus. She'd
offered him cocoa and listened when he'd complained about losing Dru or getting chipped. When the others, especially Xander, had gone out of their bloody way to make him feel worthless, Joyce had always been there to listen. She'd tell him about her day, and he'd threaten to eat whatever wanker had given her shite, and she...

Spike pulled thoughts away from those lazy evenings. He'd been newly chipped and Buffy was off being college girl, and Joyce had been about his only refuge, right up until she'd bloody died. Spike still felt a sort of helpless rage over that. If he were still a real demon, he could have saved her. True, his stomach just about turned inside out at the thought of Joyce as a vampire, but that would be better than leaving her for the fucking worms.

Spike could feel rage flowing through him, and he very carefully put the pot back on the low wall. His demon wanted to rage out of control, but Spike was too old and too powerful to lose control over the beast inside his heart. Besides, demons shouldn't bloody need acceptance. They shouldn't need to cling to some pathetic human just to keep from walking out into the sun. Power, wealth, jewels, even sex—those were bloody respectable pursuits. Acceptance, no.
The chip might have crippled him, but he was still the big bad. Spike cracked his neck and watched restlessly. A coed with one of those small computers you could carry around had camped out on the lawn. He feet kicked like a bloody metronome, and Spike started counting each kick. The chit looked a bit like the slayer, all blonde hair and white smile and sunshine.

But she was just one more weak human—a walking happy meal waiting for something big and bad to come eat her. His Buffy might look like some breakable doll, but she was steel strong. She'd come back from the dead, Buffy had. Death couldn't even hold that one, but Spike could. Spike could hold her hips and feel the strength rolling under her skin as she slammed him into a wall.

And she'd get tired of these soddin' games sooner or later. If she was going to be stubborn, she'd just better remember that he'd put up with Dru for a hundred years, and he'd wait a hundred years if that's what it took for Buffy to realize that he was the one who was loyal. All her little friends had abandoned ship, and he was the one there to take her anger. Every welt and cut and bite mark was proof that she did need him, and one day, she'd realize that she could trust him.
Xander had his fun, trying to make Spike jealous with all that rot about how Buffy loved Angel, but Angel had left her. The fucking nob had taught her that she couldn't rely on anyone, and her worthless friends were just reinforcing that. But Spike would show her just how loyal he could be, and then he wouldn't just have her in his bed; he'd have her. She'd be his in a way that she never belonged to Angel.

That thought amused Spike. When he and Buffy had truly settled in, they'd take a trip down to LA and show Peaches just how much he had lost—twice. Angel had walked away from both of them, after all. And Spike would be more than happy to have a little talk with the wanker.

If Angelus hadn't come up with that idiotic plan to end the world, Spike never would have started sitting with Joyce. He would have missed the quiet conversations, and even the time she'd threatened him with a butcher knife the size of a bloody Lamk demon's arm. Before Angelus and all his schemes, humans were food. Spike hadn't noticed them any longer than it had taken him to drain them of blood and drop their cooling bodies to the ground.
Once he'd worked through his railroad spike days trying to impress his sire, he'd forgotten humanity. He'd forgotten the simple joy of sitting at a table and listening to a beautiful woman talk about pottery. Angelus had reintroduced him to humanity, and just as soon as Spike had well and truly claimed Angel's lost human, Spike was going to enjoy telling him that in exquisite and glorious detail.

The door to Tara's dorm came open, and Buffy was standing there, the afternoon sun catching her blonde hair so that she was caught in an illusion of fire. Spike had an irrational urge to write a poem. Buffy just stood there, her expression so weary and lost that Spike wanted to walk across the lawn and sweep her into his arms, but there wasn't anything Spike could do until Buffy reached the shadows.

Tara appeared behind Buffy. Buffy turned, and for a few minutes, the two women talked, but Spike couldn't tell who was doing the comforting and who was getting comforted. If Buffy needed to forget her pain for a while, Tara wasn't the one she needed. Tara with her doe eyes was too much like Joyce, all about the giving. But Buffy, she needed to take—she needed to rip and tear and
demand. Tara couldn't give her that, but Spike could.

He only needed to wait until she reached the shadows. She had to know he was here—either that or some random vampire was haunting the bloody campus while the sun was still high enough to fry an incautious vampire. But Buffy didn't even search the shadows for him. She played him, forcing him to wait as she stood in the sun.

A familiar smell drifted on the breeze, and Spike's eyes yellowed. Fuck. Puppy boy was on campus, and he sure as fuck wasn't here for the classes. If that worthless git said one word to Buffy.... Spike jerked back, slamming his shoulder into the wall as the chip fired a warning shot. The girl with the computer happened to see him, and she frowned and pushed herself up with one hand, like she might come over to see if he needed help. He sure as hell didn't need some happy meal offering to hold his hand because his head hurt.

Now Spike spotted Xander across the lawn. His hair was cut close, and his tool belt hung low on his hips so that he looked absolutely out of place walking past all the nice college boys and girls with their books and their punk hairdos.
"Buffy!" Xander called out, actually managing to sound surprised. Spike stepped into the deeper shadows, waiting to see if the wanker had the balls to tell Buffy that he knew about the sex. Spike was pretty sure he'd made his point last night, but Harris did have the bad habit of growing balls at the absolute worst time.

Spike still remembered the night Angelus had come back full of piss and vinegar because Xander had kept him from killing Buffy. Angelus had planned a long night of flowers and seduction with a side of rape and torture, and Xander had stood in the middle of the hallway and forced Angelus to back down—Spike still didn't know how the puppy-boy managed that one. However, Spike's back had been a mass of whip marks and bites before Angelus had finally worked through all his frustration. Sadly, if Xander did open his big gob, Spike couldn't even properly punish the boy. Oh, he could torture him in a dozen little annoying ways, but the damn chip kept him from acting on the fantasies he'd had ever since Thanksgiving.

"Hey, Xander." Buffy looked at him with a smile, but Spike could see how forced the expression looked.
"Buff, what brings you to the land of the over caffeinated and whorishly dressed?" Xander asked as he looked around. "Wow. None of these people would get past a first interview. Do you think they know that?"

"I'm thinking they don't actually care about dressing to impress," Buffy answered. Tara stepped back, disappearing into the dorm before Xander ever spotted her. "Or they're trying to impress, but it's probably not the impressing of bosses on their mind."

"Those of us who work for a living are a little more about the impressing of the bosses instead of the showing of the boobs, not that I have boobs. Because I'm very much not boob-having man." Xander verbally stumbled to a halt. "Although I'm thinking I might be a boob," he finished when the silence continued too long.

"You aren't a boob," Buffy hurried to reassure him. Nob. Spike wanted to rip Harris' tonsils out. Buffy needed loyal soldiers and warriors to stand at her side, and Harris was blundering around looking for reassurance. If he'd been a minion, Spike would have staked him years ago.

"That's debatable," Xander said with a shrug. "So, are you visiting Tara or just gracing the university with your
beauty so they don't forget what beautiful... um... beauty looks like?"

Beautiful beauty. Moron. The poet in Spike wanted to take a knife and carve those pathetic words into Xander's flesh. The chip gave another warning jolt. Wankers.

"I was with Tara." Buffy looked back into the building, but Tara was long gone. "Seeing if she was okay."

"Yeah, that was what I was doing, too. Great minds and all."

Another awkward silence fell, and Spike rolled his eyes, annoyed at being stuck listening to this drivel. If Xander weren't bloody good at providing a comfortable and well-stocked lair, Spike would hire someone to kill him. Problem was that Spike would have to take Xander's money to hire someone for the hit, and that seemed soddin' wrong, even to Spike. Raping nuns and hiring killers with the victim's own money—those felt like Angelus' sorts of games.

"So, is she?" Xander asked.

"Is she what?"
"Okay. Is Tara okay?"

Buffy sighed so loudly that Spike could hear her from the other side of the campus.

"Yeah, that's about what I figured," Xander said with a grimace, as if he were in pain. "Willow's pretty much the same."

Spike could see Buffy curl into herself. Her arms hugged her stomach. The body language screamed her unhappiness, but that moron couldn't bloody see it. Spike ached to take Buffy in his arms and draw out the inner strength that was still there under all the pain. Get Buffy going, and the slayer came out, hungry for sex and power and pleasure, and Spike knew exactly how to feed each of those needs.

Xander cleared his throat. "Well, Willow's the same except for the part where she'd pretty much to blame and Tara is the whammie instead of the whammer."

"Whammer?"

"One who puts the big wham on those she should not be
"whammieing," Xander said. His big grin did suggest that he found himself funny, but Spike was having more and more homicidal thoughts with every passing second.

"She did do a little too much whammieing," Buffy agreed, her voice so soft that Spike had to strain to hear over the other conversations on the wide lawn that separated them. "Or a lot too much."

"I would vote 'a lot' only my position as the whammier's oldest friend requires me to abstain."

Buffy nodded at Xander's innane conversation. "I should go home," Buffy announced.

"Oh, yeah." Xander took a quick step back, and his arms crossed over his stomach as he just about hugged himself. The gesture looked ridiculous on a man his size—a man who was wearing a huge tool belt full of soddin' phallic symbols. Some days Spike wondered why the hell Angelus hadn't ever claimed the boy. He was a walking pile of sniveling and groveling, and Angelus did appreciate a good grovel.

Buffy started walking away, but then Xander called out her name in a voice that almost cracked with emotion.
Spike held his breath. If the wanker was going to grow the balls to betray Spike, it'd be now, and Spike was helpless to do anything about it.

"Yeah?" Buffy looked like she was on the knife's edge of panic. She wanted out, and Xander was standing there, his sad gaze holding her in place as she shifted from foot to foot.

"Buffy, if you're ever feeling whammied, you know you can come to me, right?"

"Sure," Buffy answered quickly, and that seemed to make puppy-boy even sadder.

"I mean," Xander went on as if Buffy hadn't just agreed with him, "we've all had some pretty big hits this last year, and you definitely got the fuzzy and dirt-encrusted end of that lollipop, but we get through because we always stick together." Xander dropped his gaze to the ground in front of Buffy. "You know that, right?" he asked softly as he looked back up. "I mean, I'm going to pretty much stick by you way after you're ready to go your own way because I'm not good at letting go. So I'm going to be here for you no matter what, come hellgods or you keeping secrets because you don't want to hurt
the rest of us. And I really hope that's okay with you because it's going to be awkward to be at your side if you go and get a restraining order or something."

Something in Buffy, something dark and wounded, seemed to show its small head. Her expression twisted, and Spike could feel his own guts twist in response. He should be out there at her side, and the fucking sun trapped him away from her. She had to feel him. Her slayer sense had to be screaming at her, but she wasn't coming over where he could stand at her side and throw barbs back at this man-child who had the audacity to say things that so clearly hurt Buffy.

"Buffy, I love you. I know we were big with the stupid and hurtful and magically irresponsible, but I'm here. You know that, right?" Xander put all his insecurities out in the open for everyone to see. Spike sneered.

Buffy didn't answer, but she gave a tiny nod. Xander took a step forward, and Buffy threw herself into his arms.

Spike's mouth dropped open as he watched Buffy cling to Xander, her cries spreading across the lawn. A few students looked over, curious. Others turned away, giving Buffy and Xander some privacy. The world turned
sharp-edged and the colors faded as Spike's eyes yellowed. The burning rage made the burning pain in his head bearable as the chip flared in his head.

"I will always love you. You're bright-shining Buffy, even when you're snotty and sort of blotchy," Xander promised, and Buffy fistked his shirt and let him carry her weight as she leaned into him.

"I'm not," Buffy finally got out between sobs.

"Snotty and blotchy? You kinda are, but hey, I’m into snotty and blotchy."

Buffy aimed a punch at Xander's stomach, but she was clearly not using her strength because Xander smiled.

"But you'll always be bright and shining Buffy. Anyone else would have curled up and died, so if you can get from Tuesday to Wednesday without major trauma, you're way better than the rest of us. Willow and me... we just have normal girlfriend stuff, and we pretty much screwed it all up and are all screwy in the head. You're so much stronger."

"No, I’m not. I'm really not." Buffy made a strange sort of
hiccup, and Xander patted her on the back.

Spike snarled, and the chip flared so strongly that he stumbled back against the wall and fell to one knee as the whole world wavered and dimmed.

"It's okay to feel like the big screw up. Hey, voice of experience here—you get used to feeling like that. But that doesn't mean you are one bit less amazing."

"Okay, stop. You're making me more snotty and blotchy," Buffy said, and this time the sob was mixed with laughter.

"I'm just trying to even the playing field for all the other girls who can't hold a candle to you," Xander said in a loud conspirator's whisper as he looked around the campus.

Buffy aimed another punch at his side before she backed up out of his arms looking stronger than Spike had seen her for a while.

"Go give Tara the pep talk. I have job hunting to do," Buffy ordered, wiping at her eyes.
"Yes, ma'am. Oh, there's a job down by the docks, but I really don't know if you're going to be okay with it."

"Right now, anything that pays is looking pretty good."

"Clem told me about it. The boss is slightly demonic."

"Demonic? Okay, you know what I just said about anything looking good? Scratch that." Buffy took a deep breath and cleared her throat.

"Consider it scratched," Xander agreed. He gave Buffy a pat on the arm and then turned to go into the building. Spike watched as Buffy stared at the doors leading into the dorm for a long time before she finally turned away and scanned the campus. Stepping away from the building, Spike stood between two pillars, neatly framed by one of the arches of the covered walkway. But Buffy turned her back and started walking the opposite direction.

Spike stood perfectly still for long minutes, not breathing or blinking as he watched college students wander aimlessly through their pathetic lives. Then he stepped forward and picked up the small pot with the designs carefully carved into the clay and he threw it as hard as
he could. The pot hit the brick wall and shattered, a million green shards of jagged pottery flying in every direction.

Turning his back, Spike strode back toward the sewer entrance.

**Part Ten**

Spike walked through the door and looked around the living room. Bonnie was on her stomach in front of the television, and for a second, Spike thought she might have picked up the trick of levitating. It took him a second to realize that he was the one weaving forward and back and that gave the illusion that she was floating. He reached up and grabbed the door frame, frowning as he tried to get control over his limbs. Soddin' embarrassing to be pissed on cheap American booze.

"Hey, Spike," Xander said. He stood up and watched Spike warily. Fucking right he should be wary. The boy was his. It wasn't even like Spike ever wanted puppy-boy, but puppy-boy was his and the nob had the nerve to try and take the slayer from him.

"You fucking git," Spike snarled. He cut his tongue on his own fang, and the taste of blood, even his own, made his
demon sing.

"Spike?" Xander sounded confused, and the confusion and fear were music to Spike's ears. Crossing the room, he grabbed Xander by the back of the neck. The chip gave a warning jolt, and instead of throwing the moron through the wall, Spike threw him toward the couch. Xander hit the back, rolled to the cushion and then slid to the floor. Spike stood, still weaving, a smirk on his face. It took a bloody worthless piece of shite to get thrown around in his own home. But then, this wasn't Xander's home. This was Spike's home. He'd chased the demons out, and he'd laid claim to it.

Looking around, Spike realized that he owned everything he saw. His gaze fell on Bonnie who was sitting near the wall, her eyes bright and green and her cheeks deeply shadowed and puffy. Spike stared at that for a second, not seeing Xander until the git had tackled him from behind.

"You leave her alone!" Xander landed a punch on Spike's kidney, and that bloody hurt. With a roar, Spike twisted around and backhanded Xander. The man's arms flew wide as he sailed across the room, but Spike only had a millisecond to enjoy that before he was on the ground,
screaming as the chip burned a hole through his skull.

"Fucking chip." Spike pushed himself back up, his sense of danger pulling him to his feet even when his vision was still clouded by the pain. He caught a broken chair leg an inch from his chest and wrenched it out of Xander's hand. Throwing himself forward, he caught Xander even before he could see him.

"Bonnie, run to Clem!"

"Daddy!" Bonnie's voice was panicked, and Spike snarled at the tone, but the pain and the alcohol was definitely slowing him down.

"Run! Now!" Xander screamed the words, and Spike shook the man as hard as he dared in order to shut him up. Spike knew the moment Bonnie darted out of the room, and he snarled at Xander. He soddin' liked Bonnie, and if he was going to spend the evening with someone, he'd sure as hell rather be telling the ankle-biter stories from his glory days than he would sit around and watch puppy-boy be depressed.

Spike threw Xander back at the couch, and he heard the thump as the boy landed somewhere near it—
somewhere that wasn't as soft. But the chip didn't even give a chirp. Spike wondered if he could take a knife and just gut the moron as long as he wasn't looking at him at the time. The chip gave another little warning zap, and Spike snarled.

"Why the bloody fuck did you send her away. Now I have to go get her back," Spike snarled. He started toward the door, but Xander crashed into him from the side. They both hit the wall, and the mirror hanging on the wall shattered. Glass tinkled to the tile entryway, and Spike shook his head to get the glass bits out of his hair.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"You leave Bonnie alone." Xander was between him and the door, his body poised for a fight.

That made Spike laugh. "You plannin' on stopping me, mate?" Spike ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip and considered the human in his way. The chip might not let him hurt Xander, but it sure as hell would let him dump Xander on his oversized arse. Reaching out, he caught Xander's arm. The boy fought, but a human was no match for Spike. Spike tried to throw Xander to the side, but Xander had caught Spike's belt and was now
holding on for dear life.

"Let go you moron." Spike tried to pry Xander's fingers loose, but the chip gave another warning spark as Xander grimaced in pain.

"You leave Bonnie alone. You want to take out your bad day on me, fine. But you leave Bonnie the hell alone or I will have Buffy stake your worthless, undead heart."

Spike snarled and reversed direction. Now he was holding Xander and forcing him back. Xander's thighs hit the arm of the couch, and then he tipped over onto the couch itself, and Spike landed on top of him. "Do you think you get to tell me what to do? What do you think Buffy would do to a little demon girl? Huh? I bet I could even convince her that Bonnie isn't even your kid... that she isn't a tyke at all but another of those demons that looks like a rug rat to get people's emotions all tangled up. Joyce told me that whole story, and I bet that memory would make the slayer willing to listen to good old Spike and his hundred years of experience."

"You wouldn't." Xander's voice was a whisper.

"Try me." Spike gave his nastiest grin.
Xander exploded, bucking up and punching, but he couldn't get Spike off him. "She won't believe you," Xander yelled. Spike snarled as he remembered Buffy standing in the sun, Xander's arms wrapped around her. Maybe she wouldn't. Spike let go of his prisoner and sat back.

While Xander's hands were free, Spike was still sitting on his feet. Spike sniffed, wiped his nose, and braced his one hand on the back of the sofa to keep from falling over. Bloody slayer. She probably would believe Xander. He had

"I'll do anything to keep Bonnie safe, but if you threaten her, I will find a way to stake you," Xander said quietly. "I will find a way to turn you back into dust that I will walk all over. I'll spread your ashes at the city dump where you belong."

Spike fell forward, his hand catching Xander by the throat. Xander gave a little choked off cry, and Spike's chip gave another twinge, but Spike was just drunk enough that the small warning jolt was only a tickle.

"Just what would you do to keep her safe?"
"I'd stake you," Xander offered, but the fear pouring from him made it pretty clear that Xander knew that wasn't going to happen. On the other hand, Spike was drunk and enjoying the scent of terror and submission.

"I was thinking about staking you." Spike tilted his hips so he could grind his erection against Xander's body. The pain was one more aphrodisiac.

For a second, Xander froze. And then, he gave a weak and twisted sneer of his own. "You want to rape me? Fine. It's not like I can stop you, but you hurt Bonnie, and I'll..."

"You'll what?" Spike shut Xander up with a hand over his mouth. "You'll tell the slayer how you’ve been hiding a demon child? You'll tell her how you offered to sell your ass to me just to keep a some demon chit safe from the big bad slayer? You'll tell her how you soddin' pulled her out of heaven and then didn't even trust her with your own flesh and blood? You moron."

Spike pushed himself back up. "'Sides, I don't rape. My lovers are always willing participants, even when they've only got minutes left to live. It's a talent." Spike smirked
and stretched his neck. The world warbled in and out of focus, and Spike had to blink to clear his vision. During that moment's distraction, Xander managed to slip away to the far side of the room.

Rolling his eyes, Spike leaned back. The git wouldn't get two steps toward any door before Spike was on him.

"I won't let you put Bonnie in the middle of this." Xander crossed his arms across his stomach like the little boy he was.

"She's not in the bloody middle. You sent her toddling off into the night, didn't you?" Spike felt a flash of satisfaction as Xander lost all the blood from his face. The chip might keep him from killing the boy, but it couldn't stop all forms of torture.

"I'm going—" Xander didn't get more than two steps before Spike was up and in his path.

"You're not going anywhere, mate. Seems like you've been a very bad human, and we're just going to have to get creative about how to provide a little discipline."

"Bonnie needs me." Xander tried to push past Spike, but
Spike caught him easily, holding on even when Xander started kicking and biting like a wildcat. Laughing, Spike threw Xander toward the couch again, watching as he caught the back of the couch and twisted around to meet Spike's attack. Only Spike was still standing in the middle of the living room watching Xander. This was the boy-child that Buffy turned to. He was bloody weak. He wasn't fit to play minion to her, and she couldn't see that.

"I thought you liked Bonnie," Xander said, his voice a quiet accusation.

Spike shrugged. "I do. You shouldn't have sent her out into the night, but seeing as you did, I'm willing to have a little faith in the bit. She'll get to Clem safe as houses or she'll leave some soddin' wanker bleeding on the street for his trouble."

"She's a little girl!" Xander practically wailed. Git.

"She's a demon, mate. She's a demon armed with a knife I bloody gave her and taught her to use, and she's a right treat when she uses it—all innocence and quivering lip until she strikes. She's got her mother's sense in fighting, that's for fucking sure." Bonnie might have inherited
Xander's thick curls and god-awful love of color, but she had a power to her that puppy-boy certainly didn't have.

"You gave my daughter a knife? She's six, you asshole." Xander threw himself at Spike, but Spike easily forced him back again, pushing him to the couch and practically sitting on him.

"You think you're so bloody perfect with all your human rules. You just about drove Anya round the twist with all that rot about how she had to fit into the mold, and now you want to do the same with Bonnie and with Buffy. You'd fucking clip their wings and make them smaller just so that you could neatly fit into their shadow. You're fucking pathetic." Spike breathed the words into Xander's ear, holding the puppy-boy down easily. "I won't let you destroy them." Spike pushed himself up just enough to look Xander in the eye.

Xander's brown eyes were dark with fear, and Spike smiled. "I won't let you destroy the girls just to make them fit into your tiny little life."

"Spike, I would never..." Xander verbally stumbled to a halt. Funny that. Usually the git had diarrhea of the mouth. "I love both Bonnie and Buffy," Xander finally
"The slayer's mine." Spike snarled the words, grabbing Xander and shaking him until his head flopped like a doll's and the chip forced him to let Xander go. With a cry of pain, Spike grabbed his head and rocked back and forth as he tried to see past the agony. When he got this chip out, he was going to hunt down every soddin' soldier-boy on the west coast and eat 'em.

"Spike," Xander said slowly. He raised his hand and rubbed at his neck, "Buffy pretty much belongs to Buffy."

"And you think you can have her?" Spike sneered at the weak human below him. He could hold Xander down with one hand. The idiot had already offered up his ass, but Spike didn't need to put Xander in his place, the git already knew he was lower than Spike. Even with the chip, Xander couldn't compete with a very drunk Spike, and Spike knew just how very drunk he was.

"No, I don't think I'll ever have her," Xander said softly. "I think I’m lucky she doesn't kick my ass for playing games with her destiny. I think I’m lucky Anya doesn't call down some kind of vengeance on me because I acted like a
giant jerkface. So, hey, I’m not arguing about how I'm not always the nicest person, but I have never tried to keep any of my girls back. Never."

"So, you just ruin their lives by accident, then?"

Xander flinched back, and Spike could feel his demon bask in the sadism. The blood left Xander's face. "Yeah, that would be me. Ruining lives with good intentions ever since 1997."

Spike sniffed again, rubbing his nose which was oddly cold. Staring down at Xander, he wanted to hurt the boy. Bloody cheeky, hugging the slayer like that, offering her comfort when she was always trying to pretend that she didn't need anyone. But Spike could smell Xander's misery, and the boy wasn't lying. It hadn't been any play for Buffy's attention.

A knock at the door distracted him, and he nearly fell off the couch. Clem was probably bringing Bonnie back. At least if he liked all his skin still attached to his flesh, he'd bring her back. Spike nearly lost his balance as he stood, but Xander was a good pet and stayed right on the couch like an obedient little puppy-boy as Spike headed for the door. It was suddenly hard to remember why he was
angry with Harris. Hell, Harris' life was pathetic enough without Spike torturing him. Besides, torture was like picking a fight... you always wanted to have an opponent strong enough to really be worth your time and trouble. He smiled as he remembered Angel in chains bellowing as hot pokers were driven through his flesh.

Strolling across the room, he threw the door open. The flash of light was so bright that Spike thought he'd somehow missed sunrise, that the sun had come up and he hadn't even noticed it. His skin burned, flesh shriveled and he fell back into the living room with a wordless cry. Spike felt someone rush past him, and the smell of Xander's aggression trailed behind a halfsecond later.

"Tara?" Xander sounded bewildered, and Spike blinked, white spots still dancing through his vision.

"What the soddin' hell was that?" Spike demanded. Tara was standing there with a small pouch still in her hand and her mouth set into a grim line. Oddly, Xander was standing in front of her, his body angled for defense. True, he was handling the defense all wrong, but he was definitely trying to defend the house.

"I... I heard," Tara said. She took a step forward, her
expression as hard as ever.

"So you attacked me?" Spike demanded. "What the fuck do you mean, 'you heard'?"

"Tara?" Xander sounded about as confused as Spike felt.

"I answered the phone. At Buffy's house."

"Oh." Xander's voice was sounding oddly guilty.

"What the fuck did you do, you moron?" Spike demanded. The world was still blotchy, but Spike wasn't sure if that was the alcohol or the spell Tara had clearly used on him.

"Hey, you're the one who lost your mind and went all Hannibal Lecter."

"You're the one who stuck your nose in with Buffy. Git."

"I was very much not sticking my nose anywhere. Not even when I probably should have been, but no, I’m all 'letting you two make your own mistakes' man!"

"Not bloody likely." Spike snarled as Xander got right in
his face. He might have started throwing Xander around again, but Tara took a step forward, raising the pouch in her hand. Spike knew that type—all velvet and silk outside but with a core of steel. Tara wasn't all that different from Buffy when it came down to it, and he wasn't feeling up to dealing with a brassed off magic user. "I saw you on campus," Spike said with a bit more control.

"And? What, do you think we were sneaking off into the shadows and doing it?" Xander was sounding like a petulant child now that he had Tara to back him up.

"You don't have the bollocks for that." Spike snapped.

"Then what the hell is your problem?" Xander poked a finger at Spike, and Spike grabbed it with a snarl.

"No!" Tara said firmly. She stepped forward and pushed both of them back away from each other. "Have both of you l-l-lost your minds?" She demanded. "Sit down. Now."

Spike glared at Tara, but the fact was that he was bloody tired, and the chip had gone off on him so much that his whole body ached and his muscles were threatening to
start shaking. Only sheer determination was keeping him on his feet. So instead of arguing, Spike turned and dropped down into his chair.

"Get me some blood," he ordered Xander. Xander's expression turned murderous as he stood staring down at Spike. Spike twitched one eyebrow up and just waited. Puppy-boy clearly had some balls, but Spike didn't think his new-found defiance would last long.

"Get it yourself, blood breath." Walking over to the couch, Xander threw himself down on the end and then reached behind him to the windowsill where he took his cell phone out from behind the curtain. Spike watched curiously. "So, did Buffy catch any of the call?" Xander asked Tara.

Tara shook her head. "Buffy and Willow and Dawn were fighting. I don't think they even heard the phone ring. But I heard. I heard about Bonnie." Tara was looking at Xander, but when all the blood left Xander's face so that he turned pure white, she looked away.

"You called Buffy?" Spike demanded. "You bloody idiot."

Xander's head whipped around. "Hey, you were
threatening Bonnie."

"I was threatening you, mate. I happen to like Bonnie. The chit's got good sense she clearly didn't get from you."

"Hey!" Xander protested, but he didn't disagree as he turned his phone off and then curled into himself. His flash of anger vanished into a sort of despair. Spike sighed. Bloody hell, this was not going down as one of his more pleasant evenings. "I have to go check on Bonnie," Xander said softly. He started pushing himself up from the couch.

"Can you call?" Tara asked. For a second, Xander got his stubborn look, the one that meant he was going to do something more idiotic than normal. However, he pulled his phone out and dialed. Spike listened as Xander checked on Bonnie and asked Clem to bring her home. Tara asked for the kitchen, and Spike waved her in the right general direction.

Fucking hell. This was a right mess. The second Tara told Buffy about this little set-up, Spike was going to be out a lover and a place to stay and the dosh to keep himself in smokes and booze. He was bloody tired of staying in a
crypt, but with the chip, the normal ways of making money just weren't available. Blackmail had been the most profitable thing he'd found since the bloody army had shoved the chip in his head.

Oh, Fect'v had a line on some business, babysitting Suvolte eggs if Spike was remembering right, but he'd have to be soddin' desperate to try anything that dumb. Those buggers were mean as hell the second they hatched, and killing the newborn in order to use the bits and bobs in spellmaking might be profitable, but it was like as not to get you dead. Fect'v even had a few human clients—people who wanted live Suvolte demons to use as attack dogs. Mind, those would be more like personal miniature Armageddons instead of Dobermans, but the money was damn good.

Spike sneered as he realized that he probably still wouldn't make enough to live as good as he did here. Stupid git had to go and call his friends. What kind of man went crying for some woman's skirts the second things got a little dicey? Spike glared at Xander as he asked Clem to walk Bonnie back home, promising that they had finished fighting.

Spike sniffed at the smell of fresh human blood, and Tara
handed him a warm mug. "Ta," he offered her, raising his mug in a quick salute before drinking. The blood drove back the headache and the worst of the alcoholic daze, only now Spike was feeling even grumpier. If Xander weren't such a bloody white knight none of this would have happened. Spike indulged in a quick little fantasy of what Angelus should have done to the boy the night Xander stopped the poof in the hospital. Wankers. Both of them were world-class wankers.

"Are you two done fighting?" Tara asked softly, but her gaze was hard as steel. Spike just glared at Xander, daring the boy to say anything.

"I didn't do anything!" Xander finally said as he exploded up off the couch. "Whatever your problem is, you just need to remember that I will stake your scrawny biteless ass if you even think of touching my daughter."

"Never thought that, ya nob. I was thinking of backhanding you. You lot are bloody worthless—leaving the slayer to fight your fucking battles, dragging her out of heaven, expecting her to just pick up and toddle on like a good little soldier. She's fucking amazing, and you lot are a bunch of soddin' leeches sucking the life out of her. I'd call you vampires, but you aren't even as strong
as a fucking minion."

Spike stopped as he realized that Tara seemed to be taking his words to heart a mite bit more than Xander. She was looking pale enough to fall over any second. Bloody hell, he was definitely off his game because he was usually smarter than that. Tara struck him as the sort to hold some mighty big grudges once she got well and truly brassed off.

"Oh yeah, and you chasing after her... that isn't creepy or life-sucking, not at all." Xander's sarcasm wasn't subtle.

"Xander," Tara said, "Spike has a point."

"Spike... what? No, no Spike does not have a point. Spike is pointless. If Spike wants, I can get him a nice wooden point, but as of right now, he is big no-point-having man." Xander turned on Tara with an incredulous expression, like she had just driven a knife into him and he couldn't quite figure out why.

Tara ducked her head. "We pulled Buffy out of heaven. And now w-we have problems that are making her life harder."
"I'm not. I am handling my own problems." Xander crossed his arms. "Yep. I have a problem, I deal with a problem. I put up with my problem moving in with me and ordering me around using threats and blackmail."

Tara nodded. "You have. How long have you had your daughter?" She looked up, her expression honest and open even though she was manipulating the hell out of Xander. And it was working. The second Xander started thinking on his little girl, Spike could see the man's expression soften.

"Her mother only left a month ago, but I've always visited her. Her family weren't bad people, not the type to sacrifice virgins or open hellmouths, just the sort to twist someone's head around so they think they're not as good as everyone else, which is making me not so happy with them. If they show up again...." The expression on Xander's face was murderous.

"Bloody hell, I may not be able to fight humans, but let one of those wankers show up and try to touch her, and I'll rip their soddin' heads off their bodies," Spike finished for him. No way were they getting their manipulative hands on either Bonnie or this house ever again.
"So humanish evil?" Tara asked, looking from one of them to the other.

Xander shrugged. "Actually, I think they were probably less evil than my parents, although I do still sometimes want to find the grandmother and have a little talk with her. Only I would use fewer words and more sharp edges. She let the other kids call Bonnie names. I think that's ass-kicking worthy even if it's not exactly slay-worthy."

"I would agree with that," Tara reached out a hand, and brushed it over the couch seat, and Xander settled back down next to her. "Does she go to school?"

"Um, home school. Kinda. Clem is awesome, and he's teaching her all things human since she already has a little too much background in all things demonish." Xander glared at Spike, and Spike lifted two fingers in return. "Um, Tara." Xander chewed on his lip. "I know this is really unfair to ask you, but maybe you could not mention this to Buffy and Willow. I mean, I normally wouldn't mind Willow knowing, but if Willow knows then she'll tell Buffy, and Buffy is not big with the demon love. And then there's that whole very creepy scene with Willow and Rack and the magic overdose, I... um..."
Xander stopped.

"Don't trust Willow around your daughter?" Tara finished for him.

Xander visibly cringed. "Yeah, that. Only I would never say that because Willow's my best friend."

Tara didn't answer immediately. She studied her hands and Spike could smell the grief on the air. No wonder Buffy could never get her emotional balance back with this lot around her. "I love her too. It doesn't mean I have to ignore how dangerous she's becoming." Tara stopped again. "I can keep this a secret as long as you two aren't going to keep fighting." Tara looked from one to the other.

"He keeps his sad, little fantasies away from Buffy, and I can do that," Spike agreed. He was sobering up a little too fast, and a flash of memory caught him. Buffy yielding to Xander's embrace, leaning into him, slipping her arms around him and letting all her emotions slip out. Spike growled and shook his head to clear the memory.

"I am not having sad, little fantasies about anyone. I'm
just trying to work and raise a daughter and not think about the fact that my daughter can smell lust. Although really... I'm so very glad to know that she still thinks human sex smells icky because sex and Bonnie will not be happening for about... oh... fifty years."

Spike snorted. "She'll be grown inside ten, Harris. She's not a human."

"And yet she will still not be having sex for fifty years," Xander said firmly. Tara smiled, her hand resting on Xander's knee. "Maybe sixty," Xander added mulishly. The idiot probably would have kept adding decades, but the door came open and Clem carefully stuck his head inside.

"Hi, guys," he said, his grin as fake as his pleather coat. He inched into the room, and Bonnie peered around the corner of the door. "So, how you doing?" Clem looked from one to the other.

"Bonnie!" Xander called. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. Spike was just being a poop head, and let that be a lesson about never drinking because drinking bad." Xander held his arms out, and Bonnie darted around Clem and threw herself at her father. He scooped her up and held her
close. Spike watched as her eyes traveled the room only to land on him. Bloody smart little chit. She knew who was the fucking center of this household. He nodded at her and leaned back, propping one foot on the coffee table. Immediately, Bonnie relaxed.

"Bonnie," Xander said, utterly unaware of the exchange, "I want you to meet a friend of mine. Bonnie, this is Tara. Tara, this is my daughter Bonnie." Xander looked about proud enough to burst as Bonnie held out her little hand and solemnly shook with Tara. He didn't even seem to notice that she had looked over at Spike first, checking to see if this new addition to her universe had his approval. Spike just appreciated that at least one person still knew he was the bloody boss in this house. He just had to start handling things a little smarter. He had to start handling Harris a little smarter because he'd gotten entirely too used to having a little dosh and a lot of comfort.

"It's very nice to meet you," Tara greeted her.

Yep, Spike liked this life. It was time for him to start thinking about putting a little effort into keeping it because tonight had come entirely too close to disaster. Harris wasn't the only idiot around here, but unlike Xander, Spike knew when he needed to make a change.
He wouldn't have lived this long without learning how to adapt.

Part Eleven

Spike's cell phone rang and he grabbed it off the side table. "This had bloody well better be good," he snarled, not even fully awake yet.

"That would depend on your definition of good."

"Anya?" Spike swung his legs over the side of the bed and groaned. Fucking hell, he actually managed to give himself a hangover. A mug of blood would fix that problem, but Spike wondered what it would take to fix the mess he'd made with puppy-boy. Yeah, the twit was a nuisance, but he also paid for the cell phone and the blood Spike was about to drink. Since the chip, Spike had learned to be a little more flexible about how he got his needs met, and he'd mucked it up badly last night. "Something better well have blown up," he warned her
as he stood and headed for the kitchen.

"Buffy is annoying and invisible."

Spike stopped. "She's what?"

"Annoying. Just because she has a problem, she thinks I'm going to stop having a life to deal with it. Actually, she started by expecting me to drop everything, and then she just announced that she was going to have some fun with it, and she wandered off."

"Did you say invisible?"

"If someone was trying to attack her, that seems like a very foolish way to start. Now they can't see her fist coming at their face."

"Is she there? Put her on the phone," Spike said.

"I already said she wandered off. I don't know where she went. I don't even know why I bothered to call you about it." The phone went dead. Fuck. Spike could tell from the itch in his bones that the sun was still up, so he couldn't exactly go wandering around town looking for an invisible slayer. However, anything powerful enough to
turn someone invisible was dangerous. If Red had done something stupid, Spike was going to lock her in the basement until she learned to give up the mojo. He indulged in a quick fantasy of bringing her to heel. At one point, she was the one he most wanted to turn with all that insecurity and anger right under her skin. She'd make a lovely vampire. But even if he could find a way to bring her over, he wouldn't. It would destroy Buffy and put Dawn right in the line of fire.

So that meant he had to clean up whatever mess Red had made without killing her. Spike cursed and headed for Xander's room. Puppy-boy was a moron with the survival skills of a suicidal lemming, but he wouldn't get turned to dust if he walked into the sun. Spike threw the door to Xander's room open, but it was empty. The strong smell of him clung to the unmade bed, but no Xander. However, Spike could still hear a heartbeat. Spike stepped into the room and tilted his head as he pinpointed the source.

Walking to the closet, Spike slid the door open. Bonnie looked up at him.

"Poppet?" Spike crouched down and rested his hands on his knees as he looked at her. "Where's Clem?"
"He didn't come today. He had to do something with kittens and he said it would take too long for him to come back and teach a lesson." Bonnie looked up at him, her cheeks darkened with anxiety even though he couldn't smell any. She had her father's god-awful love of ugly colors, but not any human scent glands.

Spike pushed a couple of Hawaiian shirts to one side so he could see her more clearly. "Why are you in here?"

Instead of answering, she just stared at him.

"I asked you a question, pet. I expect you to answer." Spike let a little yellow leech into his eyes. He had a situation with the slayer to deal with, and he didn't have time to coddle a demon who knew better than to test him.

"I wanted to be here when Daddy came home."

Spike frowned. "You could wait for him upstairs, pet."

"That human witch is up there."

"Tara," Spike corrected her. He wasn't sure Xander would
appreciate Bonnie's tone, but for a demon, a human witch was a significant threat. Most humans were talented at ignoring the supernatural, but witches were not only aware, but plenty of them hunted demons for certain body parts to use in magical spells. "She's a friend of your da. She wouldn't hurt you."

Bonnie's lips pressed together so tightly that they almost disappeared.

"Come on, we can go upstairs together." Spike stood up and offered Bonnie his hand. Instead of taking it, she crossed her arms and pressed herself back into the corner of the closet. "Now, pet," Spike said.

"No."

Spike dropped his hand to his side and raised his eyebrows as he looked at her. Bloody hell. Her father was clearly teaching her a few manners that were not going to impress any demons. The small and weak did not challenge the strong. Spike had learned that at Angelus' feet, and while he had no intention of using Angelus' teaching methods, he wasn't going to let someone half his size challenge him. Reaching in, Spike caught Bonnie by the arms and lifted her out.
"No!" Bonnie yelled. She kicked out, catching Spike in the shin.

"Bloody hell, what the fuck is wrong with you?" Spike flashed into gameface, but Bonnie just kicked harder. Going over to Xander's bed, Spike put her down on the edge of the bed and held her. Her bare feet kicked at him; she was almost as strong as an adult human, but she wasn't anywhere near strong enough to hurt him. He just held her arms, waiting as she finally wore herself out.

"You done?" he asked when she finally went still.

"No." Bonnie pressed her lips together, the swelling under her eyes nearly black with distress, but she had gone quiet. Spike still had no idea what the fuck was wrong with her. Every once in a while, her idiot father's genes definitely showed through.

"Well then, you let me know when you're done and then you can tell me why you're being such a git." Spike carefully let go of her arms and tried to back off, but she launched herself at him, her small fists windmilling wildly.
"Fucking hell!" Spike caught her around her chest, pinning her arms to her sides and holding her close. She still didn't smell of aggression the way humans would. It was an advantage he'd tried to teach her how to use in a fight, but he soddin' resented her bluffing him into dropping his guard. "You'd be one hell of a poker player if it weren't for those kwaini markings."

"Let me go!" She tried to kick backwards.

"Not on your life." Spike sat on Xander's bed, still holding Bonnie. "Right then, first lesson—don't attack if you can't keep a good head on your shoulders. I don't bloody well know what attack strategy that was, but it sure as hell wasn't one I taught you. Second lesson—never attack someone when you know you can't bloody win. Discretion is the better part of valor, and those who run like hell live to not get decapitated by some soddin' enemy."

"Are you going to decapitate me?" Bonnie demanded.

"Bloody.... No." Spike was so shocked that he couldn't even say anything else.
"For real?" Bonnie tilted her head up.

"'Course not. Don't know how that rot got into your head, but have I ever done anything to make you think I'd hurt you, pet?" Spike studied her. If it weren't for her deeply colored and swollen cheeks, Spike wouldn't be able to tell that she was upset—her voice was even and she still didn't smell of anything other than little girl's soap and pancakes. If Xander was playing some game to turn the bit against Spike, Spike was going to hire someone to pull his intestines out through his nostrils.

"You hurt Daddy." Bonnie's eyes narrowed.

Well fuck. Spike let her go and leaned back on the bed. She moved away from him, her eyes still watching him suspiciously. "You know about the chip, poppet. I can't hurt your da, even when he annoys the unlife out of me."

"You tried."

"If I'd have been trying, he'd still be laying in this bed healing," Spike pointed out.

"You did try."
"He rubbed me the wrong way, is all."

"You tried." She crossed her arms and stamped a foot on the ground in an imitation of every Shirley Temple movie Spike would never admit to having seen. Dru had been bloody obsessed with the things, and Spike could get in some good hunting in the dark. Right now, that wasn't helping him much. He doubted Bonnie's rich father was going to sweep in and fix everything before the closing credits rolled.

"I've been trying for going on three years now, and your da is still breathing. Bloody hell, my sire before me tried hurting him, and he's still here. I wouldn't worry too much about him if I were you."

Bonnie's expression twisted, and for one horrible moment, Spike thought she was going to cry. "You say nice things like how he's stronger than he looks and then you try to hurt him when all he does is try to make you happy."

That made Spike raise his eyebrows. He doubted puppy-boy had ever given two thoughts about making Spike happy, but for all her maturity, Bonnie wasn't going to understand their relationship, and Spike really didn't
want to explain blackmail. "It's complicated."

The second he said it, Spike mentally cringed. Bonnie wasn't some human child who would believe trite answers like that. Oh, she'd accept them. She was demon enough to know that you couldn't force someone stronger than you into talking, but she wasn't some human child to be distracted by a bright bauble or pushed to the side. Demon children were considered miniature adults and included in adult conversations and business long before they could understand most of it, and Bonnie for all her curls and smiles, was a demon.

"Fucking hell." Spike sighed. "He drives me 'round the twist half the time," Spike snapped. "There are days I don't bloody know whether to lock him in his room or just soddin' sit on him because he puts on this helpless display that is bloody annoying. And then he goes and does something that shows he isn't half as helpless as he pretends and it's fucking—" Spike waved his hand. "So, yeah, I tried to hurt your da last night." Spike stood up before he said more. He'd tried to kill Xander last night. In the cold, sober morning, he knew that Xander hadn't been moving in on Buffy. Fuck, Buffy's idea of sex would probably break the human into so many pieces that the doctors wouldn't be able to put him back together. But
watching Buffy turn to the village idiot....

Walking over to the door, he slammed it open so fast that it crashed into the wall with the dull cracking sound of something breaking. "Slayer's in trouble, and your da is going to get his knickers in a twist if we don't do something to help her," Spike said over his shoulder as he headed up the stairs.

Upstairs, Tara was at the kitchen table, her eyes wide as he looked at him.

"Morning, luv," Spike said as he headed for the refrigerator. He wondered if she'd stayed the night or just shown up this morning. Clem might have called her, but Spike wasn't comfortable with the thought of a human just wandering into his lair, especially since he couldn't defend himself from them. He worked silently, pulling the warmed blood out of the microwave before he turned to really face her.

"Morning," Tara said softly once Spike had settled back against the counter.

"You stay the night?" Spike drank his blood and put on his best poker face. Last night she'd been quick enough
to take his side, so having her around might prove useful, but at the same time, Tara being here was sure to catch Willow's attention. With the chip, Spike couldn't protect himself from Willow, and he was experienced enough to see that she was becoming dangerous. Oh, the children would never admit that one of their own was on the path to becoming one of the bad guys, but she'd tasted power, and she liked the taste. If it weren't for Bonnie and Dawn and Buffy, he would enjoy the mayhem she was going to cause.

"I stayed in the room next to Xander." Tara straightened up in her chair, clearly prepared for some sort of verbal attack.

Instead, Spike shrugged. "Good to have allies around when the shite is about to hit the fan," Spike told her. "But let's get some things straight."

"Ththings?" The stutter was back. Spike rolled his eyes. It wasn't like he was going to demand blood tribute or rape her. Even before the chip, he'd never treated humans as anything other than food, and a person didn't rape and torture food. Not unless he was trying to impress Angelus. Now that wanker loved to torture his food—like it took a big demon to terrorize some helpless human.
"I don't want you bringing random people over here. No college co-eds or study parties or covens in my house, got it?" She nodded. "And no Willow. I don't want that bint anywhere near this place or Bonnie. If you break that rule, I will find a way to kill you, got it?"

"Got it," Tara agreed; her voice was shaky, but she gave him a firm nod. "I wouldn't put Xander and Bonnie in the middle."

"See that ya don't," Spike told her. "Otherwise, you're welcome to stay here."

Bonnie had shown up by then. She hovered near the doorway, her cheeks just starting to fade to the dull reddish stain that might pass as sunburn. Right then, he had both the girls sorted. Hopefully. From the way Tara sat at the table, ramrod straight and her fingers curled around a glass, she had a lot to say.

"Slayer's in trouble," Spike announced.

"What?" Tara blinked in surprise. The first rule of engagement was to not let the enemy predict your moves. Spike glanced over toward Bonnie, hoping that
she understood what she was seeing.

"Anya called. Apparently someone's gone and turned her invisible. Three guesses about who might be mucking around with magic."

Tara slumped, her eyes closing for a second in utter despair. "Either Willow or Amy," Tara said softly.

"I was going to guess Red, but if her little mate is into magic, that's possible," Spike said with a shrug. "According to Anya, Buffy is enjoying being invisible a little too much. I'm thinking Red might have tried to make Buffy's worries disappear or some rot like that. She has perfected throwing the baby out with the bathwater, that one."

Tara seemed to physically shrink, but then she had encouraged Willow's pursuit of magic, so Spike wasn't giving her a free pass and he sure as hell wasn't going to offer any emotional support. She'd turned her head the other way until Willow had put Buffy and Dawn and everyone else in danger.

"I'll go to the dorm and get my magic supplies. I know their magical signatures, so I can search for any active
spells they've laid in the last day." She stood up, her face
determined. She had real steel at her core, Tara did.
Spike could respect that.

"Have plenty of magical supplies right here." Spike
walked to a corner of the kitchen where the stone
counters were particularly thick and rough. The cabinet
above was heavy wood with scrolls of iron across it, and
Spike could feel the magic skittering over his skin like
spiders as he opened the door. "Help yourself."

Tara moved closer, her eyes wide as she studied all the
herb bottles and charms carefully lined up. She had to
have felt the magic, but she had waited for an invitation.
She was a real lady. In a lot of ways, Tara reminded Spike
of Joyce. If she broke the rules and brought Willow here,
he was actually going to feel bad about hiring someone
to kill her.

"Where did these come from?" Tara raised her hand, but
stopped just short of touching the ingredients lined up
on the thick shelves.

"No bloody idea. Came with the house," Spike headed
back to get another mug of blood to get rid of the last of
his headache.
"My mother gathered them," Bonnie said. She was clinging to the side of the door, but her voice was strong. "Her father was a powerful mage, but she didn't inherit a lot of his magic, only a little."

Ah, that explained why the grandmother had been diddling a human. Must have been a real slap in the face when her spawn had ended with human hair and very little magic. Spike smiled at that. Bonnie's grandmother was a right bitch who deserved every moment of unhappiness life threw at her. Spike drank his blood and watched as Tara explored the cupboard. If he'd had his way, he would have dumped the whole lot of it, but you didn't just flush magical herbs down the toilet, not unless you wanted magical cockroaches crawling back up out of the sewers.

"These will be very useful," Tara said with a smile for Bonnie. Bonnie still watched her with wide, suspicious eyes. "I'm going to do a magical trace spell. Would you like to watch?" Tara invited her. Bonnie still didn't answer, but she went up on her toes so she could see which bottles Tara pulled off the shelf. Her vigilance spoke of distrust, but Spike figured Tara could win the tyke over. He had other problems to deal with. Heading
back downstairs, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Xander's number. It was late enough in the afternoon that he should be off work, so hopefully he had the soddin' thing turned on.

"Hello?"

"Buffy's in trouble," Spike announced.

"What? Spike?" Xander sounded about as confused as ever.

"Who the hell else would have my bloody phone?" Spike demanded. "Anya called, and someone's gone and made the slayer invisible. She didn't give me much to go on, but Tara's looking to see if Red's been mucking around with the mojo again."

"Shit, it just never ends, does it?" On the other end, tires squealed as Xander turned his car around.

"That's life, Harris. Tara will know soon enough if Red cast the spell. She's doing some of her own mojo back here. I need you to go by the slayer's house. Check to see if Bit is alright and see if her sis is with her. If not, see if she left any messages."
"Buffy's house? But what if Willow is there?"

"Try not to let her turn ya into a toad," Spike suggested and then he turned his phone off. Xander was safer around Willow than anyone else, and part of Spike really resented that. He was afraid of Willow. Deep in his unbeating heart, he knew just how damn unstable she was, and Xander would walk in there without any fear at all. Moron. If life were fair, Xander would be the first to get turned into a toad, but like he'd told Bonnie, Xander always did seem to survive. Bloody annoying that.

Part Twelve

Spike growled as he stood outside the arcade. The idiot trio might be invisible, but he could smell them well enough to track them. Unfortunately, they were human which meant that even if he could get his hands on them, he couldn't do a bloody thing to stop them. As if to remind him of his weakness, the chip sparked while Spike
thought about what he would like to do to these idiots.

His phone vibrated, and Spike moved farther back into the alley to answer it.

"Wot?" he demanded.

"Did you find them?" Tara asked softly.

"Followed their bloody van to an arcade. Can't do anything else other than watch."

"But... Willow and Xander..."

"The idiots who took 'em are human. I don't suppose you've found a way to disable the bloody chip so I can rip their entrails out," Spike snarled. The silence at the other end told him the answer to that. He'd been a soddin' moron for thinking they'd ever tried looking for a way to get his leash off. They liked him leashed. Spike moved forward and leaned on the building where he could see Xander through the front windows. With one hand, he was holding onto Willow, and his other was fisted at his side, but from the jerky and uncoordinated movements, they were both getting yanked around by invisible opponents. The boy didn't have the reflexes or the
senses to deal with something like that.

"I might—"

"Find a way to help or stop bothering me." Spike turned the phone off and barely avoided smashing it against the wall.

"Temper, temper," a voice whispered.

"Buffy?" Spike looked around, but all he saw were the little happy meals toddling through their meaningless lives. Then a hand pushed him back against the wall. "Bloody hell." Spike breathed the words as all his other senses registered the slayer. Tingles of danger crawled down his spine, the heat of her hand pressed into his chest, her warm breath slid across his skin. Spike could already feel his cock harden as she held him against the wall.

"I looked for you at your crypt," Buffy said.

"I'd have been there if I'd known you'd come looking. Last we talked, you were singing another tune," Spike pointed out. He'd known Buffy would come looking for him, but it didn't hurt to remind her about how she'd
been treating him. A little guilt could go a long way.

"Yeah, but now things are different."

"Because you're invisible," Spike guessed.

"Well... yeah. I'm free. I'm free from rules and reports. Oh, you should have seen it, Spike. There was this social worker who was giving me grief about Dawn, and I made her think she was totally losing her mind. This is wonderful. I feel free from life!"

Spike's eyebrows went up. Yeah, he was the first to admit that he had issues, but that wasn't sounding mentally healthy, not even to him. "Got another word for that, luv. It's called dead."

"You're supposed to be in my corner," Buffy's hand withdrew, and Spike wished he could reach out and catch her. She sounded upset, and he wanted to pull her close and run his hands over her hard curves until she forgot how much she hated this life. Unfortunately, without being able to see her, he was going to end up flailing around trying to catch the air.

"I am, luv. Always," he promised. "I also think you're
going to be kicking yourself if Red and Harris get shot by those morons over there," Spike jerked his head toward the arcade.

"Oh yeah. Some dork called me at home and said that I had to come or they were going to hurt Willow and Xander. He was sounding way too much like a low-budget movie to be a real threat."

Spike raised an eyebrow. Maybe they had different definitions because from where he was standing, those three could definitely hurt Xander or Willow and Spike couldn't do a bloody thing to stop them. "From the smell, I figure it's three humans, but they're invisible."

"Well then, it's a good thing I am too. You coming?"

"They're human," Spike pointed out. There was nothing he wanted more than to go with Buffy, to stand at her side as her hunting partner, but rolling around on the floor and clutching his head wasn't going to impress anyone. Instead he pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "Go on then, go save the kiddies."

"They won't know what hit them," she said with a cheerfulness that bothered Spike. He'd seen the slayer go
into a fight angry and fearful and confused and arrogant, but he'd never seen her acting like a bloody fool, and right now that's exactly what she sounded like. Spike could track her path across the street from the whistling. Through the windows, he watched as Willow and Xander shifted around.

The sun had only just slipped from the sky, and Spike had to step around the last weak rays to get closer. Willow and Harris had moved to a back corner, along with a floating ray gun that looked like a bloody movie prop. Suddenly the gun slammed Willow, and Xander wrenched himself away from whatever invisible enemy was holding him, and he tackled the air. The ray gun flew up into the air, and then the arcade broke out into chaos. Spike watched the screams with a sort of warm nostalgia. Dru would have loved the whole scene... little kiddies all shoving and scratching at one another to get out the one door.

Light arced through the air and then Spike could see Buffy and some little twit who looked familiar. Buffy dropped the boy and lunged after another enemy, leaving the first one just standing there looking confused. Spike took a step closer. What in the bloody hell was she doing, leaving an enemy on his feet? Soon she had three
twits lined up in front of her. Willow stood at one side, but at least Harris on the other side had the good sense to be brassed off. He lunged forward, his hands reaching for the blond one. The blond one fell back, windmilling his arms with a look of panic on his face, and Spike figured Xander had finally managed to pick a fight he could win, but Buffy held him back. Oh yeah, Harris was in a right tizzy now. He yelled, his words were indistinguishable from this distance, but the tone was pretty damn clear.

Spike snarled. If these twits were anything other than human, he'd have skinned them alive by now. Instead, Buffy looked like she was considering inviting them in for a spot of tea. While Spike often didn't understand Buffy... he didn't understand her willingness to align herself with weaker allies, he didn't understand her resentment of Dawn, and he didn't understand her bloody obsession with fashion... never before had he been so frustrated with her. One of the trio threw a smoke bomb, and Spike growled at the idea of them escaping. He started for the door. Chip or no chip, he could soddin' well backhand one into the wall and then deal with the pain of the chip later.

A security guard was talking to Buffy and the others.
Xander had his arms crossed and was almost vibrating with fury, while Red looked downright smug about something.

"We should be going. Good luck with that ghost problem," Buffy told the guard with a smile as she headed toward Spike and the door. Spike backed out of the door again. Clearly the enemy had already fled, and Buffy wasn't doing much to try and chase 'em down.

"Oh my god, Buffy!" Willow sang out.

"I know, they're gone. I guess we should chase them." In one second, all the joy had drained from Buffy, and she seemed to shuffle, all the energy that made her so vibrant drained in a moment.

"No, your hair! It's adorable." Willow gave Buffy an enormous smile as they passed Spike. Buffy's face lit up with honest joy. Spike frowned. Why in the bloody hell would a comment about hair make her that happy?

"Hey, can we go back to that part where we should chase them part?" Xander asked.

"How did you guys find them at all?" Buffy asked. Xander
clenched his teeth, and Spike wondered if he noticed the way Buffy neatly ignored his questions. Normally, Spike was all in favor of ignoring the puppy, but this time, he was right. Those three were nuisances that needed to be taken care of, preferably with a sharp edged blade and a lot of blood.

Willow sat down right on the curb. "The hard way. The spell-free way. The oh-my-god-my-head's-gonna-fall-off, my-feet-are-killing-me way. And I might have hacked the DMV." Slipping a shoe off, she started rubbing her foot.

"And back to the chasing them down part, those three were going to kill you, Buff." Xander crossed his arms and continued to stand, even when Buffy sat on the curb next to Willow.

"I say we focus on the important thing. Willow got through the day without magic. Go Willow." Buffy leaned into Willow, their shoulders touching, and Spike felt a flare of jealousy. She'd knock boots with him, but something as simple as a touch in public would never happen. Some days, he thought Buffy was as difficult of a lover as Drusilla ever had been.

"Right then, good on you for not blowing up the town,"
Spike told Willow, "now are we going to track those three?"

"What he said. Wait." Xander grimaced. "Did I just agree with Spike?"

Willow nodded solemnly and Xander grimaced again. "Okay, first... ick. Second... what he said." Xander poked his thumb in Spike's direction.

Spike glared at all of them, struggling to not explode. They were all blathering about while those three escaped. "Got bad guys to hunt down, people," Spike said, his voice carefully controlled because if he didn't control it, he was going to bloody explode.

"We don't hunt people." Buffy didn't even bother looking at him.

That bothered Spike more than he could say. "You may not, but they bloody well do. They hunted you down."

Willow reached over and put a hand on Buffy's knee. "They were going to use the ray to make you turn to goo."
"Exactly, there was goo talk," Xander jumped in.

Buffy just shook her head. "You two heard them. They didn't even want to fight me."

"Warren was sounding oddly serious about killing." Xander shifted from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable about arguing with Buffy. Either that or he was uncomfortable about being around both Buffy and Spike. Spike studied him. Ever since Xander had found out about the sex, he'd carefully avoided being in the same room with both of them. Let Spike show up at the Magic Box, and Xander quickly found he had a chore elsewhere. The girls might think he was avoiding Anya, but Spike figured he was trying to avoid the temptation to say something that would get him in more shite than he knew how to get out of.

"It's funny," Buffy said, sounding more pensive than amused, "not too long ago I probably would have welcomed it. But I realized ... I'm not saying that I'm doing back-flips about my life, but I didn't ... I don't want to die."

"Hey, that's progress." Willow gave her a sad smile, and Spike just gritted his teeth. Willow was the one who'd
ruined Buffy's life to start with, pulling her out of heaven and making her dig her way out of her own grave. Harris certainly didn't have the balls to try that on his own, and Tara had more sense when she wasn't listening to Red. But now Willow sat here with her sad smile, her hand resting on Buffy's leg while the soddin' enemy walked away.

"Right then, you lot even know why the trio of twits came after you?"

Buffy finally looked at him. Spike stared down, willing her to open up and trust him to have her back, to share intel and form a plan together. Instead she shrugged. "Something about being my arch-nemeses."

"Oh bloody hell. And you let them walk out?"

"Give it up, Spike. I'm not going to hunt humans just so you can get a vicarious thrill out of it." Buffy's words cut into Spike, and he went absolutely still. He'd bloody well given her his loyalty and he'd let her take his body in ways so brutal that even Drusilla couldn't have matched her ferocity, and still she thought he would use her for his own ends.
"Okay, then how about you hunt them down for me? I promise I'm not into vicarious thrills, but they tried to kill you, Buffy. I vote that anyone who tries to kill you is a bad guy."

"Fine." Buffy stood up and faced off against Xander. "I hunt them down. Then what? What do I do if I find them Xander?"

Xander opened his mouth, but then he shut it again without saying the obvious answer. She should cut the gits into small pieces and dump their rotting bits into the sewer. Seemed logical enough to Spike.

"They won't stop coming after you," Spike commented. He'd already lost this fight, and he knew it, but he couldn't just walk away. He'd seen the look on the one's face. He knew hatred when he saw it.

She sighed. "They aren't demons, Spike. They aren't on some quest to kill a slayer and cement their place in history. They'll get bored."

Willow stood, brushing her pants off. "She's right. I mean, that was Jonathan. He was one of the sweetest guys in school."
Xander looked over to Spike, clearly begging for some sort of backup. This wasn't the conversation he'd intended to have when he got up, but if he had to ally with Xander to knock a little sense into Buffy, he would.

Spike stalked forward, his body prowling toward the group in a way that made Xander skitter away like the good little prey he was. Buffy squared her shoulders and faced off against him, and Spike smiled. She was all strength. The alpha defending her territory. The head of the clan demanding tribute. Spike lowered his head and ran a tongue along the inside of his lower lip. "I told you once that love was about blood, about your blood screaming inside you, demanding... wanting." Spike closed in on Buffy, his hands ghosting over her hips without actually touching, his body crowding hers. He could smell her desire; he could almost taste it on the air.

"If you have a point, make it." Buffy's words were brittle, and he could feel the need racing under her skin. She wanted to grab him, to push him down and run her nails over his skin until he bled, and she knew he wouldn't stop her. Spike smiled.

"Oh, I have a point. Love is blood, but hatred is
pleasure—the longest pleasure. Hatred is the trinket that men hold onto for years, polishing it, clinging to it. That one in the middle, he hated you, and he's going to keep polishing that hate until he destroys himself or you or both."

Buffy took a step back, and Spike let her, watching as she struggled to get both physical and emotional distance between them. She was breathing heavy, her breath coming in ragged gasps that even the humans had to hear. Spike waited.

It took several minutes for her to gather together her wits and stop staring at him, her hands clenched just to keep herself from reaching out and grabbing him. When the tension and strain finally drained from her body, she shrugged. "He can try," she commented. "I need to get home."

Buffy turned and headed down the street. Spike wanted to call out, to shake her until some sense managed to get through her; however, he didn't. In their relationship, she was the dominant one, and if he really wanted to make her listen, that would have to change. He'd have to dominate her, force her to heel, and if he did that, part of Buffy—the part he'd first learned to love—would be
destroyed. Instead, he was the soddin' pet on her leash, watching as she bloody well fucked up. Love's bitch indeed.

Willow looked at each of them, clearly torn. Spike leaned against a light pole and pulled out a cigarette.

"I should... you know." Willow bit her lip for a second and then she was trotting down the street after Buffy, playing the good little follower.

If Spike had a minion in his court who played at following while running all her own little schemes, he'd dust it. He'd dust it just like he'd track down enemies and gut them for challenging him, even if he didn't think they were a serious challenge. The problem was that Spike figured these three were serious. They'd made the soddin' invisibility gun. They'd taken two of Buffy's little minions hostage, and still she wasn't taking them seriously.

"Is it just me or is this feeling like a really big mistake?" Xander asked. Spike looked over his shoulder and Xander was still standing there.

"Aren't you going to go trailing after her like the good
little puppy you are?" Spike asked with a sneer.

"If I could make her listen, sure. Hey, I'd dress up in a puppy suit and do the Snoopy dance in the town square if it would make her listen. I'm thinking she's past listening."

Spike snorted and turned back to the street, watching all the little happy meals on all their little pointless chores. The streetlights were on, and a few other vampires were out, early hunters looking to find weak prey before the real big bads came out.

"Look, Spike, I know you hate me."

Spike turned around and stared at Xander.

"Okay, really, really hate me?" Xander stepped back. "What is up with that look, and please tell me you still have the chip in."

Spike thought back to what Bonnie had said to him about Xander always trying to make Spike happy, and he frowned. Xander wasn't a vampire, and he wasn't offering to change alliance. Spike knew that. He also couldn't help feeling the same contempt he always felt
for weaker vampires; he couldn't help feeling fury that Xander was saying something that might be taken as defying Buffy's leadership. Spike recognized that none of his feelings were actually warranted, but it didn't make them less real.

"If I didn't have the chip, do you think those three would still be breathing?" Spike turned back around and leaned on the light post again.

"Point. So, I'm thinking that even if we hate each other—"

"Bloody hell. I don't hate you, Harris," Spike said. "Don't feel strongly enough about you to hate you, even if I did dislike you."

Xander didn't answer. Spike listened as he shuffled his feet several times before inching closer. "Okay, was there a compliment in there somewhere?" Spike looked over with one raised eyebrow. Xander sighed. "So, that would be a 'no.' Maybe even a 'hell, no.'" Xander looked down, the picture of submission.

"For fuck's sake, stop showing your underbelly like some sort of git who needs reassurance that he isn't a waste of
"oxygen," Spike snapped.

"Walking upright means the belly shows," Xander said with a crooked grin and a pat on his stomach.

Spike rolled his eyes. "That is what bloody annoys me. You don't follow the rules, Harris."

The grin vanished from Xander's face, and he watched Spike with a guarded expression. "If there are rules I'm supposed to follow, you're going to have to spell them out. Completely. I was never good at Wheel of Fortune."

Spike took a deep drag on his cigarette and thought about that. Bonnie'd been right. No wonder Xander was always creeping around like the lowest ranking minion when Spike complimented him one day and ripped him up the next. Both were valid enough responses to Harris' stupidity, but clearly the man needed the rules clearly explained so he understood just why he was such a thorn in Spike's side.

"For starters," Spike blew out a long plume of smoke, "when a human goes up against Angelus, the human dies."
Xander waited. After a minute, he started to frown, and finally he asked, "Can I buy a vowel?"

Spike twirled around, snarling, his real face pushing forward, and Xander stumbled back until he hit the wall of the arcade and stayed there, stuck like a bug pinned to a card. "So, you face down Angelus, but you act like a bloody moron who doesn't understand what I'm saying."

"Hey, not acting," Xander said, his hands up.

Spike reached up to slap him, and then fell back with a cry as the chip sparked. Not bloody fair. He hadn't even gotten to slap Harris before the fucking thing fired.

"Okay, if you're going to have a murderous phase, maybe I should be somewhere else." Xander started to leave, but Spike reached out and caught his wrist. He couldn't hurt Harris, but he could hold on until they'd had this out. Spike only had one potential ally in his quest to protect Buffy from the three twits, and he wasn't going to let even that small advantage slip away, not when he was fucking helpless against humans. He snarled again at the unfairness of the entire situation.

"Spike?" Xander's voice went girlishly high.
Spike shook his head, freeing himself from the last of the pain before he stretched his neck in one direction and then the other. Harris was smelling of fear now, and that went a long way toward soothing Spike's frayed nerves.

"So, let's try this again." Spike moved closer and threw an arm around Xander's shoulders. Xander was taller, so it was an awkward gesture, but vampire strength meant that he could control the man easily. "I don't hate you. I bloody hate not knowing if you're going to zig or zag. You face down Angelus, but then you turn around and call yourself a moron."

"Actually, you called me—" Xander stopped when he saw Spike's face.

Walking down the street, Spike forced Xander to keep pace with him. He thought about the time he'd come to town seeking revenge on Angelus and then decided to force Willow to make a love spell for him. "Here's a rule for you, pet. When I take a hostage and threaten to kill them if a witch doesn't finish a spell, and that witch never finished that spell, I bloody well kill them. Like as not, I'll torture them a bit just to make the witch more cooperative and then I'll kill them."
Xander shivered. "So, the rule I'm breaking is breathing? Spike, I'm not liking this rule."

"Here's another one. If a human gets used as bait by one vampire to distract another, the human's going to get eaten by one side or the other."

"Parent teacher night," Xander whispered. "I always meant to put holy water in Deadboy's hair gel for that stupid stunt."

"Wasn't stupid," Spike said, "it distracted me for that half second. I could smell the slayer on both of you, and I could smell your honest terror of Peaches. It did throw me off my game a bit." Spike sucked in air through his front teeth. "I just can't figure out how you walked out of there alive."

"I didn't. I ran. I flailed and ran."

"Shouldn't have mattered. The way you go around putting off submissive signals, some vamp should have scooped you up and had ya for dinner."

"Submissive." Xander squeaked. They were at the edge
of a park, and Spike pushed Xander toward a bench that sat under a weak lamp that cast a yellow glow that didn't even reach the ground.

"You aren't dominant."

"How about neither. I'm neither. I'm a big old in the middle man. Only not in the middle as in middle of a threesome, and why did I say that? Spike, you're freaking me out here." Xander nearly collapsed onto the bench, and Spike sat next to him. If they were going to form an alliance to deal with the trio, they were going to have to talk this out. "If this is some attempt to get me all confused so I don't bring up your drunken impersonation of Tony Harris last night, can I just say that I plan to never mention it again." Xander buried his face in his hands, a move which should signal every big bad in the park that he was easy prey. That didn't bother Spike nearly as much as his suspicion that Harris would get home in one piece if Spike abandoned him here.

"The rule you keep breaking isn't one I made, mate. I can't bloody figure out why you're still breathing, and it's annoying the unlife out of me." Spike leaned back and spread his arms across the back of the bench.
Rolling his head to one side, Xander looked at Spike without taking his hands away from his face. He didn't say anything, he just looked at Spike with big, confused eyes.

"You shagged a demon, Harris."

"I think I noticed." Xander rolled his head back so that he hid his whole face again. "Actually, I didn't notice right away, but the memories started coming back about a day later."

Spike looked down at the boy who was still crumpled in on himself. "Why the bloody hell didn't the grandmother gut you?"

Xander sat up. "You're upset that she didn't kill me?"

"I don't bloody understand why she didn't kill you. I don't understand why Angelus didn't kill you." Spike leaned back and stared at the stars. "I can't even figure why I didn't finish the job when you got between me and Red back when I wanted her to do that spell."

"You tried." Xander rubbed the spot on his head where Spike had hit him with a microscope.
"That's exactly what I mean, Harris. You act like a submissive. You crawl around talking about yourself like you can't possibly compete—"

"I can't, Spike. Buffy's the slayer, Willow was a computer goddess long before she got her witchly powers, and you're a century-old vampire. I can't compete."

"Then why aren't you dead? You throw yourself into every fight, so if you're all that bloody average, why aren't you six feet under? Why haven't you been turned?" Spike sprang up off the bench and started pacing. "When Angelus came home that night after the hospital, he was bloody furious. He planned tortures for you, described them in such brutal detail, I almost felt sorry for you."

Spike stopped. "Almost. I thought he was a bit of a wanker for caring all that much about a bit of nothing like you. But then you were the one who talked Buffy into sacrificing the big ox. Angel went to hell for a century because of you."

Spike stopped and looked at Xander. He was staring back, his eyes so wide in the darkness that Spike could see the white of them all the way around.
"You're pissed about the hell thing? I mean, I explained that to Buffy, and I apologized. A lot."

"Bloody hell, no. I wouldn't care if you sent his fat arse back there now," Spike lied. "I just don't see how you could have done it. You took the watcher away from my Drusilla. A century of watching her play with her pets, and I've seen her starve them, torture them, kill them, or just give them away, but once someone gave her a pet—human or not, I never saw her lose one. Never."

"So I was lucky."

"And the troll, that bloody monstrous beast that Anya used to date? And Dracula? And the Initiative? And the fucking first slayer hunting you through your dreams?"

Xander's lips curled back in disgust, an expression that looked a lot like a snarl, only the boy would never snarl. "Okay, put together like that, I was really, really lucky."

Spike sighed. "You don't even know, do you?" He collapsed on the bench next to Xander. "You have no bloody idea why you're still breathing."

"Nope," Xander agreed. "Is that why you're so..." Xander
let his voice trail off.

"Round the twist?" Spike asked.

Xander gave him a confused look.

"Not logical around you," Spike explained.

"Oh, yeah, that would be one way of putting it."

"Well... yeah." Spike frowned. Now that he said it out loud, it seemed like a pretty frivolous reason to try and kill someone. Not that he needed a reason to want to kill a walking happy meal. "Can't figure out whether you're a safe ally or not. Every time you're around the slayer, sets my teeth on edge because I can't tell if you're going to go and do something stupid that's going to get her killed. Luck runs out, mate. Luck always runs out."

"I know that, Spike." Xander gave a rough laugh. "I expected mine to run out a long time ago. You want to hear something stupid?"

Spike didn't answer; he just waved Xander on.

"Sometimes I think Jesse is up there watching out for
me."

"Jesse?"

Xander rubbed a hand over his face, and Spike could smell the heady mix of emotion: grief, love, loss, and anger, all twisted together. "Darla killed him to try and get at Buffy. We lost him the first night we found out vampires were real."

Spike ran his tongue along his lip and looked up into the sky. "That'd be a pretty powerful ally—an angel."

"Do you believe in angels?" Xander leaned toward Spike, desperate for something.

Spike shrugged. "Demons exist. Seems right that angels would too. Mind you, I’m not in a hurry to meet any."

"Jesse would like you."

Spike frowned at the thought of an angel even noticing him. For a demon, that wasn't a comforting thought. However, the boy might actually be onto something. If he had some powerful ally, it would explain how he could be so soddin' submissive and still survive. "So, what if this
luck or angel of yours fails, pet?"

Xander shrugged. "I guess I'll die doing what I think is right, but I can't worry about that, Spike. There are too many things that go bump in the night, and if I worry about them all, I'm going to hide under my covers and end up on a television program about a six hundred pound man who hasn't left his bed in a decade. That's really not the future I want for myself."

Spike pursed his lips. "That's what most people do when they find out."

"I can't do that Spike. I can't stand back when other people are in danger. You know the old saying, for lack of a nail, a shoe was lost. For lack of a shoe, a horse was lost. For lack of a horse, the battle was lost..."

"For lack of a battle, the war was lost," Spike finished.

"Exactly. I'm the nail, Spike. I know that. But sometimes the nail matters. And as long as luck or my guardian angel keep me alive, I just have to keep nailing things."

Spike raised an eyebrow.
"Not sexually, of course. I mean, my daughter can smell sex on people, so I pretty much plan to be celibate, oh, forever."

"Nob," Spike complained.

"Hey, that's just wrong. She's six."

"She's a demon, mate."

"She's a six-year-old quarter demon, Spike."

Spike rolled his eyes and started back toward the arcade.

"Hey, do you think it's too late to try and track those three?" Xander hurried to catch up.

"I think whatever trick Red used to find them, Tara can replicate," Spike said confidently. Xander gave a wolfish smile and fell in beside Spike. Either by accident or because of his guardian angel, Xander managed to end up a half-step behind Spike. Any demon who saw them walking would definitely think that Spike had managed to turn one of the slayer's little minions. In the demonic world, misinformation could be nearly as valuable as
information, so Spike tucked that tidbit away for now and led them back toward home.

**Part Thirteen**

Xander sat at the kitchen table, smiling as Bonnie stood on a stool and stirred the pot.

"You're looking for the color to change," Tara said. She was pretending to read the book propped up on the kitchen counter, but she kept sneaking looks into the pot. "When the color turns, it means that the two ingredients have become one and we can move to the next step."

Bonnie was biting her lip and staring into the pot with such intensity that Xander had to hide a smile behind his coffee cup. He had tried so hard to give Bonnie something that looked like a normal life, but it took Tara to bring out this little girl who struggled so hard to learn something new.

"Are you sure it will turn?" Bonnie asked, her voice worried.

"Almost sure," Tara said. "Sometimes the two plants just don't combine, and you have to start over."
Xander recognized the look of dismay on Bonnie's face. "Hey, I bet even Tara has that happen sometimes. I know if I touched it, the plants would never combine."

A frown flickered over Tara's face before she turned to look at Bonnie. Then she ducked her head and gave a shy grin. "When I started, I couldn't get them to join a lot. Sometimes I used the wrong amounts. One time, I confused Virginia creeper and poison ivy. There was all this smoke, and I gave everyone in the house this really terrible rash."

Bonnie sucked in a breath. "What did they do?"

Tara looked away, her whole body coiled and tight, and that was all the answer Bonnie needed. Reaching over, Bonnie slipped her hand in Tara's.

"Yeah, I met your family, and can I just say they suck worse than mine?" Xander stood up to get coffee, but first he moved to Tara's side, resting a hand on her arm. Tara gave him a shy smile and sort of shrugged.

"They are... d-d-difficult." Tara stopped and took a deep breath.
"They're dorks," Xander said. "Giant poop-faced dorks." Tara gave him another small smile. "Which does not mean you have permission to call anyone poop-faced!" Xander quickly added, pointing a finger at Bonnie.

"I like nancy-boy pillock," Bonnie announced grandly, the words coming out with an English accent. Xander groaned at the same time that Tara laughed. "What?" Bonnie looked from one of them to the other, her cheeks slowly darkening.

"Sweetie, those are just Spike words," Tara said.

"That I was hoping you would never ever learn to use," Xander sighed. "Just like if I had my way, you would never grow up and never take knife lessons with the bleached one and never, ever, ever look at boys." Xander stood behind Bonnie's stool and hugged his daughter.

"Boys? Ewww." Bonnie made a disgusted face.

"That's my girl." Xander kissed the top of her head. "Hey, look!" Xander pointed to the pot where the liquid was slowly turning a vivid purple.

"It turned! It turned! I thought maybe it wouldn't
because I'm—" Bonnie just stopped.

"Because you're what, Jelly Bean?" Xander held her close and waited. She looked up at him and whispered something. "What?"

"Human," she said so softly that Xander barely heard her. Xander felt another flare of hatred for Bonnie's grandmother. If Spike offered to gut the old woman, Xander wasn't even going to make a token protest. Hell, he'd hold Spike's duster while Spike did it.

"Being part human doesn't make the magic weaker," Tara promised.

Bonnie looked over, and Xander could tell from the shininess of her eyes that she was close to crying. She hated crying, but Xander hated seeing her struggle so hard to hide every emotion. He'd done that as a kid—he'd tried so hard to smile at his mother and make jokes with his father and make everyone happy when everyone was so damn miserable that it wasn't funny. He'd always sworn he would do better for his kids, only he hadn't. He'd kept right on having the same life he'd had before that night with Bonnie's mother, and Bonnie had been left in a house where people made her feel like she had
to hide her tears.

"Granddame said—"

"Honey, your granddame is..." Xander stopped. Oh, he knew what he wanted to say, but after all the times he'd told Spike to not swear in front of Bonnie, he really couldn't say what he wanted to. "Your granddame doesn't know anything about humans. And hey, she had a daughter by a human, so humans can't be all that bad."

Bonnie sniffed. "Did I ever tell you about my family?" Tara asked gently. She scooped out some of the crushed leaves from the mortar where she'd been grinding them and sprinkled the powder over the top of the purple stew. "They told me I was part demon and that being demon m-made me less of a person." The slight stutter was the only way that Xander knew that this still upset her. Tara had walked away from her birth family and had then tossed them out of the Magic Box when they came looking, but Xander figured that part of her would always feel some sort of connection, just like Xander was always going to be Tony Harris' son and Bonnie would always remember her cursed grandmother.

"Being demon made you less? But most demons are
stronger." Bonnie tilted her head and frowned in confusion.

"But lots of demons are..." Tara looked to Xander for help.

"Poop heads," Xander said. "Fledges just crawling out of their graves will kill anything. They're too stupid to even stop and check if they should kill. And Bezoar need hosts, usually humans, to even live and that Kindestod guy had to prey on children because he wasn't strong enough to even take on an adult, and that thing in the basement of the frat house needed humans to throw girls down its hole because it couldn't even hunt for itself. Demons are not always the sharpest crayons in the box," Xander pointed out.

"My family tried convincing me they were all evil," Tara explained, "which is wrong because you and Clem are the nicest people I know." Tara reached out and stroked her hand over Bonnie's forehead, pushing back a stray curl that had escaped her ponytail and tucking it behind Bonnie's ear. "But they tried telling me that I was wrong... that there was something wrong with me. They said when I got old enough, that my demon would show through. But they were lying. I wasn't part demon, and
demons aren't all evil, and I'm strong enough," she paused. "I'm powerful enough to take care of myself," she finished.

"Were you disappointed when it turned out you didn't have any demon blood at all?"

Tara looked at Xander, but he didn't know what to say. Bonnie would probably always see being demon as superior to being human, and he sure hadn't been able to convince her otherwise.

"No, I'm happy just being me," Tara said. "But sometimes families say things that are really wrong, and we just have to ignore them. Now, the dried rosemary leaves give the protective potion strength. Rosemary is associated with the sun and it can draw on the power of the sun, but you don't want to use too much. If you do, it can overpower all the other ingredients and then you lose the balance in the potion. You'll end up with something strong, but it won't stay strong for long enough to use it. Watch the color fade. The lighter the color, the more powerful the potion, but the shorter the amount of time it will last. If the potion turns pure white... well, let's not let it get pure white."
"Do I want to know what happens if it's white?" Xander asked. For the first time, it occurred to him that potion making with Tara might be, in its own way, nearly as dangerous as knife lessons with Spike.

"Nope, you don't," Tara answered playfully.

"Just don't blow up the house," Xander joked. Tara didn't joke back; she just looked at him, and Xander looked in horror down at the pot that his daughter was now dutifully stirring. "Please tell me you aren't going to blow up the house."

"Not as long as the potion doesn't turn pure white," Tara promised. She gave Xander a small smile, just enough to reassure him that she wouldn't actually blow up the house.

"I'm growing gray hairs, here," Xander said, but with a defeated sigh, he went over to get more coffee, leaving his daughter stirring a pot of potentially explosive potion. Fatherhood sucked. He really wanted to snatch Bonnie away, but if he did, he would definitely get that quivering lip that meant she was willing to accept his rules even if his rules made her utterly miserable. He hated that look.
Xander jerked as the front door slammed hard enough to make the walls shiver. "Bloody fucking hell. Harris, your plan is rubbish." Spike stormed into the kitchen, his eyes yellow and blood streaked across one swollen and split cheek.

"Spike." Xander stood, his guts twisting. Damn it, he shouldn't have let Spike spy on the idiot triplets alone, not when they were human and Spike couldn't defend himself. "Are you okay?"

Spike stopped in the middle of the kitchen and turned to just glare at Xander.

"And of course you're okay. You're Spike. Those three couldn't actually hurt you," Xander hurried to say. Spike's glare just intensified. "And many, many more dangerous things than those three wouldn't be able to hurt you." Xander frowned, not sure what he was supposed to say to soothe Spike's wounded ego. Yeah, it sucked to get knocked around by humans, but it wasn't like Xander didn't get knocked around all the time, and you didn't see him getting all yellow-eyed and growly about it.

"Your plan is rubbish." Spike poked a finger in Xander's direction. "I can't believe I even considered such a bloody
stupid plan. Coppers in this place couldn't find their arses with both hands."

"When it comes to real criminals, no. But hey, all they have to do is follow the nice little frame-up and presto... no more idiot trio."

"Your plan is a giant cock-up, mate." Spike slammed the refrigerator door open so hard that it crashed into the pillar that partially blocked the door. "They killed some bint."

"That's not good," Xander said, but he still wasn't quite understanding Spike's problem. Spike wasn't really big on caring about humans. Hell, he hadn't even recognized Warren as the guy who made the Buffybot until Xander pointed it out, and even then, Spike had just gotten all snarky about how Xander wouldn't recognize which cow he'd gotten his morning milk from, and humans were nothing more than cattle. Given that kind of attitude, a random dead girl shouldn't have Spike all homicidal.

Spike drank his blood straight from the bag, still cold. Xander made a disgusted face, but Spike just glared even more viciously. When he stopped drinking, he wiped the blood from his lips. "They convinced Buffy she'd killed
"They what?" Xander stood up so fast that his chair fell over.

"I got rid of the body... mostly." Spike frowned. "But Buffy was still soddin' determined to go throw herself on her sword or some rot like that. She was all about right and wrong. Some days, I swear, a soul is nothing more than lard that gets stuck between your ears." Spike threw his mostly empty blood bag at the sink. It hit the backsplash and splatters of blood fanned out across the stone counter.

"Did you tell her that Warren—"

"Wot?" Spike whirled to face Xander, his game face pressing forward. "Should I tell her that I'm bloody ignoring everything she says and still hunting those nobs? How would that go over, Harris?"

"M-maybe we sh-should all calm down." Tara's voice trembled, but her hands were steady as she stepped between them, one hand held up toward each.

Spike sighed and took a step backwards, his human face
reappearing. "She was ready to throw her whole soddin' life away. All the good she's done, and all she cares about is some bint that she thinks she might have killed by accident. Don't make a lick of sense." Spike's voice was softer now, and it was easier for Xander to recognize the helpless fear behind Spike's anger. Little hands reached around his legs, and Xander put his hand on Bonnie's shoulder, reassuring her. "As bad as Dru most days," Spike finished.

"You said she 'was' determined. You talked her out of it?" Xander asked. The look he got was cold rather than furious, and Spike reached up to touch his split cheek. Shit. Buffy had done that. Living with Spike was twisting his brain inside out, because he was starting to have more and more sympathy with Spike, and Buffy's willingness to hurt him was starting to piss Xander off. Yeah, Spike was a soulless monster, but he was a monster who felt things—like love—just as fiercely as any human. Bonnie and Dawn were both in his heart, and Xander had no doubt that Spike would fight until he was dust for either of them. That should earn him some credit.

"Don't bloody know what talked her out of it. She went into the station, but she came back out muttering about
"Well, that's of the good, right?" Xander asked. "I mean, if she knows that Warren has stepped up to murder, she'll finally do something."

Spike gave Xander a withering look. Tara pulled her hands close to her chest and clasped them over her heart.

"Oh dear," Tara whispered. "But if they're killing..."

"They're human," Spike snapped. "She's got blinders the size of Camden Town firmly in place."

"So, it's okay for humans to kill?" Bonnie asked, her distress clear in both her voice and her darkening cheeks.

"No!" Xander said firmly. He felt loyalty to Buffy, even this new harder Buffy who had come out of heaven, but that loyalty wouldn't ever interfere with him as a father. "Buffy is hurting." Bonnie's eyes flickered to Spike's face, and Xander could practically see her confusion because Spike was the one who looked hurt. "Buffy isn't thinking straight. She knows it's not okay for humans to kill, but she thinks it's not her job to get involved."
"But they're hurting family," Bonnie protested.

"Soddin' right. Good to know one person doesn't have her fucking head up her fucking arse," Spike muttered. Before Xander could complain about the language, Spike had turned and gone back to the refrigerator.

"Can't you explain it to her, Daddy?" Bonnie looked up, and hands down, this was the worst part of fatherhood. When Bonnie looked at him like this, Xander wanted to have the power to fix the world, but he just didn't.

"Sweetie, let's not forget the potion," Tara said, going over to the stove and picking up the spoon Bonnie had abandoned.

"Oh yeah." Bonnie went over to the stool, but she kept glancing over her shoulder at Xander.

"Time's up, mate. We tried it your way, and now it's just time for you to shoot the gits." Spike made that calm announcement with the sort of smug happiness that Spike often got when talking about killing, but Xander's guts twisted in revulsion.
"Spike, I can't do that."

"Sure ya can. You're aim's improved with practice." Spike still had that expression that meant he was satisfied with himself.

"No, I mean I can't just kill someone."

"Ya kill demons." Spike gave Xander a cold look, his gaze flickering over toward Bonnie just long enough to remind him that little ears were listening, and judging.

"No, I usually don't. I'm more the carry and fetch boy. The only times I kill anyone are when fledges go for my neck and when hell goddesses are trying to end the world." Xander frowned. "Scratch that. I didn't even do the killing then. Hell, when Angelus was trying to suck us all into hell, I was grabbing Giles and running for cover." Xander knew that Bonnie had a bad habit of judging people based on strength, but he couldn't compete with Spike in that department, and trying was just stupid.

"So, you'll be standing on the side with Buffy, letting them take shots at her until they win? You bloody—"

"No!" Xander interrupted Spike before he could go off on
one of his rants. "No, I'm voting a big no on the letting of anyone take shots at Buffy."

"Well your plan is rubbish, so it's time for mine. Get a weapon, mate." Spike crossed his arms, clearly daring Xander to argue with his logic.

"No, my plan B is clearly rubbish, which leaves us with my plan A."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Are you totally 'round the twist?"

"Hey! It could work."

"Aliens could land at Stonehenge."

"I'm not shooting them." Xander thought about that for a second. He thought about the possibility of Buffy in prison for murder and Dawn back with a father who had largely ignored her for most of her life. In Dawn's case, someone might think that the monks were to blame for that since they had created Dawn's past life; however, that didn't change the fact that the asshole hadn't talked to Buffy in years. Xander looked over to where Tara was trying to distract Bonnie by helping her pour protective potion into small bottles. "Not yet," Xander amended
himself.

Spike snorted.

"Spike, they're dweebs."

"They're bloody dangerous ones. You're starting to sound like Angelus—always underestimating the enemy. Look where it got him—all stuffed down under that soul."

"Yeah, I'll watch out for stray souls flying around," Xander said sarcastically. Spike slammed his mug down on the counter and took two strides across the kitchen, which put him in striking distance. Out of the corner of his eye, Xander could see Tara put a bottle down and wipe her hands on a towel.

"Listen ya moron, they're going to get someone killed... someone important."

Xander sighed. "Spike, I happen to think that someone important was killed if they killed some innocent woman. But I can't just kill them without doing everything to try and fix this first. Just let me try plan A. Just let me talk to them. Or maybe just talk to Jonathan because Warren is starting to creep me out."
"Talk?" Spike crossed his arms.

"Yes, talk. Spike, you know demons, so when there's a demon threat, you're the first person I go to. But these guys are dweebs. I know dweebs. I am a dweeb."

With a snort, Spike shook his head. "These wankers aren't anything like you. You had the bollocks to stand up to Angelus in his prime. He was barmy as hell, but he was at full strength, and you faced him down. These three would try to get one of their toys to work, and failing that, they'd piss in their pants."

Xander shrugged. "So, I'm a prince among dweebs. I still understand them, Spike, and I'm telling you that I can talk to Jonathan. I just need to get him away from Warren and that other guy... Tucker's brother."

"He is the magic user. Might be an interesting piece to keep around." Spike sucked air through his front teeth as he thought.

"Spike, you do not get to keep him," Xander said.

"I do if we catch 'im and you can't convince him to stop
acting like a nancy-boy running around after Warren."

"You... no, no you don't." Xander couldn't come up with any better argument than that because he knew where the discussion of slavery-bad would go with Spike. As far as Spike was concerned, if you were strong enough to get away with something, you should go for it.

"If you don't want me to put him on a leash, you'd better hope that you know how to speak dweeb well enough to convince him. Glinda, I need you to enchant a chain. This one's not half bad with magic, so I need something that will hold him and bind his magic so we can keep him safely."

"Spike," Xander said, nearly growling in frustration.

Tara looked from Spike to Xander and back.

"Can I help with the binding spell?" Bonnie asked with the same sweet smile she might use when requesting pancakes.

"Sure," Tara said, her voice soft but steady.

Xander sighed. Clearly he'd lost this round. Now he just
had to talk really, really fast. If Spike brought home a slave, Xander had no idea how he was supposed to have the slavery-bad talk with his daughter.

"You're a bad influence," Xander hissed at Spike before heading toward the closet for his jacket.

"Bloody right, I am," Spike agreed cheerfully. This time it was Xander who glared.

Part Fourteen

Xander hid behind the corner while Spike messed under the hood of the idiot trio's van. Xander still wasn't sure about this plan, but it was better than Spike's plan A, B, or C. Even if Xander physically could shoot them, he didn't want to, and he was voting no on any plan that involved widespread arson. He voted 'no' twice when Spike got this gleeful expression at the thought of setting half of Sunnydale on fire. Spike finished and slammed the hood down before strolling over to Xander's hiding place.
"Hurry up," Xander hissed, watching the door to their sad little basement hideout.


"Yeah, yeah, but—" Xander stopped, not sure what to say. Vampire hearing did seem to make the whole sneaking around part a little unnecessary. "Stupid unflappable vampire," he settled for saying.

Spike gave a sniff, and Xander got the impression that Spike didn't mind being called 'unflappable.' "Big word for you, that," Spike commented. He took out a cigarette, but instead of lighting it, he just let it hang from his fingers as he leaned against the building.

"It was one of Willow's words of the week." Xander shrugged. "She had this whole experiment where she was going to make me and Buffy into some sort of vocabulary geeks and that was supposed to trick the SAT people into letting us into college."

Spike looked him up and down, and from the expression, he was finding Xander wanting. "Not one of her more
successful plans, mate."

"True," Xander agreed; he couldn't exactly argue the point. "At least I can do a condensate line installation."

Spike snorted. Clearly, he was not impressed.

"Hey, if the air conditioning or heating goes out, that is way more important than knowing ten different words to mean stubborn. If the heat goes out in winter, you'll actually appreciate me."

"Not bloody likely. I'm a vampire, mate."

Xander was not buying that argument at all. Deadboy might be willing to live like a monk when he had the soul attached, but Spike was a pure hedonist, through and through. Hedonist—another Willow word. "You're a vampire addicted to your heat sources. You run the hot water out every single night, Spike. You use the fireplace anytime it gets below 70 and don't think I didn't notice the electric blanket."

"No need ta be miserable when you can get all the little luxuries handed to you." Spike looked at Xander, and his expression made it very clear that he expected Xander to
be providing those luxuries.

Crossing his arms, Xander glared at Spike.

"Wot?"

"When did I start understanding all your weird English looks?"

"English looks?" Spike actually looked confused at that.

"Like all your English talk with prat and prams and biscuits that aren't biscuits, only more with the twitching eyebrow and narrow eyes," Xander explained. Now that he thought about it, Spike actually managed to say a whole lot without actually saying anything.

"A look can't be English, you prat."

"Hey, you have English looks, and I'm just wondering when they started making sense."

"Really?" Spike leaned against the wall and ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip as he considered Xander like a bug under a microscope. "Right then, what am I thinking about now?"
"That I’m a moron," Xander answered with confidence.

Spike's mouth came open like he was going to protest that, but then he closed it again. "That was too bloody easy," he complained. "'Sides, the real morons are coming. Let's get to the car." He headed for the alley, and Xander scrambled to follow.

"At least I'm the moron who knows how to keep a job and not spend my whole life living in a basement making invisibility rays." Xander thought about that for a second as he got into Spike's car and shoved aside a mountain of crumpled paper and enough empty bottles of Jack Daniels to build an altar to drunkenness. "Actually, that doesn't sound very moronic. That sounds a whole lot of smart."

Spike snorted and started the car. "If they were smart, they'd bugger off before turning themselves into a target. Those three don't have the common sense to come in out of the rain. You'd be doing the human race a favor if ya took 'em out of the gene pool."

"Forget it, Spike. I'm not killing them." Xander kicked a bottle that rolled into his ankle from the force of Spike
taking the corner too fast. "Okay, shouldn't the van be breaking down at this point?"

"It will." Spike had that grim look on his face—the one that said his plans weren't going exactly the way he'd planned.

"Uh-huh." Xander crossed his arms and glared at Spike. "Tell me you didn't screw up."

"I didn't bloody screw up, moron."

"I'd feel better if you didn't have your 'oops' face on when you said that."

Spike turned to glare at Xander for so long that Xander could feel the growing panic as the car kept barreling down the street—right toward a dead end, emphasis on dead.

"Spike!" Xander pointed out the front window of the car. "Road! Spike!" Spike slowly smirked as he definitely didn't bother looking. "You're going to kill us!"

"Already dead here." Spike's smirk got just a little wider before he finally turned back toward the road. His eyes
went wide. "Bloody fucking hell." Jerking the wheel to the right, he barely avoided a pole as the wheels jumped the curb and they took out a bench. Spike wrenched the wheel and the car bounced back into the road.

Xander clutched at the dashboard, his heart pounding so fast that he could hear his own blood pounding in his ears. "You... you... moron!" Xander gasped. It wasn't the best insult in the world, but it was the best he could do when most of his concentration was going into not peeing his pants.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist." Spike had his cool firmly in place, but the car had a weird thump-click in the transmission it hadn't had two seconds ago.

"Hey, my knickers have every right to be twisty. Geez, Spike, some of us would like to survive our twenties."

"All downhill after twenty-five, mate. Be better to get turned young and handsome."

"Um... what? That's a no. How did we even start talking about turning because I will never be turned. I'm going to be old and wrinkly and grandfatherly with all the little grandkids."
Spike looked over, but this time, it was only a glance. "That's not going to be easy. Not when you don't plan on letting the bit have sex."

"It's called immaculate conception," Xander countered. Ahead of them, red lights flashed as everyone put on brakes. "Spike!"

"I see 'em. Bloody hell, you're going to give yourself a heart attack before you're thirty. I'm all in favor of dying young and leaving a soddin' pretty corpse—" Spike smiled wide and preened just enough to make it clear that he considered himself a particularly pretty corpse. "But a heart attack would just be a bloody waste. If you're going to kill yourself, slitting the wrists is a better way to go."

"I'm not letting you drink me," Xander said, his words clipped. Part of it was aggravation with Spike, and part was good old-fashioned terror because this was his first official kidnapping. "Are you sure they're going to split up?" Xander asked.

Spike snorted. "If you were stuck in a van with any two of those three, would you want to stick together?"
"Point," Xander conceded. They were working together, but from what Spike said from his spying missions, they didn't exactly like each other. Xander was starting to understand bits of Spike-thought just by watching which parts of the idiot trio confused Spike the most. Spike sure as hell couldn’t figure out why Jonathan and Andrew kept having the same fight—one that usually started with one of them touching the other's stuff. His comment that one of them should just kill the other and get it over with did make Xander think that maybe Spike didn't understand horseplay. At least, Xander was pretty sure it was horseplay. If Andrew was touching Jonathan's comic books, it might have been semi-serious, but the whole fighting without expecting anyone to win was definitely not impressing Spike.

Spike pulled the car over to the side, and now Xander could see the van's hood up, smoke pouring out from the engine. "Worked like a charm," Spike said smugly.

"Phase one, anyway. We still have to get through the kidnapping part."

"Easy enough. I've done it a million times," Spike commented with a shrug. That made Xander look over at
him.

"Okay, that's just creepy."

"Wot?" Spike turned to Xander, and clearly they had reached another piece of human logic that was not working its way into Spike's brain.

"Please do not remind me that you're a mass murderer, not when we're in the same car." Xander could feel his stomach roll at the thought. He was kidnapping an ex-potential-friend with one-quarter of the Scourge of Europe driving the car. At sixteen, his whole vampire-bad rule might have been simplistic and stupid, but at least it never left him wanting to throw up in his mouth.

"I am evil, mate."

"See, I know this. I'm just trying really hard to forget it," Xander said. Before Spike could answer, Xander pointed out the front window. "Jonathan!!" They'd already decided to target either Jonathan or Andrew, whichever one ended up on his own, but Xander was a little relieved to see the short, dark-haired man get out and start walking down the street. From the body language, he was pissed.
"Oh yeah! Double back at you!" Andrew yelled from the side of the van, waving his fist toward Jonathan who just started walking faster.

"Good crossbow, and you could take him out easy from here," Spike said, curling his lip in disgust as Andrew started complaining to someone in the van—more than likely Warren.

"I'm not killing anyone."

Spike sighed, but he pulled back into traffic so they could pass the van. Since Spike had traded the old clunker with spray painted windows for a medium-old semi-clunker with tinted windows, hopefully Warren and Andrew wouldn't notice them. And if they did... well, Xander would revise his policy of not killing people if he had to, he just really didn't want to have to. "Daft gits," Spike muttered as they passed the van, and Xander chose to believe he was talking about Warren and Andrew who were now loudly arguing about whose job it was to keep the van running. From the little bits Xander could catch, Warren seemed to think that as grand-master poopah dork, he was above chores like getting the oil changed.
"Right then, you still sure this is going to work?" Spike asked. They passed Jonathan and a half block farther down, Spike pulled the car over to the curb again.

"Sure? No. But hey, the advantage is that if it doesn't work, he won't be dead."

Spike gave Xander a withering look, one that made it perfectly clear that he was fine with any plan that ended in death. However, instead of having another round of calling Xander stupid for not wanting to commit murder, Spike just arched his back and slithered into the backseat in a move that would have made a pole dancer envy Spike's flexibility.

"You ready?" Spike asked from the back seat. Xander nodded. Spike could grab Jonathan, but the chances were that he couldn't hold him for long, not without hurting him, and with the chip, that was not going to be pretty.

"I'm ready," Xander said as firmly as he could. Shifting around, he got on his knees and prepared to jump on Jonathan as soon as he was in back. The handcuffs dug into his ass, the metal making hard circles in his flesh, but Xander ignored that and just tried to not hyperventilate.
Throwing the back door open, Spike sprang out just as Jonathan went to pass the car. Jonathan gave a startled yelp, but Spike half flung, half stuffed him into the backseat before he could really get any defense together. Xander squirmed over the front seat and sort of flopped on top of Jonathan, yelping when Spike slammed the car door and Xander's shin got in the way. Colorful British curses answered, and Xander knew that Spike was hurting bad, but he really didn't have time to worry since Jonathan turned into a bucking bronco under him.

"Help! Help! Fire! Kidnapping! Rape!" Jonathan seemed to be calling out random crimes, and Xander struggled to get a hand over his mouth before he attracted too much attention. Yeah, this was Sunnydale, but sometimes people did actually notice things. Not often, but sometimes.

The driver's side door opened, and Spike was still cursing as he threw himself into the seat and started the car. "If you can't fucking convince him, I'm having him for dinner," Spike snarled. He then gave a roar of pain that suggested his chip didn't like that plan. Xander cringed in sympathy, but with Jonathan fighting the handcuffs, he really didn't have time to worry about it. The car pulled
away from the curb, and for better or worse, Xander had just committed his first felony with Spike. If this went wrong, Buffy was going to kill both of them.

Spike pulled the car up next to a storm drain big enough for a cow to walk through, and Xander struggled to get the collar with Tara's magical un-magic spell on it tied around Jonathan's neck. He might not want to hurt Jonathan, but that didn't mean he wanted to give Jonathan the chance to magically fry him.

"This is kidnapping!" Jonathan cried out as Spike opened the back door and reached in to grab Jonathan's shoulder. One unhappy look, and Xander knew that Spike didn't like Jonathan's hands being cuffed in front of him, but Xander just felt lucky to have gotten the cuffs on at all. Jonathan might be small, but he was a wiry little fighter.

"'Course it is. It's not like I invited ya over for tea." Ignoring the handcuffs, Spike started for the storm drain, dragging Jonathan with him. Xander locked up the car and went running after them.

"Xander, you have to help me," Jonathan begged, and Xander felt little stabs of guilt at that.
"Okay, I hate to say this, but we aren't on the same side anymore, Jonathan," Xander said, and that actually hurt. Jonathan was the other dork Cordelia had dated. He was the other one that the demons always seemed to target. He was the alternate Zeppo, and Xander had always felt a bit of a connection to him. Maybe that's why Xander avoided him, because sometimes looking in a mirror was just not good for the ego.

Spike dragged Jonathan to a hidden door in the side of the tunnel and pressed a rune into the side of a brick. Xander wondered how Spike had found the hidden catacombs under the house, but the man had been way more secretive about that than Xander had expected. Spike wanted to have his secrets, and Xander couldn't really do much about it. The room Spike pulled Jonathan into was pretty clearly part of a dungeon. The center room was barely high enough for Xander to stand up without ducking, and there were two cells set into the stone walls on either side, both so narrow that Xander wouldn't be able to fully stretch out, and both so low that he'd be forced to crouch. Either they were built for really small demons, or grandmother did like to torture people.
Jonathan tried to stop, but Spike just pushed him forward and pressed him down into a chair in the middle of the room.

"You can't keep me!" Jonathan tried to stand up, but Spike stepped so close that Jonathan would have to get in Spike's face, and even knowing that Spike was chipped didn't stop him from being seriously terrifying. Jonathan settled back into the chair. Xander felt more than a little guilty, but he followed the plan and wrapped a rope around Jonathan's chest and arms, tying him to the chair even though Jonathan was looking at him with big, tragic eyes.

Xander was tying the knots before Spike leaned down and got right in Jonathan's face. "Mate, as far as I'm concerned, you're nothing more than chattel."

"Spike!"

"Wot?" Standing up, Spike gave Xander a contemptuous look. "I made it pretty clear that I'm not letting him loose to threaten Buffy." Xander sighed, not sure what to say because a big part of him agreed with Spike. He just really didn't think that slavery was an actual option.
"Me? I'm not threatening her." Jonathan's voice was shaky, but Xander didn't know if it was guilt or fear affecting him.

Xander moved around to the front and tried to put on a friendly face. With Jonathan looking at him like Xander was a serial killer, it was hard to keep focused on the plan. "Jonathan, I'm on your side," Xander promised. "I'm voting a big old 'no' to any plan of Spike's because Spike's plan are just a little evil."

"Then why did you kidnap me?"

Xander crossed his arms. "Why did you try and kill Buffy?"

"I didn't!"

"Invisiray Buffy! Ringing any bells?" Xander's voice went all high, but Xander was still more than a little pissed about that.

Jonathan was already shaking his head. "That was a mistake. I like Buffy. I wouldn't kill her."

"And Warren?"
Xander's question made Jonathan freeze like a deer in the headlights. He stared up at Xander and swallowed several times. "I like Warren, too. Kinda," he finally said, but from the tone, Xander could guess that Jonathan was intentionally misunderstanding the question.

Spike snorted. "He's a bigger prat than you are," Spike told Xander.

"You're not helping, Spike."

"Not trying to." Spike leaned back against the stone wall and watched with all the calm of a vampire who had already decided that slavery and death penalty were options if Jonathan didn't listen to reason. Xander's back was sweating. He really didn't handle pressure well.

Instead of thinking about Spike and his ultimatums, Xander focused on their prisoner. "Jonathan, you know Warren doesn't like Buffy," Xander said calmly.

Jonathan frowned and started staring at his own knees. "Well, yeah."

"Okay, so you know Warren hates Buffy, that's step one."
How many times has he threatened to kill Buffy?"

"What?" Jonathan looked up. "Never."

"Really? Doesn't he call himself Buffy's arch-nemesis?"


"And what is Lex Luther always trying to do to Superman? What is Black Manta always trying to do to Aquaman? What is the Joker always trying to do to Batman?" Xander pulled a second chair over and put it in front of Jonathan so he could sit down to talk to him. "Come on, Jonathan, you're not this dumb."

Spike snorted again, and Xander glared at him.

"He doesn't mean it." Jonathan quietly defended his friend. His evil friend.

"Really? So he didn't have the invisiray thingy set to turn Buffy into jello?" Xander waited, but Jonathan didn't answer. He was staring at his own knees like he could just make himself disappear if he tried hard enough. Maybe he really was trying to do that, but Xander had
faith that Tara's magic collar would keep that from happening. "Maybe I even heard it wrong and he didn't kill some girl while trying to make her a sex slave," Xander said softly. Jonathan looked up so fast that he probably gave himself whiplash. "As someone else who is not exactly talented with women, can I just say that rape and sexual slavery is squicky to a level that I actually had to consider Spike's suggestion that we just kill you."

"You did?" Spike stood up straight, but Xander focused on Jonathan who seemed to have lost most of the color out of his face.

"You're a rapist." Xander said the words quietly and firmly. Jonathan turned nearly pure white.

"He never..."

"What? He never got around to raping her, so that makes you only an attempted rapist, because I'm not really seeing the moral line there, Jonathan. I mean, you're smart and talented, and yeah, you're a little dorky, but I never would have thought you were a rapist."

"I wouldn't have." Jonathan whispered his denial.
"No, you just would have helped others." Xander sighed. This was harder than he thought. "Newsflash, Jonathan, that's the same thing. If some demon catches me, do you think he's going to care that I don't usually get a chance to kill the demons? That I'm more backup for Buffy than an actual fighter? No. I help Buffy do her thing, so that means I'm morally right there with her." Xander left out all the other ways he was morally responsible for others. He'd helped Willow pull Buffy out of heaven. When Faith came to town and was living in a cockroach infested hotel, he hadn't even mentioned it to Giles because he was too afraid of making him angry again after the whole Valentine's day spell and then the "kick his ass" lie. Actually, he should probably feel morally responsible for the lie, but he was still feeling pretty justified on that one. He just hadn't wanted to put himself out there and get everyone mad at him again. It was a pretty lame reason to not help someone who really needed help, and Xander still felt guilty for leaving Faith hanging like that.

"And you," Xander continued, "are right there morally with Warren, which would make you a raping, killing, back-stabbing arch-villain."

"A bloody poor excuse for one, too," Spike chimed in.
Xander glared at Spike. The stupid vampire had promised that Xander could try this his way, and now he was sticking his nose in. However, Spike just stared right back without even pretending that he'd back off.

"Okay, normally I try hard to not ever agree with Spike, just on principle, but you are more Maxie Zeus than Ra's Al Ghul," Xander told Jonathan. "Seriously. But you're still much with the morally creepy. I mean, if I told Buffy that there was this demon that was trying to mind-wipe women to rape them and killing and stealing, I'm pretty sure that she'd be right there with a big honking sword to cut them into little pieces. If you're doing things to earn yourself a spot on Buffy's kill-list, that makes you a giant creep. And I'm guessing that the girl you helped Warren kill would call you a psychopathic bully." Xander could see that the one word—bully—had reached Jonathan more than anything else he'd said.

"I'm not a bully," Jonathan snapped.

"Really? How do you define bully because I'm thinking pushing people around using your fancy equipment is pretty bullyish."
"I—" Jonathan just stopped. Xander could see him squirm, and it didn't have anything to do with the ropes.

"I just wanted—" Jonathan stopped again, but Xander didn't need him to finish that sentence. He'd felt the same way often enough to understand Jonathan. Hell, he'd wanted so much to make a difference—to have a place where he fit in—that he sacrificed Bonnie's first few years of childhood. He'd left her with a vindictive and cold grandmother while he went running around playing Buffy's sidekick. Yeah, the need to not be the worthless, in-the-corner guy was pretty hard to deal with when you grew up with so many people calling you worthless.

"I get it," Xander said softly, "but Warren? Seriously, sidekick to evil makes you Harley Quinn, and I'm pretty sure that's not really what you're going for."

Jonathan shook his head without looking up. Xander suspected he was trying to not cry. Walking over, Xander started untying the ropes.

"Oi, what the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Untying him. Duh," Xander answered.
"If I didn't have this chip." Spike just about growled the words, so Xander figured he really was good and frustrated. Unfortunately, Xander didn't know any other way to handle Jonathan and letting Spike keep him was just not going to happen.

"Yep, you'd eat me in a second, got it," Xander agreed. "And I'm really hoping that chip was made with German engineering because I am very well aware of that." Spike glared murder at him, but Xander finished untying the ropes so that Jonathan could reach up with his cuffed hands and rub at his eyes. No man should have to cry in front of people without being able to hide it. He couldn't remember how many times he'd been reduced to near-tears after the whole Cordelia thing, and if someone had tied him to a chair and kept him from hiding it, he would not have been happy.

"I tried to get Warren to go to the police," Jonathan said softly. "After he killed Katrina, I told them that we should pay for our crimes. It isn't right, and now the police are saying that she killed herself." Jonathan's breathing grew shaky. "It isn't right," he whispered.

"Jonathan, have you ever thought about L.A.?" Thinking about Cordelia had suddenly give Xander a whole new
idea, and as a bonus, Spike was going to hate it.

Jonathan sniffed. "Sure. They have some neat magic shops. I can't go to the one up here much anymore because... well... you know." He shrugged.

"Yeah, even if you weren't fighting for the side of evil, Anya can be a little difficult to deal with," Xander admitted. "But I was wondering if you would like to maybe learn a little magic without working for Warren, because you know that's going to end badly." Xander grimaced. "Strike that. It already has ended badly. Someone's dead, so going back..."

"Is not an option," Spike cut in. "You targeted the slayer. Either you'll get the fucking hell out of her territory, or I'll find a way to split you open, chip or no chip," Spike warned.

"And as creepy as this sounds, I'm going to be siding with Spike on that if you keep trying to hurt Buffy." Xander didn't move as Spike walked up to stand at Xander's side. Yep, they were a united front on this issue, and being all 'united front' with Spike was badly rearranging his brain.

"So, L.A?" Jonathan looked up. His eyes were red and
swollen, but he'd either fought back or wiped away the actual tears.

"Yep. Hey, you'll like this guy. He was totally dweebish, only he was all geek boy with demonology books instead of comic books."

Spike looked over in horror. "No!" Spike crossed his arms.

"What?" Xander looked up with his best innocent smile as he pulled out his cell phone, but Spike's glare just got fiercer. Clearly he was not amused at Xander's big plan.

"You are not giving that wanker a valuable piece like a magic user."

Xander dialed the number. "Hey, look at the bright side," Xander said with a smile, "Angel is going to rip his hair out wondering where the trap is." Xander turned to Jonathan. "Angel is Spike's souled up sire, and he's a giant pain in the ass. He spends a hundred years crawling around alleys doing absolutely nothing to help anyone, and he thinks that makes him a champion. Personally, I think he's just a walking commercial for Prozac, but does anyone listen to me?"
"Not usually," an unhappy voice answered over the phone. Xander closed his eyes and cringed as it occurred to him a little too late that the phone had stopped ringing.

"Deadboy!" Xander faked enthusiasm, and Spike snorted his disgust at the whole mess.

"Is something wrong?" Angel was sounding a little more testy than usual, but Xander didn't actually care.

"I wanted to talk to Wesley. Is he around?"

"Wesley?"


Angel didn't answer.

"Or I suppose I could ask Spike to drive me down to L.A. so I could talk to him in person," Xander offered. Spike's scowl turned into an amused smirk as Angel immediately called for Wesley to come to the phone. "Wanker," Spike whispered before he pulled out a cigarette and walked to
the far side of the room to lean against the wall and light it.

"Mr. Harris?" Wesley asked in a confused voice.

"Hey, Wes. Long time no verbally torture."

"Yes, I had rather enjoyed out growing schism."

"That sounds vaguely insulty, and I was actually calling to do you a favor."

"Oh?" Wesley sounded a lot more interested now.

"How much natural magic would it take to create a time loop that traps a slayer?"

"Buffy's trapped?" Wesley sounded alarmed, and Xander could hear a half dozen voices in the background. Angel probably had them all ready to come riding to Buffy's rescue, which wasn't all that comforting because when she really needed him, like when she was emotionally drowning and doing her weird sex thing with Spike, then he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Not anymore. She broke loose, but not after really
having a really bad day. Over and over," Xander said. "And then the same guy, and keep in mind this guy has very little training. He's doing this mostly from reading spell books, but anyway, he cast a spell over the entire town, and everyone thought he was perfect and worshipped him, only that somehow created a monster that was just as horrible as we all thought this guy was wonderful. So, how much trouble could this guy really be?"

"Good lord," Wesley breathed, and for a half a second, Xander could almost hear Giles in his voice. It made his chest tighten because things hadn't been the same since Giles left. Part of Xander could understand Giles because it was pretty much ripping Xander to shreds to stand back and watch Buffy self-destruct, but Xander still thought Giles should have stuck it out with the rest of them, miserable or not. "Xander, this person could be an extreme danger to all of you. Are you sure that he has no formal training, that he can control this sort of power without opening a channel to tap other sources?"

Xander turned to Jonathan. "Has anyone ever trained you?"

Jonathan shook his head. "A girl showed me the glamour
spell and people in L.A. sold me books that they said I could use, but no one really taught me anything."

"Any chance you're channeling energy?"

Jonathan shook his head even more vehemently. "I would be too afraid that someone might drain me. Rack, he does that. He tells people that he's helping them and he taps into their power to either take their magic or to dump his magic into them when he needs to get rid of a lot of power fast. They say one witch blew up." Jonathan lowered his voice as if Rack might hear him.

"Rack that Willow went to, that Rack?"

Jonathan nodded solemnly.

"Okay, ew."

"Xander!" Xander blinked as he realized that Wesley was almost yelling into the phone.

"What?"

"Is he there? The man with this power, is he right there?"
"Well, yeah. That's why I was asking him about your questions, and he says he definitely hasn't trained and he's scared of tapping into others' power because he doesn't want his own to get drained. So, do I take it that this is interesting?"

"Interesting?" Wesley's voice went up. "Interesting? Someone with that much power could be exceptionally dangerous. You should get Buffy to handle this."

"Oh." Xander smiled at Jonathan. "So, you would say it would be a bad idea to, I don't know, kidnap him, tie him to a chair, and let Spike threaten him with slavery if he doesn't stop playing games in Buffy's territory?" Xander nearly laughed as Wesley started spluttering. Tilting the phone out and leaning forward, Xander let Jonathan listen to the random noises of borderline panic. Every dork needed to sometimes feel like maybe he had something a little dangerous going for him. Xander remembered when he'd faced down Jack O'Toole. Jonathan deserved that moment.

Jonathan actually smiled.

"I don't plan to throw any fireballs in here," Jonathan said into the phone.
Xander took the phone back, and listened to the absolute silence on the other end. "Wesley, Jonathan's friends are just getting more and more with the creepy and potentially felonious, and he really needs someone to show him the magical ropes. I was thinking maybe you could do that."

"Me?" Wesley sounded genuinely confused.

"Sure. I mean, you have all the book learnin'," Xander said. "And I know you wouldn't go trying to blackmail or strong arm Jonathan into putting Buffy into a time loop, so that's a plus."

"Jonathan?" Wesley's voice got quiet. "The young man who tried to kill himself his senior year?"

"Yep," Xander agreed. He waited, but the silence on the other end told him what he needed to know. Wesley was just like him and Jonathan... one more dork looking for a place to belong. "Wesley, he can't even go home because Warren is getting really dangerous, and it's not easy for Buffy to see a human as a real threat, so we're trying to work around some stuff here."
"We have rather a lot going on here as well." Wesley sighed. "But I could use a hand with all these blasted prophesies. I'm feeling rather buried alive in parchment."

"So, it's settled. You'll give Jonathan the low down on how to not blow anything up with his powers and not ask him to break any major laws—"

"I can hardly promise that. I seem to find a new one to break on a weekly basis, but I can assure him that I would never ask him to act unethically. Xander, perhaps I should speak to Jonathan."

"Sounds like a plan." Xander handed the phone over to Jonathan. Spike raised an eyebrow, but he didn't protest as Xander headed for the door they hadn't come in. "I'm assuming this goes up to the house."

Spike strolled over, giving Jonathan a look as the man tentatively said 'hello?' into the phone.

"We done then?" Spike asked.

"Yep," Xander agreed. He'd have to come back down and take the cuffs off and figure out transportation, but he figured they really were just about done with Jonathan.
He couldn't go running back out the sewers without Spike's magical rune, so they could give him some space. Hopefully he'd find someone to cling to other than Warren.

"If the poof can't be bothered to drive up, I'll take him down." Spike glanced over at Jonathan who had the phone clutched in his cuffed hands, but after just a second, he turned back to the door and unlocked it. It led into a narrow passage with stairs Xander had never seen before. The walls had an odd glow that suggested something other than electricity worked down here. If Willow had gone all dark magic and Buffy hadn't come back from the dead, would he have turned into Jonathan—following the wrong person just because he needed to follow someone? His head said that Willow would never go that dark, and that Xander had more sense to follow if she did. Xander wasn't so sure that his heart agreed.

Spike reached the end of the narrow passageway and pushed his shoulder into what looked like a solid wall. The whole thing slid forward, and Xander found himself following Spike out into his room. Grandma had her secrets, that's for sure.
Walking over to the bed, Spike flung himself down so that he was leaning back on the pillows. Xander narrowed his eyes and stared at Spike. If Spike was the big bad, who was making his bed so that all the pillows were set up like a fancy hotel?

"Wot?" Spike glared at Xander suspiciously.

"Nothing. I'm just a little freaked out over our first felony." Xander walked over to a chair and sat down. "And can I just say that I'm so very happy that we aren't going to take up slavery, because this house is kinda screwy and dysfunctional now."

"As long as the git is under control and out of Buffy's territory, I can't say I care what happens to him."

"Yeah, I got that," Xander agreed. Spike had way more to him than the normal fledge who cared about blood and not getting dusted, but that didn't mean that you could expect him to have actual morals.

"I didn't understand two bloody words you said down there, pet. You need to read something other than comic books."
"I did say that we nerd types had our own language, didn't I?"

"Don't know." Spike shrugged. "It's not like I listen to anything you say."

"I'd believe you more if you didn't offer to give Jonathan a ride."

"Just want him out of my territory." Spike sat up. "If he pulls any more stunts around Buffy or Dawn or Bonnie, I'm going to have to rip his intestines out, and that's going to be bloody painful."

"Well, yeah. Intestine ripping usually is."

"Not for him, you nob." Spike frowned for as second, but before Xander could point out Spike's illogic, Spike kept talking. "Well, actually it would be for him, but I don't bloody care. I meant for me. The damn chip would make the job a mite bit more difficult than it should be."

"Uh huh," Xander said, not even pointing out that if Spike were really thinking about eviscerating Jonathan, the chip would be going off now. Sometimes, just sometimes, Xander did not understand Spike. Most of
the time, Spike was just Spike. He was a vampire who wanted to feel good and control his world and eat and have sex until he felt good. That part of Spike was actually pretty damn easy to understand. But sometimes there were parts that Xander really didn't understand.

Part Fifteen

"Harris!"

Xander turned off the saw and pulled his ear protection off. "Hey. What's up?" Johnson poked a thumb toward the ground level. "Boss said someone was looking for you."

Looking down through the bare-stud walls, Xander tried to see who it was. The lack of cat calls meant it wasn't Tara or Willow or Buffy, but the sun would keep Spike away. Xander just prayed that Jonathan wasn't coming to visit.
Leaving his eye and ear protection at the table saw, Xander fingered the cell phone in his pocket as he headed down the stairs. With Jonathan gone, Warren seemed to be panicking, and Xander braced himself to run like hell and dial for help if the twerp was trying another one of his crazy schemes. Of course, Xander wasn't exactly in a whole lot of danger, not unless he was standing near Buffy.

Xander was ninety percent sure that Warren had set the fire the night that Dawn's wish trapped them all in Buffy's house. That could have been so very, very bad. The worst part was that he, Spike, and Tara were all in the house, trapped and watching a fire take out a good chunk of Buffy's backyard.

Xander should have been worried about himself or his friends who were facing death by fire, but all he could think about was that Bonnie was going to be left with Clem. Not that Clem was a bad guy, but Xander would rather not have his daughter raised by someone who considered hiding under a pile of rotting trash an effective fighting strategy. His lecture on the various types of garbage smells and using that as camouflage had made Xander totally skip dinner. Even Spike had turned a
little green.

When he came around the corner, Xander stopped and started at the familiar face. "Riley?" he called. He headed for the hard-hat line before pulling his hat off.

Riley stood near the manager's trailer. "Hey, Xander." He was smiling, but Xander could just feel something wrong. Considering just how many secrets Riley might have discovered, Xander wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Riley. Had they even told Riley about the whole bringing Buffy back from the dead?

Xander plastered on his best smile. "Hi, Riley. Long time no see."

"It has been a while. I was wondering if maybe we could... go out to lunch." Riley didn't even bother to hide the awkward pause in the middle that suggested he had an agenda that didn't include food. Well, that and he was wearing his camouflage uniform. He wasn't being subtle.

"We can hold the fort, take off," Paul called from the window of the manager's trailer. Xander opened his mouth to protest because he needed the money, but the fact was that he really didn't. Spike was cheaper to keep
than Anya had been. He just didn't want to spend a whole lot of time with Riley. Unfortunately, Riley caught him by the arm and was hurrying him off the site before Xander could even stage a token protest.

"It's my treat," Riley said, his voice making it sound like he was best friends with Xander, and Xander really couldn't protest without things getting really weird really fast.

"So, how's life been treating you?" Xander asked. "You aren't here for any..." Xander stopped and looked around for any eavesdropping coworkers before he finished. "demon problems, are you?"

Riley steered them out one of the gates and toward a chicken shack set up on the corner. Most of the guys ate here, but lunch was over, so the tables were empty and the woman in the shack was wiping down the same bit of counter over and over. "Actually," Riley said quietly, "we had a Suvolte demon egg infestation, but it's taken care of now."

"Demon eggs. Ick."

"They weren't fun," Riley agreed.
"They weren't fun last time, either. Last time they burrowed into people's brains and made them serve the momma demon." Xander sat at one of the bent metal benches attached to the table. He looked up to find that Riley was looking at him with a vague sort of horror. "I'll take a soda and some fries," Xander said.

Riley shook his head and then headed over to buy the food. The town was quiet this time of day. Xander had a few more hours on shift before he could go home. He'd promised Bonnie a zoo day, which meant he was probably going to have to pass on patrolling tonight. He'd thought they were demon free, which is why he was skipping the Scoobie thing, but maybe he should drop by Buffy's instead.

"So, is there still an egg issue?" Xander asked when Riley sat down with the food.

"It's all taken care of."

Xander grabbed one of the fries. "So, it's all good. Good." And with that, Xander was pretty much done with the small talk. Riley used a French fry to push some ketchup around on his paper plate.
"Spike knew about the Suvolte and hadn't told anyone."

"Color me unsurprised." Xander shrugged.

"He's working with you, and he withholds information. You're okay with that?" Riley mangled his French fry and glared at Xander.

"It's Spike. Spike would fight tooth and fang to protect Buffy or Dawn, but if there's someone eating John Doe right in front of him, he's not only not going to care, but he's not going to understand why you do."

"And you're okay with that?" Riley was looking way too tense for someone who was just concerned about Spike's ethics in general.

"Okay? No. But Riley, he's one of our strongest fighters, and I guess it's like working with someone who's blind. You just get used to making sure you steer them around the furniture. Spike's just Spike, so if you have some moral rule that really bothers you, you just have to tell him because he's never going to get it." Xander thought about that for a second. "Actually, you and I would tell Buffy or Dawn and THEY would talk to him. If we're
unhappy, Spike would consider that a bonus."

"And you're okay with that?" Riley asked the question softer this time.

"Okay would be too strong a word." Xander sighed. "It's complicated, Riley."

"Is it complicated for Buffy, too?"

Xander stopped chewing and just stared at Riley. His brain started spinning, planning lies and denials.

"You know," Riley said quietly.

"Know?" Xander tried for ignorance, but Riley wasn't biting.

"You know about Spike and Buffy. I walked in on them, Xander." Riley made a disgusted face, but in Riley's defense, Xander made that same face every time he thought about it too much.

"Oh. That." Xander swallowed and then started pulling one of his French fries into little tiny potato bits. "Yeah. I just try really, really hard to repress."
"But... Is she..."

Xander held up a hand to stop Riley from verbally flailing into territory where Xander just didn't want to go. "Whatever you're about to ask, the answer is probably going to be 'no.' As in 'no' she's not thinking right, but also 'no' that she's not getting taken advantage of. Weirdly, she seems to be doing more of the taking than the getting taken in the advantage department."

"Oh." Riley's face twisted in disgust.

"Yeah. Oh." Xander's expression matched Riley's.

"Xander, is there anything I can do to help? I just... I never wanted any of this for Buffy. I understand that she just couldn't love me, but—"

"She came after you," Xander interrupted.

For a second, Riley just blinked at him. "She what?"

"The night you left. She came after you, Riley."

Most of the blood left Riley's face. "Oh god."

"So me showing up here probably is not helping." Riley ran his hands through his hair and leaned back.

"Why?" Xander asked suspiciously. Riley's face had a whole lot more guilt in it than it should. A whole lot. "Didn't things go well with her?"

Riley gave a feral laugh. "I introduced her to my wife."

Xander cringed. "Ouch."

"I didn't know, Xander. I thought that she let me go over a year ago. And I really thought she would never sleep with Spike." Riley fell silent, and they both stared at their French fries. This was going down in Xander's list of all-time most uncomfortable conversations, right up there with the Jesus talk he'd had with Bonnie.

"Buffy sleeping with Spike," Riley muttered unhappily.

"I don't think they sleep much."
"Yeah, I got that. In Technicolor." Riley grabbed his soda and drank as if the very thought put a bad taste in his mouth. Xander could relate because he found himself decorating cupcakes with Bonnie every time he spotted a new hickey or trail of fingernail marks on Spike. "Xander, are you sure he's not using her somehow? I've seen a lot of stuff in the last year—mages that can make people see things... spells to control people."

"I've been seeing that shit since I was fifteen, Riley," Xander said before Riley could really get going and convince himself he had to save Buffy. "Trust me, this is good old fashioned screwy in the head stuff. Spike's not using her; she's using him. She's going to wake up one of these days and realize that beating the shit out of Spike isn't exactly a nice thing to do, and then the shit and the fan are going to have an up close and personal relationship." Xander stopped. His voice was getting high and fast, and he was breathing hard, and he had to take a second to really get control. It was like being on a train that was headed straight for a cliff and knowing that you couldn't do a damn thing but stay quiet and hope the engineer stopped the train before it turned into a brilliant ball of fire in the bottom of a ravine. "But Buffy's going to have to come to that conclusion on her own,"
Xander added. "For once in my life, I am staying out of it."

"Even if she's hurting?" Riley's question made Xander look up, but Riley's expression wasn't accusatory, just confused.

"Especially if she's hurting. I don't know what to do without hurting her more, so I'm going to wait and then help pick up the pieces after shit and fan have that meeting."

Riley stared at Xander sadly. "I am sorry. I really had no idea that things were so bad here."

Xander laughed. "You know the weird thing? They really aren't. I mean, last year we were in all kinds of hurt because Spike was our only fighter, and he was running himself ragged trying to keep everything together when that chip was like the biggest handicap ever. Before that, we had a goddess trying to end the world. Before that, we had... well, you know. If anything, it's quiet around here."

"So, it's not as bad as it looks from here?"
"Oh no. It's way worse," Xander quickly corrected him. "I just can't quite figure out why, but it's way, way worse. I'd be telling Buffy and Dawn to take a long vacation anywhere other than here, but I'm pretty sure the hellmouth would implode because everything feels like this big balloon that's about to explode, and I can't figure out how to stop people from blowing more and more air into it. Even Spike's getting twitchy, and anything that makes Spike twitch pretty much terrifies the rest of us."

Riley sat up. "Spike's twitchy?" Yep, that was proof that anything that made Spike twitch terrified everyone because Riley was looking alarmed. He hated Spike, and he still didn't dismiss Spike's instincts.

Xander nodded. "In a Spike sort of way. It's like he's always looking around and ready for something to jump at him, but that might be because of Warren. For Spike, having our villain of the day be a human is just a little uncomfortable."

"Warren? What's going on, Xander?"

"Buffy didn't give you the sitch?" Xander wasn't sure what to think of that. Yeah, Riley wasn't exactly one of them anymore... if he ever was... but she'd always been
share-girl with Riley.

"She said there weren't any problems other than employment and broken plumbing. She didn't even know that someone was raising Suvolte demons. She said that was the most demonic activity she's seen since—" Riley fell silent. There were a lot of awkward silences in this conversation.

Yeah, he and Riley had never exactly been buddies, but Xander thought that they understood each other. Now they were just two guys who didn't understand each other at all. Xander could see that Riley expected something out of him. Since Xander was the one still in Buffy's circle, he should be the one to do something to help get Buffy out of this hole she was digging for herself. Maybe it was his desire to keep Bonnie safe or maybe it was just his growing realization that he couldn't live other people's lives, but Xander really didn't think there was anything he could do. He'd helped pull her out of heaven, and now there was nothing he could do. But maybe there was something Riley could do.

"The evil these days is coming in a human package. Did you see Buffy's backyard?" The fire that had almost taken the house with everyone trapped in it had scorched the
grass and left black soot stains all over the back. Warren was getting desperate, and Xander was starting to think that he just needed to shoot the duo of destruction as they were calling themselves now.

Riley cocked his head to the side in confusion. "Buffy said a barbeque got out of hand."

"Actually, a barbeque missed its mark since we were the main course. Warren tried to burn the house down when we were trapped inside. Weirdly, it was Anya that saved us."

"Anya?"

"She knew a demon—you know, nevermind. Long story." Xander sighed. There was so much going on, but none of it really mattered, not when it came to Warren. "But the short version is that Warren has killed a girl, attacked Buffy, robbed banks, summoned demons, and is now going for the ever-popular arson. He's pathetic as far as evil minions of hell go, but Buffy won't confront a human, and Spike can't."

"Are you asking me to turn the chip off?" Riley's voice was slow and careful.
"God no. Riley, Spike has been staying with me, and you know how much fun that always is. Exactly how long do you think I'd live if you took that chip out?"

Riley seemed to sag in relief. "Thank god. I thought maybe you wanted me to help turn it off."

"Could you?"

Even though Riley didn't answer right away, Xander could see the truth without Riley saying anything. There was a way to get the chip out. And he had no idea how he felt about that. Eventually, Riley nodded. "If there were a good reason, yes. But it doesn't sound like this Warren is a big enough problem to warrant taking that risk."

"Which leaves me." Xander couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. He didn't want to be in this position, but if Spike couldn't and Buffy wouldn't do anything, then he had to do something.

"Xander?" Riley sounded worried.

"Can I ask you a hypothetical and confidential question?"
"One that's not so hypothetical, maybe?" Riley leaned forward and gave Xander his best psychology major expression.

"Maybe," Xander agreed. "How do you decide when you have to use deadly force? I mean, I still have little fragments of my soldier memories, like little floating bits of information that don't really make all that much sense anymore, so I have this sense that soldiers talk about these things, but I don't have any useful memories at all."

"Whoa." Riley leaned back and blinked. "That's a big question. Xander, is this problem with Warren that serious?"

Xander rubbed a hand across his face and vaguely wondered if he was talking himself into a nice long stay in Leavenworth by confessing this. If Warren showed up dead now, Riley was going to ask some really uncomfortable questions. Xander was a little disturbed to realize that he trusted Tara and Spike to look after Bonnie if worse came to worse. "He was threatening one of his friends, Jonathan. Warren got Jonathan to use some pretty strong magic to attack Buffy."

"Crap."
"But I talked Jonathan into going to work with a friend who would teach him magic without the blackmail. So, that's all unproblemy."

"Good thinking. That sounds like a good solution. But from your expression, I'm guessing the rest doesn't end as well," Riley said.

"Not really. Twit number two is really good with demon summoning and controlling magical beasties. I talked his brother, Tucker, into trying to get Andrew to leave, and Andrew turned his brother into a hell mouse."

"A what?" Riley's voice rose an octave and something that sounded suspiciously like a laugh slipped out at the end.

"A hell mouse." Xander held up his hands to indicate something really small. "Like a hell hound only really extra tiny and weirdly cute. It took Tara a week to change Tucker back, and he is definitely not interested in talking to Andrew again."

"So, we're talking a major threat."
"Hugely. And our only two fighters are out for the count," Xander said. "Oh, Spike would love to eat them, but with the chip, that is not going to happen."

"So you're wondering if you should step in."

Xander shook his head. "Oh, I know I should step in, only after that fire, I'm thinking maybe I need to start listening to Spike's plans instead of trying to play nice."

Giving a big sigh, Riley turned and stared at the cars that were passing them on the road. "Xander, that is not an easy call," he eventually said.

"Which explains all my avoidance, but if I wait until Warren actually kills us, that's going to be an even worse call," Xander pointed out. Riley made an unhappy face that suggested that he agreed with Xander, even if he didn't like agreeing with Xander. Considering that Xander wasn't so hot about having to kill someone, he didn't mind Riley being not enthusiastic about it. "So, where is that line when you can call something justified? I mean, if I had shot him when he was setting the backyard on fire, that would be justified, but if I shoot him in his bathroom... I just don't know what to do, Riley."
"Have you talked to Buffy?"

"Hell no. Riley, she's having trouble enough with her own shit, and clearly she's not willing to deal with the duo of dorkitude, so that leaves me with Spike and Tara."

"Spike wants you to kill them."

"And Tara is spending so much time not commenting that I'm guessing she kinda agrees. And honestly, if Warren came anywhere near my family, I would not hesitate, but going out with a plan to kill him is feeling not good."

"If it ever starts feeling good, that's when you need to worry about yourself," Riley said seriously. "Right now, it sounds like you're asking yourself the right questions, at least."

"And how about the answers?"

It took Riley a long time to answer. "Those ethics classes that you remember... they didn't give answers, Xander. As soldiers, we have to assess the threat and make the decision, and if people at HQ disagree, we have to live with the consequences. However, there aren't any easy
answers."

"You do know that's not what I wanted to hear, right?"

"Sorry about that." Riley gave him a sad smile. "I can do you one favor. If Warren and Andrew are summoning demons, my unit can go over there and ask a few questions—poke around some."

"Arrest them and throw them under the jail?" Xander asked hopefully.

"Not unless I see a felony that I can swear to in a military tribunal. However, if they're as reckless as you're suggesting, having two soldiers show up on their doorstep might provoke a reaction.

"You're using yourself as bait?"

Riley gave Xander a wicked grin that would have made Spike himself proud. "If it works, it means I can take care of this problem for you."

"Or it means you could end up a hell mouse."

Riley's grin faded. "Have Tara keep the anti-mouse spell
handy, but I'm going in with an entire team, including a shaman of my own, so Andrew might find me a little more formidable than his brother. And if he tries a hell mouse spell, our shaman will definitely testify in a military tribunal. Andrew could end up under the jail for that kind of an attack."

"Just...." Xander chewed on his lower lip.

"Xander?"

"I don't think Andrew is actually the evil one," Xander blurted. "Warren made it out to be a big game, a chance to live out some comic book and Andrew and Jonathan went along, but their plans are all out of some kid's fantasy: an invisible ray, a mind control devise that gets them women, a time loop to annoy Buffy to death by making her please the world's pickiest customer. Riley, these aren't exactly the plans of someone with a whole lot of good mental hygiene."

"Which is why you don't want to shoot them."

"Well, that and killing people is generally not of the good."
Riley leaned closer. "Xander, no offense, but I've fought next to you. I never had any doubt that you would kill to protect the people you loved. If you're hesitating to use lethal force, it's because you don't think you should. So, my unit will head over there and shake the tree and see if we can't get one or both of them to panic. If they do anything threatening toward us, that will be enough to arrest them."

"And if they don't?"

Riley stared off into the distance. "Collect evidence. Because you aren't in the service, the tribunal will require something in the way of proof because you won't be allowed to testify. So, if you can get enough evidence that five officers would look at the file and believe that these two are a danger to society, you call me back and I'll make the arrest."

Xander thought about sneaking around the duo of dorkitude trying to take pictures or record their stupid fights. "That's sounding more dangerous than Spike's big plan."

"Which is?"
"Shoot them," Xander answered. That was pretty damn obvious. Or not. Actually, Spike's favorite plan involved long detailed descriptions of evisceration and the drinking of blood, but plan A usually ended up with the chip firing, and Spike colorfully cursing as he clutched his head.

Riley nodded. "Xander, you have to trust your instincts. If getting evidence is going to put you or others in danger, then you do what you have to. Killing may not be easy, but it's better than allowing the innocent to die, and you know that. Don't second guess yourself."

"Is it okay if I just pray that they try to attack you so you have to deal with this?"

"No, that's fine. I'm actually hoping the same thing. Look, I should go. We have to ship out in three hours, and if we're going to make an extra stop, we're running short on time."

"Hey, thanks for stopping by. Actually, was there a reason you stopped by? I sort of hijacked the conversation."

Riley stood up and offered his hand. "I just wanted to get
your input on what's going on with Buffy. I guess I just wanted some sort of reassurance that someone had her back and understood that she was heading for an emotional cliff."

Xander felt weird shaking Riley's hand like two men making a business deal in the middle of the street. "Knowing that doesn't mean I know how to actually help."

"Like you said, just be there for her when the shit hits the fan." Riley turned to leave, and Xander could feel a tightness in his stomach. He didn't want Riley to leave. He wanted one person in his life who wasn't falling apart—one person who he could be weak around. But Riley just headed down the street. Closing his eyes, Xander tried to banish all these resentments that crawled up through the cracks in his brain. He didn't want to be the strong one. He didn't want to be the fighter. He didn't want to watch his friends for the first signs of a complete emotional meltdown.

Yep, and hell mice in hell wanted ice water. They were all going to have to learn to live with disappointment.

Part Sixteen
Spike struggled to not show his gameface as Buffy sat on the bottom step of the basement trying to explain why she'd tied up her friends and tried to feed them to a demon. Actually, she mostly seemed to be explaining to Anya since Buffy had already told the others about the demon who had infected her with the delusion that her whole life was part of a hallucination that she needed to kill.

Bloody fucking martyr. Everything had to be about her, that was for bloody sure. All this because she wanted to pretend that none of them mattered. That he didn't matter. That Dawn hadn't ever existed. All this because she wanted to imagine that she meant it when she told him they were done. He'd been through that song and dance once already, and he hadn't bloody liked it the first time around.

Actually, he'd been through it twice. Angelus and Drusilla had both treated him like he was a soddin' chess piece to move around. "Oh boyo, it's just us men tonight," Angelus would promise with that idiotic smile of his. Yeah, until Angelus felt like fucking Dru right in front of him and calling him weak.

William had followed Angelus around like a fucking
puppy, and when Angelus had finally given in and pushed William over a table and fucked him raw... well William thought that meant something. He thought he'd earned the keys to the fucking kingdom and that he would finally be part of the clan. Instead, Angelus had pretended it never happened. William had sat with drying semen and blood streaked across his legs, and Angelus pretended that none of them could smell it. Darla had just smirked, and all William's stupid, silly confidence had just vanished. And Drusilla. As much as he bloody loved her still, he hated her. She would push him one way or another just so she could pretend he was her precious Daddy. He lived for the days when she looked at him and saw him, but there were too damn many days when her eyes would glaze over and she'd imagine Angelus' hands holding her down.

It was ironic that the gits in the Watchers called him one-quarter of the Scourge of Europe because he'd never been anything more than their fucking toy. And now, Queen Buffy was tending her court, apologizing for just about feeding her little minions to a demon, and she couldn't even spare him a look. When he stood too near, he could still smell her desire, and she wouldn't even fucking look at him. Spike bit the inside of his lip hard enough to taste blood.
"Spike's right," Anya said. That distracted Spike from his inner monolog. "You're making this all about you. You did not imagine me. I was alive and cursing men's genitals before you were even born." Anya crossed her arms and glared at Buffy. "And if you call me over to ambush me again, I will find a way to make you pay." Coming from a bint like Anya, Spike would suggest Buffy take that threat seriously. Instead she just rested her elbows on her knees and hung her head.

"Hey, how about we all play nice here? I mean, it's not exactly Buffy's fault what with the demon venom," Willow hurried to say. "So maybe we should all go find some aspirin and ice packs and x-rays." Willow said the last with a look over toward Xander.

His eyes were still a little unfocused, and Spike was guessing he had a good concussion going. Getting clocked by a slayer was tough, even on a vampire, so the puppy boy's head was no match for a frying pan swung by an insane Buffy. Spike shifted uncomfortably. Xander was hers to do with what she wanted, and if she wanted to gut him and hang him out for some demon, that shouldn't bloody matter to him. The problem was the git spent so much time submitting to Spike and hiding things
from Buffy that Spike was having trouble remembering exactly whose minion he was. If he were a proper vampire minion, Spike would stake him just for making things uncomfortable by blurring the lines of ownership.

Anya looked down at the demon. "Wait. This is the demon you killed?" She sounded pretty brassed-off about that.

"He tried to kill us first," Xander pointed out. Anya gave him a withering glare.

"He's Glarghk gu'ul kashma'nikt, innit he?" Spike asked from his spot at the top of the stairs.

Anya gave him a look that, once upon a time, he would have disemboweled her over. Soddin' chip. "Which means he isn't predatory. Glarghk gu'ul kashma'nikt are reality demons. Some people say that D'Hoffryn is half Glarghk gu'ul kashma'nikt."

"Vengeance demons are part Glargy gull Kashmir?" Xander looked from the demon to Anya like he was trying to see a family resemblance.

"No, you idiot. Anyone who can impress D'Hoffryn can
become a vengeance demon. D'Hoffryn is just part Glarghk gu'ul kashma'nikt." Anya gave a very unladylike snort. "I don't have time to explain this to people who are clearly incapable of understanding. And I'm losing money." With that she headed for the stairs. Spike leaned to one side to let her out.

Xander groaned. "This whole conversation is giving me a headache."

"That's probably the frying pan lump," Willow said. She reached up and touched his head where Spike could see swelling from the far side of the room. When Buffy decided to cure her delusions by killing all of them, she'd done a bang up job of getting started.

"I'm so sorry," Buffy repeated for the tenth time.

"Hey, none of this is your fault." Willow glared at everyone in the room, making sure that they all knew the script she expected them to follow. Right then, time to pretend that Queen Buffy could do no wrong. She sure as hell wouldn't be knocking boots with him, would she now? Irony of it was that puppy boy and Tara both knew about him and Buffy. Willow was so caught up in her own drama that he doubted she cared, and Dawn.... Spike
watched as Dawn hovered near the far wall like a wounded beast. He liked to think she wouldn't mind. Spike wasn't even sure who Buffy wanted to hide from anymore.

"Hey, I know you would never say that about me," Dawn said, her voice shaky. "Not without something being really wrong."

Buffy looked up. "I really wouldn't. You know I love you," Buffy told her. She held out her hands and Dawn nearly threw herself at Buffy, allowing herself to be pulled into a tight hug. Spike looked away. He bloody loved the Bit, so it hurt to feel so fucking jealous of her.

"Are you okay?" Willow asked Tara softly.

Tara nodded. She was pale, but then she'd thrown a lot of power around. Spike could still feel her magic like spiders over his skin. Willow inched closer to her, desire rising from her like a mist.

"Right then. I'm off." Spike stood up to leave.

"Spike, wait!" Xander sort of stumbled forward before he got his legs coordinated enough to cross the basement.
"The sun's up."

Spike shrugged. "Got a blanket, don't I?"

"Oh." Xander looked dazed, but that was probably the concussion. "I should... you know..." Xander just fell silent. The man was crap at hiding things. It was a wonder that the others hadn't found Bonnie yet, but Spike figured they weren't actually paying much attention to Xander.

"Come on, then," Spike said, rescuing the puppy from his own idiocy. Xander hurried up the stairs, and Spike headed out into the main house.

"Thank you for coming to the rescue," Xander said once they reached the kitchen.

Spike grabbed his blanket off the floor where he'd dropped it. "Didn't actually rescue anyone, mate."

"No, but you showed up when I called, and considering the big ball of light in the sky, that means a lot, Spike."

Spike snorted. He'd been too bloody late to do much more than sit on the sidelines while Buffy ignored him.
"So, sewers or car?" Xander asked cheerfully, and the boy never did cheerful when talking about the sewers. Spike'd never seen anyone who complained about a little shite as much as Xander.

Spike stopped and really looked at puppy-boy. "What are you hiding?"

"Me?" Xander blinked, all exaggerated innocence and big brown eyes.

"Yes, you. I'm not in a mood for games, so just spit it out," Spike warned with a glare.

"Oh... it's not bad. I just...." Xander sighed. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

Spike just stared at Xander, not sure what the hell he was supposed to think about that. He assumed they'd gotten past surprise gifts like a sudden stake to the heart, but he wasn't entirely sure. Sometimes Xander was remarkably hard to understand. Instead of explain, Xander held up a finger. "Wait here," he said before he darted out the back door. Swearing, Spike leapt backwards to avoid a stray sunbeam.
He didn't have long to wait before a white panel van pulled up. Xander jumped out of the driver's side and opened the back doors. Spike could see a heavy curtain hiding whatever he had in the van. With a huge smile, Xander waved.

"Come on!" he called with excitement in his voice. Reaching in, Xander pulled the curtain aside to show an empty van. Spike looked at the distance, and he could feel something suspiciously similar to fear in his guts. If he ran for the van, that took him in the opposite direction of any shade. All Xander had to do was block his way, and he'd be dust before he could even protest.

"Any day now, Spike." Xander's excitement was turning to frustration now. The boy had no patience, but Spike pulled the blanket up over his head, braced himself and ran for the van. His skin was smoking, and he could feel the heat soaking into him by the time he leaped into the back of the van. The heavy thud of a slamming door followed, and Spike threw the blanket off, pounding at his own body to put out the fire he could feel threatening to eat his flesh. After a second, he realized that he was only smoking, and he sank down onto an uncomfortable bench bolted to the side of the van.
"So, what do you think?" Xander stuck his head through a second dark curtain that divided the cab from the cargo area.

"I'm not on fire," Spike commented. Other than that, there really wasn't much to say.

"No, about the van."

"It's a van, Harris."

"It's my van. The company was buying two new vans, and I thought that with our sun problems, we could use something without windows, and can I just say again that Angel is an idiot. A vampire with a convertible really is just about as stupid as they come. Oh, but before you even think it, if you paint the windows, I will put holy water in your blood supply," Xander threatened.

Spike opened his mouth, not even able to quite figure out what the bloody hell was going on before Xander disappeared into the front cab and started the van. The git had bought a van because of Spike? And then he'd threatened Spike with holy water. His words were playful, but then his body smelled of contained anger and
uncontrolled grief. "Bloody barmy wanker," Spike muttered as he looked around. The van's engine sounded solid, and the interior could be fixed up to be a little more comfortable. If a minion had gotten this for Spike back in the day, he might have lived another day before Spike dusted him just because he didn't bloody like minions.

"Drop me by the sewer entrance to our tunnels," Spike ordered.

"Um... I was hoping...." Xander stopped.

"Just spit it out, Harris."

"Do you know someone who could sell me a gun?"

Spike looked at the curtain separating them. It was about bloody time Xander did something other than bloody whine about Warren, but Spike hadn't imagined he'd reach his breaking point today. The road noise under the van changed and then the van stopped. Spike was guessing they were in a parking lot. This was better than a trunk, but it was still pretty damn annoying.

The van shifted into park and then Xander turned it off
before pushing the front curtain back. He'd parked in the shade of a store so Spike could see all the little happy meals toddling around the parking lot with their carts of food. "Well?" Xander asked.

"You ready to shoot Warren, then?"

"Enough's enough, Spike."

"It's been more than enough for a while now. Why get your knickers in a twist now? I thought your big plan was to find evidence." Spike crossed his arms and tried hard to not point out that Xander was an idiot who should have listened to him a long time ago.

Xander clenched his jaw, and Spike saw a flash of something hard and angry under the surface before Xander just sighed. "When Riley arrested Andrew, do you know what he was saying?"

"No, no, I'm too pretty of a nancy-boy for prison," Spike sing-songed in a high pitched voice. That forced a rough laugh out of Xander.

"Okay, something like that might have come out. But Spike, "Xander looked up at him, "Andrew said it wasn't
fair because soon enough Buffy wouldn't be the slayer anymore."

Leaning back, Spike ran a tongue along the inside of his lower lip where he'd bit. He could still taste the blood.

Xander's voice got dangerously quiet, but every breath was louder and more strained than the last. "Andrew and Warren did this. They did something to make that Glargy demon go after Buffy because they wanted her to not be the slayer."

"Could be," Spike agreed. It was the sort of sad little plan those two would come up with.

Xander's breath was so ragged that Spike thought he might start sobbing. "Spike, Anya said that the demon was something like D'Hoffryn."

"And?"

When Xander looked up, he had a wild expression Spike had never seen on the boy. "Anya said that wish universes have lives of their own. It's like digging a new channel on a river. You can divert the water, but then you can't control where it goes or force it back into the
same river."

Spike raised an eyebrow and waited for the part of the explanation that actually made sense. Xander's face twisted and he turned away, slapping his hand against the side of the van so hard that he must have hurt himself.

"Somewhere out there, some version of Buffy is still in that asylum because Warren and Andrew did this. She's alone and hurting and she always will be because someone she never met ruined her life." Xander stopped, the rage pouring from him. If Spike had any doubts about Xander's willingness to kill, and he had a lot of them, this version of Xander pretty much answered any doubts. Spike suspected that Xander was having trouble not just rushing over there and choking Warren with his own two hands. As far as Spike was concerned, his Buffy was safe and any other Buffys were on their own, but if this was the motivation to get Xander off his arse, he'd use it. Warren needed to die.

"Right then, so we need a weapon. You any good with a gun?"

"I can use one." Xander's expression was blank, but the
fury still poured from his skin. Any demon in a mile would give the boy a wide berth right now.

"Anyone can use one, Harris. Pulling a trigger isn't difficult. However, are we looking for a rifle so you can take him at long range, a pistol, or a shotgun? You might have to take a couple of shots with the shotgun because those pellets aren't always good at penetrating the vital organs, but anyone can hit a target with one of those."

"A pistol," Xander said softly. Spike studied the boy wondering whether lack of confidence or a need to be up close and personal with his kill was inspiring that choice.

"I can get you that," Spike agreed. "In the basement, you had a regular armory. What happened to that?"

"I sold it when I was trying to keep the apartment and still pay Bonnie's mom," Xander said. "Where do I go for the gun?"

"Franklin cemetery... just north is an abandoned church. Demon I know runs a business out of the basement."

"Of a church?"
Spike shrugged. "Keeps the minions and fledges away, and Buffy doesn't usually go in churches."

With a nod, Xander got behind the wheel again, letting the dark curtain fall shut. As he started the van, Spike called home to Clem. Might be best if Clem took Bonnie out for a bit. Spike had a feeling that Xander was going to be out of sorts for a while, and Bonnie didn't need to see that. Yeah, she saw Spike ranting about as often as not, but Xander was her da. Xander never came home smelling of blood and death, and Spike just preferred to keep it that way.

**Part Seventeen**

Xander stood at the corner of the house and fingered the gun he had tucked under his shirt. The metal was cold against his skin.

"Best if you just knocked and shot him before he had a chance to react," Spike said. He'd said some version of
"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were worried about me," Xander accused him. The sun was barely down, and yet Spike was standing next to him, an unlit cigarette hanging from his lips. Spike just shrugged. At this point, Xander was so mixed up he wasn't sure if Spike wanted to help or just watch as Xander screwed this up and got turned into Xander-meat, extra rare.

"I have to do this my way," Xander said firmly, despite the fact that his stomach was knotting. He'd talked Jonathan down. Hell, from the sounds of it, Jonathan and Wesley were best friends, and Angel was ready to pull his hair out because Jonathan was almost worshipping the giant dork. On one hand, Xander was not in favor of anyone worshipping Angel. On the other, anything that caused Deadboy to pull his hair out in frustration couldn’t be all bad.

Spike's lighter made a familiar clicking noise as he lighted his cigarette without comment.

Taking a deep breath, Xander headed for the small house where Warren had set up his new shop. It was a small house with a white picket fence that leaned drunkenly in
every direction. Xander wondered how many of Warren's little toys were pointed at him as he walked up the front, but he fought the urge to reach under his shirt and touch his gun.

Stepping around a rotted hole in the front porch, Xander knocked at the door. Inside, he could hear a television click off and footsteps scramble around, but he just waited. After several minutes, the door flew open and Warren stood there with a shocked expression on his face.

"Warren," Xander said calmly.

"Xander?" Warren stood staring at him for second and then he pointed his finger at Xander. "Freeze. Just freeze right there."

"Usually people have guns when they say that."

"Shit." Warren reached for something beside the door, and Xander's whole body clenched. His hand reached for the gun out of fear, but if he pulled it out, he was going to have to shoot Warren. The man had forgotten to bring a gun to threaten Xander at all, so shooting someone that dorky just didn't feel right. Xander was still debating
with himself when Warren pointed the end of a freaky looking ray gun at his stomach. "Okay, now freeze." Warren had a sadistic grin on his face.

"I haven't actually moved," Xander pointed out. "I came here to talk."

"Talk?"

"That thing people do with their mouths."

"I know what talk means, moron." Warren backed up a step and raised the gun. "Inside. Close the door behind you." Xander figured Spike was out there cursing him in British, but Spike couldn't do anything, and Xander really didn't want to back Warren into a corner where he felt like he had to shoot, so Xander stepped inside and pushed the door closed. The house was small and they stepped right into a tiny living room that Warren was clearly using for a workshop. Xander recognized a few of the things on the tables—a clip from an automatic weapon, the guts of a coffeemaker, something that might be a shoe horn. But for the most part, it just looked like a junkyard had thrown up in the room.

"So, the slayer sent you to negotiate? She's finally willing
to parlay with me?" Warren asked, nodding his head faster as he got excited. Xander ignored the large quantities of dorkiness Warren was showing by using the word "parlay."

"Okay, that would be a no and an even bigger no. Buffy didn't send me; I just came to talk. Man to man. Nerd to nerd."

"I am a genius, not a nerd. I was going to Dutton Technical College when you were all memorizing Spanish verbs. They saw my talent." Warren's face twisted into something dark, and for the first time, Xander could actually see the killer lurking just under the surface.

"Okay, scratch that last one, but we can still talk man to man," Xander said carefully. "This is gone too far. We're so far past 'too far' that you can't even see it from where we are."

"I say when it's gone too far, and it hasn't until Buffy and her band of do-gooders is defeated."

"Which would be never," Xander said slowly. If hell gods and giant snake demons couldn't take them down, Xander really wasn't too worried about Warren making
the big move to rule the Hellmouth. Now Warren killing someone out of sheer stupidity—that might happen.

"That's what Buffy thinks."

"Buffy doesn't think much of anything about you. She mostly is worried about paying the bills, and if she even found out that I came over here, I'm pretty sure she'd smack me. Actually, I'm very sure she'd smack me." Xander shrugged. Buffy seemed to think he was always her backup, there to follow her lead, and nine times out of ten, he was. However, if he needed to lie about a little soul spell or face down Angelus in a hospital or even hide a daughter he fathered by a demon, he would.

Warren frowned in confusion. "Buffy didn't send you?"

"That would be a huge 'no.' If she knew I was here, she would give me that look that meant she was questioning whether I had fat blocking up the brain cells. I guess I hoped that maybe we could figure out a way to stop making each other miserable. Or rather a way to keep you from making Buffy miserable because Buffy is pretty much not doing anything to you."

"She's not doing anything to me?" Warren's voice rose.
"She's not doing anything?" he demanded in a voice so high it nearly squeaked.

"Pretty much, yes. She has other fish to go fishing for."

Warren stood up straight, the barrel of the gun dipping towards the floor as he seemed to pose. "I am her arch rival."

Taking a deep breath, Xander wondered just how screwy in the head Warren was and how to talk him off this ledge before the man jumped. 'Cause going after a slayer was so many kinds of stupid that Xander couldn't even count them. "Okay, that's not making sense to me. You know about the whole slayer thing, so why would you want her to come after you? As someone who was recently hit in the head by Buffy, I can say that it is not fun."

"She has to come after me."

"Why?" Xander's question stopped Warren. He opened his mouth like he was going to answer, but then closed it without saying anything. Xander watched as a dozen emotions crossed Warren's face, and most of them inspired pity, not fear.
"I'm her arch rival," Warren said in a small voice. However, then he grimaced and stood up a little taller. "When I kill her, people are going to know who I am. They will know my name. They will."

Xander just stared at Warren, struggling to come up with an argument against that. He was starting to feel like he was talking to Spike. As much as Xander was starting to realize that Spike had more going than bloodlust and weird curse words, the vampire didn't seem to understand that other people existed outside of him. Buffy's pain from being ripped out of heaven was something that Spike had to fix or something that he resented, but he never seemed to think about how it just affected Buffy.

Even the people he loved, like Dawn and Buffy and Bonnie, he looked at how they fit into his life or how he fit into theirs. If Dawn wanted to go away to college, Xander figured they were all going to have their hands full trying to deal with Spike. The vamp would either want everyone to move with Dawn or Dawn to stay home. And no matter how much Xander tried talking around that roadblock in Spike's mind, he couldn't.
Up until now, he'd thought it was the missing soul that made it impossible for Spike to really consider people separate from himself. However, Warren had a soul, and he was doing pretty much the same thing. Xander existed to carry a message. Buffy was nothing more than an obstacle to throw himself against so that he could prove himself. Give him some yellow eyes and fangs, and Warren was already a vampire.

"Hey, did you hear there's a mated pair of Kiest demons near the library. Those things are ferocious, but I bet you have some fancy gun that could make short work of them," Xander said with the largest smile he could paste on. If Warren was going to think like a vampire, maybe Xander could distract him from his Buffy obsession using the same sort of bait a vampire would fall for—the promise of greater glory.

"Kiest?" Warren snorted. "They're nothing compared to a slayer."

"Can we maybe do a logic test here? I know that you think the whole arch rival plan glitters with greatness, but all that glistens is not gold or even gold wrapped or gold colored. Sometimes those sparkles are the yellow in the eyes of the vampire that's about to eat you. Only in
this case, it's going to be Buffy's fist coming at your face if she decides that you're a real threat." Xander didn't say that Buffy never would. Warren had shot at the house, he'd sent demons after her, he'd turned her invisible and then nearly turned her to goo, and she still had this weird hands-off policy because Warren was human. If Xander wasn't feeling guilty about the whole pulling her out of heaven mistake, he'd kick Buffy's ass, only with less kicking and more words about being stupid.

Warren was shaking his head. "No. She will realize that I'm a serious threat, and then she'll have to come after me, and I'm ready. You guys got Andrew, but I'm not going down that easy. I'm going to kill the slayer, and the very fact that she sent you means that she knows it. She won't even face me." That last thought made him smile.

"I don't think she's worried about—"

"Why won't she face me?" Warren interrupted.

"Maybe because she's got work and a kid sister to raise and a house that—"

"She isn't a slayer anymore, is she? That's it, isn't it?"
Warren was talking faster now, too excited to actually
listen to Xander at all.

"What? Okay, we've officially left the logic tracks here and we're heading for the cliffs. Warren, are you maybe not feeling well?"

"The demon. It did its work. It changed reality, and now Buffy isn't a slayer. She's totally helpless, so she sent you to beg me for mercy." The wide smile on Warren's face made Xander want to punch him. "She knows I would never listen to her, but she's hoping that maybe you could get through to me."

Xander sighed. "And here we go off the cliff."

"It all makes sense now."

"Yeah, all except for the part with the not making sense," Xander said. "Warren, I know about the demon, but Willow broke the spell."

Warren was shaking his head again, his gun pointed at the floor like he felt totally safe now that he'd won. "No. No, she couldn't have. Andrew promised that this plan would work, and I didn't believe him. Once I take over Sunnydale, I'll have to break him out of prison and
"Which is not happening," Xander said firmly. "None of that is happening. Warren, Buffy is still the slayer, and if you go anywhere near her, she will kick your ass. I am trying to keep your ass from getting kicked, and I have to tell you, I'm starting to wonder why I'm bothering."

"Oh please," Warren looked at Xander with this expression that was a cross between pity and disgust. "You're so unimportant that I'm not going to even bother shooting you. I should go after Spike, though. He's important enough to kill." And again, Warren was sounding creepily like a vampire. Xander briefly wondered if a person could lose his soul without getting vamped.

"I guess I should thank you on the not killing of me, but Warren, you are not tracking with reality," Xander tried again. "Your plan failed. Yeah, the demon made Buffy think that she was in some mental institution and if that demon's magic is anything like vengeance demon magic, that means that somewhere out there, some version of Buffy is still sitting in an insane asylum, but our Buffy broke the spell. She figured out that she's real, and she broke the spell. When she died, she came back out of
heaven. Do you really think your stupid little spell could hold her?” Xander stopped himself just short of calling Warren a pathetic little pimple. He really didn't want to get shot in the guts by a ray gun.

Warren looked Xander up and down. "You sound desperate," he said in this haughty voice.

"Well, duh. I kind of am. What does it take to get you to see that you lost? You lost. L. O. S. T. And if you keep this up you're going to be dead as in not breathing as in... dead. You have to stop this."

"No, you wouldn't be here if you weren't desperate, if you hadn't already lost." Warren leaned against one of his tables and pursed his lips like he was deep in thought... or faking being deep in thought, anyway. "So Buffy isn't the slayer, and now I just have to decide how to split up the spoils of war." Putting his ray gun down on the edge of the table, Warren actually rubbed his hands like some sort of comic book villain. "You can go back to whatever little life you have, but Willow... I have always wondered what a redhead would be like in bed. I'm going to find out."

"Do not go there," Xander warned. This wasn't working
the way he'd planned. Warren wasn't listening.

"Or maybe the slayer herself will be my reward—the old queen reduced to nothing more than a blonde bimbo chained to my bed." Warren's eyes seemed to glaze with lust, but when Xander took a step forward, he grabbed his gun. "Oh no. No, you do not get to stop me. I beat Buffy, the great slayer who returned from the dead. Me. I beat her, and everyone's going to know it."

"And you're going to celebrate by raping Buffy? That's kinda slimy. Actually, no. That's seriously, huge, enormous layers of slimy."

Warren narrowed his eyes. "Fine. If you're just a fan of the slayer, maybe I'll let you have her if you're nice to me. I can take the sister—Dawn."

Xander felt the pull of the gun in his hand, smelled the hot air and heard the thunder-like explosion as it went off. He saw Warren fling his hands up as he body fell back, a tiny red stain on his shirt like a flower blossom. He felt the wave of warmth, either from the gunpowder or from his own adrenaline. He saw his own hand rise up, pulling the gun farther out from its hiding place under his shirt and felt his finger tighten against the warm metal
He watched Warren hit the wall, his hands still spread, fingers wide as he slowly started sliding down. He couldn't hear as dozens of trinkets and weapons, mostly in pieces, clattered to the floor when Warren caught the edge of the table in his slow slide down the wall. Behind him, Warren left long streaks of red, and the twin flower blossoms, red-stained, ragged circles on Warren's green shirt, seeped blood. The stain spread and then drifted down, the blood turning into a teardrop as gravity pulled at it.

Xander watched, some part of his brain not understanding what he was seeing as Warren's lips moved. They were stained red now. Warren's hands ruined the perfect teardrop pattern forming on his shirt by ripping at the cloth with clumsy fingers. But those desperate movements slowed and soon only Warren's chest was moving, slower and slower until it just stopped.

Xander stood looking at the mess. Hands tugged at him, took the gun from him, and Xander stared at the inelegant pile of twisted limbs that had once been Warren. His mouth was open, a small trail of drying
blood at the corner.

Xander was shifting backwards now, his body moving even though his brain hadn't sent any messages. It couldn't. The door started closing, and Xander had one last look at Warren's tangled body, small pieces of his inventions scattered around like rose pedals. Then the door blocked his view. Xander blinked, his brain struggling to restart.

"Bloody hell, you're a fucking nob. You never should have put yourself in the same room with him. Considering that you have the survival instinct of a soddin' lemming, I don't know how you've lived this long." The voice was familiar, but Xander wasn't ready to deal with it. He was cold. So cold. He started shivering, and hands pushed him up into a seat.

"Drink this." Something cold was shoved into his hands, but Xander couldn't seem to get his fingers to close all the way. He couldn't feel his right hand. He let it drop into his lap as he flexed his pointer finger, struggling to get back feeling in it.

"Oh for.... If this were the old days, Angelus would be saying you were ready for the charnel house, mate."
Hands lifted the cold flask and brought it to his lips. Xander almost choked as the fire ripped a path down his throat.

"Shit." Xander choked and spit whiskey all over the inside of the van. "Holy shit." He coughed, his whole throat burning. He got control of the coughing, but his heart kept pounding so loud that Xander couldn't hear anything other than the rush of blood through his own veins. Spike was standing in the open passenger side door, his hands on Xander's thighs.

"I killed him," Xander whispered. His stomach jolted, and he might have thrown up, except he couldn't without throwing up on Spike, and even with half his brain stuck somewhere between panic and horror, that didn't seem like a good idea.

"That was the point."

"He's dead." Xander closed his eyes, and he could see Warren's body falling.

When Spike slapped his face, Xander's eyes flew open. "Don't even start that shite. He was threatening to rape Buffy, rape Dawn. What do you think he'd do the first
time Willow insulted his manhood? He was a worthless git with less morals than a common vampire, and you don't get your knickers twisted about stakes them."

Xander opened his mouth, but he couldn't come up with any argument for that. Warren had wanted to hurt them all just to make himself feel better, which was pretty much what vampires did. But that didn't erase the bone-deep cold he could feel when he thought about shooting him.

"You need to get pissed, pet."

"Don't have the energy to get angry." Xander wasn't even sure he had the energy to stand up. His legs felt shaky, like he'd been running for miles. Spike gave him a disgusted look, but Xander just looked at him. He was too tired to try and figure out Spike weirdness.

"Drunken, pet. You need to get good and drunk."

Xander shook his head. "Harris family genes and alcohol do not mix."

Spike snorted. "Well, they will tonight. We're going to get you good and drunk—drunk enough that you stop
"Not brooding," Xander complained softly, but Spike slammed the passenger side door and Xander was left sitting in the seat still clutching Spike's flask. He wasn't brooding; he was wondering how things had gotten so out of control. When he was sixteen, Giles had stood in the library and promised him that the world was simple. People were good. Demons were evil. His hand had held the stake that turned Jesse into dust, and he'd ordered himself to not grieve because Jesse had been a demon, and demons were evil.

The driver's side door opened and Spike dropped his cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his heel before he got into the driver's side. Xander watched Spike as he started the van and then carefully backed out of the driveway. "Wait." Xander looked at the house, and Spike braked.

"Wot?"

"The...." Xander stopped. He couldn't call Warren a body. Warren wasn't a body, he was a pain in the butt, a nerd, a geek with a robot obsession. He was a person.
"I already arranged to take care of it, pet. Just drink up." Spike started backing up again, and Xander watched Warren's house until they turned the corner and he couldn't see it any more.

Part Eighteen

Spike ended up carrying Xander since the boy's feet kept crossing each other and threatening to make them both tip over into the lawn.

"Not a girl," Xander muttered. At least that's what it sounded like. The boy definitely couldn't hold his whiskey.

"Never thought you were, pet. You're too bloody heavy, for one," Spike answered. Propping Xander up on the porch, he dug in his duster's pocket for the key to the front door. Despite the fact he had two perfectly good legs, Xander started to slide to the ground, and Spike used a hip to pin him to the wall and keep him upright.
"Your rule is still stupid." Xander laid his forehead on Spike's shoulder.

"You chuck on me, and I'll make you eat it," Spike warned with a glare, but Xander was too drunk to take much notice. "And my rule is not stupid. It works better than your bloody 'demon bad, human good' rot. I thought you were smart enough to recognize that as rubbish."

"Rubbish. Rubbish, roobish, rubbage." Xander chuckled, and Spike tried to remind himself that he'd set out to make sure that Xander wasn't brooding, so ripping out his intestines for being in a good mood would be a mite bit hypocritical. Finally getting the key in the lock, Spike kicked the door open. The house was perfectly silent, so everyone had to be in the lower levels. "But it is," Xander said. The git didn't even try to help as Spike tried to maneuver them through the door.

"Is what, pet?" Spike propped Xander up against the corner of a wall, and Xander clung to it, his whole body swaying.

"Is stupid. The demon-bad rule is stupid. Really stupid. Giles shouldn't be that stupid. Being stupid is my job."
Spike locked the front door and headed into the living room to make sure all the drapes were pulled. Sun was going to be up in less than an hour.

"Giles was supposed to be the smart one. He gave us that demon bad rule, you know. Demons don't have souls, only that doesn't really explain Clem. Clem is a very souly demon."

"That he is." Spike stood in the middle of the living room and considered Xander. Getting the git down the stairs without head trauma would be hard, but Spike felt he owed Xander something after he'd taken care of the problem.

Curling a lip, Spike snarled at fate, at the chip and at the whole bloody government. He wasn't weak, but with the soddin' chip in place, he couldn't even protect Buffy like he should. It felt too much like the time Dru had been ill, wasting away before his eyes and he couldn’t do a bloody thing about it. Spike always had felt a certain gratitude toward Dalton for helping him through those days. Mind, he hadn't been grateful enough to protect the vampire from the Judge. Actually, thinking back, he'd been amused at the sight of the bookish vampire getting
immolated, but that was another matter. He'd gone out of his way to not kill Dalton himself. And now he could feel that same reluctance to rip out Xander's intestines.

"Giles was wrong."

"Bloody right."

"But you're wrong too!" Xander pointed a finger at Spike and nearly fell over.

"Am not. My rule actually makes sense."

"Perfect sense except where it doesn't make any sense at all. If you kill everyone who isn't family, that means you have to kill...." Xander frowned, and for a second Spike thought he might actually be trying to count that high in his head. Next time he had to cheer Xander up, he was just getting him stoned.

"I didn't say you had to kill everyone who wasn't family."

"Yes you did."

"No, I didn't."
"Did!" Xander grabbed the wall again as he nearly fell over.

"I bloody well did not. I said you could kill anyone as long as they weren't family. Not the same, is it?"

"Is it?" Xander echoed.

"You can't hold your whiskey," Spike accused Xander. He turned toward the stairs where quiet footsteps were creeping up the treads. "Tara, that you?" Spike called. He'd asked Tara to make sure Bonnie was out of the house, but it wasn't like either Tara or Xander went out of their way to follow his every rule to the letter. It was like having someone else's minions around... even if he did like these two more than minions.

Tara stuck her head around the door and looked around like she was expecting a demon attack. Spike dropped down into the chair and gestured toward Xander. "I brought the boy home. Bonnie out?"

Tara nodded and came the rest of the way into the living room. "She's with Clem. Are you two okay?"

Spike snorted. He was right as rain. With Warren dead,
he almost felt good about life. Now all he had to do was get Buffy over this weird insistence she had that she wasn't going to have sex with him anymore. That would last about two days. The bint had the sexual appetites of a demon, she did.

"Tara! Hey, you have to be the tie... tiebroker," Xander blurted out.

"Tiebroker?"

Xander looked at Tara like she was a little crazy. "Tiebroker? Like a broker of ties." He laughed. "Nope, tie breaker! You're so silly."

"He's as pissed as a rat," Spike offered.

"Pissed rats." Xander laughed again. "Do they have little rat protest signs. No more rat poison. Down with cats!"

Tara walked over to him and rested her hand against his shoulder. "Xander, you need to get some sleep."

"And water. The boy's going to hurt come tomorrow," Spike said. Tara tried to guide Xander away from the wall, but Xander fought her, clinging to the casement and
giggling like a five-year-old girl.

Eventually, Tara turned to him. "Spike, what happened?"

Xander answered before Spike could. "Warren happened. Buffy happened. Warren and Dawn was not happening." Some signs of anger started showing through all the drunken happiness. For all the helpless, bumbling vibes the boy put off, he had some darkness in him. He'd put two bullets right into Warren's heart and stood there without blinking. True, he'd then gone as loony as Dru on one of her bad days, but he'd done the killing without a twitch.

"Warren and Dawn?" Tara sounded confused.

Throwing out an arm, Xander leaned on her. "So, you have to break the tiebreaker. Spike says the rule is that you can kill anyone who isn't family."

"Kill?" Tara's voice got shrill with shock.

Xander put his weight onto her, and she stumbled before she pushed him back toward the wall so it could hold him up. "I had a couple of ideas, but I can't find them right now," Xander said sadly.
"Spike, what happened?"

"Boy went over to talk to Warren. Git sent the demon after Buffy and he thought it had worked, that Xander was there to beg for mercy. He was trying to figure out who to rape first as part of his victory dance." Spike ran his tongue along the inside of his lip and tried to ignore the curling wisps of hatred and panic and fear that still plagued him. The fact that Warren was human meant that he couldn't do a bloody thing as the git threatened Spike's family. If Xander hadn't shot him, Spike would have, even if the soddin' chip burnt his brain out. "Seems he'd settled on raping Dawn."

"Oh goddess." Tara's hands flew to her mouth.

"He is not raping Dawn," Xander blurted out. "Not that I'm okay with the raping of Willow or Buffy, either. I'm voting no to all forms of rape. Rape bad."

"You're absolutely right, Xander. Rape is always an evil act." Tara patted his arm, but she looked to Spike for answers.

"When the nob threatened to rape Dawn, the boy finally
took care of the problem," Spike said with a shrug. It was over now, and he was ready to head down to his room, turn on the music and have a good wank.

"Took care of it." Xander giggled. "What a nice way of calling me a murderer."

"Murder? Oh heavenly goddess. Xander." Tara's voice got all sad, and Spike braced himself for another round of moralizing. Bloody annoying the way they could talk anything to death. No wonder they were all so set against killing when every death seemed to bring on hours of talking.

Xander shook his head. "I'm not a heavenly goddess. At least I don't think so." Xander felt down between his legs, and Tara blushed and turned her head as he inspected his cock. Spike would call him an idiot, but this was more the drink than any actual stupidity. "Nope, still here," Xander announced with a bit of pride.

"I'm sure it is," Tara said with amusement. But as soon as her smile appeared, it vanished again. "Did you really kill Warren?"

"Shot him. I think I shot him. It's a little fuzzy. I had the
gun in my hand, and he fell down from being shot, so I'm saying that I probably shot him." Xander frowned like he couldn't quite remember, which was good as far as Spike was concerned. He couldn't obsess about what he didn't remember.

"At least he's not brooding over it anymore," Spike pointed out. "Warren needed to be put down. Eight months I've put up with those three attacking, and the fucking chip kept me from taking care of the nobs. Now they're fucking gone, and good riddance."

"No swearing in front of Bonnie," Xander muttered.

Tara sighed and leaned close, brushing his sweaty curls off his forehead. "Bonnie's staying with Clem tonight, Xander. Clem had family visiting, and he wanted to show her off."

"She's not here?"

"No. She'll be back in the morning."

Xander didn't answer immediately. He turned his head and rested it against the wall. "Hopefully my head will fall off by morning," he finally whispered.
"Oh Xander."

"It should fall off. I killed someone."

Spike rolled his eyes. "You've killed lots of someones, pet. Can you even count the number of vampires you've staked?"

"Sixteen." Xander answered without a moment's hesitation, and Spike blinked, surprised that the boy would bother to keep track. It wasn't like he went around bragging about how many he'd dusted, so he wasn't keeping stats to brag about.

"Right then, just call this seventeen," Spike suggested. It wasn't like Warren had any more morals or any more right to live than any vampire Xander had staked. He was too weak to protect himself and too bloody immoral to claim the protection of Buffy and her white knights.

Xander was already shaking his head. "But he wasn't a vampire. He talked like one. Wanted to kill Buffy so he could prove he was some big badass, which is sounding like Spike."
"Oi!"

"He does have a point," Tara said softly, turning to give Spike an apologetic smile. Xander took the opportunity to move away from the wall and toward the second chair.

"Don't bloody start. I didn't have to prove anything, unlike that nancy-boy pillock."

Xander started laughing and then fell on his ass when he tried to sit in a chair and missed it altogether. Then he sat there looking vaguely confused, like he couldn't figure out why the chair hadn't just slid over to catch him. It was a good thing that the boy wasn't a drinker because he didn't hold his whiskey well at all.

After a few seconds, Spike realized that Xander was not going to get himself up off the floor and Tara was just looking from him to Xander and back, waiting on him to do something. With an aggravated sigh, Spike walked over and caught the boy under the arms, picking him up and tossing him onto the couch.

"Killed him," Xander keened softly, which was even more annoying than brooding.
"It's not like he had any choice. That wanker was getting more dangerous, and Xander knew it. We all knew it," Spike told Tara. He'd said the same to Xander often enough that he'd gone bloody blue in the face.

"He admitted to sending the reality demon?" Tara moved to the couch and sat next to Xander, her arm going around his shoulders.

"Yeah. Wanted it to change reality so Buffy wasn't the slayer. That way he could defeat her and have the added bonus of chaining her to his bed as the spoils of war." Spike growled at the thought of that pathetic worm ever touching Buffy. Even if it meant the chip fried his whole brain, Spike would have found a way to kill the wanker before that happened.

"And now... not so much." Xander hiccupped. "Know why? Cause he's dead. Like in doornail only more dead because a doornail never was alive, and so it can't really be dead, and Warren is. Really. Dead."

"Don't start in on that rot about killing humans being all that different from killing demons." Spike pointed his finger at Xander and wondered if there was any hard
liquor in the house. He'd need some if Xander started in on that shite again. "You kill who you have to if you want to protect family. A vampire or Warren... if they threaten family, then they're choosing to get killed."

Xander let his head flop back onto the couch. "I'm listening to moral rules from the moralless one, Tara. You see why you have to break the tie?"

"What tie?" Tara stroked his leg like she might a dog she wanted to comfort.

"Bloody hell, the boy keeps coming up with theories, each one more barmy than the last. He's run through some rot about it only being okay to kill people who have killed and then he had some shite about saving two for every one you kill and then something about Darwin. The boy's a piss-poor philosopher when he's pissed drunk."

"Two for one," Xander mumbled, scratching his chest. "I saved Jonathan and Andrew. I sort of saved Andrew." Xander frowned. "Andrew's alive, but he would not be saying I saved him, so maybe I saved one and a half. Does that make it okay that I killed Warren?" Xander turned big puppy-eyes on Tara, and she had a look on her face like a deer about to get pulverized by the semitruck
whose lights had caught it.

"I don't know, Xander," she finally answered.

"Bloody hell. You could reassure the git," Spike complained.

"Spike." Tara stopped and chewed on her lip. "I can't say something that isn't true. I just don't know right now, and Xander's not sober enough to have this conversation."

"He was even less fun having it when he was sober." Spike stood up and headed for the kitchen. He needed a bloody beer. On the couch, Xander was still trying to talk morality.

"I thought maybe the rule should be you only killed people who had killed first, because Warren killed that girl that he liked and he tried to kill Buffy and he... he did other stuff I'm not remembering right now."

"I know, Xander." Tara made a little crooning sound, and Spike opened his beer and leaned against the counter. Bloody souls weren't good for anything but mucking up the brain.
"But there's a flaw in that theory," Xander said, his voice a loud whisper.

"What's that?"

"I killed. I killed Warren, so does that make it right for someone to kill me?"

"No, Xander, it doesn't."

"Then maybe I wasn't right. Maybe I shouldn't have...." Xander's voice trailed off into a sob. Bloody hell. Spike had worked all night to get the git to the point where he wasn't brooding. He was coming up with daft rules about who could kill, and he was doing that in a bar full of demons who probably thought Xander was more than a little touched in the head, but he wasn't brooding. Five minutes at home, and now he was sobbing, the sound muffled as if by fabric. He was crying on Tara then.

Throwing the beer cap in the sink, Spike headed for the stairs. "You want help getting him downstairs?" Spike asked.

Tara shook her head. Xander was laying on the couch, his
head in her lap and his arms around her waist as he sobbed. "We're okay here." She was still petting him, but Spike wasn't sure Xander even noticed. The man really was about as touched in the head as Dru.

"When he's listening to reason, you just remind him of one thing: If Warren's plan had worked, Buffy wouldn't be the slayer, Dawn would be chained to his bed, and I'd be dead. If Xander hadn't acted, that's the future Warren would have created sooner or later. He was too bloody obstinate to ever give up without some sort of victory to cling to." Spike was one hundred percent sure of that. Xander just kept sobbing, and Tara kept stroking his shoulder like some sort of stray, and Spike just rolled his eyes and headed down to his bedroom. Daft. They were all daft.

**Part Nineteen**

Then next night, Spike cut through the dungeon level rather than risk running into Xander and his brooding. It reminded him too much of Angel and his constant whining about how he wasn't human anymore. Git. Some days Spike wondered if it wouldn't be a mercy to just stake his overgelled sire.

Of course, if he did that, he'd never get to see Angel's
face when the big poof found out that Spike had succeeded where he hadn't. Years ago he'd told those two that love was passion, it was blood and fire and passion, but Angel was such a dead fish that he couldn't match Buffy. Spike was a much better mate. And now that Warren was out of the picture, Spike could focus on the important battle: getting Buffy to stop deceiving herself and everyone else about their feelings. The woman was stubborn. Spike smiled because he was even more stubborn.

The house was dark when Spike strolled up the sidewalk. The door opened and Dawn came sailing out. "I'm off."

"Don't forget—"

"Got it!" Dawn cut her sister off and slammed the door mid-nag.

"Bit," Spike said as he looked at the bag thrown over her shoulder. "So, running away from home, then?"

Dawn laughed and came over to throw her arms around him. Spike hugged her back, feeling her heat and the steady thumping of her heart. The idea that Warren was getting stripped to the bone and eaten just made the feel
of her arms around him even better. "I'm having a sleepover at Janice's," she said. She turned and waved at a car. Inside a middle aged woman with jowls waited, a girl about Dawn's age in the front seat waving back.

"You two planning on going out drinking or chasing boys?" Spike asked. Those might be normal enough pastimes for a girl Dawn's age, but if Dawn was planning to do either, Spike needed to make sure they got home safe.

Dawn rolled her eyes at him. "No. What I plan is a night of painting our toenails and watching chick flicks. Are you going to stalk us?"

"For chick flicks? Fuck no," Spike answered. From Dawn's expression, she was telling the truth, but it still bothered Spike a bit that Buffy hadn't warned him the Bit was going out. Sunnydale was a dangerous place, and he wasn't sure this Janice was a safe enough place for her. He dropped his cigarette to the ground and crushed it. "You have weapons?" he asked soft enough that no one could overhear.

"Two stakes and a knife. I'm okay, Spike. Geez, you're as big of a worrywart as Buffy."
"Oi!" Spike objected, but then Dawn went up on her toes and gave him a peck on the cheek, and he couldn't help but smile at her.

"See you tomorrow!" Dawn said before she ran for her friend's car. Spike watched as she got in and the car vanished. Spike would get Janice's address from Buffy and check the place out before he went home. Felt wrong, having family spread out so much, but that was humanity for you... downright illogical at times.

Spike headed up the steps and walked into Buffy's house without knocking. She was picking up a bowl from the coffee table, and she froze for a second, her whole body tight. Spike smiled. Already she was itching for a quick tumble; he could see it in the way her muscles tenses and her eyes dilated. She said all sort of things when the others were around, but her body would always yearn for him.

"Spike, what are you doing here?"

"Wot? I need an excuse to come visit?"

"Actually, yes. You do. Excuses would be good. You not
coming over at all would be better."

Ignoring the insult, Spike walked over to the sofa and threw himself down on it, propping one boot on the table. Buffy hit his foot, and he smiled as he shifted it to the floor. Given a little prodding, Buffy did make a beautiful and vicious domme.

"Is there a reason for your visit?" Buffy put the bowl back on the coffee table, crossed her arms and glared down at him.

"Yep." Spike gave her his best smile, the one that always tempted the good little prey into his bed and made Angelus backhand him. "Wanted to give you a chance to enjoy my company." Buffy snorted. "That and I wanted to let you know Warren's gone. The wanker hired the demon who sent you 'round the twist, so Xander and I took care of him."

Buffy took a step back. "Took care of?"

Spike shrugged. It still irked him that he hadn't been able to take care of it himself, but he wasn't some insecure git who took other's credit. "Xander shot him, twice in the heart."
"Xander...." Buffy made a strange noise in the back of her throat and then she started shaking her head. "No, Xander wouldn't do that."

"Took him too long, but he finally got around to finishing the job." Spike stretched and watched Buffy through half-closed eyes, waiting for her move. Instead Buffy dropped down onto a chair.

"He... he killed Warren? Xander wouldn't do that. He isn't...." Her voice trailed off. Spike wasn't really surprised at the shock though. Hell, up until Xander pulled the trigger, Spike had been starting to wonder if the boy had any balls at all, despite Anya's colorful descriptions of him as being endowed like a Viking.

"When Warren didn't fall for any of the puppy boy's plans, Xander finally went over to deal with him directly."

"Plans?" Buffy glared at Spike.

"You know, talking Jonathan into going down to L.A."

"But...." Buffy was definitely off her game today. "He said he ran into Jonathan, that they just started to talk."
Spike frowned. What the bloody hell was Xander doing lying about what he'd done? The only time Spike had ever lied to Angelus was when he was about to sell him out to the slayer. "He said that?"

"Yeah. Spike, what is he not telling me?"

Spike sat up. Bloody right the slayer could trust him. "The boy and I snatched Jonathan up off the streets, and Xander talked some rot about comic books and right and wrong and then he talked Jonathan into going to stay with that nancy-boy watcher of Angel's."

Buffy smiled. "Okay, that sounds like Xander. Except for the snatching part, which sounds more like you, Spike."

"I helped," Spike agreed. "Bloody chip kept me from doing much but driving."

She nodded. "I bet you helped Xander with killing Warren, too, didn't you?"

"Helped him get the gun and drove him over. Then I was stuck outside listening to him try to talk Warren around to being a white hat. That one wasn't ever going to
change, but Xander just kept trying to reason with him until the wanker finally threatened to rape Dawn. Apparently he thought his demon had done its work and you were helpless to protect any of us."

"So Xander killed him?" Buffy had a strange tone to her voice. Spike frowned and tried to figure out what she had running through her head.

"Shot him twice in the heart, but I arranged for some demons to come get the body, so the boy's in the clear." Spike sprawled, his arms stretched out on the back of the couch.

"You." Buffy stopped, her lips pressed tightly together, and Spike could feel a wisp of fear. Back in the day, that look meant Darla was about to take a whip to him until he couldn't stand on his own. "Get out." Buffy's voice was slow and measured.

"Wot?"

"I can't believe you. You backed Xander into a corner, and then you're going to come over here bragging about it?" Buffy was up on her feet, a finger pointed in his direction, and Spike sat up fast. "What? Isn't it enough
that you corrupted me, but now you have to go ruining Xander's life?"

"I never—"

"Get out." Buffy's whole body was trembling, and Spike could smell the aggression and need rolling from her like a heavy fog.

"Going to play that game again, are we?" Spike stood up, bending his elbows as he prepared for the attack. Buffy did like her games, almost as much as she liked ripping through his back with her nails, leaving him bleeding and sore. Spike's cock was getting hard in anticipation.

"I told you, we're done."

"I heard that chorus before, luv." Spike pursed his lips and stalked closer, lured by the scent of Buffy's desire. She was breathing fast, and he could hear each heavy breath and her heart pounding.

"I mean it this time."

"No, luv, you don't," Spike said. "No need to keep lying to yourself?"
"Don't say that!" Buffy's fists came up, and her smell sharpened. Breathing in the scent of Buffy's desire, Spike smiled. "Just...." Buffy stepped back. "Okay, so I have some feelings."

"Some?"

"Okay, more than some. I have a lot of hard, sweaty feelings. But it's not love. Don't you see that?"

Spike moved forward again. "I see how much you want me."

"Do you see that I can't trust you?" Buffy's words cut through Spike, and he stopped. If this was some new game of hers, he didn't like it. Often as not she verbally and physically dominated him, but she'd never questioned his loyalty.

"You think I'd sell you out, side with some wanker like Warren who wanted to kill you?"

Buffy sighed. "No." Spike tried to not show the relief he felt at that, and Buffy kept on going. "But I can't trust you to understand what I'm feeling, what I need."
That made Spike laugh. "Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy. Great love is wild ... and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes." He stalked forward. "That's what you need. You need to let the fire take you until you don't have to think about anything but the passion." Spike had seen it a dozen times, the way Buffy's pain and loss would fall from her in the middle of their sex. She'd start full of conflicts and hurt, but he'd erase that... make her feel alive and whole and dominate.

"But until there's nothing left," she said softly. "Until there's nothing left of me... of the people I love. Love like that doesn't last, and how many people are going to be hurt?" That slight sour of pain was there in her scent, and Spike snorted at the wrongness of that. She just needed to slip back into their roles, and she could let that pain slide away.

"I know you feel the passion. You don't have to hide it anymore." Spike reached out, but Buffy yanked her hand away before Spike could catch it.

"Spike, please stop trying to make this work. It won't."

"Let yourself feel it." Spike whispered the words, his
voice a plea. When he moved forward, she hesitated, and he slipped his hands around her waist, feeling all that strength below her skin. She was more demon than human some days, and he could see the wildness in her now.

"No."

"You love me." Spike leaned in to kiss her, waiting for her legs to wrap around him, taking him to the ground.

"No, stop it." She sounded cranky now, and Spike smiled and tried to grind his body against her. She just needed reminding of just what he could do for her.

"Admit it, luv. We're made for each other."

Buffy caught his arm and wrenched it so that muscle and tendon strained. Spike hissed through his teeth, his cock totally hard now. He grabbed her hair and tried to pull her close for a kiss. He loved that she would use his body any way she wanted, but he craved a kiss. She pushed at his shoulders, letting go of his arm, and Spike grappled for dominance. He'd never get it, but pushing Buffy to take control was the best part of the game.
"Ow, stop it." Buffy twisted and fabric ripped in Spike's hand. Well, that was one more shirt for the rubbish bin. He'd hear about that later, but not until Buffy was hot and stated, her limp body lying across his.

"What the hell do you—" Buffy's words were cut off as she hit the chair with the back of her leg and tumbled to the ground. Spike was on her in a second, pinning her to the ground and smelling the aggression like a perfume.

"Ow!" Buffy tried to crab walk out of the small space between the coffee table and chair, but Spike had her trapped.

"Let it go. Let yourself love me."

"Get off me!" Buffy brought up a knee that caught Spike just under the ribs, and he grunted in pain.

"Fuck yeah." His eyes went yellow and his whole body was tense, ready for a fight or a fuck. He hadn't felt this since Dru... or since Dru'd stopped having good days, anyway. After Prague, they'd never been the same. His vicious plum had seemed to barely notice him most of the time, but Buffy wasn't going to ignore him. She couldn't claim to be off talking to stars or dolls. When she
needed him, he'd given up everything to be hers, and she was going to see just how much he loved her, no matter what he had to do. "You have more in you than that, luv," Spike crooned.

"No, stop it!"

"I know you feel our passion, our fire. When I'm inside you, that's when you come alive." Spike ran a tongue over her neck, feeling the heat and tasting the salt.

Buffy shoved him back and scrambled for the couch. Spike reached out, catching her foot, and she went down in an inglorious heap, her head hitting the coffee table with a loud crack. Spike flinched. If they broke that, he was never hearing the bloody end of it.

"Ow. no, Spike don't, please," Buffy cried out.

"I know how to make it all better. Going to make you feel good," Spike promised. He reached for her, and she made an awkward roll to the side to get out of his way, almost like she meant to lose the battle. That wasn't part of their normal game at all, but he'd done that for Dru often enough, taking the dominant role, playing at a relationship that didn't really exist between them. On the
worst days, she'd call him daddy when she'd begged him to hurt her. Spike shoved that memory aside and focused on Buffy.

He focused a half-second too late. Buffy's punch caught him in the middle of the face and sent him sailing backwards. He hit the chair, tumbled over it, and crashed to the ground.

Spike bounced back up, confused and bleeding from the nose. That soddin' hurt.

"Stop!" Buffy said coldly. Her tone more than her word stopped him. Spike frowned at what he saw. Her body was defensive, but not coiled with power the way it usually was when they were together. Instead she almost looked like she was curling up inside herself, hugging her own body the way the puppy boy would. She held one side of her blouse up, the fabric ripped and a rug burn already showing through on the skin below.

"Buffy?" Spike cocked his head and sniffed the air. Her musk was there, dominating the space, but instead of being tinted with lust and power, there was a weariness in it, a pain that he'd never smelled before. Spike looked at her again, slowly realizing that this wasn't like every
other time they'd been together. She wasn't fighting back. She wasn't digging her fingernails into his back and demanding that his body yield in ways a human couldn't survive.

"Ask me again why I could never love you," Buffy asked quietly.

Spike's blood turned to ice. He hadn't meant-- He never—Spike's thoughts chased through his head as he remembered every time they'd been together, every time he'd had to taunt her, encourage that demoness to slip out from under the weary and defeated woman Buffy had become.

"Buffy, my god, I didn't—" Spike stopped. He didn't mean to try and rape her. That was Angelus' game, and Spike generally preferred his partners willing. He wanted them reaching for him, not crawling to get away. He'd had enough of lovers who didn't actually want him. However, before he could explain any of that, Buffy cut him off.

"Because I stopped you," she snapped, and he had no comeback for that. "Which is something I should have done a long time ago."
"We're good together," Spike argued. Okay, he'd fucked this up, but there was room to recover.

"No, we aren't," Buffy said firmly. "You convinced Xander to kill someone. You convince me to—" She stopped.

"You loved every second," Spike snapped. He'd never made her do anything. Not until things had just gotten out of hand.

"I shouldn't have, Spike. That's my point. You need to leave, and you need to not come back." Buffy crossed her arms.

Spike wanted to argue, to slide up close to her and whisper in her ear. He wanted to feel her hands holding him down, fingers pressing deep into his flesh. However, some little part of his brain cautioned him that he was dangerously close to provoking the slayer in her. Spike backed up toward the door.

"Spike," Buffy said. Spike looked at her. "I mean it. Don't ever come back. I can't trust you, and I won't have you around Dawn."

Spike turned and strode out the door, his guts twisting so
painfully that he actually touched his stomach to check for some sort of wound. Fuck. Fuck it all. It wasn't his fault. He just... he didn't understand how people worked. He didn't understand Xander or Tara or Buffy with her fucking rules that never made one bit of sense. Spike found himself running down the dark road without any destination in mind.

Part Twenty

Xander watched as Willow came in the room and shyly smiled at Tara. Tara ducked her head, but Xander was guessing that if he had sat on the other side, he would have seen she was smiling back. It felt weird; he'd killed Warren and life was just going on like normal. He felt like he should have some giant sign floating over his head that said, "Murderer here."

"Hey," Willow said, "so, big Scooby meeting? What's the sitch?"
Buffy shrugged and pulled her feet up under her. "Tara and Xander called this one."

"You two? Together?" Willow looked at them in confusion.

"Yep," Xander agreed. "Only not together, together. Just more like... um...."

"We decided that it's time for all our secrets to be on the table," Tara finished for him. Xander smiled at her.

"What she said," he agreed. He really didn't want to give up his secrets, but Tara was right that this thing with Warren was too big to hide. It wouldn’t be fair to leave Buffy thinking Warren was still out there, and he really didn't want to follow Willow down the path of repression and denial. That was just not a fun path.

"Okay." Willow sat down in the chair opposite Buffy. "Just to let you know, I haven't done any magic. None. I don't have secrets. Promise. So if this is an intervention, I am intervention unneeding. At least now, because it's not that I'm denying that I had a problem, only that it's no longer at intervention requiring levels."
"Willow," Xander said, but she just kept going.

"I mean, I'm getting more into the computer again, and I found this great group online, people who understand how hard it is to get through the day when there's this giant hole where the addiction used to be. And it's great to have people who understand, but they're addicts. Real addicts. Heroine and cocaine addicts, and let me say that it was not my life's goal to ever have anything in common with drug addicts, so I totally understand that I was out of control. Am out of control. Well, I'm sort of out of control, only I've been really good about controlling it. Promise." Willow had the sort of insecure, desperate expression that Xander remembered from high school. This was his non-addicted and babbly Willow... much better than the too-large and too-in-charge magically super-powered one. Maybe Tara saw that, too, because she leaned over to rest a hand against Willow's leg.

"Actually, I was hoping I could start." Xander said.

"Oh." Willow cringed.

"Xander?" Buffy asked. Xander looked over because Buffy had a strange tone in her voice.
"And hey, maybe after I start, we could all take turns baring our souls," Xander suggested with a plastic grin. He really wanted Buffy to come clean about the Spike-thing before either of them got hurt. He looked around at the whole room. Tara gave him a proud smile.

"Sounds fun," Willow said, her face scrunched in either disgust or dismay.

"Yeah," Buffy agreed in a weak mockery of a cheer. She actually looked like she might be nauseous. Actually, now that he thought about it, Xander was coming mighty close to worshipping the porcelain god.

"Maybe I should start," Tara said quietly. Everyone looked relieved, and Xander was suddenly aware that he didn't know what was going on with Buffy and Willow any more than they knew what was going on with him. Oh, he already knew way too much about the Buffy and Spike show, but he didn't know why Buffy would turn to Spike. He didn't know why Willow's love of magic sparkles had turned into the addiction that threatened to destroy her. He didn't know his best friends anymore, and it hurt him.

Tara looked down at her lap. "I kn-kn-knew Willow was in
trouble." Her voice trembled and Willow reached out for her hand before yanking her hand back before they made contact.

"Hey, you're not the one to blame for that."

"The addiction? No," Tara said firmly. "But I have my own sins." She took a deep breath and Willow laid her hand on top of the one Tara had placed on her knee. "I should have said something, but I thought I would lose you. So I didn't step in when I knew there was a problem." The stuttering just about broke Xander's heart, and he wanted to just rush in and confess his own screw-ups to keep her from hurting herself. However Tara looked each of them in the eye and Xander couldn't interrupt her. "I should have put my foot down, but I covered when you forgot things, forgot people. I should have walked out before you became so addicted."

Willow's eyes were shiny, and her fingers curled around Tara's hand. "It wasn't your fault. I was out of control."

"And I let you get away with it," Tara said softly, her voice trembling with emotion. "I love you, but I can't be part of you destroying yourself or others." Tara took a deep breath. "If we try this again, I can't give you chance
after chance, and I will use protective spells to keep you from putting a spell on me."

Willow flinched, but she nodded. "I can see why you need that. I don't like seeing it, but I can," she agreed. "But this isn't your fault."

"Not only mine." Tara looked around at the room. "We all should have stepped in sooner. We've all started keeping too many secrets."

Xander flinched, and he noticed that Buffy did, too. He wished there were an easy way to just blurt out that he knew about Spike and Buffy. That way he could save Buffy the awkward joy of trying to figure out how to say the words.

Tara turned toward him. "Xander?" She gave him an expectant look, and Xander's stomach churned.

"My turn? Hey, I heard there's a Bollywood marathon on television tonight." He smiled at his own joke, but no one smiled with him. Willow looked confused, and Buffy... she looked freaked out, actually. "Bollywood's not that bad," Xander muttered. "Okay, I've got some biggies."
"You can tell us anything," Willow said, looking even more confused.

"Theoretically, yes," Xander agreed. This was harder than he thought.

"Does this have anything to do with how upset you've been lately?" Buffy asked. She leaned forward and studied him until Xander actually squirmed uncomfortably.

"Funny you should ask." Xander cleared his throat and swallowed an inappropriate joke. "Okay, I've been really worried because the idiot trio was getting out of hand, and I think the whole humans-aren't-a-problem attitude is a little weird because humans kill more humans than demons ever could. And I really thing Warren was leading up to some serious killage."

"You do?" Willow wrinkled her nose. "But he's Warren."

"Which means we know he's a little psycho and Andrew is weirdly obsessed with him and willing to do pretty much anything. Sooner or later, they were going to give up shooting ray guns and time loop thingies and just use bullets."
"Were?" Buffy asked sharply, and Xander flinched. Yep, he'd put both feet in his mouth and now he had to tell them.

"Were," Xander agreed softly. "I asked Riley for help—"

"Riley? My Riley?" Buffy sat up and looked shocked. "Riley Finn?"

"Um, yes and not anymore and yes, in that order," Xander agreed. "You guys know that Jonathan headed down to LA, and I asked Riley to drop in on Andrew and Warren and just poke around a little. Well, Riley's shaman had to do the anti-mojo mojo when Andrew panicked and started throwing magic around. Riley arrested him for assault with magic and attempted murder."

"Oh, goddess. Is Riley okay?" Willow asked. Buffy was just staring at him like Xander's head had turned blue and caught on fire, and this was going about as well as Xander had expected.

"Riley's fine. His shaman was expecting the dork to try something, but that means that Andrew is out of the
way, but Andrew had already helped Warren hire the dimension demon thingy that put Buffy in that reality where she's in an insane asylum.

"And you decided to confront him on your own?" Buffy demanded. Before Xander could get offended at the suggestion he couldn't handle himself, Buffy had her hands held up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It just came out wrong."

"Xander wanted to protect you," Tara said softly, her voice offering Xander the support he needed.

"He was insane. Like Joker levels of nuts. He was making plans for who to rape first." Xander's guts churned at the memory. "I thought if it was just the two of us, he'd stop playing this weird game in his head where he had to beat us. I even offered to help him beat up some really scary bad guys. That always works when Spike is feeling useless." Xander sighed as he realized he was saying everything except what he wanted to say.

"Xander?" Willow had her head cocked as she looked at him.

"I shot him," Xander whispered.
Willow's mouth opened in a shocked "o," but Buffy just took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. "Oh, Xander." Buffy sighed the words out, her voice utterly weary. "This is all my fault."

"Hey, I say we blame the nutcase who thought rape was the prize at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box," Xander said. "This wasn't your fault."

"This wasn't anyone's fault," Willow hurried to say as she looked from one of them to another with a shocked expression.

Buffy didn't answer, but from the way she was slumped in her chair, she wasn't actually hearing the part where it wasn't her fault. Xander traded a confused look with Tara. He had shot Warren. He'd held the gun when it had gone off. He'd seen Warren go down in a tangle of limbs, and he had chosen to go off and get shit-faced drunk... Harris-level drunk... while Spike cleaned up the mess. Buffy wasn't anywhere in that whole story. However, Xander could feel guilt stabbing at him because Buffy was clearly blaming herself.

"Okay, I'm not even seeing why this is your fault. Do you
want to share with the rest of the class?" Xander asked.

Buffy's face twisted. "I brought Spike into the group. I.... He stayed because of what I was doing, and I know he pushed you to do that, Xander. I'm so sorry. I should have sent him away a long time ago, and instead I...."

"You what?" Willow asked Buffy. Xander found a soda stain on the carpet and focused on that for a second. Spike was sticking around for Buffy, and he had pushed Xander to kill Warren, so he could see why she was connecting those dots, but she wasn't being fair to herself.

"I chose to kill him," Xander said firmly without looking up from the stain. Spike wanted me to kill all three of them, and I don't mind telling you, he was pissed as hell that I gave Jonathan a pep talk and sent him wandering down to LA. Well, at least until he figured out that it got Jonathan out of the way and annoyed the crap out of Angel as a bonus. But still, if this were Spike's fault or your fault for keeping Spike here, all three of them would be dead. I decided to do something. I decided that they were dangerous, and I couldn't afford to take a risk with our lives." Xander looked up, but Buffy still had that guilty, sympathetic expression that meant she wasn't
listening to any of it.

"Wait," Willow said, "Why would you say you were keeping Spike around?" She looked at Buffy, and Xander flashed to seventh grade when he and Jesse had tried to explain sex to her. She had that same expression now, like she didn't understand or believe anything anyone was saying. That was better than good-mood Willow throwing magic around, but Xander could feel sweat gathering along his spine just from the stress of dealing with all the dark, dusty little corners where they'd all hidden their secrets. Tara was studying the drapes and blushing.

"I've been sleeping with Spike," Buffy blurted out as fast as she could. Willow continued to stare at her like she couldn't understand the words. "But it's over now. It's totally over." Buffy waved her hands in front of her like she was erasing a board. "In fact, I don't think Spike is going to be coming back any time soon."

"Um, Buff," Xander said, "I hate to say this, but he's totally, completely and obsessively in love with you. He's not just going to go away."

"You knew?" Buffy and Willow demanded at the exactly
same time. Xander's brain advised him to run for his life because both girls were looking cranky, and he might have gone for it, only he couldn't outrun Buffy."

Xander shrugged. "Spike's been living with me in the new house, and he comes home with...." Xander stopped because he really didn't want to say that Buffy left bite marks and claw marks all over her lover. Xander was fairly sure that wasn't something she'd ever done with Angel or Riley, and from Buffy's sudden blush, he was right about that.

"Oh goddess, I don't want to know, do I?" Willow whispered to Tara, but then she cocked her head and really looked at Tara. "You knew, too!"

"I thought there was something wrong with me, that I came back with something missing because Spike could hurt me. I asked her to not tell you," Buffy hurried to explain. "You and Xander already had so much guilt going, and I didn't want to add to that."

"You're playing avoidy with the question about why Spike wouldn't come back," Xander said. "Oh God, you didn't dust him, did you?" Xander could feel the cold stab of panic at the thought. Yeah, Spike was a soulless monster,
but he was their soulless monster, and he'd take Spike over a souled monster like Warren any day.

"What? No. I don't go around just—" Buffy made a face. "Okay, I do go around just staking people, but I didn't dust Spike. I told him that we were through, that he needed to not come back here again."

Xander snorted. "And you think that's going to work? This is Spike we're talking about. The man's obsessions make Imelda Marcos look like an amateur. I don't care what you said—" Xander stopped as Buffy's expression turned to pure anguish. "Buffy, what happened?" Xander asked. He scooted forward on the couch and hated that she was sitting on the other side of the coffee table. He remembered a day when they'd all lay on Buffy's bed and it seemed like nothing could come between them. Then they'd grown up.

"Nothing," Buffy said, her voice emotionless.

Willow leaned forward. "Hey, secrets bad. We're getting all our secrets out and we're forgiving each other and we're fixing whatever went all wrong here. You can tell us anything."
"It really is nothing," Buffy repeated.

Xander's heart sank as he thought about the marks and bruises and bites Spike would come home sporting. He'd come home one night limping so badly that Xander thought he'd gotten into a fight until he spotted Spike's self-satisfied grin and Bonnie had wrinkled up her nose because sex smelled funny.

"Did someone get hurt?" Xander asked. Willow frowned, but the instant blush on Buffy's face, Xander figured he'd guessed right. "Is Spike okay?" It would have to take a serious injury to slow him down, but if she'd hurt him that badly, he might need help.

"He's fine," Buffy said, emphasizing the "he" as she pulled the neck of her blouse to one side. She had a spectacular bruise in the shape of a hand.

Willow's eyes narrowed. "I'm going to turn him into a toad. A slimy, croaking, wart-making toad."

"Will, don't," Buffy quickly interrupted. "It.... He really thought I was still playing, but that's what I mean. I shouldn't have gotten involved with Spike because he doesn't have a soul and he can't know right and wrong,
and he pushed you into killing Warren because it's what he wanted to do... to protect me," Buffy said with a sad look in Xander's direction.

Xander wondered if the girls were always going to assume he was just some follower. "Buffy, I told you. I made that choice."

"After he pushed you."

"He pushed me to kill Jonathan, too, and Jonathan is in LA following Angel around. I'm a little more worried about Spike hurting you like that. Were you fighting or...." Xander stopped because he really didn't want to think that Spike would force himself on Buffy. As much as the insane one loved Buffy, he wouldn't hurt her intentionally, but Buffy was right about the line between moral and immoral was a little fuzzy in Spike's head.

Buffy made a disgusted face. "Or," she admitted.

Xander dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his face. When had he gotten so used to expecting some sort of ethical code from Spike? Clearly, he had to rethink how far he trusted Buffy. If Spike would hurt Buffy under the right conditions, it pretty much meant he would hurt
anyone. Not because he meant to, but just because he was a soulless demon.

"Hey, doesn't it feel better to have all the secrets out?" Willow asked, but the tone of her voice suggested that she was ready to dig a hole to hide in.

"I actually still have the big one," Xander admitted. He rubbed his hand over his face again.

"Bigger than killing Warren?" Buffy sounded worried, and Xander ordered himself to just blurt the truth out before Buffy and Willow could go jumping to conclusions.

Sitting up, he looked at the girls and found he couldn't find a single word in his head. It was like he'd just lost his ability to use language.

"Xander," Tara prompted gently.

Closing his eyes, Xander took a deep breath and reminded himself that these were his best friends. And if nothing else, they didn't know where he lived, so Bonnie was safe. "Um, do you remember the hyena?"

"You still have a hyena?" Willow asked.
"No. No, the alpha bitch is well and truly gone," Xander reassured her. "I just... that night I did some things."

"Like eat Principal Flutie?" Buffy guessed.

"Like sleep with this really nice kwani demon. Half-kwani, actually." Xander blurted out. K'wana, Faith, and Anya—there was a pattern there. Xander waited for the accusations and blame, but Willow and Buffy both just looked at him like they couldn't figure out what he was trying to say.

"I'm sorry I hid it all these years, but at the time, I thought I could keep that part of myself separate from my life with you guys."

Buffy leaned forward. "Xander, no offense, but what you do with your sex life really is your business. The best part of you and Anya breaking up is that I don't get daily updates on your performance in bed because that was seriously creepy."

"I think I left the important part out." Xander licked his lips and fought down an urge to flee. "K'wana had a daughter. I have a daughter."
Now both girls looked dumbstruck. That was the reaction Xander had expected. "K'wana's family made her leave almost a year ago, and I've been raising her. I guess when I was young I was all caught up on the demon-equals-evil theory, only K'wana isn't evil, her mother is more normal levels of emotionally abusive evil, and Bonnie isn't evil at all."

"Bonnie?" Willow asked. "You have a daughter named Bonnie?" Buffy looked like she was having trouble getting her mouth to close.

"She's really beautiful. She has all these dark curls and bright green eyes." Xander skipped the part where she developed kwani cheek patches when she got upset. "I looked at this little baby, and when I was a kid, it seemed reasonable to hide her from you guys and especially from Giles."

"Giles? Why Giles?" Buffy asked.

"Um, because he was the baton twirler in the cheer squad of 'demons-equals-evil.' I didn't want him to tell the Watchers about my daughter."
"So you didn't tell us?" Willow had her hurt voice out now, and that voice was worse than her overly cheerful addicted voice. Whatever Willow said in her addict-voice was all about her addiction, but right now, Xander was hurting her and he knew it. Tara slipped an arm around Willow's shoulders.

"I'm sure he had a reason, but he was very young. We all did stupid things when we were young. I believed my family when they told me I was an evil demon," Tara pointed out in her gentle voice. Tara could get Willow to listen to things that Xander never could.

"I was embarrassed. I mean, how many safe sex talks did my dad make me sit thought, and then I not only slept with a demon, but I got her pregnant. And it wasn't like I had custody and you guys could come visit. K'wana's family barely let me visit," Xander explained.

"That's not right. You should have told us, and Buffy would have made them be nicer," Willow said firmly.

"Which would have led to Bonnie having dead family members, and I was trying to avoid that."

"You think I'd kill your daughter's family?" Buffy crossed
her arms and glared at him.

"I think K'wana's family would have tried to kill a slayer that stepped foot on their family's property," Xander said. "I know you guys are upset, but even looking back, I'm not sure how I could have told you back then. And yeah, after we graduated, I probably should have told you, but once you keep a secret for too long, it's hard to figure out how to let it out." Xander stopped, and he noticed a heavy silence had fallen over the whole group. Willow was leaning into Tara and Buffy had curled up into a corner of her chair, and Xander picked at the lint on his jeans. Yep, fun times.

The silence ticked by, and Xander scrambled for words other than a joke. The air felt so tight that if he told a joke, something might snap and the universe end. It was like the three of them were on opposite points on a triangle and there was a big middle of awkward that kept growing between them. This wasn't supposed to happen, not to the three of them. Tara reached over and put her hand on his knee, smiling at him sadly.

"Buffy, are you okay?" Xander finally asked.

"What?"
"The Spike thing. Did he hurt you?"

Buffy shook her head. "I thought you'd be singing choruses of 'I told you so.'"

Xander shrugged. "He's a demon. He's a soulless demon who doesn't know right from wrong. He's also been living with me, so I think I lost track of that as much as you did."

"Were you and Spike...." Willow wiggled her fingers and made a squinchoy face.

It took Xander a second to interpret that. "What? No. Absolutely no. Really no. He just moved in after he found out about Bonnie. There was blackmail, which should have been my first hint that he wasn't good... well, after the whole attempted murder and hitting me in the head with the microscope and hunting Buffy and siding with Adam. But somehow, I started to think of him as a friend and roommate instead of a blackmailing asshole." Xander looked at Buffy. "We were both kind of idiots."

She didn't disagree.
"We all had a really hard night," Tara said. "Maybe tomorrow we could have dinner together. A potluck?"

Willow sucked her lower lip into her mouth. She wanted Tara to stay the night; Xander could practically see it written across her face.

"I'll see you then?" Tara asked Willow. Willow's whole face collapsed, and Xander hurt for her. Willow put on her best good-little-soldier face and nodded.

"I'll walk you home." Xander stood up. He realized that Tara hadn't told the others that she was living with him now, but then maybe she wanted to wait on that secret. She loved Willow. Xander could see that on her face every time she looked at Willow, but she hadn't learned to trust her again.

"I could," Buffy looked up.

"Buff, I got it," Xander said. "Other than a few random vampires, the town's been pretty quiet." Xander didn't point out that their most dangerous enemies were dead. The image of Warren's shocked face flashed across his memory. Bile rose in his throat and he had to swallow it down.
Buffy nodded and Xander started toward the door at Tara's side.

"That wasn't too bad," Tara said once they were outside in the warm California night.

"The worst hasn't come," Xander said as he thought about Spike attacking Buffy. He didn't for a minute believe that Spike would intentionally hurt Buffy or Dawn or Bonnie; however, he couldn't keep sticking his head in the sand. Spike wasn't a good man. "Can you do a dis-invite spell for me?"

Tara looked at him with wide worried eyes, but she nodded.

Part Twenty-One

Fucking bitch. It wasn't his fault. She's the one who'd set the fucking rules, and then she'd had the nerve to tell
him that he'd fucked up. Spike fell off the curb and landed on his hands and feet on the cold pavement. His skin itched as dawn approached. He'd have to get to shelter soon, but the house was hiding from him. Fucking house.

Spike pushed himself up to his feet and swayed.

He'd never tried to hurt her. Call him what you like—killer, sadist, rapist. He was all of them. Every last fucking one. But he'd cut off his own arm before he'd ever be disloyal. Angel had gone out of his way to stab him in the back at every turn, and Spike still hadn't returned that favor.

Oh, he'd tortured Angel a bit, found a creative use for hot pokers. But he hadn't actually damaged the vampire he'd called his sire for so many years. He hadn't killed that sharp-tongued bint the wanker liked. Spike stopped and swayed in the gray pre-dawn air. She'd liked Xander at one point. How the hell did someone go from Xander to Angel?

Xander didn't have most of Angel's better qualities—his strength, his knack for eviscerating his enemies, his love of fun. Well, those last two were more Angelus'
specialties, but they were still there, buried under the soul. However, Xander had qualities Angel could never match. He was loyal and about as stubborn as Spike himself. Spike smiled at that. Puppy boy really was about as stubborn as a mule. And he might put out all the submissive signals, but when push came to shove, he had real steel under there. He'd faced down Angelus in that hospital. Spike would pay good money for a spell that would let him go back in time to see that.

A tree root reached up to grab his boot, and Spike went flying, catching the tree in a hug to keep from hitting the ground. Fucking wankers were out to get him.

Spike wondered what Xander would be like as a vampire. Would he keep that loyalty? Would he still have that camouflage of helplessness that hid the weapon under it? Warren sure hadn't seen it coming. The wanker was 'round the twist, but he wasn't stupid, and Xander had walked in there and gotten right under the radar. As a vampire, that would be a powerful advantage.

Running his tongue along the inside of his lip, he imagined a vampire Xander as he pushed off from the tree and squinted at the waving houses. Which was his? Fucking thing had moved. He wondered if a vampire
Xander would walk up to prey with those big brown eyes of his, his mouth drawn up to an shy frown and his head ducked in submission. It was a pretty thought, especially when Spike imagined the demon then springing forward, all yellow eyes and teeth.

An image of Xander going after Buffy made Spike stop and snarl at the air. He'd never let the boy do that. Never. Buffy was just having a womanly fit of pique. She's calm down and....

Spike's brain couldn't supply an "and." Buffy had told him to leave lots of times, but she'd never smelled of such weariness, like she was so tired of having Spike around that it was wearing her down. She'd gone and turned on him.

If he could just figure out why, it wouldn't be so bad. Dru had left because he'd gone soft on the slayer. Even before he went and fell for her, he'd been drawn to her strength and her confidence. He'd believed she was going to defeat Angelus; he never would have sided with her otherwise. Wait. He'd sided with her. Did that mean he'd stabbed Angelus in the back? Spike rubbed his arm across his nose and tried to think, but the alcohol was making that hard. Angelus had turned on all of them,
trying to end the world like some sort of feral dog that turned on its own. It wasn't Spike's fault.

What happened with Buffy... that wasn't his fault either. Spike patted down his pockets looking for a bottle. He needed to drink more if he wanted to make himself believe that. She was always the dominant. All he had to do was follow her fucking rules. Spike's foot went out from under him, and he sprawled on the lawn. It was comfortable. Lying his head down on the grass, he went to go to sleep.

"Spike?" A voice drifted in.

"I think he's drunk."

"He's way past drunk."

"Spike, the sun's going to come up."

"Can he even hear you?"

"Spike! Can you hear me?"

Spike raised a hand in a two-fingered salute.
"He hears me. I should go out there."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Funny enough, neither do I, but the alternative is letting him get dusted."

"Be careful."

Spike growled when human hands pulled at him. He forced his eyes open and saw Xander's face an inch from his. "Oh, it's you."

"Hello to you, too. Did you drink a distillery?"

"Fucked up."

"Yep, you really, really are," Xander agreed. "Come on, one foot in front of another, Spike. You know how it works." Xander had his arm around Spike's waist and he was trying to walk him toward the driveway. Spike kept trying to get his foot in front of Xander's so he could get to the porch, and their legs were tangling in the middle.

"As amusing as this is," Xander said, "the sun is coming up, and we need to get all the good little vampires into
the shade before they turn into piles of dust."

"House is that way, Harris."

"We aren't going to the house, Spike."

"Then sod off." Spike shoved Xander back, and he landed on his butt. The chip didn't even spark. Maybe something was finally going his way. He staggered up the steps, ignoring Xander's shouts and the look of panic on Tara's face. Whatever was going on, he'd fix it after a good day's sleep. He hit the entry and bounced off, an invisible barrier blocking him out of his own home. Snarling, Spike shoved against it, only to have it hold.

"Spike, you need to get inside." Tara wrung her hands.

"Then invite me in," Spike said. He stood up as straight as he could and tried to not sway. Tara looked past Spike, and Spike turned around to see Xander just getting up from the lawn. "Hurry up and invite me in, ya nob."

Xander sighed. "Spike, I can't."

"Sure you can. Not hard. Even you can manage it."
Xander climbed up onto the porch like an old man. Spike squinted, trying to see if he was hurt, but he just moved like he was old and tired. "Spike, I'm really sorry, but I can't invite you in. Now let's get you somewhere sunproof.

"It's my fucking house." Spike turned and tried just ignoring the barrier. It repelled him strongly enough to send him crashing into the porch post, and Spike snarled in full game face.

"Invite me back in or you'll be sorry." Spike pointed a finger at Xander. After the words were out, it occurred to him that he'd just made the most pathetic threat in history, but he was too soddin' drunk to get more creative in his intimidation.

"I am sorry, Spike. I actually got weirdly used to having you around, but after what happened with Buffy, I just can't have you in the house with Bonnie."

Spike frowned, trying to understand what Xander was saying. "I never hurt the poppet. Never would."

"And you'd never hurt Buffy," Xander said. Spike opened his mouth to protest, but Xander cut him off... cheeky
sod. "I know you would never intentionally hurt Buffy, just like I know you would never intentionally hurt Bonnie, but I forgot that you're a vampire, Spike. You aren't a soul-having demon like Clem—you can't even understand why we're so upset."

"Sure I can. Buffy's brassed off because I broke the rules," Spike defended himself. "That's doesn't have anything to do with you, mate."

"It has everything to do with me, Spike. I don't expect you to understand that, but I'm not going to let you into the house, and time is running out. We need to get to the van."

Spike lurched forward and caught Xander by the shirt. Tara cried out, but Spike ignored her as he used his weight to push himself and Xander off the porch. Xander lost his footing on the side of the walk and they both went down in the grass. Xander grunted as they hit, and the chip sparked, helping to sober Spike up a bit as well as giving him a bloody headache.

"This is my house, mate. Now you let me in or you're going to find out what kind of enemy I make." Spike nearly whispered the words. There was something
particularly terrifying about making prey strain to hear the threats.

"I really hope you don't become enemies, Spike, but I have to protect my daughter. If you can hurt Buffy, you can hurt her."

"I didn't hurt the slayer. She's just playing another of her games. She'll be back to wanting me." Spike put on his cockiest grin even though his gut was telling him he'd ruined something there.

"No, she won't. And I don't expect you to understand that."

Spike pushed himself up and looked down at Xander all sprawled in the grass. If it weren't for the chip, he could eviscerate the boy in two seconds. A quick twist of the knife, and his guts would spill out like an over-filled grain back. The chip sparked again, and Spike snarled and fell back. "I'm not stupid," Spike snapped. "Don't go telling me that I can't be expected to understand. You lot are the dumbest bunch I've come across. It's downright embarrassing that so many of my plans have been ruined by bumbling morons."
"It's not about being stupid. It's about not having a soul and not understanding what morals are. You can care about individual people, but you can't understand us... you can't be part of us. Spike, I'm not saying you're stupid or that you were trying to hurt Buffy. I'm just saying that vampires and people aren't meant to live this close together and we're going to keep hurting each other if we do, and I can't let my daughter be in the middle of that." Xander looked over his shoulder. "Spike, please, the sun is coming up. You have to get into the van. Please." Xander was pleading now, and Spike liked the sound of that, but he wanted his house. He wanted his bed and his telly. He wanted to play with the poppet and go over to see Buffy when the sun set—fighting or shagging, he wasn't particular. He wanted to check on the Bit and make sure she wasn't sneaking around with boys. They were his clan. He'd bloody lost everything except them, and he wasn't going to give them up.

Spike sat heavily on the lawn, his Doc Martin propped up on the sidewalk.

"It's my house," Spike said as firmly as he could. The world was bobbing and weaving a bit, yet.

"Xander, the sun's coming up," Tara called out,
desperation in her voice. If they wanted to play chicken, he would, but he wasn't giving up on what was his.

"Spike stop being so stubborn," Xander said. He got to his feet, and Tara came padding out in her nightgown, holding out a dark blanket. "Come on." Xander took the blanket and held it out as an offering. Spike could feel the sun skittering across his skin like spiders, but there was time for him to get in the house if they would only invite him.

"No." Spike crossed his arm.

"You'll thank me when you've sobered up," Tara said.

Spike turned and frowned at her. "What's that supposed to mean?" Tara threw up her arm and dust flew into the air and then Spike's world went dark.

Part Twenty-Two

Xander headed into the living room and moved the chip bowl.

"It'll be fine," Tara said.

"Daddy's scared," Bonnie whispered to Tara, but her
childish voice carried into the living room.

"He's nervous," Tara corrected her.

"Spike would make him happy again. Spike's good at happy annoying." Bonnie had taken up complimenting Spike ever since he'd disappeared, absconding with Xander's van in the process.

"He was good at annoying, anyway," Xander agreed. Bonnie looked through the arch, her forehead wrinkled in a miniature frown. Oddly, Xander missed Spike, too. He missed him and worried about him. With the chip, he couldn't defend himself, but Spike was one hundred and twenty years old. He could take care of himself. Usually. Xander was trying hard to not think about the spectacular examples of just how self-destructive the vampire could be. "He'll come back when he wants to." Xander moved over to Bonnie and took her hand, walking her to the kitchen table. Bonnie sat in one of the chairs, and Xander sat next to her. Holding her hand, he looked at her for a second. When he'd told Spike that he couldn't come in any more, he had no idea that Bonnie would give him more of a guilt trip than Spike ever had. One glorious guilt-inspiring pout and Spike was gone—although Xander figured if he ever told Spike that he'd
looked like a pouting child sitting in the grass, the vampire would find a way to pull Xander's spine out, chip or no chip. Then, hauling Spike's drunk, confused ass to the van had inspired more guilt than Xander had ever expected.

However, all of Spike's guilt-inspiring drama paled in comparison to Bonnie's big-eyed and silent stare. "Honey, Spike had to go away."

"Because you made him," Bonnie said sadly, but she managed to sound resigned rather than angry. The problem was, she was never angry, not even when she talked about her grandmother's hatefulness. So the resignation in her voice now just made Xander feel like more of a shit.

"I just told him he couldn't stay in the house with us. He could have stayed in the tunnels under the house. There are four rooms down there." Xander didn't mention that they were dungeons. Spike had stayed in worse, though.

"Then why isn't he here?" Bonnie asked with a tremble in her voice.

Xander looked at Tara helplessly, but she simply
shrugged. "Oh, honey," Xander said, "I really don't know."

Bonnie chewed on her lower lip. "Did he find a better clan?"

Xander's heart tightened when he saw the rejection and resignation in her eyes. "No, he didn't, Bonnie." Xander pulled his daughter close and hugged her. "He just couldn't stay when things changed, but he still thought we were the best clan around." Xander figured he was stretching the truth on that one, but he was putting it down to parental prerogative.

"So, he doesn't like the rules?"

"Yep," Xander agreed.

"Can we change them back?" Bonnie pushed herself back away from his hug and smiled up hopefully.

Xander had always hated it when his parents dismissed him with a 'you're too young to understand' argument. However, he was so very tempted right now. How was he supposed to explain souls and rape and the idea of a moral compass, or, in Spike's case, a missing moral
compass. He took a deep breath and blurted out the truth. "I can't let them." Xander braced for the disappointment and betrayal on Bonnie's face. Instead, he saw only confusion. "Honey...." Xander groaned. Where was the demon attack when you needed it?

"Spike's not coming back," Bonnie whispered.

"We can't know that," Xander answered, and after years of wanting Spike to go to hell, he was a little surprised to find he really did miss fangless. Spike had been an important part of their lives... not always a particularly good part, but an important part. It was like missing your first car—the one that took every dime of your money for gas and oil and still broke down on you. Yeah, the car was just bad news, but you liked it anyway. And Xander was not even going to think about what a shit that made him because Spike had hurt Buffy. He'd actually hurt Buffy, and Xander still couldn't seem to stop himself from feeling some sort of sympathy there. After all, he'd been the one at home when Spike had come home with marks and a ridiculous grin that meant he totally didn't understand what Buffy was doing.

"He won't. He won't come home." Bonnie pulled her hands out of Xander's grip. "It's okay, Daddy." She gave a
weak smile.

"No, it's not." Xander sighed. Sometimes being a father just sucked. "He hurt us. It's not okay, and some days I want to track him down and drag him back here while insulting his intelligence."

"Can we?" Bonnie's eyes brightened.

"Spike wouldn't appreciate it." Xander looked at his daughter's hopeful expression. "But who knows—if he's not back in a year, maybe we can. You could do a tracking spell, couldn't you?" Xander turned to Tara.

She smiled at them. "It wouldn't be easy with a vampire. Most tracking spells use life force, but I bet Bonnie and I could go through the books and find the right spell." Tara's words made Bonnie bounce on her chair.

She turned to Xander. "You can make him be okay with being dragged home, Daddy," Bonnie said with confidence. "You can make the slayer lady be nice to him."

Xander leaned back in his chair and exchanged a look with Tara before he focused on Bonnie again. "I can't
make Buffy do much of anything."

Bonnie didn't look as happy at that.

"Do you want to help me pick pizza toppings?" Tara asked. Bonnie's face lit up and she slid off her chair to head over to where Tara was holding out the toppings menu. Xander flinched because Bonnie did pick some revolting combinations. Funny, Xander remembered the day when he ate anything on a pizza, but these days, pineapple and asparagus should not ever touch the same pizza. Actually, asparagus just shouldn't touch pizza at all.

Bonnie studied the menu intensely, and Xander went back to pacing. The two halves of his life were about to collide, and he was on the verge of developing an ulcer. The doorbell rang, and Xander jumped-his heart pounding painfully. Okay, he could do this. Xander headed for the door and plastered a smile on his face before opening the door. "Hey!" He greeted Buffy and Willow who stood on his porch with overly wide smiles.

"Hey," Willow echoed.

"Way to be responsible home-owning man," Buffy said.
"I thought I'd grow up. It seemed better than the alternative." Xander had meant that as a joke, but Buffy and Willow just stared blankly at him. Clearly he'd missed the funny.

"Willow," Tara whispered from behind Xander. Xander could hear the hunger and fear in her voice, and Willow ducked her head.

"Hey," Willow answered, sounding as unsure as the ninth grade girl who had blushed every time Jesse said 'sex.' When Xander stepped back to let them in, Willow drifted toward Tara. "I tried calling to see if you needed a ride over." Tara ducked her head, but she didn't volunteer the fact that she was living with Xander. "Oh," Willow said in surprise. Bonnie appeared from behind Tara's legs. "Hi there." Willow gave Bonnie a bright smile. Instead of smiling back, Bonnie looked over at Xander, her cheeks darkening.

"Honey, this is Willow," Xander said. He walked over to the couch, sat down, and held out his hand. Bonnie darted to his side and stood with both hands clinging to his arm. "Willow, this is Bonnie."

"Hi," Willow said again.
"Please to meet you," Bonnie offered, her childlike voice very formal. Willow's smile faded a little, and for a second, Xander thought she was going to correct Bonnie's grammar. She didn't.

"And this is Buffy," Xander said.

"Hey." Buffy kept her greeting pretty casual and dropped into a chair. "You look like Xander."

"You're the slayer," Bonnie announced. That seemed to catch Buffy off guard.

"Where's Dawn?" Xander asked quickly.

Buffy turned to look toward the door and frowned. "I don't know. She just needed to grab something out of the trunk, but she was right behind us." She got up and headed for the door. She was almost there when Dawn came charging through the still open door.

"Hi! Oh my God, Xander, you should have told me that you had a really cute boy living next door."

"I do?" Xander sat up and tried to figure out which house
Dawn might be talking about, because this might be really, really bad.

"Yeah. The house next door with the blond boy. He's so sweet. He offered me a piece of gum."

Xander cringed. Oh yes, this was going to be bad.

"And what's this boy's name?" Buffy asked suspiciously. After Dawn had accidentally dated the vampire, Buffy had gotten a little paranoid, and Xander just didn't have the heart to point out that Dawn hadn't dated half the psychopaths the rest of them had.

Dawn shrugged. "I don't know. I was busy looking into his blue eyes. So, you must be Xander's daughter. I would kill for those curls. I used to have a crush on Xander so bad, and I swear it's the way his curls look when he needs a haircut and then he gets them messed up. I'm Dawn." Dawn introduced herself to Bonnie and then turned back to Buffy, seemingly without noticing that Bonnie was clinging to her father's arm more than ever. "And you can just stop being so overprotective," Dawn told Buffy.

"I'm your sister. It's protective, not over-protective."
"Are you going to kill Halvard?" Bonnie asked, her eyes focused on Buffy. For a second, the entire room seemed to freeze. Willow and Tara were standing in the arch to the kitchen, Buffy was standing near the chair she'd claimed, and Dawn was next to her, and they were all looking at Bonnie.

"Um, I wasn't planning on it," Buffy said with a confused look at Xander. "I don't kill people."

Bonnie cocked her head to the side, and Xander had that feeling like when you see your soda going over, and you know you're about to get ice cold Coke all down your shirt and in your lap and you just can't do anything to stop it.

"You're the slayer, and they kill people like us."

And yes, that would be the soda hitting. "Honey," Xander said in the awkward silence that followed, "Buffy focuses on bad vampires and people who try to end the world."

"So, she wouldn't kill Halvert?" Bonnie turned to look at him.

"Of course she wouldn't," Xander said, and he was
praying for two things. One, that he was right, and two, that Bonnie would just change the topic.

"I thought maybe because he was a krakonos that the slayer would just kill him because he wasn't human. Grandmother always said that slayers came from human magic where humanity was trying to push the native people of Earth off into other dimensions, and that they didn't care if people were good or bad, only if they were human or demon."

Xander's stomach developed three ulcers, but Bonnie just looked over at Buffy. "But my grandmother was wrong about a lot of things. She said Daddy was a worthless pile of meat."

"She did?" Buffy sounded almost winded.

"So, he's a demon?" Dawn asked. "He's so cute."

"He can do this thing where he grows wings and he makes shadow puppets real good," Bonnie added with a smile.

"He's actually a really good kid," Xander said with a weak smile. Right now, an attacking horde would earn his
eternal gratitude if it would only pick his house.

"Krakonos are peaceful," Tara offered. "They can call up fogs or snows to protect their secrets, and legend says they're keepers of medicine and magic that they share only with people who have a pure heart."

"Cool." Dawn sat on the opposite end of the couch from Xander. "But knowing Sister Worrywart over here, she won't let me date a demon."

"I never said that." Buffy's gaze flicked over toward Bonnie who was watching with wide eyes. What had made Xander think for even one second that this was a good idea?

"So I can date him?" Dawn sat up and gave Buffy a smile that was either excited or manipulative... Xander couldn't figure it out.

"Hey, you have a spell oven," Willow said in an overly bright tone of voice. She practically fled into the kitchen, and Tara followed her. Xander might have gotten cranky with Willow, but she was living with Buffy and Dawn, so he supposed she had a right to avoid one more sibling fight.
"I didn't say you can date him. I don't even know him."

"But you don't want me dating him?"

"I didn't say that." Buffy threw her hands up and turned on Xander. "Did I say that?"

"She did too, didn't she?" Dawn demanded. Xander stared at them both with his mouth open. Okay, this would be why Willow had fled.

"So, the pizza should be here soon. Any oddities in the toppings are not my fault. So, the school is well on its way to being a school again instead of a pile of rocks. And can I say that it's a little weird to get paid to build something when I was the one who blew it up in the first place? Have to love those soldier memories."

"That is too cool," Dawn said, following him onto the new topic. "I wish I could tell everyone that my family blew up the school. Actually, you'd think they'd know since you weren't exactly secretive, but people really are blind when it comes to mayors turning into giant snakes." Dawn leaned in toward Bonnie. "Has Xander told you that story?"
Bonnie nodded. "Daddy and the slayer blew him up."

"Yep, they did." Dawn smiled. "So, do you have your own room? When I was your age, Mom made me and Buffy share, and I don't think I ever recovered from the trama."

"You didn't recover?" Buffy demanded, her voice incredulous.

Bonnie looked at Xander with wide eyes and shadowed cheeks, and he knew exactly what she was thinking. "It's okay," he told her. "They aren't like most company. They're more like clan, so you can show them downstairs. In fact, it might be a good idea if Dawn knew where the entrance to tunnels were, just in case." Xander felt a twinge when he realized that they'd have to go into Spike's room to see that.

Bonnie smiled and turned to Dawn. "I'll show you." She finally let go of Xander's arm and headed for the stairs.

"Cool." Dawn turned to Buffy and gave her a not-nice smile. "Don't go killing anyone when I'm gone, oh great slayer of native people of Earth."
Buffy stiffened, but before she could say anything back, Bonnie and Dawn were through the door to the basement levels. Sagging back into the chair, Buffy closed her eyes. "I swear, I'm going to kill her and hide the body. Some days she's great, but other days, she's this giant pain in my ass. I think it's pretty clear which one she's being today."

It was oddly comforting that Xander's demon daughter didn't even cause a big enough ripple in the water for Buffy to make a comment.

"You're trying to be mom and sister. It's easier when you only have to be the parent," Xander said.

Buffy opened her eyes. "Huh. Xander Harris, father extraordinaire. That's a little bit cool. Or a lot." She smiled at him. "So, how's the father thing going for you, and where did you get this house because I'm feeling whole lots of materialistic jealousy here."

Xander looked around at the intricate carvings on the exposed beams and the hand plastering work with niches built into the thick walls. The floors had some sort of hard wood with a waving grain that made Xander suspect it might be from some demon dimension because it
wasn't in any of his woodworking books. "It is nice, huh?"

"Only totally awesome. I'd get up to see what made Willow so excited about your kitchen, but Dawn has sapped all energy from me, so I'm here until someone feeds me pizza," Buffy said as she spread out her arms so they'd dangle over the sides of the chair. "How'd you find this place?"

"It's a funny story," Xander said as he thought back over the past year. "You know about the night with the hyena, but I guess the story of this house started about a year ago." Xander leaned back on the couch and thought back to how much life had changed in the last year, and how much his view of the world had changed, too. "It started with Spike and a little blackmail, but I guess that's not surprising considering this is Spike we're talking about..."

Part Twenty-Three
"Xander, we've got a problem!" Buffy called as she ran out of the bathroom with the new gaping hole in the floor in the newly reconstructed Sunnydale High School, right on the grounds of the old Sunnydale High School, which seemed slightly stupid. However, Xander had only been hired to build the place, or parts of the place anyway. No one had asked his opinion about putting hormonal teenagers on top of a Hellmouth. He had been considering public high school when Bonnie got older, but hell and the Hellmouth would both freeze over before that happened, now.

"Um, yeah. I am so glad I was not in charge of the subflooring because the boss is not going to like the new expressway to the basement," Xander said. "And can I just say that zombies are so very overdone. I mean, maybe I'm getting old and jaded, but these guys were not up to Jack O'Toole standards. Sure they had the whole living dead-rotting flesh thing going for them, but Jack had a slimy charm that sucked you in before he gutted you with his giant knife. These guys? No style."

"Not that." Buffy punched him in arm a little harder than she should have. Xander winced and rubbed the newly forming bruise.
"If you're talking about your ability to humiliate Dawn, I am staying out of that. Forever. And ever."

"What did I do?" Buffy crossed her arms, but after a half second of indignation, she sighed. "Okay, so I might have humiliated her. I am a mother-figure now, you know. I mean, you've humiliated Bonnie lots of times, right?" Buffy looked at him with hope.

Xander thought about that. Bonnie'd been raised by a demon grandmother to respect strength and power. "Probably," he admitted with a sigh. "She just hides it way better."

"Dawn is not really much for hiding the humiliation. She's more about magnifying it until she can get a new CD out the guilt she inspires. However, our problem is in the basement."

"Shit. The pipes aren't leaking, are they?" Xander had been in charge of overseeing that the plumbers and the framers hadn't killed each other or ripped each other's work out. Buffy gave him a truly terrifying glare.

"Spike's down there," she said.
Xander's mouth fell open. Spike? His Spike? The giant idiotic Spike who had vanished and left Bonnie picking at her food and throwing the world's quietest temper tantrums?

"Yeah, I was about that shocked," Buffy said. "But Xander, something is seriously not right with him. He's acting like he's been hanging out with Dru too much... either that or he's gotten into serious glue sniffing."

Xander frowned. "Spike?" Spike was a lot of things, but he wasn't generally nuts—not in the traditionally crazy ways, anyway. A vampire falling in love with a slayer did ping the crazy-meter.

"Unless it's a shape-changer...." Buffy stopped. "Wait. It could be a shape changer. We've seen weirder."

"And we've seen weirder than a crazy Spike," Xander said, heading for the door to the basement as he pulled out his construction keys.

"Can I help you?" A black man in a suit came walking down the hall, and Xander held up his work badge without giving the guy time to see it.
"You have a clear violation of section 1632 of California Code of Regulations for building which requires you to provide temporary railings and toeboards or covers where there is danger of people or materials falling through a floor. You'd better get in that bathroom before the inspector comes," Xander said without pausing.

"He's right. I think. There is a big hole in the floor, although I'm not sure on the code stuff," Buffy was saying, but Xander had the door to the basement open and was half-way down the stairs before she caught up. "He's the principal," Buffy explained. Xander got to the bottom and looked around. This was not the basement he'd help build. This place looked like it had been built in the 1920s, and welcome to the Hellmouth. Buffy moved in front of him, still talking. "He wants to hire me for something that sounds a lot like a counselor, only without the college degree requirements." She headed into the maze.

"That's great, Buffy." And it was. Xander hated how money had been such a problem, and he could only sneak so much money into the house before she started noticing.

"I hope so. Being back here is bringing up some therapy-
inducing moments. I wonder if the health insurance covers therapy?" Buffy sounded vague and distracted. Normally she could find her way anywhere once she'd been there once. Either she had a really good sense of direction or it was a slayer thing. Either way, Xander was getting that cold fingers-up-your-back feeling about this place. Eventually Buffy came to a door and pushed it open slightly, her body tense and poised for a fight.

"Stop. Please, mum! Begging now! Make it stop! Oh, God!" The voice that cried out was Spike, but not like Xander had ever heard him. He gave a pained cry, and a shiver went through Xander's whole body. Buffy turned to look at him with concern. Even though part of Xander wanted to run away and not see the creature making such pathetic sounds, Xander inched forward and looked into the dark.

Spike's curls were loose instead of slicked back, and his black shirt hung open showing cuts and gashes all over his chest as he sat on the dirt floor. "Holy shit," Xander breathed. Spike looked up at him, his eyes wild.

"It's coming. Big and ugly. Coming. Can feel it."

"Oh great," Xander sigh.
"Did I mention he's crazy?" Buffy said quietly.

Spike made a sound that might have been a shaky sob or the world's saddest laugh. "Bug-shaggin' crazy. Crazier. Shagging bugs is nicer than the whispers in my head," he offered. Xander and Buffy traded worried looks.

"Hey, I know a nice quiet dungeon cellar with hot and cold running water and a telly," Xander offered cheerfully. He felt like crap for not offering to take Spike back to the house, because the vamp was clearly injured, but he couldn't risk Bonnie getting hurt. If Spike showed up for a while and then vanished again, Xander didn't even want to think how Bonnie would react.

"From beneath it devours," Spike said, his voice a terrified whisper.

"Okay, this is getting creep-tastic," Xander said.

Spike pointed at an empty corner of the room. "No! Not my fault, you silly bint. You went to the beach." He brought his hands up around his head. "Stop it. Can't hear you." He turned to face the wall and Xander looked at Buffy helplessly. There was crazy and then there was
bug-shagging crazy, as Spike liked to call it, and he was definitely that last one.

"Xander, can you get him to come with us?"

"You have the slayer strength."

"You have the construction clothes," Buffy countered. "Hey! Do not give me that look. I am out of money. Out. If I rip something, I can't replace it, and I do not think the principal is going to appreciate me coming to school naked."

Xander sighed and eyed Spike, wondering if the vamp was going to fight. "That would be one way to get boys to come to school," he told Buffy, already moving in on Spike. If the idiot tried to get away, Xander would never be able to hold him, but right now he looked more like a scared kid than a master vampire.

"Nope." Spike shook his head. "No, won't work. Need to find a costume, hide it. Hide it." Spike looked around the room wildly, clearly avoiding Buffy as he searched the corners for something.

"What do you need?" Xander crouched down and
pretended he was talking to Bonnie. Of course, Bonnie was never this crazy.


"Whoa, hey, let's not get all wild with the servicing." Xander could hear his voice rise to an unmanly squeak, but desperate times called for desperate measures. "How about we stick to protecting the boy?" he asked.

Spike looked at him for a long time before his gaze slipped up to Buffy. "Girl doesn't want to be serviced. Because there's no spark. Ain't we in a soddin' engine?" His voice broke, and Xander had to close his eyes. This wasn't the strong creature who had survived Angelus' torture and Dru's insanity and the Initiative's chip. This was a man who was broken.

"Spike." Buffy stopped.

"Pain and hunger," Spike whispered. "Whispers from beneath."
"Hey, you know what they say," Xander said, forcing himself to fake a cheerfulness he couldn't feel. "Your pain and your hunger, they're driving you home. Not quite as good as the music of pain, but Desperado will do in a pinch."

Spike pulled back, his head cocked to the side. "Home? No home, just whispers, reminding me of who I was. Who I am."

Buffy crouched down so that she and Xander had Spike pinned in the corner. "Who are you? Tell me what happened, Spike." Her eyes were shining, and Xander could hear the emotion in her voice even if he didn't quite understand it. He didn't understand her feelings or their relationship, but there was something still there. Squatting on the floor between them, he could feel the passions that still connected them.

"I tried to find it." Spike sounded so sad.

"And you couldn't?" Xander guessed. Spike looked at him with eyes filled with agony. His hand came up into a claw and he tore at his open gashes, blood flowing. Xander threw himself forward and grabbed Spike's hand. "Stop. Just stop." They wrestled, and Xander found himself on
his back, Spike pinning him down, and Buffy on top of Spike, holding Spike's wrists.

"No hurting yourself," Buffy was saying over and over. Xander silently gasped, the weight on his chest making every breath an effort.

"Protect the boy," Spike whispered. Without warning, he threw himself backwards. He drove Buffy across the room and slammed her into the wall before leaping away, his eyes wide with shock. "Right. Wrong. All wrong. Wrong maneuver. Wrong spark. Wrong, wrong. God, please help me." Spike looked at Buffy and then at Xander. "Help me."

Xander got up onto his knees. "I will," he promised. "I will help you, Spike. You have to tell me what's going on." Spike darted toward him so fast that Xander didn't have time to brace himself before Spike hit him.

"I get it. The joke's on me. Lots of laughs." Spike sobbed. "Yeah. Hey, bring the wife and kiddies. Come see the show 'cause it's going to be a circus. This is warm-up act, luv. The real headliner's coming, and when that band hits the stage, all of this will come tumbling in death and screaming, horror and bloodshed. From beneath you, it
devours. From beneath..." Spike's arms went around Xander's waist and he laid his head on Xander's thigh. Xander stroked Spike's curls the way he might soothe Bonnie when she woke up in the middle of the night with a nightmare.

"You had that dream about something from beneath killing girls. I'm thinking the Hellmouth is feeling frisky," Xander said to Buffy. She was already chewing her lip, so he was guessing she'd come to that conclusion on her own.

She made a face. "I was just getting used to not having a big-bad to worry about. I mean, we've been decidedly low on Hellmouthy goodness since the mayor."

"Is something in the Hellmouth making Spike extra special crazy? Maybe we should all get out of here before we start hearing voices."

"I dreamed of killing you. All of you. Blood like water running over the earth," Spike whispered, his voice nearly lost as he pressed himself to Xander like a burrowing child.

"Hey, you're a vampire. You're supposed to have they
freakishly bloody dreams," Xander offered. Yep, he was a little weirded out about hearing that the vampire who was hugging him had dreamed of killing him, but luckily the Initiative made a damn good chip. God bless American ingenuity.

"I think they were dreams." Spike sounded confused, and Xander stroked his hair while Buffy brushed herself off and came over to crouch down near them. "So weak," Spike whispered. "Did you make me weak, thinking of you? Thinking of home, of buckets of salt over the ending, of waking up without family? Angel—he should've warned me. He makes a good show of forgetting." Spike reached up and rubbed chest wounds which were still seeping blood. It was soaking Xander's jeans, which probably made him smell a little like a human sacrifice. Given his history, he really wanted to get away from the Hellmouth before someone tried feeding him to some creature. However, Spike was clinging to him so tightly that Xander wasn't sure he could get up. "It's here, in me, all the time. The spark. I wanted to give you what you deserve, and I got it. They put the spark in me and now all it does is burn."

"Way to go with the crazy," Xander muttered.
"Oh, Spike." Buffy looked ready to cry at any time, and Xander made a face at her, silently asking her to explain to the rest of the class because she was clearly understanding something Xander didn't.

Buffy reached out and touched Spike's arm. He pulled back, letting go of Xander and throwing himself across the room to lean against the wall with the sort of casual disregard Xander had seen a million times. In the blink of an eye, he looked like Spike again, but it was like the universe had shifted two inches to the right and Spike hadn't moved with the rest of them. He was out of sync.

"Your soul," Buffy sighed.

"What?" Xander looked at her with a frown; however, Spike gave an amused chuckle. "Bit worse for lack of use, but yeah."

Xander stared at Spike as the truth finally hit him. Spike had his soul. For a long time, Xander could only blink up as Spike leaned against the wall with the sort of easy cool he always seemed to possess, but his eyes darted around the room like a wild animals.

"You got your soul back. How?" Buffy took one step
toward him and stopped when Spike made a small mewling noise. For a second, his body crouched and hunched in either fear or maybe disgust, and then Xander blinked, and Spike was back to his old self.

"It's what you wanted, right? What all of you wanted? Kept telling me I couldn't understand. Didn't have a soul." Spike pressed his fingers to his head and made a low moan of pain. "And now, everybody's in here. Whispers and shouts and curses. Everything I did and everyone I killed and it... the thing beneath... beneath us all.... It's all here. It's all telling me to go to hell." He gave an inhuman little cry. Xander got to his feet and might have rushed forward to comfort Spike except that this looked like the Spike of the past—the one who would have gutted Xander before accepting comfort.

"Why? Why would you do that?" Buffy asked.

Xander closed his eyes and fought against his own tears. How many times had he called Angel an unnatural monster? And now he'd helped drive Spike to find his own soul. He'd known how deeply Spike loved—true, it was a twisted, dysfunctional, demonic sort of love, but Spike committed himself to people without conditions. He'd chosen his family, and his family had told him he
wasn't worthy because he didn't have a soul... because he couldn't understand. They were no better than Angelus torturing young Spike to turn him into a better companion.

But looking back, Xander wasn't sure what else he could have done. The moment Spike tried to rape Buffy, he'd proven that he could hurt someone even as he loved them in his twisted way. They couldn't have that sort of time bomb around Bonnie or Dawn.

Spike's eyes seemed to glaze over for a minute. "She shall look on him with forgiveness, and everybody will forgive and love. He will be loved." He slowly stared up at the ceiling. "Can we rest now? Do I have to keep fighting?"

Xander looked over, and Buffy was crying. He walked over to Spike and pulled him into a hug. "You can stop fighting," Xander said. At first Spike stood awkwardly in his arms, and Xander started to get that feeling like you might have toilet paper hanging from his pants. Maybe he was wrong about what Spike needed. Just about the time Xander was about to back away, Spike's arms wrapped around him, clinging tightly to Xander.
Spike whispered so softly that Xander could barely hear him even though Spike's breath brushed against his skin. "Your prison is walking through this world all alone." It was the line from Desperado, and Xander figured it was probably Spike's worst fear. It was Xander's.

Xander tightened his arms around Spike and just held on. He didn't know what to say or how to make this right. Everyone had done what they had to, and everyone had suffered. Xander felt a hand press against his back as Buffy moved closer to support him, but she couldn't bring herself to comfort Spike. Xander couldn't blame her when Spike had tried to rape her. She shouldn't have to deal with that. But if Spike had his soul, everything was different now. Maybe he was still going to be a cold-blooded demon. Maybe he was going to be more human. Maybe he was going to be something in between. Well, if everything blew up, Xander could just have Tara do the de-invite spell again.

"Let's go home," Xander told Spike.
Part Twenty-Four

Xander looked at Spike who was now sprawled out in a chair like nothing had changed and he was still the big bad, only now he was the souled big bad, and Xander was shocked at how much that bothered him. He thought he’d hated the vampire. Oh, he'd gotten used to him, but a week ago, Xander would have said that he still hated Spike. The idiot had blackmailed him and threatened him and hit him on the head with a microscope in an attempted to get back his psychotic girlfriend, but the idea of him turning into some brooding Angel-clone was pretty much nauseating.

“Do vampires sleep?” Dawn asked. She was sitting on a kitchen chair Xander had pulled into the living room, and she had her arms crossed in a good imitation of a pissed off slayer.

Spike looked over with an expression of confusion.
“Yeah.”

“I know you're stronger than me, but if you ever hurt my sister again, I’ll find you when you’re asleep and stake
“Dawn!” Buffy had been withdrawn and silent up to this point, but that pulled her out of her funk. “Let’s avoid death threats.”

Sighing, Xander just patted Bonnie on the back. She was clinging to him. When Spike had first come home, she’d thrown herself at him with such joy that the trembling Spike who was clearly hallucinating had vanished and he turned into the demon she knew. He’d swung her up and for one brilliant second, things felt normal. Then Buffy had followed, and Spike had accidentally brushed against her as he spun with Bonnie in his arms.

The moment that happened, Xander could see Buffy recoil, the fear and desperation etched on her face. If she’d been planning on telling the rest of them that the attack hadn’t been any big deal, she’d lost her chance. In one second, all of them realized just how much Spike had frightened her. Even Spike. He’d put Bonnie down and retreated to his chair. Even now, his body language was big bad, but he was silent, his eyes focused on the knee of his jeans.

“He tried to rape you.”
“Ixnay on the ape-ray,” Xander said desperately as he felt a need to put his hands over Bonnie’s ears.

“But if he wasn’t strong enough to win, does that still count?” Bonnie asked. The whole room fell silent. Tara and Willow hovered in the arch to the kitchen, Dawn’s back went even stiffer, and Buffy, who was sitting on the couch with Xander, turned ghost-white.

“Honey, it does count,” Xander said softly. “It’s not okay to hurt people or even try to hurt people.”

“Unless you’re Spike and then you get a free pass,” Dawn muttered. Bonnie’s cheeks darkened in distress, and Xander could understand why. Dawn was the closest she’d ever had to a friend her own age, and Dawn had always been a big Spike fan, but now Dawn was pissed. Dawn was rightfully pissed because attempted rape wasn't like putting your elbows on the table at dinner, and Bonnie was having to choose between her friend and her family. Xander held her tighter.

Xander wanted to just sit in a corner and maybe throw a few jokes around, but Bonnie was looking at him with bright green eyes that reflected nearly as much pain and
confusion as Spike’s blue ones. “He made a mistake, and part of that was the fact that he didn’t have a soul or a sense of right and wrong. He had more of a sense of strong and weak, and the strong-versus-weak thinking is not exactly moral.” Xander struggled to find the right words to make his daughter understand this. "I mean, using that rule we’re all screwed because no matter how big we are, there will always be something bigger out there. But part of that was the whole not having a soul, and hey, he fixed that.”

"What does that mean exactly—that Spike is all soul-having?" Dawn demanded. When she got going, she really was about as stubborn as Buffy.

Willow gave Dawn and Buffy matching sympathetic looks. “Now he has a soul, so he’s more like—” Halfway through that thought, Spike turned to give her a yellow-eyed glare that made Xander wonder just how well pinned on his soul might be. She fell silent.

“Not anything like the poof,” Spike snapped. Clearly there was still a whole lot of big bad in there. "I should just bugger off." Spike sat up, his posture oddly formal, and Xander could feel Bonnie's fingers digging into his arms.
"Hey, no one is looking for any buggering." Xander blushed as his brain processed that statement about one second slower than his mouth. Spike actually managed to smirk.

"Why were you in the school?" Tara asked softly. When the rest of them flailed like emotionally headless chickens, they could count on Tara to keep her cool.

Spike shrugged. "Something called me. Kept saying that it was coming from below--that I belonged in hell, but since I wasn't coming down, hell was rising up to meet me."

"Well, that's sounding un-cheerful. I thought we had that fight and won it." Xander didn't specifically mention Glorificus' hell-dimension door, not when Buffy was looking so breakable.

"Things are strange in the magical world, too," Tara said. She glanced over at Willow. "Rack is gathering magical powers faster than ever, and it feels like magic is tipping somehow." Willow's eyes slid down to the ground.

"Which I would feel if I hadn't done so much tipping myself," Willow whispered.
Buffy sat up a little straighter on the couch. "Hey, we are not keeping score here. We've all done some pretty stupid things in this last year." When Buffy's eyes found him, Xander flashed on an image of Warren sprawled in an obscene pool of blood. She would probably always think he'd been stupid and just following Spike, but Xander believed in his heart that he'd done what had to be done. Period. However, he'd always regret doing it, anyway. Yeah, if they kept score, Xander figured all of them would have some pretty sad numbers right now. "But if something's coming, then we do what we've always done--we pull together." Buffy had on her firm voice, the one that just dared anyone to disagree with her.

"I feel a need to say 'amen' which is weird with the whole Jewish/wiccan thing," Willow said. She was still timid and quiet, but Xander could feel the clinging wisps of their friendship pulling at him.

"Hey, we've kicked hell's a--" Xander coughed, "tush. We've kicked hell's tush lots of time, as long as two counts as lots. But hey, that's two more times than anyone else has managed, as far as I know. So, what's the plan?"
"We could see what Rack knows," Tara offered. "I don't think Willow or I should go, though. There's a new darkness in that part of town, so he might be killing witches or maybe even stripping their powers." Tara made a face.

"Um, you're making it sound like stripping powers is worse than killing. Personally, I'm way more okay with being powerless, but then I have a lot of experience with powerlessness," Xander said with a goofy grin that got a matching smile out of Willow.

Buffy was still looking like a glass version of herself—pale and on the verge of shattering into a million little pieces. It was weird to think that Spike had managed to do so much damage accidentally when he'd spent years intentionally trying to hurt her without making a dent in her defense. Of course, the problem was that she had let him in. She'd trusted him. As much as Xander had railed and complained and privately thought Buffy was losing her mind, he'd never been blind enough to miss the fact that something in her had pretty much trusted Spike since she'd let him out of Giles' bathtub. Now that Xander had spent time around Bonnie and Spike, he suspected that something deep down in Buffy was just a
little demonic—enough that she'd expected to be able to control Spike by proving her dominance over him. It was like Bonnie expecting Spike to come back because he was the strong one in the house so of course he couldn’t leave. That wasn't the way it worked in with demonic logic. The dominant one took control and told other people what to do, at least until the dominant one got tossed on his ass. Spike and Buffy had discovered that pretty much on the same night.

"Xander?" Willow sounded concerned and Xander blinked at her.

"Huh?"

"You're being all weirdly spacey," Willow said. Xander blinked as he realized that people were looking at him. Clearly he'd missed part of the conversation.

"Um, could we back up to where I was saying that dead is worse than powerless?"

Spike snorted, and Xander found himself oddly reassured by the fact that Spike still thought he was an idiot.

Tara studied Xander for a second, and Xander squirmed a
bit. "I said that if Rack rips the magic out of a natural witch, someone born with powers, it might rip the soul out too."

Xander's mouth fell open. "I vote no to any and all soul-ripping. I mean, body ripping is bad, but it does not seem fair for someone to go ripping your soul."

"My grandmother saw a lot," Tara said softly and slowly. She was feeling her way around the words, and Xander waited for her to figure out how to say what she was trying to. "She said some demons and warlocks could..." she stopped and swallowed. The something shifted and she straightened up, her determination shining out of her. "She said they could trap the soul. She said the women of my family were cursed because the demon that had stolen my great-great-great-great-grandfather's soul had raped the wife and left a changling child. She said we were the children of that evil—that the demon's blood travelled through the female line and that as long as one drop of the demon's blood walked the earth, the soul of our ancestor was held prisoner inside the demon's heart."

"But that doesn't make sense," Buffy said. Xander was glad he wasn't the only one a little confused. "If your
grandmother thought her blood was keeping someone's soul trapped, why would she have children?" Buffy asked. "No children, no demon blood left."

Tara gave a small shrug. "She did what her husband told her. The women of my line had an obligation to have female children who could carry the demon's power. The men wanted... they wanted us to track down other witches with the blood of the demon and kill them. It was our obligation to destroy all the other descendants and then when the line was down to one, she would have to destroy herself to free the ancestor's soul." Tara's voice had lost all emotion, but Xander could feel enough disgust for both of them.

"Your family are complete and utter tit-heads, pet," Spike offered. "How old were you when they started in with that rot?"

Tara shrugged. "From as early as I can remember. But my grandmother used to slip me books, make me translate Latin spells and magic history, and the books said that soul-trapping was a skill of the old gods and the most powerful chaos mages and practitioners of nigromancy and ya sang. Those types of magic users usually sacrifice the ability to have children because they redirect their
life-giving forces into prolonging their own lives."

"So they lied. Big surprise." Buffy frowned. "I wish I'd hit your father really, really hard when he was in town."

Tara shrugged like it didn't matter, but Xander noticed that everyone else in the room looked more than a little bothered, including Spike. The last time Tara's family had come up, Spike had congratulated them on being manipulative bastards. Then again, he'd fried his own brain by hitting Tara just to prove to her that she was human. Xander wished he could fit Spike neatly into one box so that he could stop giving himself a headache by trying to figure the vamp out. And now with the soul, Spike was even harder to understand.

"But if Rack is practicing nigromancy or ya sang, he might catch my soul or Willow's. Our soul would be trapped inside him until he died. It would become part of him, like... like a battery in a toy."

"Ick," Bonnie said. Xander flinched as he realized that his daughter was hearing all this. Her cheeks were dark and she was clearly upset, but she still looked calmly around the room with bright eyes.
"Seconding that," Buffy said with a disgusted expression of her own. "So, you two will be staying as far away from him as possible. I'll go and find out what he knows about hell rising." Buffy stood up.

"You can't go alone," Dawn blurted about a second before Xander said the same thing.

"I'll go with," Spike offered as he stood. Buffy flinched back, her foot catching the leg of the coffee table and kicking it hard enough to made Bonnie's pile of books tumble to the floor.

"Sorry. Buffy, I'm sorry," Spike said, backing away.

"No, it's me. I—I just—" She stopped. Xander could fill in the rest. She was just scared. She was just freaked out being in the same room with the vampire who had tried to rape her after she had put her trust in him. Actually, Spike was looking freaked out, too.

"Bloody hell. This can't work. I should just leave town."

"It will," Buffy blurted out quickly, and now she looked desperate. "It already is. Hey, you've been out of the basement for less than an hour and you've already given
up talking to invisible people. Give us some time and we can get back where we were."

Spike just stared at her.

"Well, maybe not exactly where we were," Buffy said with a pained frown. Yeah, she was still hurting him about as much as he was hurting her.

"Buff, no offense, but you tend to inspire either running and flailing or the firing of big magical balls of flame," Xander said. "Maybe Spike and I should try talking to Rack."

"You?" Maybe Buffy didn't mean to be insulting, but Xander had to clench his teeth to keep from saying something pretty unkind. Bonnie's darkened cheeks puffed up like little balloons so that Xander could see K'wana's face in their daughter.

"Boy is good at playing helpless and putting people off their defenses. You go in there, and you and Rack are going to end up trying to kill each other. You don't get much information out of a dead body, luv." Spike had been sounding like his old, confident self until the 'luv' slipped out. He visibly flinched.
"That might be the best way to get information. Rack wouldn't hurt Xander. He doesn't have magic and hurting him would make us come after him," Tara said. "But he m-might take you hostage," she added after a heartbeat.

"Great. I get to be bait. There's nothing like feeling like my life has purpose." Xander patted Bonnie on the back and started urging her to move to the couch seat. She was getting so big that his legs went to sleep when she sat in his lap too much, and he could feel the pins and needles start when she shifted.

"You don't have to," Buffy said.

"Hey, I don't have to do a lot of stupid things that I do anyway," Xander pointed out. "Besides, Spike still doesn't know how to work the washing machine without shrinking all his clothes, so he'll bring me back safe and sound."

"Bloody right. Houseboys are expensive to replace," Spike said before he headed for the door with long strides.

"See? I feel safer already," Xander joked as he followed
him before the girls could launch any sort of counter-attack on his manly ego and ability to not get killed. Hopefully Dawn would distract Buffy with the verbal attack Xander could see just below the surface. Buffy had jerked Dawn around about as much as Spike. Socializing with demons was bad when Dawn wanted to do it, but at the same time she was busy explaining why Dawn shouldn't date Halvard, she'd been sleeping with Spike. Yep. If they were keeping score, they'd all fail at life. "Be good for Tara," Xander said to Bonnie before he closed the door after him.

Xander stood looking at the door. Shit. In all his planning to escape the house, he'd forgotten that he'd be alone with Spike. He wasn't prepared to deal with this new vampire when he couldn't figure out what he thought about the old version.

Sighing, Xander realized he had to face Spike eventually. He plastered a smile on his face and turned around. Spike was standing by the front gate smoking as he scanned the quiet street.

"Are we going to go after Rack, or do you want a chance to take a shot at me?"
"Me?" Xander asked. Spike turned his head just enough to give Xander a cold look. "I was just making sure you weren't talking to any more of your invisible friends." Xander started toward Spike. "I had an invisible friend when I was four. He talked me into eating a mud pie. Looking back, I'm pretty sure I just thought it looked like chocolate."

Spike's eyebrow twitched.

"So... Rack? I don't actually know where he lives, so I'm really hoping you do. If we have to go back in with the girls, our egos will take more damage."

"I know," Spike said. He gave Xander a long look and then dropped the cigarette to the sidewalk before grinding it under his heel. They turned and headed down the sidewalk. Xander realized that Spike's coat was gone. He'd been a lot more dramatic with it, but maybe he was tired of the 'batman with the cape' look he had going when he walked fast in that coat.

"So, any chance we're going to be taking the van to the other side of town? You know, the van that disappeared when you did?" Xander asked. "Wait. You didn't trade my van for a soul, did you?"
Spike stopped and spun around to glare at Xander.

"Not that you could because your soul is worth way more than my van. My missing van," Xander added. Shit. He really was an idiot. He was an idiot who was kicking a vampire when he was down. Oddly, that didn't feel as good as Xander might have assumed.

Spike turned back toward the north and started walking again. This was going to be a long night.

"Did the van even survive?" Xander asked.

"If it didn't?" Spike didn't seem too concerned. Xander sighed, but hey, before Spike was ripping through his money, Anya was doing the same thing. They walked in silence for a time, neat little houses giving way to small apartment buildings and stores. "Right then, if you're planning on saying something, just say it."

"What am I planning to say?" Xander asked. Spike stopped again, this time staring at Xander until Xander started to squirm. "What?"

"I figured you'd be the one voting to stake me."
"Me? Why me?"

Spike's eyebrows went up. Some days I think you got dropped on your head as a tyke."

"Considering my mother's parenting skills, that's possible." Xander gave a goofy grin and just waited for Spike to say something that actually made sense.

The silence continued as Spike just stared at him, but Xander was a whole lot better at outwaiting people than he had been as a teenager. Sure, he still wanted to make an inappropriate joke about his mother versus Spike's crazy sire, but he had grown up enough to keep his mouth shut. Usually. Sometimes.

"Bloody hell. I really thought you'd be saying I couldn't be trusted around the women and children."

"Okay, the women in my life are scarier than me. I don't worry too much about them, although I tend to worry a lot about their budgeting and plumbing skills. As far as the children, the only one I know is Bonnie, and she pretty much adores you."
"More than Dawn," Spike said, pressing his lips together unhappily.

"There is the whole attempted rape thing. It tends to make sisters cranky."

Spike gave him a cold glare. "I wasn't trying to hurt her. You, though.... you, I'll hurt."

"First, thank god for the chip because I do know that. Second, I know you weren't trying to hurt Buffy. Okay, I will never again admit this, but I remember what it felt like when I had the hyena--Buffy was so strong, and I just wanted to either dominate her or let her dominate me, but I wanted to be in the same pack with her, and I didn't care if I hurt Buffy the girl because I wanted to be close to Buffy the slayer." Xander grimaced. "Okay, I think I just heard hell freeze over because sympathizing with you over our mutual habit of trying to rape my best friend... this is officially the weirdest conversation I've ever had."

"You? You tried to soddin' rape Buffy?" Spike's mouth was practically hanging open.

Xander shrugged and started down the sidewalk. Hopefully, if he picked the wrong direction, Spike would
stop him. "I told you about K'wani."

“Trust me, that wasn’t rape, mate. Hell, the bird still smelled of soddin’ lust even when I met her four years after the fact. When Anya called you a Viking, she couldn’t have been too far off the mark.” Spike gave Xander a look that was just plain creepy. It was an odd cross between admiration and curiosity, and Xander’s arm hair stood up on end.

“Way to be creepy guy,” Xander complained. “But I wasn’t talking about K’wani. I was talking about when the hyena took over. I actually missed out on eating Principal Flutie because I was busy trying to rape Buffy. She kicked my ass, but I tried. And I am going to deny ever having this conversation, but maybe looking at Bonnie every day and thinking about K’wani has made me realize something.” Xander looked over, but Spike was walking beside him without comment. If this had been soulless Spike, he would have made any number of comments by now. This patience was actually as creepy as Spike’s weird looks. Xander chewed on his lower lip for a second as he tried to figure out how to say this. If Spike would just interrupt him, he could change the subject and forget the whole mess, but Xander figured Spike had earned some honesty. “What Warren did...” Xander
stopped. Now Spike was looking at him, but he was still staying weirdly quiet. Maybe he was listening to the voices in his head. Xander verbally plowed ahead. “Warren wanted power. He was a sad little man who raped someone because he wanted to feel unpathetic for one moment.”

“Soddin’ right,” Spike agreed. Xander expected Spike to go off on the righteousness of killing people who threatened the family, but Spike just sniffed and went back to silently studying the street they were walking. Maybe Xander should have brought Bonnie. His daughter had the good or bad habit of showing brutal honesty. She must have gotten that from her mother because Xander was more the sort to avoid the uncomfortable parts. Like now. He’d pay good money for a vampire attack to just avoid this conversation he’d started. He was clearly an idiot.

“When I attacked Buffy and K’wani, I wasn’t trying to be unpathetic, although looking back, it was slightly pathetic, but I mostly just wanted the fight. I wanted to dominate them or for them to dominate me, and I was totally okay with either one. It was more about finding pack. So, I’m not saying that vampires are anything like primals--”
“They are,” Spike cut him off. Xander looked over, searching for some sort of emotion, but Spike was watching the street with the same predatory gaze he always seemed to have when they were hunting. Xander nodded and just walked through the pools of yellow light at Spike’s side. If vampires were like primals, Xander knew why Spike had done it. It was wrong. Flat out it was wrong. And Xander didn’t regret throwing Spike out of the house. Without a soul, Spike wasn’t going to understand the danger he was putting people in, and Xander knew that because he’d been a danger to everyone when he had the primal in him. And Xander knew he never would have been able to talk Spike or Buffy out of boffing until they wrecked each other’s lives. Nope, the whole ugly mess had been totally out of his control. But if vampires were like primals, Xander could feel a little sympathy for a subordinate pack member who found himself without a pack to run with.

They’d walked in silence for a good mile, the sounds of distant traffic and chirping bugs filling the night, before Spike spoke. “So, you’re not planning on staking me the minute I have my back turned?” he asked.

“ Nope,” Xander said, “just as long as you promise to not
turn into Angel. Seriously, one good brood or speech on redemption and spiritual torture or snowstorm and I’m reserving my right to dust you.”

Spike snorted. “Like I’d turn into that nancy-boy wanker. If I start whining about redemption, I’d want someone to put me out of my soddin’ misery.”

“Exactly. It would be a mercy killing. I know I’d way rather be dead than turn into Angel.”

“I’ll make sure to drain ya and leave your rotting corpse in some nice quiet place if you ever start abusing the leather and hair gel,” Spike offered with an expression that came close to a smile. Maybe things were going to be okay. All they had to deal with was something evil rising from below, and face it--they were all way better at fighting demons than confronting personal issues.

**Part Twenty-Five**

Xander looked around the empty room. It looked like a waiting room at the world's tackiest dentist, but there wasn't anything particularly magical about it. He might have thought they were at the wrong place, only Spike was doing his wired and twitchy thing. One of these days Xander was going to have the guts to tell Spike that he
looked like a hunting dog stalking around the room, but today was not that day.

Spike kicked open a door to an inner room, his arms bent as though prepared for an attack, but as far as Xander could see, there was only a whole lot of grandmotherish furniture. Why was evil always so tacky?

Spike stalked into the room, and Xander followed, watching Spike for signs that it was time to run like hell.

"I guess we missed him."

"Not bloody likely," Spike muttered. He had his head tilted to the side, and Xander could feel goose pimples go up his arm. "Something's here." Spike walked along the wall, his hands ghosting over the walls as he searched for something. Either that or he was trying to freak Xander out, and if it was that last bit, it was working. Xander was suitably freaked.

"Maybe we should ask someone else about the thing from belong," Xander suggested.

Spike snorted, but he didn't even bother to answer.
"And I guess I'll stand here and try to look threatening in case someone sneaks up on us."

Spike looked over his shoulder. Yeah, Xander figured those were two things he would never have to do around Spike: watch their backs and look threatening. Spike did both. When Xander gave Spike a goofy grin, Spike rolled his eyes and went back to feeling his way around the room. At least Spike was acting more like Spike now. A hallucinating, guilt-ridden Spike was just wrong... wrong like pink frogs or vegetables on pizza.

"Got it," Spike said.

"What? Our missing wizard?"

"Warlock, ya idiot," Spike corrected him.

"I dare you to call him a wizard to his face," Xander said as he walked around to the side so he could see better. Spike's hands looked like... well, they didn't look like anything because Spike's arms ended at about the wrist. "Okay, that looks painful."

"It's an open portal," Spike said.
"That's better than you just randomly losing your hands," Xander said. "So, our missing warlock skipped town?"

"Or dimension," Spike answered. Xander didn't have a joke for that. Leaving the dimension seemed a little extreme, even for someone trying to avoid Buffy. Usually people just left California.

"Should I call Tara?" Xander reached for his cell phone, and Spike paused long enough to make it clear he was thinking they might need backup. As far as Xander was concerned, if Spike even considered back-up, Xander pretty much thought it was mandatory. Spike might act all surprised that Xander hadn't gotten eaten yet, but Xander was attributing his survival to the fact that he knew when to go running and/or screaming like a six-year-old girl. A six year old human girl.

"Stay here and keep the phone ready. If this portal starts to close, get her over here," Spike finally said.

"Um, how am I supposed to know if it's closing?"

Spike pulled his hands out of the portal and turned around to give Xander a look that made it clear Spike was questioning Xander's intelligence.
"Hey, the only portal I ever saw was Glorificus'," Xander pointed out in his own defense.

Spike took a second to keep giving Xander that same exasperated expression. "Exactly, pet. When portals open or close, they make an awful lot of noise. So if you have a soddin' thunderstorm in the room, the portal's probably trying to close. Get Glinda on the phone."

"Oh. Got it," Xander agreed. When Spike kept looking at him, Xander crossed his arms. "I have it. Storm. Call Tara. I'm not so much of an idiot that I can screw that one up."

"Never said you were, mate. I just don't fancy getting stuck in some other dimension."

Xander frowned. "Spike, you know I want you back, right? I mean, I would never intentionally lose you in another dimension. Not unless you were with Angel and even then, I'd be torn." Xander held his hands up as if he were weighing two things. "Getting rid of Angel—good. Losing you—bad. Honestly, if Angel were going with you, your odds would be fifty-fifty, but since you're going in there alone, I'm going to cover you."
Spike rolled his eyes, but he also smiled. "Loon," he muttered and then he dove into the open portal before Xander could even make all his arguments about how maybe they should call Buffy for help on the backup side of things.

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Spike came out in the sort of over-decorated castle that Dracula might prefer. Outside the arched windows, a purple and black sky was lit with flashes of lightning that flashed every second or so. They definitely weren't on Earth.

A small sound caught Spike's attention and he grabbed a chair and twirled around, ready to swing it like a bat. Considering that it was just about as ornate as a throne and a good two-hundred pounds, Spike figured it could do quite a bit of damage. Rack stood there, his normal clothes replaced with a long green robe.

"Don't try it, vampire," Rack said, and Spike could feel the magic swirling around him.

"I don't particularly want to, but I'll have answers or we'll
find out which of us is stronger," Spike said as he tightened his grip on the chair. Rack would have trouble constructing a spell and ducking at the same time. He'd fought magic users before, and he had no illusion about how much danger he was in, but Spike hadn't lost a fight with one yet.

"Well, well," Rack took a step backwards and dropped his hands to his sides. Spike could feel the ambient magic settle like dust released from a whirlwind. "The vampire has a soul."

"Doesn't mean I won't pull your soddin' intestines out through your nose," Spike threatened. He was surprised when the chip didn't even give a chirp. Spike smirked. "Especially seeing as how you're not all human."

Rack shrugged. "I have a few extra pieces spliced on. They give me an... edge," Rack said with a certain level of smugness. Spike figured that meant he had some hidden fighting skill. He fucking hated magic-users. "So, what answers were you looking for?"

Spike took a matching step backwards and lowered the chair to the ground, signaling that he wasn't any more interested in fighting than Rack. "Something's rising on
the Hellmouth."

Rack laughed, the sound like a hyena's cackle. "Something is," he agreed. "Something that will play with you like a child's toy, vampire."

"Necromancer?" Spike didn't like the thought of one of those bastards in Sunnydale. The magic-users could control the dead, and vampires were like marionettes in their hands. Spike snarled at the thought.

Rack smiled and shook his head. "Worse. Far worse."

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Xander whirled around when soft footsteps told him he wasn't alone. He brought his knife up, but when he recognized the woman, he let his knife drop to his side. "K'wani?" Xander's heart tightened as he gazed at the mother of his daughter. She stood in the doorway between the room and the waiting area Spike and Xander had passed through. She was beautiful, just as beautiful as the night Xander had met her with long, black hair and dark eyes. True, she didn't look human, but Xander never let that stop him from crushing on
"Xander."

"Hey." Xander stopped, not sure what to say now. "Spike told me you had to leave, and I'm sorry."

"You didn't stop my mother from taking me away." She didn't exactly sound like she blamed him, but that was a strange thing to say. Xander had never been able to say more than two words to K'wani's mother before the woman had either walked away or shoved Xander down on the ground and then walked away. K'wani looked around the room. "You're with Spike."

"I'm playing backup boy," Xander agreed. "Bonnie's doing really well. Hey, if you want to stay with us that would be great. Spike would love to tell your mother to go jump off a cliff." Spike wouldn't use those words, but he'd get the idea across to the old bat.

K'wani's eyes found him, her long, dark hair flying in a wind that didn't exist. Okay, that was weird. "I should have been able to raise my baby."

Xander's eyes widened. "I know that," he said softly.
"You weren't even there for the first five years of her life. She's my baby... my blood. I chose you because you were so strong, but you never chose us. You had Bonnie by accident. You hid her."

Xander knew that K'wani had a right to say every single thing, but that didn't make it hurt any less. Yes, he'd made more mistakes as a father than he could count. However, he loved Bonnie. He frowned in confusion as she turned on him. "I've told my friends about her now," he said. "They all love her, and she's safe."

"Until you decide that someone else is more important than your family." K'wani looked uncharacteristically angry. "You're not good father material. The primal had strength going for him, but you have nothing."

Bile crawled up Xander's throat as he realized that there was only one good reason for her to come back to Sunnydale. "What are you doing here?" Xander asked. If she said she'd come to take Bonnie back, Xander wasn't sure what he'd do. He couldn't give up his daughter—share her, yes. However, he couldn't hand her to her mother and just let K'wani take her back to whatever demonic world she lived in.
"I came to see you," K'wani said, her tone making it clear she thought that was a stupid question. "When I first met you, I thought you were so strong."

"That was the hyena," Xander said. He tried hard to be an ethical man, a dependable one, but he didn't have illusions about being strong. Hell, about a year earlier, Spike had made a damn good point about the fact that Xander should be dead.

K'wani wrinkled her nose as she looked at him with unvarnished disgust. "I chose you to father my daughter. You. She's lost her entire heritage and culture because you're such a loser that it taints her."

Xander could feel his face warm with humiliation. It was all true, but it wasn't something he really wanted to think about. "I do my best to take care of her. I don't tell her she's worthless, unlike your mother," Xander argued.

"My mother was trying to make her stronger. You're just making her weak. And when you get tired of her, she's going to be more alone than ever."

"I would never—"
"You mean you would never walk away from blood relatives without ever visiting? You're so overwhelmingly loyal that you'd commit yourself to family?" K'wani demanded. Xander opened his mouth to say exactly that, but she interrupted him. "How are your parents?" she asked with a honeyed tone.

For a minute, Xander froze, his mouth open. Then he started to shake his head. "It's not the same."

"Really? My daughter is better off with me. I never abandoned her because it was more convenient for me. I never turned against my own blood." K'wani stepped toward Xander, and he backed up, panic making all his thoughts blur together.

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Spike narrowed his eyes as he studied the warlock. "I can hear it telling me that my place is in hell; I can feel the pull." Running his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, he shrugged as if those things didn't bother him. "But it doesn't have any power over me."
"It will," Rack said. "I left Earth because the darkness that's rising is going to swallow everyone. Oh, some people think it will devour only the good, but evil that omnipotent will consume the entire dimension."

"Then help us stop it," Spike suggested.

Rack laughed. "Not a chance. It's whispering into the ears of a hundred souls, and one of them will open that seal. I don't plan to be anywhere near Earth when that happens.

"The seal?" Spike felt a crawling fear as he remembered sitting in the room in the basement of the school. He kept getting images of his victims, buried alive and calling for him. He'd wanted to claw through the dirt until he found them, but he'd wanted to run away just as much. Instead of doing either, he'd sat huddled in the corner tearing at his own flesh as he'd tried to rip the soul out. Considering the amount of misery he'd seen come out of wishes, he was a bloody moron for trying a wish on himself.

"The hellmouth taint still clings to your aura, vampire. You know where it is."
Spike didn't bother answering that. "Who's under it?"
Spike knew of a half-dozen old ones that might be lurking under that seal, other gods like Glorificus that had been pushed out of this world when humans discovered magic.

"Not who... what," Rack said. "Muslims call it Iblis, a being created out of smokeless fire. Zoroastrianism called it Angra Mainyu, the destructive spirit. The Sumerians said it was the birthwater of Saghulhaza, the upholder of evil. You're not talking about some demon that you can fight. You're looking at the rise of the source of evil—the first evil." Spike could feel a cold chill through his body, and he gave himself some time to think by pulling out a cigarette.

"Sounds more like mythology than reality." Spike put the cigarette to his lips and lit it, feeling the warm smoke fill him with the illusion of body heat. Outside, thunder rumbled as a particularly large bolt of lightning flashed through the sky.

"Vampires are both," Rack pointed out. "I've been feeling this for the last five years, preparing to run just as soon as I had spliced enough powers onto my own to survive in a demon dimension in the proper style. So, this is
home now. You can fight for Earth if you want, but you'll lose."

Spike blew out a long plume of smoke. "I've heard that before. I'm still here."

"Yes, but this is different. Earth is built on some peculiar magical rules. Only evil can open the door for ultimate good to win the battle, and only good can open the door for evil."

"So some git who means well is going to open the hellmouth?" Spike didn't like the sound of that, especially since he knew one or two gits who were pure good intentions and just stupid enough to do it.

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Xander shook his head as he struggled for the right words to convince K'wani that he loved their daughter too much to ever leave her. "I'd never turn on Bonnie. Never."

"You turned on me." K'wani's gaze dared him to contradict her.
"I never did. I sent you money, offered to support you, tried to convince you to get your own apartment."

"You left me alone with a weak daughter and a mother who hated the sight of me," K'wani disagreed. "You abandoned me, and I'm taking our daughter before you can destroy her the way you've destroyed me."

"I never hurt you, never intentionally hurt you," he edited himself. "I was young, and I'll do anything to fix the mistakes I've made. Bonnie needs both of us," Xander said, desperate to make her understand how much he wanted to keep his daughter. Grabbing Bonnie and running for the hills was sounding better and better.

"Bonnie doesn't need a rapist as a father. You tried to rape your friend. You did rape me."

Xander could feel his legs tremble as he shook his head. "No, I never—"

"I wanted to have sex with a strong man, a man who would give my daughter the power to survive in this world, and I got you." K'wani tilted her head to the side. "Don't you remember that night? Don't you remember
how you found me on the street and threw me down on the damp grass? Don't you remember our legs tangling as I struggled to get out from under you?" K'wani's grin twisted into a dark snarl of fury. "Unless you want me to take back the daughter that you stole from me after raping me, you'd better run, little rabbit."

Xander looked at K'wani, fear twisting through his guts until he couldn't breathe, but if he ran, he was leaving Spike without backup. Yeah, he was pathetic backup, but some help was better than none. He couldn't do that, but he couldn't lose his daughter. The world narrowed until Xander felt like he was watching K'wani down the length of a straw; her face all he could see.

"No," he said. "I'm not running. Bonnie is my family, so are Spike and Buffy and Tara and Willow. If you want to fight for her, I'll fight," Xander warned. His whole body felt like it was vibrating; it was like if he didn't throw a punch he was going to collapse in fear.

Suddenly K'wani started laughing. "And here I thought the sad little boy would run for the hills. Well, I have to get one wrong every century or so."

"Who are you?" Xander demanded. "Where's K'wani?"
"K'wani? She died because she let a pathetic thing like you touch her. Demons aren't terribly forgiving. We'll see each other soon," K'wani gave a malicious smile and then it was like she was turning inside out, her mouth opening so the blackness inside poured out and she vanished into a black blob that made the hair on Xander's arms stand up.

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Rack shook his head. "Too late, vampire. The seal is nothing. Anyone can open that, and my guess is someone will soon enough. The First is whispering schemes into a hundred ears, and someone will listen. However, the door... the door that good intentions have left the locked door standing wide open and unguarded."

"How do we close it?" Spike dropped his cigarette and stepped on it.

"It's not that easy." Rack looked amused.

"Unless you want me ta rip out your beating heart—"
Rack held up his hands. "Peace, vampire. I don't have a fight with you. I just don't think you can close that door. Goodness opened the door by committing an evil act. Closing it requires an evil to commit an act so merciful and good that the scales balance."

Spike gritted his teeth. "We'll bloody find a way," he said firmly.

"Even if you do, you're still going to lose Earth to the last battle," Rack said. Earth magic has always existed in contrasts—good against evil, black against white, earth against air, fire against water. The first evil opened a door in Sunnydale, but the first good has found an opening too. After a little manipulation from the first good, evil opened a door through an act of self-sacrifice and love. The other side is working through prophesy and warriors to end the eternal struggle. The ending might be different, but the battle will still rip your reality to pieces. You should just find yourself a younger world to move to. For a certain fee, I could even help you settle here." Rack spread his arms to show that his castle was available as sanctuary if the price was right.

"Sod off," Spike said. He turned to go back through the portal, Rack's laughter following him. He pushed through
the magic, his skin burning with cold as he stepped back into the dark room he'd left. Xander sat on the floor, his back pressed back against the wall and his eyes swollen. He still clutched his knife, but his body was visibly trembling.

"Pet?" Spike flashed into gameface and looked around, expecting to find the boy had been forced to kill something—the only time Spike had seen him this panicked, he'd just killed Warren.

Xander looked up, his breath coming in little gasps. "She's dead."

Spike blinked. "Who?" Xander didn't immediately answer, and Spike strode across the room and knelt in front of him. Catching Xander by the shoulders, he demanded, "Who's dead?"

Xander looked up at him with wild eyes. "K'wani. K'wani's dead."

Cocking his head to the side, Spike studied the boy. He smelled of misery, so he clearly believed what he said.

"Something was here," Xander whispered. He raised his
hand to wipe his hand over his eyes; the smell of salt filled the room. "It said she was dead... she died because of me."

"Bloody hell, you can't tell me you're going to believe the first big nasty that tells you a tale." Spike sank back on his heels. Part of Spike considered that pretty damn stupid, but he knew enough about K'wani and her family to suspect it was true. If no one wanted her, she would have been a liability in a family where the matriarch cared more about power than anything else. Spike had suspected that from the first time K'wani had said she had to leave, but the boy did tend to assume the best of things. "Evil lies, pet," Spike pointed out. "You can't just believe it." He wasn't sure how he was supposed to offer comfort.

Xander shook his head. "It wouldn't make sense to lie. We could check. Tara could do a spell, but I never asked her to. I never asked her to look for K'wani."

"If she's made a new life—"

"She hasn't. She would have come back to see Bonnie. I just—" Xander sucked in a breath and tears fell freely now. "I didn't want to admit it, but the monster took her
form, made her say she blamed me... threatened to take
Bonnie away."

Spike could feel his fangs itch at the idea of someone
stealing his family. "Over my dusted body, pet," Spike
promised. Shifting around, he sat next to Xander on the
floor. He could understand the fear and pain of losing
family—Spike had felt it more than once. Xander wiped
his hand across his eyes again.

"Bloody hell, pet. I was there when she visited Bonnie
that last time. She knew there was a chance her mother
would throw her to the wolves, and she walked into that
trap to keep her daughter safe. If she gave her life for the
poppet, then you should bloody well respect her
strength, not cry over her." Xander's breathing just grew
more ragged. The discomfort in Spike's chest grew, and
he realized that he felt bad for the boy. As illogical as
Xander's grief was, it pulled at some emotion in Spike
that hadn't existed before the soul.

The only person Spike had ever tried to comfort had
been Drusilla, so he wrapped his arm around Xander's
shoulder and pulled the boy close enough that Spike
could hold Xander's cheek to his chest and start the
wordless crooning that had always silenced Drusilla's
screams. Xander, however, grew louder. For long seconds, Xander struggled to free himself, but Spike remembered that behavior from Drusilla, too—the desperate desire to not take the comfort she needed. Spike just held Xander close until sobs tore the cries from Xander and his arms wrapped around Spike's waist. Spike kept crooning as the boy finally faced a dark truth he'd ignored for far too long. Spike figured Bonnie had already come to terms with her mother's death, but clearly Xander needed time to grieve.

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"Jasmine, hurry up," Amy called. She could see her mother smiling at her, even if she would only talk when Jasmine wasn't around. The younger witch kept Amy's mother from returning to his world. A small part of Amy regretted that Jasmine had to die, but she'd lost so much time with her mother. Her mother was right; Amy had wasted so much of her own youth. But now she and her mother were both going to enjoy power and eternal life: it was only right for two such powerful witches.

Amy's mother gave her the sort of smile Amy had always yearned for. Her mother loved her. Jasmine's life was
such a small price to pay.

"Are you sure about this?" Jasmine looked around the basement.

"Absolutely," Amy said.

Part Twenty-Six

After he hung up the phone, Xander groaned as he looked at the clock. Five a.m. His alarm would be going off in fifteen minutes anyway. Swinging his legs over the side of his bed, he rested his head in his hands and wondered how much longer he could keep doing this. Fighting evil had been a lot easier when he’d been a couple of years younger. Between trying to spend time with Bonnie and working and answering Buffy’s five a.m. calls, he felt like shit. But she had to be feeling worse. In three hours, she had to be at school dealing with all those hormonal teenagers. You couldn’t pay Xander enough to deal with that. No thank you—he preferred
missing concrete deliveries and idiots who couldn't read code or an architect's plans.

"Something wrong?" Spike asked. Xander looked up to see Spike standing in the doorway to Xander’s bedroom. Xander flopped back so he was laying sideways on his bed, his feet still on the floor.

"Buffy called."

"Couldn’t be good news this early."

"She said to keep an eye on you," Xander said as he stared at his ceiling. It really was too damn early for him to deal with any of this. Spike came over and sat on the corner of Xander’s bed.

"Why? Does she think I’m going to burst into flame or something?" Spike smelled of cigarette and whiskey, two things Xander didn’t want to face at five in the morning.

"You stink."

"Sod off, Harris."

"It’s my bedroom."
Spike shoved at Xander’s leg as he took up more space on the bed. Xander tilted his head up and glared, and Spike was looking at him with pursed lips. "Nice erection, pet," he offered.

"Fuck off." Xander grabbed a sheet and pulled it over his crotch to hide his morning erection. Spike laughed. Spike’s odd habit of showing up in his bedroom had started after their encounter with the not-K’wani. Xander never would have guessed it, but Spike was a mother hen. Okay, maybe Xander would have guessed it because Spike always had fussed over Dru, but Xander never expected Spike to fuss over him. "So, who’ve you pissed off lately that you have Buffy all twisted up?" Xander asked. He pushed himself up so he was sitting next to Spike. Laying down with Spike sitting on his bed was actually a little disturbing if Xander thought about it too long.

Shrugging, Spike shifted so he gave Xander more room to sit up. "No idea, pet. Most of the demon community would like to see me dead."

"Yeah, well I’m not thinking highly of the demon community right now."
"Bloody hell, pet. It’s not like Bonnie's folk are particularly evil. K’wani’s mother was just a heartless bitch, a little like your mother, pet."

"My mother never got me killed," Xander muttered. His stomach still soured every time he thought about the fact that K’wani’s mother had taken her away only to let her die. Xander should have shot the old bat. Maybe they could get K’wani’s mother and all the men from Tara’s family, lock them in a warehouse and then set the thing on fire.

"She led the danger away from her girl…. That’s what mothers do."

"She should have just shot her mother."

Spike didn’t answer immediately. "You remember what it felt like to have the demon in you, pet?"

"I know I had an overwhelming urge to bite things, but I’m pretty sure I still wouldn’t have killed my daughter, if I had one at the time."

"Didn’t you ever feel the need to follow someone, even
when you thought they were bloody idiots? Even when you were pretty sure their idiocy was going to get you killed?"

Xander frowned and studied Spike. The light spilled in from the hallway, but it wasn’t enough for Xander to really see Spike’s expression. Xander rubbed a hand across his face. "Sadly, the only thing I remember is a whole lot of aggravation. I was aggravated that Buffy kicked my ass and then didn’t seem interested in it, and I would never admit this if I weren’t sleep deprived, but I was even aggravated that the others ate Principal Flutie without me."

Spike frowned at him.

"What?" Xander demanded.

For a half-second, something was there in Spike's face—some disbelief or surprise, but then the expression just vanished. "Just noticing your overwhelming stink," Spike said with a nasty smirk. Xander sighed. Yeah, Spike was hiding something, but he had no illusions about being able to get information out of a reluctant Spike.

"It’s harder to notice from your own bedroom," Xander
suggested. Getting up, he grabbed his robe off the floor and rubbed a hand over his face. More and more workers were vanishing from the worksite, so Xander was guessing the shit was about to hit the fan demonically speaking. It was funny; the people of Sunnydale were blind, but when things really started getting dangerous, they’d just start drifting away. Most of the parents hadn’t even shown up for graduation when the mayor when all snaky. It was like some inner sense told them something was in the dark hunting them even as they refused to believe in monsters than lurked in the dark.

"So, did Buffy give you any hints about why you’re supposed to watch me?" Spike asked.

Xander tied his robe’s tie and headed out into the hall. His first stop was Bonnie’s room. He cracked the door open and peeked in on her. She was sound asleep with one arm hanging over the edge of the bed. Spike stayed quiet as Xander pulled her door closed and then headed for the bathroom. Toothbrush next. Xander felt like a gerbil died in his mouth.

"Nope. She was just really clear that I was supposed to keep an eye on you." Xander said.
"Sounds ominous." Spike started to say something else, but Xander closed the door on him. He might be more comfortable around Spike post-soul, but a man wanted a little privacy when it came to peeing.

"Oi!" Spike shouted from the other side, but then he fell silent. Xander turned the shower on to heat up and hoped that he hadn’t woken Bonnie up. She was cranky in the morning, and as much as he loved his daughter, he really didn’t want to be around her when she was grumpy. She tended to get a little brutally honest when she was grumpy.

Showering quickly, he slipped into the clothes he’d set out on the counter the night before. Hopefully Buffy would be quick and he could get to work and figure out how many men had called in or just flat-out quit. Xander opened the bathroom door and let a cloud of steam escape into the hall. Spike was nowhere to be seen, so Xander headed up to the first floor. If he’d just gotten home, he’d be going for the blood.

Spike wasn’t in the kitchen, but Tara was. When Xander walked in, she stood looking at him with wide eyes, her hand reaching for the door to the basement just as
Xander came out. "Hey," Xander said. He smiled, but Tara's face was just sort of frozen in shock. For a half-second, Xander thought something was really wrong. Then he frowned as he noticed her blue shirt. "Isn’t that what you were wearing last night?" he asked. Tara blushed deep red, which was a 'yes.'

"Oh. So, you’re casting spells together again, are you?" Xander wiggled his eyebrows. Tara’s blush deepened.

"We were talking. I fell asleep."

"Talking," Xander said with a knowing nod. "Is that what those crazy kids are calling it these days?"

"I—" Tara stopped and aimed a mock punch at Xander’s arm. "We’re going slow. It’s hard to rebuild the trust, so we’re just... we’re not up to casting spells again," Tara finished.

"Yeah, I get that. I kind of hate that I have this little flinch when Willow walks past a spell book. She’s my best friend, but—"

"You love her without trusting her," Tara said softly. She ducked her head, and Xander wondered if any of them
would ever get over the damage they’d done to each other in the last year. It was funny, but Spike and Glorificus and Angelus and the mayor had all tried to destroy them, and none of them had done as good of a job as they’d done on each other.

Xander brushed his fingers over the back of her hand, a quick touch. "Seriously, I hope you two can work things out without a repeat of the whole mind-wiping, magic-abusing parts of the relationship."

Tara’s mouth quirked into a grim smile. "Me, too. I do love her, and I think she's starting to really understand that we have to go slower—that I have to really trust her to get through disagreements and fights without resorting to magic. But right now, we aren't fighting much, so...."

"So you already trust her to be a good girlfriend through the good times, and you're waiting until you see the bad," Xander concluded. He could understand that. "I was the opposite. When times were bad, I stuck with Anya, proposing so she would feel the love she needed so much at a time when we were at our lowest. But I sucked at the good times."
"You weren't that bad," Tara disagreed.

"Yeah, yeah I was. I was always telling her how she should act and I didn't even trust her enough to tell her about my daughter, which really says something. I just wasn't good at just being with Anya when there weren't demons breaking down the door. So, you need to give your relationship with Willow some time to see how it goes, good time and bad. That's fair."

Tara stepped closer and slipped her hand in his as she smiled at him. "You're the most loyal man I know. You're loving and warm and willing to give yourself to everyone you love. You will find the right relationship, someone who knows all your secrets, and then it'll be right in good times and bad."

Xander wasn't sure why, but he could feel his eyes sting a little at her softly spoken, but confident, proclamation. He wanted someone. Since Anya had formally invited them all to not come back to the Magic Box unless they were making purchases, he'd felt cut off from the part of himself that even looked at girls. Maybe it was his daughter or the fact that he was distracted by the latest evil from below, or maybe it was that he just didn't know how to reach out to people who weren't in his group.
Instead of getting into any of that, he asked her, "Aren’t you up a little early?" Xander headed for the coffeepot. "You were trying to time it so I’d be in the shower, weren’t you? And here I thought you were the innocent one."

"Not that innocent," Tara said with just a bit of coy in her expression. "However, you’re ahead of schedule today."

"Well, Buffy called and said she was coming over. Something about keeping an eye on Spike, so I’m up a little early."

"Buffy’s coming?" Tara’s eyes got even larger, and then she turned and bolted for the basement stairs.

Xander shook his head and headed for the refrigerator. Since he was up early, he might as well make himself some eggs. Eyeing the carton Xander thought about Buffy. If she’d been out all night slaying something bigger than usual, she was going to be ready to eat a whole herd of horses. He pulled out the entire carton and set it next to the stove as he went in search of a pan and bowl. Clem seemed to have some sort of religious objection to putting dishes back in the same place. He’d tried to
explain it to Xander, but all Xander could get out of it was that Clem’s people were anal retentive about being reverse anal retentive. Putting things in the same place was somehow a taboo. A demonic psychologist could make a fortune around here. Or not. Clem didn’t seem all that interested in changing, so Xander had gotten used to the endless search for dishes.

He found a bowl behind two bags of flour and the pan was propped up in narrow cabinet where Tara kept several magic books. The neighbor’s dog started barking like mad just as Xander started cracking the eggs on the side of the bowl.

A key scraped in the lock. "Xander?" Buffy shouted from the small mudroom that connected the kitchen to the backyard.

"Here, Buff," Xander answered. He started cracking eggs faster. Buffy came in the back door with a wild look in her eye.

"Where’s Spike?"

"His room, probably."
"I told you to keep an eye on him!" Buffy sounded like she was pretty close to a snapping point, and Xander stopped cracking eggs so he could really look at her.

"Buff?"

"Was he home last night?"

"No. Creature of the night, you know."

"Do you know where he went?"

"Out creaturing maybe. I don’t know. Why?"

"I should go get him." Buffy turned toward the basement stairs, and Xander felt a momentary twinge of anxiety at the thought of her going into the basement. Those lower levels were for family, and Xander had no idea when Buffy had stopped being family, but he just didn’t want her down there. Maybe their year of secrets had left deeper scars than he’d realized, but he hurried to follow her, searching his brain for some plausible excuse to keep her out of the bedroom level.

"Should go get who, luv?" Spike asked as he came up from the basement. Buffy jerked back, and Spike froze in
place.

"I was-- I mean. Where have you been?" Buffy finally blurted out.

Spike looked over to Xander for some sort of explanation, but Xander could only shrug. "Right here," Spike said.

"All night?"

Spike made a little huffing noise and headed for the coffee. "Not bloody likely. Went out to find a little action."

"Um, Buffy," Xander said, "you’re really freaking me out here. What’s going on?"

Buffy looked from one of them to the other, and Xander could feel a cold panic start to stir in his stomach. "Holden Webster." She blurted the name out and then stared at Spike. Spike stared back at her, the silence grew so long that Xander started to fidget.

"Webs? The guy from school?" Xander asked.
"You remember him?"

Xander shrugged. "Well, yeah. He had a massive crush on Harmony, but I'm pretty sure that was because he had no chance at getting her. He was the skinny guy who sat near you in that class where I never listened to the teacher."

Spike gave up on the coffee and turned to face Xander and Buffy. "I thought that described all your classes," Spike pointed out. The soul had definitely not slowed down his ability to insult. This time, though, he was right.

"True, but this teacher had a big picture of swords on the wall. I once impressed Giles with my ability to tell a broadsword from a schiavonna because I stared at the picture when I wasn’t busy staring at Cordelia’s boobs."

"Classy, pet," Spike said with more sarcasm than usual.

"Okay, you two can stop being weirdly friendly any time now," Buffy said. "Holden’s dead."

Xander’s smile faded. "Way to bring the unhappy. Was he killed tonight?"
"He rose tonight." Buffy was back to staring at Spike.

"Wot?" Spike finally demanded.

"Doesn’t his name mean anything to you?"

With a snort, Spike turned away from them and headed for the cupboard. "Wasn’t paying attention to your mates when you lot were in school." Xander might have made a joke about Spike being more focused on trying to kill them, but after he’d opened his mouth, he decided against it. Yeah, Spike hadn’t been acting crazy for quite a while, but every once in a while, he’d get this far away look in his eye or he’d flinch at a shadow. Murder jokes were probably not in the best taste.

"So, doesn’t that name mean anything to you?" Buffy followed Spike to the cupboard where he kept his Jack Daniels. Despite Clem’s habit of moving everything in the kitchen, Spike’s booze and Tara’s magic books never moved. Xander suspected threats were involved.

"Nope," Spike agreed.

"He said you sired him." Buffy’s blurted out words seemed to make the whole room freeze, like time got
stuck or something, which wasn’t totally out of the question given they were on the hellmouth.

"Spike?" Xander finally asked, his voice squeaking a bit at the end. Spike was staring at Buffy with shocked eyes, so Xander was guessing that was a clear ‘no chance in hell.’

"Why would a vampire lie about who sired him?" Xander demanded. "What’s that? Some kind of status symbol for the undead? My sire can beat up your sire?"

"Bloody right it’s status--as long as the sire actually claims you as opposed to just treating you like cannon fodder," Spike said, his voice oddly distant. "But I didn’t bloody sire anyone. I can’t. The chip would fry my brain from the inside."

Xander didn’t say anything, but he suddenly wondered if American technology was really up to par. Spike had proved that he could hurt Buffy. "So, would a vampire lie about who sired him?" Xander asked again, only this time he looked at Spike for an answer. From the sour expression on Spike’s face, it was pretty clear they wouldn’t.

"A new-risen fledge shouldn’t risk me hearing him boast,
because I’d rip his soddin’ intestines out through his nose. But clearly this git was stupider than most." Spike pulled out his Jack Daniels and took a drink right from the bottle. Xander looked at Buffy, worried that Spike was hedging his bets with his answer. With the bottle still in his hand, Spike headed for the stairs. "I’m going to turn in before I drop. ‘Night kiddies." Buffy still had her mouth open to say something when he vanished down the stairs with superhuman speed.

"Well, crap," Buffy said. Xander agreed--that hadn’t gone all that well. "The sun's coming up. I need to get home and check on Dawn. We need to keep an eye on Spike."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. When you say we you mean me. And me's got go to work. I got a big client meeting in a couple of hours, and I know I’m going to have all sorts of workers missing. The rats are starting to leave the ship, which makes me think we’ve sprung a leak somewhere."

"Xander, this is serious. We cannot let him leave this house until we know if he's killing again. We need to find someone that can watch him."

"I’ll ask Tara to keep an eye on him until Clem gets here," Xander said as he headed for the basement door.
"Tara?" Buffy’s voice was sharp enough to catch Xander’s attention. He turned to look at her. "Tara’s here?" Buffy demanded.

Xander’s brain went into Defcon One as he realized he’d let that slip out. While his brain went spinning around like a gerbil on a wheel, Buffy’s eyes got big.

"She lives here," Buffy blurted out. "That’s why she has the answering machine at the dorm room. She’s not there."

"She just needs a little space from Willow."

"So she has to lie about where she lives?" Buffy demanded. Xander sighed and silently cursed himself out. He was clearly an idiot. "I thought we decided to get rid of all the secrets." Buffy put her hands on her hips.

"Hey, this is not a secret. It’s more something that hasn’t been mentioned up until now."

"Not mentioned? The way I didn’t mention sleeping with Spike and the way you didn’t mention having a daughter?"
"No, more the way you don’t mention your home address when you first start dating someone or the way you and Riley didn’t mention being demon hunters the first time you went out for ice cream."

Buffy blinked at him, and Xander had the feeling he was about to get totally blasted. It was too damn early in the morning for this, but he’d rather have Buffy go off on him than Tara. "She’s hiding from Willow!"


"That’s not fair."

"As someone who had his daughter magically erased from his brain, I’m thinking it is," Xander said.

"So, you want me to lie and keep secrets," Buffy concluded.

"Nope, I want you to not mention this since I’m an idiot and I fail at the not-mentioning things. But if she asks if Tara is living here, I wouldn’t lie to her. I’m just trying to
be big-old staying out of it boy."

"You don’t trust Willow." Her voice was flat.

Xander had to think about that for a second. He loved Willow. He loved her almost as much as he loved Bonnie, and more than he loved anyone else, but did he trust her? "I’m trying to," he finally said.

Chewing on her lip, Buffy just looked at him with such deep sorrow etched in her expression that Xander wanted to just erase it all. The problem was, he didn’t know how. He didn’t know what he could say to make all the messiness of the last year go away. "I really, really want to trust her," Xander added.

Buffy sighed. "This is never going to be over."

"What?"

"The drama. The consequences for screwing up."

Xander thought about that for a second. "Maybe it will. Maybe we just need to give it more time."

"Uh huh. Look, tell Tara to call me if he stirs from the
house."

"Will do," Xander agreed. He looked over at the counter at the cracked eggs waiting for some cheerful breakfast where they all sat and discussed the latest big-bad while tossing jokes around the table. It had been a nice fantasy. "So, do you want some eggs," he offered weakly.

Buffy looked over at the mess. "Nah, I should get home to Dawn."

"Sure. I’ll see you later?" Xander asked.

"Sure." Buffy tossed the answer off quickly, but then she stopped and took a step toward him. "We’ll be okay, right?"

Xander opened his arms and Buffy came to him, hugging him a little harder than human ribs appreciated. "We’re totally be okay. Hey, if there’s a big bad on the horizon, that’s good. We always pull together in the face of big-badness."

"That’s true," Buffy said, her voice muffled by his shoulder. For long seconds, they held onto each other, and then Buffy loosened her grip. "I should get home to
Dawn. She’s probably freaking by now."

"Well, Tara will call you the second Spike stirs, and if some vampire is impersonating Spike, look at it this way, we’ll get the joy of watching Spike pull the thing apart limb from limb."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "He would, too."

"Hell, yes."

"Are you sure you’re okay with him here?"

That was another of those questions that Xander had to think about. Worst case scenario, Spike had found a way to kill. Weirdly, Xander was pretty sure Spike wouldn’t kill him and he was absolutely sure Bonnie was safe. Tara was somewhere in between, safer than him but Xander could imagine a world where a chipless Spike might strike out at Tara with all her powers.

"I’ll warn Tara to be careful," Xander promised.

Buffy nodded. "I guess that’s the best we can do."

"Yep," Xander agreed. Without any more words, Buffy
turned and headed toward the back door, leaving Xander with a whole bunch of raw eggs in a bowl. "I guess I’m having scrambled eggs for breakfast and lunch." The clock warned that he was late, and Xander slammed the pan on the burner to heat up before making a dash to Tara’s room to warn her that they might just have a problem.

**Part Twenty-Seven**

Spike slammed in the back door, his last nerve fraying. He’d loved Buffy… part of him still did. She was so bloody strong--such a warrior. But right now, she was gettin’ on his last bloody nerve. Seeing her on the street, following him, had been enough to drive him home early, but still she followed. This was his bloody lair—not that she had ever respected that boundary.

"Did you kill her?" Buffy demanded. "The girl. Last night. Did you kill her?"
Tara was standing at the stove, her eyes big as Spike stormed through the kitchen and headed for the cupboard with the whiskey. He needed to be drunk if he was going to have this conversation.

"What girl? You’re not making much sense, luv." Bonnie’s little face appeared around the corner of the arch, and Spike could feel a slow, burning fury that Buffy had brought this into his home with his soddin’ family. Tara turned back to the stove and started stirring her stew with an ungodly passion. She was going to slop it all over the stove if she wasn’t careful.

"I caught the first act. I missed the curtain call. Did you kill her? Did you turn her? Is she one of your kind now?" Buffy’s anger shocked him even more than the accusation. Bloody hell, he wasn’t one for making minions even before the soul and the chip. New vampires weren’t worth the wood it took to turn them to dust. As far as he was concerned, a minion that hadn’t survived a half-century wasn’t worth having around. "Answer the question, Spike. Where is she?"

Spike got the whiskey out of the cupboard and slammed the door. "Who knows? I talked to her is all."
"Really." Buffy stood in his way, blocking his access to the living room, and Xander came up from the basement and looked from Buffy to Spike and back. Spike had long ago come to think of the boy as his, and having Buffy here to challenge him and reclaim Xander’s loyalty made his teeth itch. Buffy crossed her arms and glared at him. "Looked like more than talking to me."

"Well, I certainly didn't off her." Spike shoved past Buffy and headed into the living room. When he got there, Bonnie was missing, so the poppet must be hiding in the bathroom. Spike gritted his teeth as he tried to keep from exploding at Buffy. She had no bloody right to come in and throw accusations around. He dropped into his chair and upended the whiskey, drinking fast enough to give him the illusion of warmth sliding down into his belly.

Buffy was still standing in the arch. "Right. The chip."

Spike slammed the bottle down on the side table so hard that the bottle cracked and the pungent scent of alcohol stung his nose as it poured out over the wood. "No, not the chip! Not the chip, dammit. You honestly think I'd go to the end of the underworld and back to get my soul and then—" Spike stopped and took an unnecessary
breath.

The fact was that he hadn’t gone to that demon to ask for a soul. He’d asked to be made the man he had been in hope of getting the chip out. He’d been so bloody sure that he could come back stronger and better. He could feed and grow strong enough to force Xander to accept him as the head of the clan instead of having to let the boy fight his battles for him. He’d be the one to defend the family. Since Buffy wouldn’t accept his submission, he was going to force Buffy to submit to him and then show her how much he could care for her.

He’d had all these hopes that made him burn with shame now that he had his soul back. He'd been a soddin' idiot for ever thinking they'd cheerfully submit. Hell, from what Xander said about his time with the primal, the boy had been alpha. Since primals wove the animal spirit onto the human personality, that meant the dominance was in the boy. If that was true, there was something in Xander that would never be forced to bend his neck to another. He might choose to serve, but he'd break before yielding in a fight, and Buffy was the same. Spike would have ended up killing both of them, and he hated himself for coming so close to destroying what he loved. The very idea of taking more guilt on himself now…. He’d bloody
walk in the sun before he went out killing birds.

Carefully planning his words, Spike spoke slowly. "I can barely live with what I did. It haunts me. All of it. If you think that I would add to the body count now, you are crazy."

"So, what—you just troll the Promenade looking for drunk co-eds cause you're hungry for conversation?" Buffy demanded.

"Okay, we are entering unfun land," Xander said. Spike ignored him, laughing at Buffy’s sudden indignation.

"Oh, is that what this is? Right," Spike said.

That stopped Buffy for a second. "What?"

"You're jealous!"

"Don't play games. Not now."

Spike ran a tongue along the inside of his lower lip. "Yeah, you saw me chatting up another bird, giving the eye to somebody else. Touched a nerve, didn't it?"
Buffy backed away. "Don't flatter yourself."

Smirking, Spike studied Buffy. "It burns, huh? But you can't admit it, so you trump up some charge about me being back on the juice." He knew it was a lie even as he said it, but it just felt so good to get some little scrap of dignity back. He’d bloody loved her with everything in his demon heart, and now his soul ached with both love and guilt. Hurting her felt a little good.

"Oh, Spike, save it," Buffy blurted.

"As daft a notion as ‘Soulful Spike the Killer’ is, it’s nothing compared to the idea that another girl could mean anything to me. This chip—they did to me. I couldn't help it. But the soul, I got on my own—for you." Spike was up out of his chair, his guilt clawing at him as he thought about what he had really wished for, a chance to destroy everything he loved. But he’d done it out of love. No matter how twisted it had been, he’d loved her. He’d loved her with everything in his unbeating heart. And he wanted her to be jealous of that little bit of nothing he’d been talking to. He wanted it so much that he could taste it like human blood on his tongue.
Buffy looked at him, and when she spoke, her voice was soft. "I know."

"So, yeah. I go and pass the time... with someone. But that's all it is is time, 'cause—God, help me, Buffy—it's still all about you." Spike looked over, and Xander had slipped into the room, his arms around his waist and his eyes large. He didn’t want Xander seeing him be weak, but here the boy was. Spike gritted his teeth.

"I followed you last night, and you know what? You didn't look lonely or casual to me. You looked like you were on the prowl."

"You can't know that," Spike said. Xander inched closer, his face so closed off so that Spike couldn’t tell what was running through his head.

"So, then, tell me," Buffy demanded. "Tell me what happened. You talked to her, then what?"

Dropping back down into his chair, Spike stared morosely at the cracked bottle. He bloody needed that drink. "We talked. That's all I remember."

Buffy jumped on his wording. "All you remember?"
He shrugged. "I don't know. I go out. I talk to people or I don't. It's boring. It all bleeds together."

"Well, if you seem to forget that much, then—"

"Not that," Spike said firmly. "The taste of human blood. That, I'd remember." It’d been so long since he’d had human blood that he wasn’t even sure he remembered what it tasted like anymore. The rich copper taste of human blood blossomed across his tongue, and he flashed on the image of a woman clutching at him as his soul howled in despair. Spike shook his head to clear it so he could focus on what Buffy was saying.

"You were camped out on the hell mouth talking to invisible people. Recently."

"Okay, seriously, if we want to play nice, references to crazy talk is probably not the best way to go," Xander suggested.

"I don’t need you to bloody defend me, idiot," Spike snapped. Xander’s eyes went large, and Spike’s soul felt heavy in his chest. He edged away from both of them, his thoughts spinning. "It’s early. I’m going back out," he
"Oh no, no, no, no, no," Xander just about leaped in front of him. "Spike, forgetting is not normal. You never forget anything, so if you’re doing the mind-wiped impression--"

"Move," Spike ordered as he raised his hand in a fist. Xander stumbled back before Spike could touch him.

Buffy grabbed his arm, and Spike shoved at her, throwing her into the couch before she could get a good hold on him. For a second, the whole room froze, and before the humans could gather their wits, Spike rushed out of the house. The night air was muggy and thick with the stink of California smog, but the moon was high and the evening young.

Spike started toward the Bronze, cursing the fact that both his car and Xander’s van weren’t anywhere near. He needed to move the car and have the poof’s nerd bring the van up. If it had one scratch on it, Spike would use Jonathan’s face to polish it out.

"Spike!" a voice called behind him, and Spike used his vampiric speed to race down the street away from the
emotion he could feel in that cry.

When he reached the Bronze, it was loud and crowded and smelled of human sweat and lust. Spike swallowed down an urge to flash into game face as the smell of all the pheromones hit him. The microphone gave a pop and crackle as the singer hit a high note, and Spike slipped into the middle of the crowd. He couldn’t have killed. He could feel the wrongness circling in his guts like a snake. Fuck. He’d pushed Xander to kill the three idiots--pushed him to take all this evil and embrace it. Spike clenched his fists as an almost overwhelming urge to rip open his chest and just pull the soul out hit him.

Hell, if the boy had done what Spike had wanted, Jonathan’s blood would be on Xander’s hands. The nob was annoying, but when Spike had shown up with the van, needing a little magical help, Jonathan had just about bent over backwards helping. He’d acted like Spike had gone out of his way to do some bloody intervention. Spike had been drafted into that plan only because he couldn’t rip out Jonathan’s throat.

Spike shoved all that guilt and self-loathing to one side as he scanned the room, searching for the woman he’d been talking to. She had to be here. He’d left her on the
dance floor. A memory of her backed up against a brick wall flashed through his memory, and Spike clenched his teeth.

A boy had snuck a flask in, probably because he wasn't old enough to order alcohol, and it sat on the edge of the pool table. Spike moved closer, watching until the git was distracted so he could lift it. Only then did he flee from the human masses by heading up to the catwalk. The buzz barely took the sharp edge off the storm of emotions that raged inside. He was losing his mind.

"Spike?" Xander’s voice was tentative, and when Spike turned around, Xander was standing behind him, watching with wide prey-eyes.

"Stop looking like a walking Happy Meal, Harris."

"Right. No looking like a food group," Xander agreed. "Can we put that next to no running away after tossing people around?"

Spike snorted and turned back to the rail. Xander inched closer until he was leaning on the rail next to him. "Okay, so I’ll start. You’re scaring the shit out of me, Spike."
"Should go home then."

"Well, I’m a little single-minded when I think someone I may potentially like is in trouble. So, are you in trouble?"

Spike raised an eyebrow. Bloody hell, his life really was shit when Xander Harris’s half-arsed declaration of loyalty warmed him as much as cheap whiskey.

"And the fact that you aren’t answering tends to suggest that the answer is yes. So, consider me glued to your side until you’re willing to come home... or until you use the super-speed thing and leave me panting in your dust again," he added.

"Go home, Xander."

"Nope. I may be slow, but I’m annoyingly persistent. So, even if we’re out so late that I fall asleep over my table saw tomorrow, I’m not leaving you alone."

"Doesn’t sound safe."

"Good thing I actually have meetings all day," Xander said with a goofy grin. His smile quickly faded, though. "Seriously, Spike, you’re family. You’re the dysfunctional
and embarrassing side of the family, but you’re family, so what the hell is up with you?"

Spike studied the clueless humans that danced and flirted and wasted their life away on the floor below them. "Keep remembering things," Spike confessed softly.

"Like where you left Jimmy Hoffa after eating him?" Xander asked with something that came close to hope.

Spike didn’t bother answering. Images from his memory flashed across his vision. The girl’s face twisted with fear. Spike might dismiss it as one more case of an old victim returning to haunt him, but in his memories, he could feel his soul crying out.

"And again with the freaking me out," Xander complained.

"Where’s Buffy?"

"We sort of had words, and I sort of pointed out that she needed to back off because she helped push you over the edge in the first place. There might have been a few unpleasant words shared about how her and Willow
needed to stop manipulating people."

Spike’s eyebrows went all the way up at that.

Xander sighed. "Spike, I love them. That doesn’t mean I’m blind. Willow turned into a master manipulator, and I’m hoping that Tara’s willingness to torture her by refusing to give her the quick and easy forgiveness will show her that she has to control that part of herself. And Buffy likes to share the misery with everyone near her, and Tara’s co-dependant like a mad, mad thing, and I’m a narrow-minded bastard who doesn’t have a forgiving bone in my body."

A smile caught at the edges of Spike’s mouth. The boy was right about all that.

"And you’re a bastard," Xander finished. "So, we’re all pretty screwed up. I’m just wondering what kind of screwed up you have going on in your head."

Spike turned and really studied the boy, only he wasn’t much of a boy anymore. He’d grown up since Spike had first dismissed him as some harmless bit of fluff following the slayer around.
"You shouldn’t be around me," Spike said, his eyes flashing yellow.

Xander turned white. "Okay, not be around like you're annoyed with me? Because honestly, that's a creepy look you're giving me."

"Go away."

"Nope."

Spike sighed. The boy was a bloody menace when he wanted to be. No wonder Angelus had been so annoyed after getting turned away at the hospital. A woman slid up to Spike's other side and gave him a smile. "Interested in sharing?" she asked with a look over at Xander.

"Share?" Xander squeaked the word out. "Me and him. Both of us. But... Oh no. No, no, and worlds more of no. I'm not— He's not— I mean...."

"Actually, I am, pet," Spike corrected him with a leer for good measure. It always cheered him up to torture Harris. Right now, the man was turning a brilliant shade of red. "I lived under Angelus, didn't I?" Spike asked. True, there had only been the one time for actual
penetration, and that had included a whole lot of whiskey, but Spike certainly knew what a cock felt like and tasted like. Xander looked like he was ready to stroke out.

The woman smiled, her teeth white against her dark skin. "So, maybe we can share, or do you need some convincing?" She pressed up close, and Spike was suddenly aware of her demon lurking just under her skin. Bloody hell. Of course the boy had attracted another demon; he really was a demon-magnet.

"Sorry, luv, but I'm the type best left alone."

She gave him a coy look before focusing on Xander. "How about if I slip into something more comfortable?" She went into game face, and maybe she expected Xander to go running and screaming, but he just backed himself into the rail with wide eyes.

"Vampire! Vampire!" he hissed.

"I have eyes, Harris."

"But vampire!" Xander's right hand had disappeared behind him, and Spike suspected he was clutching a
"Get away from us," Spike warned. The woman looked Xander up and down with obvious interest, and Spike stepped forward to block her view as he growled at her.

"What's with the wallflower act? You didn't seem so shy when you were biting me. I'm not asking if you wanna be soul mates, just figured you'd wanna have some fun." She actually pouted. She wasn't going to make it even a decade as a vampire, and Spike wanted to deny that he'd turn anyone, much less a vapid bit of nothing like her, but he could remember the taste of her blood in his mouth. "You can have the boy to yourself—I'll find my own meal and we can share."

Spike pulled a stake out and her eyes got big before she turned and dashed through the crowd of humans.

"Should we go after her?" Xander asked, completely ignoring the fact that the woman had claimed Spike as her sire. The boy should be running for the hills, and instead, his warm hand was resting on Spike's back.

"Leave her," Spike said.
"Okay," Xander said slowly. "You do know I'm freaking out, right?" Xander asked. Spike ignored him. An image flashed in his memory—a house. Spike headed for the street, pushing through the crowd as Xander trailed behind.

The walk was silent, Xander not even trying to talk as Spike walked the quiet streets and up the dilapidated porch to an old house. Pushing the door open, Spike walked in like he owned the place. Two steps inside, he stopped at the sight of himself leaning against a banister. "You shouldn't have brought him. It's not time yet. Not nearly. You're going against the plan, but we can make it work."

Spike took a step back, his guts clenching in fear as something in the pit of his stomach screamed at him to run from this not-Spike.

"Spike?" Xander asked softly. Spike didn't answer, but the warm hand resting against his back had returned.

"You should kill the boy," not-Spike advised him.

"No," Spike said, shaking his head.
"If he's really alpha, you know he's going to turn on you just like Angelus did. It's best to take care of that problem before it gets any bigger." Spike shied away from Xander and the hateful words of not-Spike so that his back was to the wall. Not-Spike hadn't moved, but Xander was on his cell phone.

"He's calling for someone to come and stake you. This could be the end, you know."

Spike shook his head. Even when Xander was at his maddest, after Spike had tried to rape Buffy, he'd still made sure that Spike had gotten inside before sunrise.

Not-Spike flashed into gameface. "This is not the order of things. Not at all. But we can still have a little fun here."

Spike stared at not-Spike, afraid to listen to the words, but unable to turn away. Xander was talking to someone on the phone, and Spike wanted to shout for him to get out, to get clear of this house that smelled of death and rot and rising vampires. However, he couldn't say anything. Not-Spike transformed, and suddenly Drusilla was standing in the place where not-Spike had been.

"You left me," she moaned, raising her hands to her
temples and swaying.

"Never did," Spike disagreed. "You tossed me out on my ear."

"I plucked you from nothing and planted you in the light of the moon, but you steal your light from me. I'm not your princess anymore."

Spike didn't know what to say to that. He couldn't be Drusilla's lover, not anymore. His soul wept at the memory of what he'd done with her... for her. If he could bring back the children they'd slaughtered by dying, he'd walk into the sun.

Drusilla's mannerisms slowly faded until she was left standing there looking at him with the sort of clarity that his dark princess had never possessed. "You are being stubborn. Are those two really worth it?" She gestured toward some spot behind Spike, and he turned to see Xander and Buffy talking. Maybe it was Buffy. He suddenly wasn't sure.

"I want you to... I want you to prove you're still the man you were," Buffy said from behind him, even though Spike could still see her talking to Xander. Spike looked
over his shoulder, and another Buffy was there, a familiar hunger on her face. "You know what I want... what I need," this new Buffy said, stalking toward him with a predator's grace. Spike knew this dance; his cock was already hardening. He looked back and Xander was still talking to the first Buffy.

With a snarl, Spike threw himself forward and grabbed Xander, yanking him free of both Buffys.

"Spike!" Xander yelped.

"Can't both be real," Spike said, looking from one Buffy to the other. "One of 'em's not real. You'll get him through my broken and twisted body," Spike snarled at both Buffys.

"I think it's safe to say he's still hallucinating," Xander said. He grunted as Spike pressed back into him, pinning him against the wall.

One of the Buffys stepped forward. "Spike, just let Xander go."

Spike shook his head.
"Okay, that's not working," Xander said. "Buff, maybe you should back off because I'm getting squashed here."

"His chip isn't firing?" One of the Buffys looked confused, but the other had the sort of malicious glee Spike hadn't seen on Buffy before.

"You're not real," Spike told that Buffy.

"Oh, I am. I'm real and not at all happy about your detour off the script." That Buffy looked angry.

Spike turned to the other Buffy, the one who looked concerned. "I've been remembering. The girl. I walked her home. The one you saw. And the one before that. And I think I killed her. And I think I—I think I killed the lady who lived here. And there might be others."

Buffy's eyes went big. "Oh my God. Xander, you need to get out of here."

"Um, happy to as soon as you can get Deadboy, Junior to let me go," Xander answered. His hands were resting on Spike's waist, and Spike reached down and caught one of his wrists, holding him close.
"It don't make sense. With the chip I shouldn't be able to—" Spike froze. The second Buffy had vanished and a young Spike stood there in a brown suit with softly curling hair and glasses. William.

"Early one morning, just as the sun was rising, I heard the fair maid sing in the valley down below. Oh, don't deceive me. Oh never leave me. How could you use a poor maiden so?"

Spike made a pained sound, and Xander gave a yelp of his own, his fingers prying at Spike's grip on his wrist.

"What? What is it? Spike!" Buffy sprang forward and pulled at Spike's hand until he was forced to let go of Xander.

"Remember the vows that you made to your Mary. Remember the bow'r where you vowed to be true. Oh, don't deceive me. Oh never leave me. How could you use a poor maiden so?"

William sang softly, and Spike could feel the rage roll through him. Vamping out, he threw himself at Buffy, his teeth grazing her neck so he could smell her blood.

Hands grabbed him from behind, and Spike turned snarling to find Xander clinging to his legs. Reaching
down, Spike caught him by the neck and pulled him up, pinning him to the wall as Xander clutched at his shoulders.

"Stop," Buffy cried out, jerking him away from Xander. William was in the background, laughing, and Spike was distracted for a moment, snarling at him. Buffy took the opportunity to kick him in the stomach and send him flying backwards. Bad luck would have it that he hit the door to the basement, and the latch failed sending him tumbling down the steps to the dirt floor.

"Spike, just calm down," Buffy was saying as she stood at the top of the stairs. Spike started laughing.

"Oh luv, you never wanted me calm. Wanted it harder and faster. Wanted bruises you could press in the morning. Wanted to see your marks coloring my skin for all to see. Your demon wanted to own me, but the second you had me in hand, you tossed me away like yesterday's garbage." William stood in the corner humming even though Spike didn't remember him coming down. "They're all dead. My tribute to you, luv. So many bodies I've laid in this earth, vampires to rise in your name." Spike started to laugh, his voice a echo of William's.
Buffy came down the stairs, her eyes cold and a stake out, but he threw himself recklessly forward and grabbed the stake, shattering bottles that stood in the corner. He got her against the wall, and then Xander was at the top of the stairs, and Spike was distracted long enough for Buffy to throw him across the room.

"What are you doing?"

He answered with actions rather than words. Picking up a shard of glass, he swung at her, cutting her so that the smell of her blood blossomed in the air. She fell back, and he pressed his advantage, forcing her back. Warm, human hands caught him, and Spike turned on Xander, grabbing him by the shoulders and spinning him around so that Spike could hold him by the waist, Xander's back pulled close to Spike's chest as Spike mouthed Xander's neck.

"Xander!" Buffy cried out as Spike's teeth sunk into the soft flesh. Warm hands ghosted over Spike's arms, not pulling but petting.

"It's not real, Spike. Please. Think of Bonnie, Spike. Bonnie needs me."
Spike stopped sucking and opened his eyes. Buffy was struggling in the grip of vampires who hadn't even gotten out of their shallow graves. They clutched at her with hands that rose out of the soil. Xander was limp in his arms, his body yielding even as he whispered pleas for Spike to stop. Spike pulled his teeth back, careful to not rip the skin. Letting go of Xander, he backed away. Memories flooded him—killing and feeding, burying his minions in the earth, listening as something that wasn't Buffy whispered words of encouragement. Spike stumbled back, unable to help as Buffy struggled for her life. Xander broke a rake and tossed her the broken wooden handle. Spike's minions didn't last even minutes as Buffy staked them one by one.

Not-Spike was back now. "You failed them. Now she's going to kill you. You lose, mate."

Spike started trembling, and he would have run, but Xander had caught his arm. "Spike, it's not real. Hey, you've done hallucinations before. Just tell 'em to fuck off," Xander suggested, his neck seeping blood so that Spike's mouth watered.

Buffy pulled an elderly vampire out of a grave and staked
her. "Sorry, ma'am, but it's my job," Buffy offered with real regret.

Spike cried. A century of fighting to be his own man, to be something other than the pathetic fop who couldn’t command respect from anyone, and his life had come to this. He was going to be dust with the pathetic remains of minions who hadn't been strong enough to even climb out of their graves. His dust would mingle with that of his victims.

"Do it fast. He said you would, so do it fast," Spike begged. It was too late to pretend he was anything other than a follower, a vampire too weak to fight for his own right to live.

"What's he talking about?"

"I have no idea, but I'm guessing that more than one of us has been getting visits from dead people."

"Me. It was me. I saw it. I was here the whole time, talking and singing." The words tumbled out until Spike had to catch his breath because he'd run out of air for talking. "There was a song," he whispered. He was on the ground, the fresh earth under him, and warm hands
pulled him close and held him.

"Xander, you need to get away from him. He isn't safe."

"He's never been exactly safe," Xander said. "But if he wanted me dead, it's pretty clear he could have done that."

"He bit you."

"Well, yeah, and let us never again discuss that. But I'm not leaving him. Spike, what are you seeing?" Xander asked.

"I don't know. Please, I don't remember. Don't make me remember." Spike buried his face in Xander's shoulder.

"Okay, I'm officially wigging."

"Xander, he's a little close to your neck for comfort."

"Trust me, I'm noticing. Spike, if you vamp me, I am going to make your unlife a living hell, got it?" Xander asked.

Spike shook at the thought of killing Xander. He'd come so close. He looked up to where the other Spike was
standing with his arms crossed, looking supremely angry. "Make it so I forget again! I did what you wanted!" Spike begged.

"Well, there's something here," Buffy said and then her stake hit the wall and clattered to the ground. Spike turned his head and stared at the fallen weapon.

"Oh, God, no, please. I need that. I can't cry the soul out of me. It won't come. I killed, and I can feel 'em. I can feel every one of them." Spike clawed at his chest. Xander tried to hold his arm, but he didn't have the strength to stop Spike.

"There's something playing with us. All of us."

"Oh yeah. I miss the days when bad guys just tried to slit our throats," Xander agreed.

"What is it? Why is it doing this to me?" Spike stopped trying to claw his chest open and just hung on to Xander.

After a long silence, Buffy answered. "I don't know."

"Will you... Help me. Can you help me?" Buffy and Xander traded worried looks, and Spike hated himself for
being the weak one. He'd wanted to protect them, but he was as worthless as William ever had been.

"We'll help you," Buffy promised.

Spike let himself sag so that Xander was holding most of his weight.

"Hey, fangless, we can't let you slip away before all the fun starts. When this big bad finally shows his cowardly face, I want to see you rip it to tiny little shreds," Xander said. Right now, Spike figured he wasn't strong enough to handle the weakest fledge, but he just stayed silent. For now, the voices were gone, and all he wanted was to sleep.

Part Twenty-Eight

"You need to take the slack out of the chain, mate. Give a prisoner enough slack, and they can use the freedom to break the chair apart," Spike offered. Xander was kneeling beside his chair, and he looked up at Buffy, but she didn't comment, and Xander pulled the vampire-proofed chains tighter so that Spike was pressed tight to the chair.

"How many countless others have you buried around
town?" Dawn asked, her voice sharp, just as it had been ever since she'd found out that Spike had tried to rape Buffy. His soul reveled in the pain. What he didn't like was the confusion on Bonnie's face as she stood clinging to Tara's leg.

"Don't think there are any other burial grounds, but if I get free, someone's going to die," Spike agreed with her. Instead of fueling Dawn's anger, that only seemed to confuse her.

"So Spike's bad?" Bonnie whispered.

Xander finished securing the chains, and then he held his arms open for Bonnie to rush into them. She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him with a desperation most demons would have hidden. Hell, Bonnie would have resisted showing that much fear a year ago, but she was acting more and more human with every passing month. "Spike's sort of accidentally evil, honey. Something is getting in his head making him see things and do things. It's sort of like if we had a friend who was a werewolf—we'd have to keep him locked up three days a month or he might hurt us without meaning to."
"Yeah, only with a werewolf, you know when he's going to go crazy instead of just the random craziness," Dawn complained. Spike could see Bonnie's little lips press together.

"We stick with our friends because that's what good people do, even if it's really, really hard," Bonnie said defiantly, staring at Dawn. Xander cringed and headed for the couch.

"It will all turn out okay," he promised.

A low voice laughed, and Spike turned his head to see Angelus standing there with his arms crossed over his chest. "Oh, boyo, you really have gotten yourself in a mess. I should just let you rot, but if I did that, you'd never learn any better." Suddenly Spike wasn't in the chair—he was in Sainte-Barbe, France with the smell of the ocean breeze drifting through the curtains and the taste of a peasant girl still in his mouth. Angelus' whip cut across his back, and Spike vamped out, struggling against the bonds that held him.

"Spike! Spike!" A voice called him out of his delusion, and Spike shook his head as he struggled to focus on Xander who knelt between his knees.
"He's sick," Tara said. "His aura is weak."

"It's the blood," Clem offered. "When vampires first go off the human, they get a little crazy. Of course, a lot of people say that they stay a little crazy as long as they're drinking animal blood, and Spike and Angel haven't exactly disproved that."

"So it's withdrawal?" That was Willow, and Spike snarled at the sympathy he could hear in her voice. He didn't need sympathy. He was William the Bloody, a vampire to be feared. A long line of his victims rose like mist around him, and Spike snarled his defiance.

"Xander!" a voice called.

"Tara can heal it."

"Okay, am I the only one who things this is a monumentally bad idea?"

"Nope, I'm thinking it too. I'm thinking it really, really loudly. Xander, you're going to give Spike a taste for your blood."
Voices swirled around Spike like the heavy smoke of burning bodies.

"I think he already has a taste for blood. I don't think mine is particularly special." A cup was held up to Spike's nose, and under the cloyingly sweet scent of pig's blood, he could smell the fresh human blood. He opened his mouth and a hand raised the cup to him, helping him drink.

The power and warmth in human blood helped Spike push back the hallucinations that plagued him. With a sadistic chuckle, Angelus faded into memory and Spike was left looking at the gathering in front of him. His instincts labeled it clan, even if his soul fought the term and wanted to focus on the fact that they weren't clan because they were vampires driven by instincts that Spike couldn't control or explain. These were mostly humans with rules that Spike hadn't understood even when he'd been human.

"Better?" Buffy asked.

Dawn crossed her arms.

Spike nodded. "Yeah, but I don't suppose I'm going to be
right any time soon."

"Hallucinations?" Xander put his hands on Spike's knees and pushed himself back up onto his feet.

"Yeah. This time it was the great bog-trotting mick back to get some digs in."

"Angel?" Buffy sat up.

"Only without the soul," Spike agreed.

"Okay, that is sounding vaguely ominous. Maybe I should call L.A. and make sure everything is still tacked on. Hey, I could offer to pin Angel's soul on him using a big, wooden push-pin," Xander said with a goofy grin that made it clear that he wasn't entirely joking.

"At least Angel never tried to kill us all," Dawn muttered. Everyone in the room except Bonnie gave her an incredulous look at that, and she had the grace to blush. "Well, except for the one time," she hurried to say, her blush deepening. Spike figured that Dawn had gotten over her Spike-crush a lot faster than she'd recovered from her crush on Angel.
"When did your chip stop working?" Buffy asked, moving the conversation back to Spike and his recent habit of killing the innocent. If vampires were physically capable of being ill, Spike would be.

"I wasn't aware that it had, you know. Not 'til now."

"And the losing time? How long has that been going on?"

Spike didn't answer right away only because he couldn't quite figure out when that had started.

"If something is haunting him, we could do a spell," Tara suggested. There are some protection and warding spells far more powerful than the traditional ones, but they're dangerous.

"Too dangerous," Willow added.

Tara looked at Willow, and Spike could smell the desire like the scent of roses on the wind. "For me by myself, yes," Tara agreed. "I would need your help, and that would mean using your magic only for white, protective magic." The room went silent, and Spike was surprised that Red didn't jump on that offer. She'd been chafing at her friends' ultimatums ever since they'd told her she
couldn't touch magic.

"I'm not sure I can do that," Willow said softly.

Tara reached out and took her hand. "If you slip, I'll knock you unconscious so you don't endanger the spell."

Willow laughed. "True love is willing to knock someone out?" she asked.

Tara ducked her head. "True love is willing to do anything to keep your lover from making the same mistake again."

It took Willow a long time to answer. "Deal," she whispered.

Xander cleared his throat as the two witched leaned closer. "So, can you promise us that we won't have any more memory-wiping fun because with a big-bad on the horizon, any more magical hijinx, and I get the feeling we're all going to be vampire kibble."

Tara stood up a little straighter. "I won't let things slide. There are spells I can use to counter any harmful influence."
"And if I get out of hand, you have my permission to whammy me into unconsciousness," Willow said just as firmly.

Buffy looked worried, but she gave a nod. "Okay, maybe you two can go work on the protective spell, and we'll try and find out about our new big bad." She turned back to Spike. "So, how long have you been blacking out?"

Spike tried to shrug, but Xander had chained him tight. The boy had a knack for bondage, and it disturbed Spike a bit that this was the second time he'd had cause to find that out. "Oh, things have been wonky since I got back, ever since—" Spike let his words trail off.

"Since the soul," Xander guessed. Spike didn't deny it.

"Figured that's what it was like, it'd been so long since I had one. I thought maybe when the soul had enough of remembering all the pain and guilt, it just sort of faded out."

"So, what did you think you were doing when the soul faded out?" Xander asked.

Sucking some air between his teeth, Spike thought about
that. He'd always been one to just live in the present and not worry about what he couldn't control, but he knew they weren't going to like his answer. "I figured I was just standing somewhere like an overgrown paperweight."

"So, you thought you were helpless, and you didn't ask for help?" Xander demanded. He was getting a good head of mad going, he was.

"But... that doesn't make any sense," Dawn interrupted.

It was Buffy sad gaze that told Spike that she understood. Right out of heaven, she'd put herself out there, not exactly trying to die, but not trying to keep herself alive, either. The difference was that she'd go to heaven if she finished the job, and Spike had no illusions about where he'd end up.

"How did you do it? How'd you get your soul back?" Buffy asked.

Spike sniffed and tried to make a joke out of it. "Saw a man about a girl." No one was smiling with him, and Spike dropped the act. "I went to seek a legend out. Traveled to the other side of the world, made a deal with a demon.
Leaning forward, Buffy studied him. "Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. There was a price. There were trials, torture, pain and suffering... of sorts."

"Of sorts?" Buffy jumped on the wording.

"Well, it's all relative, isn't it?"

"Meaning?"

Looking Buffy right in the eye, Spike answered. "Meaning I have come to redefine the words pain and suffering since I fell in love with you."

"You know suffering? You tried to rape her," Dawn blurted out, her anger staining every word. "How can you say that to her?"

"Dawn," Xander said softly. Bonnie was squirming in his arms, too old and too large to be in his lap for any length of time, and—Spike suspected—unwilling to be near Dawn.

"No, I'm not going to be nice about it. He's sitting there
saying that she hurt him when he tried to rape my sister and no one wants to talk about it."

"It's not that simple," Buffy started to say, but Dawn was up off the couch in an eyeblink. Spike tensed up, disliking the fact that he couldn't defend himself, but then Xander was up, too, standing between them.

"Rape is rape. Making it sound all complicated—that's just a way to blame the victim, and no one is saying that Spike is evil."

"I am," Spike said. "I'm bloody evil, luv. I never denied it, and I'm not now. I will say that I didn't understand—before the soul I truly didn't understand what it meant to rape Buffy."

"How can you not understand?" Dawn pushed on Xander, trying to get him to move, but Xander wouldn't.

"For the same reason I didn't understand when I had the primal in me and I attacked Buffy, hoping to make her part of my pack," Xander said, catching Dawn by the arms. "For the same reason that Faith didn't understand when she pushed me down and took what she needed. For the same reason Buffy didn't understand when she
hurt Spike. All of us had something demonic in us, some power, and when we let that power loose, power doesn't play by the same rules as humans. Raw power is about force, not respect. Not morality." Xander had been nearly shouting, but his voice grew softer until he all but whispered the last words.

"Apparently, I just slaughtered half of Sunnydale, pet. I'm not really worried about being polite anymore, and I'll be honest," Spike offered. "Soul's not all about moonbeams and pennywhistles, luv. It's about self-loathing. I get it. Had to travel 'round the world, but I understand you now. I understand the violence inside. When I was only a demon, violence was pleasure, it was a way to establish rank, it was a way to show favor. Angelus raped me raw, and all I felt was pride that he wanted me. Me. Drusilla and Darla were there, but he chose to leave me bleeding and that felt..." Spike stopped. He hated the pain and the crippling weakness as he crawled out of the bed—he'd hated that Angelus had looked at him with pity after, but he'd loved that he'd commanded all Angelus' attention. Him. For one night, he'd been powerful enough to distract and please and entertain the great Angelus. He'd felt the same sense of power when Buffy had chosen him, and he'd thought she'd feel a similar pleasure if he forced her. "Can't explain it. I can just say that I never
truly hated myself back then. Not like I do now."

"So, we stop worrying about the past and figure out why you're going homicidal," Buffy said firmly. "You were humming a song when you were trying to bash in our heads. You're not usually the hum and kill kind, and it was definitely not a murder-worthy song."

"Yeah, it was kind of grandmotherish," Xander agreed. "A trigger!"

"Wot?" Spike looked at Xander seriously hoping he wasn't suggesting that the others use a weapon on Spike. Didn't seem like Xander's style, but Spike couldn't be sure of anything right now.

"A trigger. It's a brainwashing term. It's how the military makes sleeper agents. They—they brainwash operatives and condition them with a specific trigger, like a song, that makes 'em drastically change at a moment's notice."

"Freaky," Buffy said slowly, "but not any freakier than Spike randomly going homicidal. This trigger. How do we holster—safety, or—I don't know guns. How do we make it stop?"
"Well, usually the operative completes his task and either blows his head off or steals a submarine."

Spike snorted. "You've been watching too many movies, luv."

"Well, yeah. That's where I learned about triggers," Xander said with a shrug. "Could we be right?"

"Don't know," Spike answered truthfully. He hated the idea that someone had enthralled him, but he couldn't deny the possibility. "Dru could trance people, but she didn't have much luck making them do things they wouldn't normally do."

"No offense, Spike, but killing kind of is what you normally do," Xander said, his voice almost apologetic. 

Spike couldn't deny that. "I just thought the soul would change that," Spike admitted.

"Their good deeds are like a mirage in the desert," Bonnie said softly. She was standing near the hall that led to the upstairs bedroom and bathroom as she watched.

"What?" Xander asked her.
"Good memory," Clem said, nodding so that his ears wiggled. "We've been studying human cultures and religions and we're doing Islam right now. It's a quote from An-Nur."

"Verse 39," Bonnie said sadly.

Clem's voice said in a near-chant, "But as for those who are bent on denying the truth, their good deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty supposes to be water--until, when he approaches it, he finds that it was nothing: instead, he finds that Allah is with him, and that He will pay him his full account in full--for Allah is swift in reckoning."

Spike didn't answer, but he hoped that his good deed wasn't some mirage. The soul had made him suffer, had reminded him of all the evil he'd committed every second of every day, and he wanted to believe some good could come out of that.

The others had grown silent, and Bonnie was holding the wall so tightly that it looked like she expected it to start bucking.
"We had the spell ready," Willow said cheerfully, her voice cutting through the heavy silence. "Um... if we still want it..." She looked around the room in confusion.

"Yeah, definitely," Xander said, visibly shaking himself free of Clem's words. "So, does this cover us from bedbug and cockroaches and ghosts of all sorts?"

Tara stood beside Willow with a large cauldron in her arms. "It can only be used on a house designed to carry magic. Good thing Xander owns one."

"Score one for team good-magic," Xander agreed. "So, what sort of the magic do we have going?"

"Blood magic," Tara said softly. Each of us puts a drop of blood in the cauldron, and then we pour the potion on the four corners and the magic in the beams will carry it through the house." Tara carefully put the cauldron on the coffee table and then walked over to touch the carving on one of the house beams. "These runes are old, so old that I haven't been able to find them all in the spell books, but they're protective magics. With the potion, we can add our magic to the house and the house will protect those of us within the spell."
"So we can't do this at my place, huh?" Buffy asked.

Tara shook her head.

"Okay, Xander, do you have room for Dawn here?" Buffy asked.

"No!" Dawn sat up. "I'm not staying here unless you are."

"I'm not sleeping three to a bed with you and Bonnie. I can handle myself," Buffy said.

Dawn crossed her arms. "So can I."

Before the sisters could get going, Xander interrupted them both. "I have room for both of you. This place actually has two basements and a dungeon under that if we're desperate. If the magic is limited to this house, it's time for us to pull together." Xander's knife already had fresh blood on it. Spike blinked as he realized that Xander had cut himself to add his own blood to Spike's dinner. "So, is this spell a 'the more blood the merrier kind' or a don't accidentally add more than one drop unless you want it to explode kind?" Xander asked.

Willow answered, holding out a small dish. "Let's put the
blood in here and add just the one drop."

"So that's the potentially exploding answer," Xander said, but he cut his finger and held it over the small bowl. A few drops fell, and Willow went to the cauldron and carefully let one drop slide down into the brew before she took the bowl away and wiped it clean. "So, who's next?" Xander asked cheerfully.

The procession went quickly enough, each of them providing a drop of blood until the potion seemed to boil and Spike could feel the power sliding over his skin like oil.

"So, we're down to just Fangless," Xander said, coming up to Spike with the knife. Spike tried to ignore the fear he could feel at having an armed human so near. This was Xander; the man could have dusted him already if he wanted.

"Xander," Willow said, "I'm not so sure that's a good idea. This is white magic, and Spike is sort of evil."

"He's family, and he's going to be part of the protection spell," Xander said, his expression turning stubborn.
"It could make the whole spell go kablam," Willow warned.

Xander paused and looked around the room. "Hey Clem, can you show Dawn where the extra rooms are. And maybe Bonnie can show her around the second basement. I don't think she's been down there." Xander's voice had a note of false cheerfulness.

"Not worth it, pet," Spike said. "I can take care of myself, so you'd be best to leave me out of the spell.

"Funny enough, you can't take care of yourself tied to a chair." Xander turned and gave Clem a sharp look.

The demon cleared his throat and got up. "Hey girls, we could check out the dorm rooms on the lower level. We could set up a recreation of the Balish dimensional wars using one-fifth scale models. How's that sound?"

"Like history class," Dawn complained.

"Dawn, go on," Buffy said. Dawn opened her mouth, but Buffy pulled out a glare worthy of Joyce herself, and with a long-suffering sigh, she followed Clem down into the basement. Bonnie didn't make as much of a fuss, but
Spike could tell she was just as unhappy. Only after the heavy basement door had closed did Xander reach out to grab Spike's forearm and bring the knife up to it.

"You could blow the whole house to pieces," Spike warned.

"This house has been here longer than any of us have been alive," Xander said, "including you. It'll be fine."

"Xander." Tara stepped forward and rested a hand on Xander's shoulder. "Are you sure? It could weaken the spell to have evil woven into the fabric."

"We don't leave our own vulnerable just because it'd be way easier and a whole lot safer," Xander said firmly. Buffy had a neutral expression, but then Spike figured Buffy's judgment was probably overshadowed by guilt over what she'd done to him. Willow was flat-out against including Spike's blood and Tara was worried at the very least.

"We're not saying to leave him staked outside like a sacrificial goat," Willow said. "We're just saying that this is slightly unsafe the way nuclear bombs are slightly unsafe."
"Forget it, Will. We can throw the whole spell away and try another one or we can add Spike's blood." Xander drew the knife across Spike's forearm so fast that he flashed into game face, but Xander just collected the drops in the little bowl and then pressed his hand against Spike's arm as vampire healing made the cut close again.

"We can try this," Tara said softly.

Willow looked from one of them to the other, her mouth set in an unhappy line, but she didn't comment. For not the first time, Spike considered the fact that he'd done some misjudging. He'd always figured Red set the rules in her relationship with Tara, but now Tara was making it clear that when she put her foot down, she expected others to follow. And Xander—the boy had knackers Spike had never suspected. Truly, though, he should have.

Angelus and Angel both liked complaining about the boy. He'd been there, refusing to back down to Angelus at the hospital, and Spike wasn't ashamed to say that he had trouble facing down Angelus. The boy had tricked Buffy into sending Angel to hell, and even though he'd forced her to do that, he hadn't lost his rank in their group.
When Angel had come back and Buffy had refused to kill him, the boy had changed allegiances and turned to the other slayer, Faith. When Spike had come back to town, there were a number of demon gossips nattering on about that. No wonder demons tended to hate the boy—he was weak and all his body language screamed of submission, but when you look at what he'd accomplished, his acts were those of a dominant.

Not waiting for anyone's permission, Xander stepped to the potion and let a single drop of Spike's blood fall into it. The rolling surface started to hiss and steam rose like a plume of smoke from a volcano.

"That's not good, is it?" Xander asked as he stumbled back. He pulled the key to Spike's chains out of his pocket.

Tara was kneeling next to the coffee table, chanting softly, and the smoke thinned and then vanished. "It's okay," Tara said softly. She looked around the room. "The spell held."

"So, now we put the protective spell on the house and figure out how to hit this thing back," Buffy said firmly.
Spike figured he was out of this fight—he'd spend it chained to a chair listening to voices in his head, but at least the others were acting like the group that had managed to kick his arse more than once. He had to believe they'd win again because if they didn't, Spike was going to die, and his soul railed at the thought of eternal damnation, even though Spike knew he deserved it.

Part Twenty-Nine

The knock on the door sent Xander reaching for his gun.

"Won't help against most beasties," Spike pointed out from his place in the chair.

"Yeah, but even you're going to be surprised if you're met with a gunshot to the face," Xander pointed out with a sadistic grin. Spike gave him a very odd look in return, and Xander realized that he was talking to someone chained to the chair. "Not that I would ever shoot you in the face," he hurried to add. Spike's eyebrow quirked.
"Because the days of me wanting you dead are long over. Well, not long if measured by vampire time what with living with centuries, but...." Xander snapped his mouth shut and just turned to the door. Spike was really looking at him oddly now, but Xander couldn't quite figure out how to get his feet out of his mouth. It made his heart heavy when he realized just how much they'd all hurt each other, and still did, and oddly, Spike was now in that category of people he didn't want to see hurt.

Bracing his foot behind the door, he got a good grip on his gun and hid it behind his hip as he eased the door open. In the crack, he could see Buffy leaning heavily on Giles. "Giles?" Xander's mouth fell open.

"Yes, it is I. Perhaps you could open the door," Giles suggested. Three girls stood behind Giles and Buffy.

"Buffy?" Xander asked. If they were all seeing things, he wasn't willing to trust that Giles had just randomly shown up. One of the girls sort of pushed past Giles and reached out to shove the door open. "Oh for God's sake, just let us in." She pushed on the door, but Xander's foot blocked it. Xander brought the gun up, pointing it right at her face.
"Okay, I know I don't know you, and I suspect that I'm seeing things, so I'm pretty much going to pull the trigger first and figure out what's hallucination and what's real later." Xander might not normally be willing to do things in that order, but his daughter was in the house, and if this thing from below wanted in, it was getting in over his dead body.

"Xander?" Tara called.

The girl had fallen back, her eyes wide.

"Good Lord, Xander. We have an apocalypse to worry about. Must we worry about your idiocy as well?"

Okay, that sounded a whole lot like Giles, but he still wasn't feeling too sure. "Tara, will the house spell protect us if these are bad guys dressed up like friends?" Xander asked.

Buffy raised her head and she was badly beaten. "Xander, it's Giles. The council is gone, and these are the potentials. Open the door."

Xander wanted to. He wanted to let Buffy in, but a little part of him worried that this might be like K'wani, a
hallucination sent to trick him. If that was the case, Xander wasn't sure he was strong enough to fight this many people.

"Do kindly move," Giles snapped.

"Tara?" Xander asked.

"I've got it covered," Tara said.

Xander stepped back and glanced over at Spike. He hated having strangers in his house with Spike tied up, but he couldn't exactly let Spike loose to eat people if he heard the murder theme song. Xander let his gun fall to his side as Giles helped Buffy to the couch, the three girls following.

"What happened?" Xander asked. Tara stood in the kitchen archway, her hands hidden under her apron.

"The First." Giles looked at Spike. "Have you been acting up again?"

"Giles, back off," Xander said. Once Buffy was settled on the couch, Giles stood up, his back iron stiff as he glared at Xander.
"He's one of us," Buffy agreed. "Please tell me you have aspirin," she changed the subject, and immediately Giles' attention went back to her. Once a Watcher, always a Watcher.

"You took some nasty blows."

"And if it did that to a real slayer, it's going to rip through us," one of the girls whispered.

"The First hit you?" Xander slipped his gun back into his waistband. "Okay, so we've moved on from the light show to the hitting, so we just have to change tactics."

"It summoned a Turok-Han," Giles snapped. "This is unexpected, but the First is the source of evil, an eternal entity with endless resources."

"A Turok-Han?" Spike's eyebrows went up. "Didn't think those buggers were real."

"Neither did I, until today." Whatever a Turok-Han was, it had clearly freaked out Giles, and even Spike was looking a little green around the gills. Xander closed the door and dropped the heavy bolt into place. Spelled glass or not,
maybe it was time to close the steel shutters. The nice thing about having a demon designed house as that demons were more than a little paranoid about home security.

"What's up with the bondage fun?" The dark-haired girl that Xander had pulled the gun on asked in a suspicious voice.

"The First has been sending us visions, and it played a few mind tricks on Spike."

"Killed a whole lot of people," Spike agreed as he looked the woman up. "You smell like a slayer, but you don't feel like one."

"I smell like...?" All three girls stumbled over themselves to get away from Spike, but he just sat in his chair watching them with the same look of amusement. Xander was guessing that he didn't feel amused because a vampire chained up in a room with this many slayers had to be twitchy.

"So, potential slayers?" Xander guessed.

"Is he a vampire?" one of the girls asked.
"Yep, and if you stake him, I will personally let something vamp you so I can stake you back," Xander warned. He wasn't exactly being a good host, but the invasion of the teenage attitudes was not making him happy.

"You will do no such thing," Giles snapped before turning to the three girls, a slightly less cranky expression on his face. "However, Spike is off limits. He has his uses, and he is not generally dangerous. Right now, we need to focus on the real danger. The First has declared war on the entire line. It's not corporeal, so it must act through intermediaries." Giles glanced over toward Spike. "Weak individuals it manipulates or its priests—the Bringers."

Spike stiffened at getting called weak, but he didn't comment.

"So, we're all at risk then," Xander said firmly. "I mean, it tried to play mind games with me and with Dawn. Buffy, has it been working on you?"

Buffy nodded. "I keep seeing my mom telling me that I just have to rest, that I have to take care of myself, only her version of getting me to take care of myself seems to include not fighting. It's really hard to ignore because
everything she says is something Mom would have said."

"Only Joyce would have been fighting harder than anyone when the big fight came," Xander finished for her. Joyce might not have gotten in the middle of the slaying often, but when she did, she was perfectly willing to bash something big and bad over the head.

"Bloody right she'd be fighting," Spike agreed. "Classy lady, your mum, with a spine of steel."

"She was," Buffy agreed sadly, her eyes shining.

"I keep seeing my grandmother," Tara admitted. "She tells me to throw my magic at rising evil, but with Willow...." Tara looked down. "I'll go get aspirin."

"Willow?" Giles asked. Xander stared at Buffy, not even sure how to get into that explanation. Giles had been gone long enough that Xander didn't know where to start.

"She went off the deep end, sold out her magic to a bloke named Rack, summoned a demon, nearly got the Bit killed, and wiped everyone's mind for jollies... and to hide that she'd been mentally raping Tara for months,
erasing Tara's good judgment along with the memory of their fights. Of course, you were there for that bit, Rupert. You just didn't think it was important enough to deal with. She was a right treat to watch, if you're an evil fiend," Spike summed it up.

"Spike," Buffy warned with a dark tone.

"He might have been a little blunt, but it's the basic truth," Xander said. "However, he left off where Willow gave up magic for a couple of months, until she didn't feel a need to use it. And now she only uses magic with Tara around to help guide her, and she let Tara put spells on her to monitor her power. So it's not all bad." Xander gave Spike a dirty look, but Spike didn't look even a little embarrassed about ripping into Willow.

"Oh hell." Giles cursed softly and sat on the couch next to Buffy. "I had thought that she would change after that dreadful spell. I never expected her to...." His voice trailed off.

"Yeah, because once you have a taste of power, once you've summoned a demon by letting your powers go wild, it's a right picnic to just stop abusing that sort of magic." Spike gave a nasty snort and Giles looked up so
the two men could glare at each other for several seconds.

Xander stepped into the line of glare and stood beside Spike's chair. "Okay, before we reminisce about our good old days of mutual hatred, can I just ask why you're here?"

Buffy leaned back on the couch and gratefully took aspirin and a glass of water from Tara while Giles answered. "The council was clearly in imminent danger. I grabbed what I could and came here with my three charges. Other potential slayers will follow as the few remaining Watchers try to direct them here, but if this is an all-out war, we need our resources in one place."

"Oh yeah, because then the First can blow us all up at once," Xander pointed out. Giles' glare slipped from Spike to Xander. "Just pointing out the tactical error in your thinking, and speaking of tactical errors, why are you at my house because I really don't want this place to turn into ground zero of a tactical nuclear strike."

"The Turok-Han followed me to the house," Buffy said, her voice as defeated as Xander had ever heard. "Thank God Dawn wasn't there. Where is Dawn?" Buffy asked,
looking around.

"Her and Halvard are doing some science project next door, and his parents promise to send her running over here if anything slimy or scaly shows up," Xander said, ignoring the confused look on Giles' face. "And we're back to why we're all making ourselves one nice compact target."

"I still say that we should be on the other side of the world, not sitting on top of a hellmouth, so I'm kind of agreeing with Farmer John here."

"Kennedy!" one of the other girls said in a horrified voice.

"Construction worker Xander," Xander corrected her, "and feel free to head for the other side of the world as fast as your legs can carry you."

"She most certainly will not." Giles looked angry enough to give birth to kittens. "Their Watchers are dead, torn apart by Bringers who have clearly found a way to track the line. If the last of the Slayers die, there will be no way to protect the line and humanities first line of defense against the darkness will fall."
"She looks pretty fallen to me already," Kennedy muttered.

"Oi, don't be so sure. Buffy's one tough bird." Spike gave Buffy a supportive smile, and Buffy smiled back with half her mouth so swollen that it didn't move.

"We've been kicking demon ass since 1997," Xander agreed. "We'll kick the First's non-corporeal ass right back to wherever he came from."

"Daddy?" a soft voice called, and Xander looked over to see Bonnie peering from behind a door, ready to run for cover. Clem was not only teaching her human history and culture, but doing a good job of teaching her how to protect a line of retreat. Xander just hated that his daughter had so many opportunities to use that particular skill.

"Honey, it's okay, come here," Xander encouraged her. Bonnie came slowly into the room, giving the three potential slayers a wide berth before standing next to Xander, her eyes studying the room. "Bonnie, this is Giles—Buffy's old Watcher. And these are three girls with no manners and a whole lot of attitude." Xander was well aware that he was poisoning Bonnie against the
potentials, but so far, he was okay with that.

Spike snorted. "Subtle, luv."

Xander shrugged. "Giles, this is my daughter, Bonnie."

"Daughter?" Giles had an expression on his face that Spike would call gobsmacked. Up until this moment, Xander had thought that was a pretty stupid word, but gobsmacked worked a whole lot better than plain old shocked. "Daughter?" Giles asked again, pitching his voice up.

"Remember the night of the hyena? Well, I did a little more than chase cars and pee on trees," Xander joked. Bonnie's mother and I... well... obviously we...." Xander stopped, blushing as he tried to find a way to explain that.

"The boy diddled a half-kwaini," Spike said.

"He.... Oh my." Giles' glasses came off.

"In the face of an apocalypse, I would think my love life would be a little less than important," Xander complained. The last thing he needed was for Giles to
make a big deal out of this.

"Where's the mother? Oh lord, this is an ancestral kwaini home, isn't it? The protective runes are demonic in nature, but it never occurred to me that you were involved with a kwaini family, certainly not to the point that they would allow you inside their lair."

"I'm not... exactly," Xander said. "K'wani's mother was not thrilled about the fact she chose me, and I pretty much just tried to stay out of the way until K'wani and the family left town."

"K'wani?" Giles repeated.

"That was her name," Xander explained.

Giles blinked at him. "That's not a name, Xander."

"It was Mommy's name," Bonnie said firmly.

"Yes, it was," Xander agreed, glaring at Giles.

The glasses went back on. "Xander, I'm not sure how to broach what is surely a difficult subject." He glanced down at Bonnie. "Perhaps we can talk later."
That made Xander's gut clench. Getting called into the office shouldn't freak him out when he was an adult, but he pretty much felt like a teacher had just given him detention. "Mommy's name means girl-child. It's what they call all children until they grow big enough to have a real name, but Granddame didn't think Mommy deserved a name because she didn't have the magical powers Granddame wanted," Bonnie said with a solemnity that didn't match her childlike voice. But then what she was saying wasn't very childlike.

Xander crouched down and looked Bonnie in the eye. "She refused to give her daughter a real name?" Xander asked.

Bonnie nodded. For one shining moment, Xander thought he was going to be sick. "Mommy said that Granddame had to give me a name or Mommy would take me away and never come back and tell everyone she met that Granddame wasn't worth following," Bonnie confessed. "That's why Granddame named me Bo'yan'nea."

When Xander looked at Spike, he just gave an awkward shrug; however, when Xander looked at Giles, the man
had gone pale and sat down on the couch. "She who disgraces her mother," Giles whispered. Xander's vision went black for a second, and if that old bat had been in front of him, he would have strangled her with his bare hands. Reaching out, he caught Bonnie in his arms and held her tight, all his emotions spilling out so that silent tears slipped free.

"It's okay because you renamed me Bonnie. Mommy looked it up. You renamed me pretty and good, and that's all that matters."

Xander's chest ached, his heart weighed down with guilt. He'd left his daughter with those people. He'd never given her a new name—he just couldn't pronounce her name. If it weren't for the fact that he was an idiot, he would have gone through life calling his daughter a name that made his stomach churn. Holding on tightly, Xander struggled to get air into his lungs.

"Past doesn't matter, Harris. She's loved now. It really doesn't matter," Spike was saying softly, and fingers caught at Xander's hair since Spike couldn't reach more than that because of how he was chained. Tara came over and knelt next to them.
"You didn't know. You're the best father you can be," Tara whispered in his ear.

"You're the best Daddy," Bonnie said, and Xander could hear the confusion in her voice. Wiping a hand across his eyes, Xander leaned back against Spike's chair, still holding his daughter in his lap.

"If your granddame ever shows her face in town, I'm going to chase her down and...." Xander stopped when he looked down at his daughter's curious face. She didn't need to hear all the homicidal fantasies in Xander's heart.

"You'll never have a chance, pet. I'm claiming that right." Spike's voice was hard, and when Xander looked up, he could see that Spike didn't have any doubts about killing that old bag, soul or not.

"I'll race you," Xander said grimly.

"I'll win."

"Excuse me. Not to interrupt," one of the potentials said—not the one who had already pissed Xander off, but one with slightly lighter hair and an English accent. "but are we safe here? I'm a bit concerned about the Turok-
Han breaking in here."

"I'm more concerned about the fact that nothing she did stopped it," Kennedy said as she looked at Buffy. Xander noticed that Buffy had slid off the couch and was sitting next to Tara, her hand on Xander's leg. Hugging Bonnie, Xander realized that he had family, and it was time to protect what was his.

"Then we help her stop it," Xander said firmly. "What did you guys hit it with?" Xander asked as he looked at the potentials. He knew what Buffy used in a fight—blunt objects, fists, kicks, and something pointy for the grand finale. She was a very different fighter from Faith who liked to use cutting edges and slice into her enemy. However, he didn't know what these girls brought to the table.

"Us?" One of them asked with big eyes.

"Xander, they aren't slayers," Giles explained. "They simply carry the potential, which is why they've become targets.

"Hey, newsflash," Xander said, "I'm not a slayer, either. But I still go wading into the fight. In fact, I'm pretty sure
that I'm the one that got you out of Angelus' lair."

"He is?" one of the not-Kennedy girls whispered to her two friends.

"Xander, I'm the slayer," Buffy said firmly as she pushed herself up and sat back down on the couch.

"Yep, which means you get to lead the fight and do all the really crappy jobs," Xander agreed. "I know that if I'd been trying to distract the giant mayor snake, he would have eaten me because I don't have slayer speed. But I was there planting dynamite, so you just tell me where to put the dynamite this time."

"You're really going to go into the fight?" Kennedy demanded with the sort of arrogance that Xander had always hated in Faith.

Giving Bonnie one last hug, Xander let her go and stood up. Bonnie went to sit in Spike's lap and Xander ignored the way Giles' mouth came open in either shock or disapproval. Xander didn't have time for him. "This is my family, so I'm going to hit that thing with everything I have."
"Which is?" Kennedy asked.

Tara stood up next to him and Xander crossed his arms. "A machine gun or two, a rocket launcher, some semi-automatic weaponry and an assortment of grenades. You can get a lot at the army-navy store." Xander gave her a nasty grin. "And if that doesn't work, construction-worker Xander can get high-grade explosives. So, if this thing is big enough to give Buffy a run for her money, I'm going to be there knocking it on its ass every chance I get. An army doesn't let the general go into the fight without backup."

"Protective magic can give Buffy an edge," Tara said. "Since this thing is trying to get me to use magic, I won't use it aggressively, but I can reinforce Buffy's healing ability and provide her with some magical stamina without doing anything that could be drained off and used by the First. There's old folk magic that was designed to fight the fey, and I know most of it," Tara said firmly.

"Good on you," Spike said. "I'd offer to help, but...."

"Don't worry about it Spike," Xander said. "As soon as we kick First ass, he'll be hurting too much to go crawling
through your brain. And can I just say that he's a brave, brave demon for wanting to be up there. You gross me out on such a regular basis, I'd be scared to go in there." Xander teased Spike.

Spike got a look of exaggerated indignation. "Oi. You know you're turned on by the thought of me and Angelus romping between the sheets."

"Ew," one of the girls blurted out.


"Geez, are you ever going to lay off Angel?" Buffy asked with a wrinkle of her nose.

"Nope. I'm an unforgiving bastard. Sorry," Xander offered. "So, are we up for kicking ass?"

Buffy looked at them. "Yep, we are. If this thing thinks he's going to mess with my family, he has another thought coming. Now my house? Clearly, he can mess with that all he wants. So, any chance we can crash here?" Buffy gave him a pleading expression.

Xander looked over at the girls and then at Tara. They
could move down to the lowest level and leave the potentials in the first basement. It would put Bonnie behind the line of fire if the First found them, and they'd still have access to the escape tunnels. He couldn't turn Buffy away, but he wouldn't put his daughter in danger.

"We have four bedrooms in the first basement, and Bonnie and I can move down a level, but Tara keeps her room if she wants it. We also have one bedroom on this level, but it has a ghost that tends to wake up anyone who sleeps there if so much as a drop of rain touches the house."

"A family guardian spirit?" Giles asked with a familiar light in his eye. Xander was guessing the man was going to be up all night trying to talk to the dead.

"He always liked Mommy and me," Bonnie said. "He wouldn't warn Granddame when Daddy came over, and she was afraid that the house was dangerous because Daddy brought a vampire here. She was afraid the vampire would come back and burn the house and Natyet wouldn't warn the family."

"And he has never attempted to drive any of you out?" Giles asked.
"It's just ghost, Giles," Xander said as he studied his daughter. Clearly she had some talent in keeping secrets. Then again, Xander had never talked about her family because he never wanted to upset her. Looking back, he suspected that he didn't want to upset himself by learning any of these dark family secrets.

"A family guardian is hardly just a ghost," Giles muttered. "Girls, we'll get settled, but I dare say this will be the safest place for us."

"I'm going to lock down the shutters," Xander said.

"I should start some spells," Tara said.

"I'm going to lay here and ache," Buffy said.

Xander looked at her face. Most of the bruising would be gone tomorrow, but she had to hurt like hell. "I think you earned it," Xander said. "So, you heal up because if it's a war this thing wants, you're still our general, and we need to you kick some ass."

"Hell yes," Buffy agreed. "Just maybe not today. Oh, and can someone call Willow at school and tell her we're
here? The house is really trashed, and she's going to think we're all dead if she sees the hellmouthy fun."

"You got it," Xander agreed, heading for the phone before starting work on the shutters. Weirdly, it felt good to have demon hunting to do.

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Part Thirty

Xander knelt behind a half-built wall and watched as Buffy leaped over a scaffold and darted through a maze of reinforcing braces. The Turok-Han followed her much more slowly, but Buffy couldn't run forever. Buffy reached the end of the construction scaffolding and darted forward, dropping down into what would be the basement of the new library if the town didn't get sucked into hell in the next few months.

"Now!" Xander called. Standing up, he opened fire with a fully automatic weapon. The weapon shook so hard that the vibrations made his whole body ache as the bullets
poured out. These were armor piercing bullets, and they tore through metal struts and the Turok-Han’s hide, but that didn’t seem to slow him much. Six gunners were all firing, and the monster fell back and looked around.

They may not be the brightest monsters in the world, but Xander had to give them points for sheer determination. The beast swung his head toward the south. Xander grabbed his bullhorn. "Cease fire. South rim, run like hell!"

There was a scramble as girls got out of the way, and for a second, Xander wasn't sure if the Turok-Han was going to chase them or not. He stood, his whole body numb from the vibrations of the machine gun and his hand on the bullhorn as he waited to see if he was going to have to call Buffy for help.

"Hey, stupid. I'm down here!" Buffy called. The beast swung around, and Xander could see hundreds of red streaks across its chest, each no more than a small wound. He felt a little like a mosquito trying to bring down a bull elephant. Hopefully they could give it malaria.

"Fall back!" Xander called through the bullhorn to get the
potentials to keep their heads down, and then he opened fire again. The bullet casings fell like rain, pinging against the metal scaffolding where Xander had set up. The monster spread his arms and roared, which actually made him a way better target. This one was not getting into Mensa.

Without warning, it leaped forward and disappeared into the basement excavation. Xander checked his ammo, put the safety on, and slung the weapon over his back as he watched the fight below. The potentials appeared at the edges of the building site on three of the sides. Willow was on the south side, Tara on the north, and Xander looked up to check on the four girls he had taken under his wing on the west.

Tara was chanting, and Xander could feel something warm the air as the whole scaffold to the north started to glow.

"Okay, it's just you and me now," Buffy promised the Turok-Han. "Or should that be you and I? I was too busy killing things like you to really pay attention in school." She kicked it, and it barely even took a step back. Xander tensed up and wished he was down there with her. But some fights he just couldn't fight. He didn't have the
strength to go one on one with Neander-vamp, and he'd just get in the way.

Buffy's quips quickly faded as they fought viciously. It slammed Buffy into a wall, and Buffy swung a pick ax she had grabbed from the ground. She caught it a glancing blow on the shoulder.

"If the heart thing doesn't work, eyes and legs are good alternatives," Xander coached the would-be slayers near him. "Spike claims that genitals are a good third alternative, but personally, I get the ookies trying to stab a guy in the family jewels. But hey, feel free to try it out," Xander said. Buffy went flying across the basement and crashed into a pallet of building materials.

"Are they all that hard to kill?" One of them asked quietly.

"Not usually," Xander said. He was starting to get a little uncomfortable at the amount of times Buffy was getting knocked on her ass. They needed another fighter. They needed Spike.

"That has to hurt," one of the girls said as Buffy took another flying dive into construction equipment. Xander
clutched the scaffold and honestly prayed. If this thing took Buffy, they were all in serious trouble. None of these girls was ready to pick up the fight, even with slayer strength, and the First was too powerful to fight without a slayer. Besides, Xander wasn't all that sure another girl would get called, and he was really, really sure Faith wasn't going to show up and just offer to help out.

The Turok-Han reached out to grab Buffy, and she caught an arrow still sticking out of its chest from an earlier fight. Yanking it out, she stabbed the creature in the eye.

"Go Buffy!" Xander whooped. Buffy flew into a series of punches and kicks that forced the creature back. It finally stumbled and fell on a pile of cinderblock, and Buffy wrapped a length of barbed wire around its neck. One good twist and Buffy was alone in the ring with a big cloud of dust. Coughing, she backed away from it.

"See? Dust. Just like the rest of 'em. I don't know what's coming next, but I do know it's gonna be just like this. Hard. Painful. But in the end we'll win. Here endeth the lesson." Buffy looked pretty damn proud of herself, which was fair. She'd just kicked primeval's ass, but the Biblical language might be a little over the top.
"Go team Buffy!" Xander called before he started climbing down the scaffolding. Buffy was limping as she headed for the ladder out of the basement, but she wasn't beat up as much as she had been the first time she'd danced with the big and ugly.

"Are you okay?" Willow asked as she rushed to Buffy's side.

"Way better than the other guy," Buffy said. "Really, I'm fine," she hurried to add when Willow's face twisted with worry. "I got a harder workout cheering," she said, only now she sounded like she was full of shit, probably because she was.

"So, time to head for home!" Xander said to all the little slayers. Giles had made it sound like the slayer line was in danger of dying out, but Xander was starting to feel like there were way too many would-be slayers. He wondered exactly how many girls had the potential slayerness before the first started killing them all.

"Did you see him turn to dust?"

"Buffy was amazing."
"Oh man, if I got hit that hard, I would have just stayed down."

The baby-slayers headed for the house, happily chattering away. The good part was that they were going to scare away any vampires way before seeing them. Xander's nerves couldn't take any more monster hunting tonight.

"Are you okay?" Tara asked Buffy softly.

"A little banged around," Buffy admitted. "A lot less banged up than I would have been without help, so thanks for the backup.

"Hey, that's what we're here for, upping the back," Xander said with a smile. "Actually, that doesn't make as much sense when I say it out loud."

"And I'm very happy to have you around, not making sense," Buffy said with a smile. In an instant, alpha demonish Buffy was gone and his friend was back.

"And I'm happy to make no sense for you, milady," Xander agreed. Willow slipped her hand in Tara's as the
four of them walked behind the troop of girls. Everyone had pretty much invaded his house at this point, and he kept expecting to find Willow moved into Tara's room, but so far, Tara had not been inviting, and Willow wasn't pushing. Xander could feel hope growing as he watched just how much their relationship had changed—he actually believed Willow wouldn't go all manipu-fun this time around.

"So, is it just me, or could we really use another front-line fighter?" Xander asked.

"Spike." Buffy said it without any emotion. Willow and Tara stayed quiet on the matter.

"We can't keep him chained up forever. We tried that once. It didn't work."

"It has been a while since he went all grrrrr on us," Willow said. "Which does not mean he can't start doing the grrrr the second the chains are off."

"I kind of need him to go all grrrr, just on the bad guys," Buffy said. "I mean, I took the Turok-Han, but if that's the henchman, the big boss is going to be ass-kicking hard to kill."
"Can you kill evil?" Xander asked. The girls all looked at him like he'd just opened all the presents two days before Christmas. "Right. Of course we can. We can do anything," Xander quickly added loud enough that a couple of the baby-slayers at the back turned around to see what he was talking about.

"Tootin' right," Willow said firmly. She seemed to think for a while. "We could do some sort of monitoring spell."

"For evil? Wow, that's going to light up the town," Xander said.

"For Spike, to monitor Spike," Willow said with a dramatic roll of her eyes. Xander grinned because this was starting to feel just so damn normal. There wasn't a baddie in the world they couldn't take down when they were together.

"Something to let us know if he tapped his demonic energy," Tara agreed with a thoughtful tone. "Or maybe we could monitor him for music, watch for the signs that he was hearing music."

"You can do that?" Xander asked.
Tara gave him a knowing smile. "I can do a lot of things."

"That's actually a little scary," Xander said.

"It should be." Tara smiled at him and then started walking faster so that her and Willow headed for the pack of baby-slayers.

"Tara really can be scary," Buffy said softly.

"Uh-huh," Xander agreed. "Hopefully she'll let a little of that scary out if Willow starts going all—"

"Seriously, Xander, let it go," Buffy said.

"Right. See me let go?" Xander mimicked dropping something. "Hey, you do the Dawn-frustration, I do the rehashing the past."

"Less rehashing, more moving on."

"Got it," Xander agreed. She was right that Willow had been on the straight and narrow for a while. "So, you agree that we need Spike?"
Buffy sighed and for some time they walked in silence. More and more of the houses were showing signs of being abandoned. A lot of Xander's neighbors had a little demon blood, and more than one had whispered to him that the whole demon community had been warned—pick a side because the end was coming. "Giles is going to be majorly unhappy."

"You mean the guy who left us alone to handle things? The one who tried to claim he was doing it for our own good?"

Buffy frowned at him. "You're getting cranky in your old age."

"I always was. One word: Angel."

"Point taken." Buffy sighed as they walked down the dark street. The first of the baby-slayers hit the house and went pouring in, the house seeming to shimmer for a moment as they passed through the protective barrier. So far, either Tara's spell or the protective runes or the house ghost had kept the First out, but Xander suspected they weren't going to be that lucky forever. "So, we cut Spike loose, but only for short periods of time when we're with him. We can't risk having him go out on
another killing spree."

"I think he'd appreciate any time out of that chair. He's been growling at potentials just to keep them from torturing him with teenage angst."

"Is that why they all came running down the stairs screaming the other day?"

"Yep," Xander agreed. "And personally, I’m kind of right there with Spike. If I hear one more story about the house in the Hamptons, you're going to be short one baby-slayer."

"That one is a little annoying, isn't she?"

"Hey, if Spike tries to eat her, I'm not even going to stop him," Xander said.

Buffy shoulder bumped him hard enough to push him off the sidewalk. "Well, you unlock Spike, and I'll tell Giles."

"Have fun with that," Xander said. Buffy didn't answer, but when they hit the front door, Buffy headed back toward the bedroom Giles was using. Xander was betting that Giles would claim any other bedroom right now
because the family ghost was not an easy roomie, but Tara, Willow, Buffy, and Dawn had the four first basement bedrooms and Xander and Bonnie had moved into Spike's room just off the emergency exit. Well, that and it was the only room with a private bathroom. None of the potentials had figured that out yet. They all shared the two huge dorm-style rooms and single bathroom that had once housed the clan children.

Xander smiled at Spike who was still chained to his chair. "So, it sounds like you lot did well," Spike said. His face was tight, and if Xander had to guess, he would guess that Spike hated getting sidelined during the fighting.

"Yep." Xander walked to the weapons chest and put his machine gun inside. "So, where are the potentials?" Usually after going out, they demolished the kitchen.

"Willow chased the kiddies downstairs; she made it seem like something was going on." Spike was watching carefully while Xander fished the key out of the weapon's cabinet.

"Yep, you're getting sprung," Xander told Spike.

"In the history of bad ideas, this stands out as an
exemplary example of poor judgment," Giles said as he came out of the back bedroom with Buffy right behind him. Ignoring him, Xander unlocked the chains that held Spike.

"Well, yeah, but we need more firepower, and Spike is very fiery."

"Poor word choice there, considering I'm a vampire," Spike said. "And as much as I truly loathe agreeing with Rupert, I'm not sure this is a good idea, pet."

Buffy shook her head. "Hey, you've been sane for a week now. Besides, you're not getting out of fighting that easily," she teased. "Willow and Tara are going to use the spell to tell us if someone is sending you a music o'gram in your head, but I need a good fighter at my side."

"And as one of the not-good fighters, I second Buffy," Xander added. He'd hated watching Buffy get the snot knocked out of her, even if it had given him a chance to use some of his newly-purchased toys. If he was going to be honest with himself, it had pretty much terrified him how much it took to kill the vamp that time forgot. Luckily, he wasn't feeling like being honest with himself, so he just shoved all those feelings to one side.
"The potentials aren't helping?" Spike asked.

"They're doing their best," Buffy said. Xander was pretty sure that meant they were about as effective as a horsefly going after a buffalo. "When Giles rewrites the Council books, he can say that a good beheading works for a Turok-Han. It just helps to have a few hundred bullets in the thing to slow it down first."

"I find a few hundred bullets helps with almost anything," Xander agreed. "Well, anything that actually has a butt to kick. I'm getting annoyed with the First's whole non-corporeal gig."

"We'll find a way to stop it," Willow said with her best resolve face.

"I question the wisdom of freeing Spike," Giles said. Xander tried to not smirk when everyone just ignored him. Spike was family. Embarrassing family, but family.

Giles sighed. "I just don't understand why this thing is attacking now." Giles set his glasses on top of the two books that had dominated the kitchen table for days now. They were the only two books that Giles had
rescued from the Council, which meant they were the only documents anyone knew of that referenced the First, and so far, they'd been pretty much "omnipotent" this and "omniscient" that. Not cheerful reading.

Xander took the last chain off, and Spike stood up and stretched his head first one way and then the other. Even standing in the middle of a house full of potential slayers, he still looked like the predator in the middle of a whole lot of sheep. Spike stopped and turned to look down at Xander with a raised eyebrow. Clearing his throat, Xander stood up. "So, nearly-fearless leader, what's next?" he asked Buffy.

"I wish I knew," Buffy said. "Any luck, Giles?"

"None," Giles said. He stared down at the books and papers.

"Any chance that Rack was telling the truth?" Buffy asked.

Giles sighed. "I fail to see any reason why we should believe a notorious warlock who has made a regular practice out of draining others of their powers."
"We're all going to die," Rona whispered from the door to the basement where she stood staring at them. At least Xander was pretty sure it was Rona. The number of potentials that the coven of English witches and the last few Watchers had sent them was getting a little ridiculous. Xander was about to start calling them things like "black chick who keeps giving Spike a weird look" and "creepy pushy brunette who spends too much time randomly mentioning rich parents" and "lame girl who always writes in her notebook." At least then he could keep track of them. Rona came up into the room and three more faces appeared in the door. Xander glanced over to see if Willow or Buffy were going to chase her back downstairs, but neither reacted, although Buffy had that tightness to her body that meant alpha demonish Buffy was about to make another appearance.

"Yes, we're all going to die," Buffy snapped. Xander was starting to think that slayers were like vampires—if you got too many of them in one place, they started turning on each other and playing alpha games. But as long as the slayers didn't resort to cannibalism, he wasn't getting in the middle. Buffy started pacing.

"But you knew that already. 'Cause that's the cool reward for being human. Big dessert at the end of the meal."
Don't kid yourselves, you guys. This whole thing is all about death." She stopped and pointed at the girl who was probably Rona. "You think you're different because you might be the next slayer? Death is what a slayer breathes, what a slayer dreams about when she sleeps. Death is what a slayer lives. My death could make you the next slayer. You could be standing here on the mouth of hell with it threatening to swallow you. But that's the slayer's job, to make sure that the hellmouth chokes on her bones. We're not ready? They're not ready. They think we're gonna wait for the end to come, like we always do. I'm done waiting. They want an apocalypse? Oh, we'll give 'em one."

Buffy's face was hard.

"Um, Buff?" Xander asked. She turned and looked at him, and for a second, Xander could swear he was looking into the eyes of a demon. "Way to be a little creepily over the top. Before going for death and breathing death and choking the hellmouth with bones, maybe we could... oh... look for a solution that doesn't include death."

Buffy sighed, but her expression was still hard. They really did need to keep a certain distance between slayers, Xander thought to himself, but suggesting that
these girls were turning more and more demonic the more time they spent with each other was a sure way to get his ass kicked.

"No reason for Rack to lie," Spike said. "He's bloody moved on to another dimension, so he doesn't have to worry about some demon from below eating this world whole."

Giles put on his best constipated expression. "And he has no a reason to help us, either. I don't see any reason for believing—"

"Except that part came true," Spike interrupted.

"It did?" Xander frowned. "Was I out of the room when we had apocalyptic signs?"

Spike shrugged. "Rack said there were two doors open—that good had committed an act so evil they'd opened a door here. But he also said that evil had committed an act so good that the other side had started their own plans for ending the world."

"Other side? There's another side?" Note-taking girl asked, pulling out her notebook. Xander rolled his eyes.
"The Powers," Willow said. She pulled out a chair across from Giles and sat down. "They're Powers of good and light, but if they end the world, we're all still kinda dead."

"Which I'm saying is not good," Xander said.

"Depends on which way you're headed after dying, pet. I figure the Powers just want a nice gentle way to kill humanity and send them on to the path of light, but light isn't the first stop for a vampire." Spike's gaze slid off to the side, and Xander didn't know what to say. Spike was still totally convinced that he was damned, and Xander wasn't sure about things like eternity. He just knew Spike deserved another chance. "However, when Rack said that, I figured the poof wouldn't let us trump him. If we had us an apocalypse going, he was probably in the middle of the other one."

"Is he?" Buffy demanded, worry carving lines on her face. Spike flinched. Yeah, the last thing Spike needed was a reminder that he was still number two in her books.

"Yeah," Spike said. "Darla got knocked up."

"Vampire Darla?" Willow asked. "She's dead—dusty
dead, not the walking around getting pregnant sort, not that vampires get pregnant a whole lot."

Spike walked the room, stretching out his arms. "And she got brought back as a human to try and trick the moron into sleeping with her and losing his soul."

"Wait, there's another vampire with a soul?" Notebook girl started flipping through her pages. Xander felt like reassuring her that Angel wasn't on the test.

"Angel would never risk—"

"Oh he did," Spike cut Buffy off. "He buggered her, but it turns out that sleeping with Darla is just as much fun now as it always was. Bint always was a terror in bed. Angelus broke Drusilla before turning her just so he wouldn't have another ball-buster in the clan. However, Darla got pregnant and then managed to keep the baby after getting turned."

"Oh good Lord," Giles breathed. "A vampire has no life force, there's no possible way for that to happen."

"She did it anyway," Spike said. "And when the pregnancy went wrong, Darla staked herself, dusted
herself to set the child free. Evil committed the ultimate act of good."

"Which opened an apocalypsy door?" Xander demanded. "There's unfair and then there's whole huge levels of unfair. There should be a one-apocalypse-at-a-time rule." Xander threw himself down in the chair Spike had just left and rubbed his hand across his face. Buffy wasn't the only one coming close to going completely nuts.

"Please tell me that Angel got the door closed," Xander begged.

"Jonathan isn't sure," Spike said, and Xander twisted around to glare at him.

"I told you to tell me that it's all okay."

Spike gave him a long look. "Sorry, pet. It turns out that the tyke is the door, and Angel isn't about to let anyone touch Conner. The good side is that Jonathan and Wesley have already untangled a half-dozen plots against the boy, and Angel's so brassed off at the Powers he's refusing to be a champion for anything other than his family, and he's sworn to raise his son as far from any fight as he can get him."
"So, the door's open," Xander summarized.

"Yeah," Spike agreed.

"Great," Giles added.

"So, if we win we're still going to die?" Redheaded girl asked from the stairs.

"But it'll be a happy-happy sort of dead," Xander said, twirling his finger in the air like he was spinning one of those party favors. "I swear, if we stop evil here, and Angel loses his apocalypse, I'm going down there and kicking his ass so hard his teeth are going to rattle."

Spike raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, I'm not," Xander admitted, "but I'm driving Spike down there and watching as he kicks Angel's ass."

"Bloody right," Spike agreed. He twitched, his whole body jerking, and two of the potentials just about jumped out of their skins.

"Muscle cramp," Spike said with a grim smile. Xander
looked over, and Willow and Buffy and Giles were all looking as confused as he felt. Spike did not do muscle cramps. Vampires in general were not big with muscle cramps.

Buffy gave Spike a concerned look for a second before getting back to business. "I could ask around Willy's... see if anyone has any information."

Willow scrunched up her face. "I don't know, Buffy. It's just that Rack said that good did something evil, and I'm thinking that you aren't going to find too many forces of good in Willy's place."

"The Initiative," Buffy blurted out.

"I doubt that," Giles said. "While they were certainly attempting to do good, or rather the soldiers were, I doubt the Initiative itself could be considered a force of good."

"More a force of the twisted good intentions," Willow agreed.

"You lot can argue this out. Let me know when evil needs its arse kicked," Spike turned to head for the basement,
and the potentials scattered. Rona darted toward Giles' room and the others disappeared downstairs.

"Spike," Buffy said, her voice having just an edge of panic. Yeah, a potentially psychotic Spike plus a whole lot of teenagers could be monumentally bad.

"I'll go with him," Xander offered. Buffy gave him a disbelieving look, and Xander shrugged. "Hey, if he goes all psychotic, I'm more skilled than anyone at running, flailing and screaming. Trust me, you'll know in seconds." Before Buffy could answer, Xander headed for the door. If she really hated the idea of him playing guard, she'd say something, but she didn't and Xander heard Spike's heavy boots behind him on the stairs. They'd hit the lower level where a long hall divided the two dorm rooms before it occurred to Xander that Spike didn't know they were sharing a room now. All Spike's punk music CDs had been neatly stacked up and put next to Xander's music of pain. Oh well, if Spike was going to kill him for touching his stuff, it was too late for Xander to do anything about it now.

**Part Thirty-One**

Spike got just inside the bedroom door before throwing himself at the wall, his hands clutched to his head.
"Spike?" Xander ran to his side and caught Spike around the waist, half afraid that he was about to go crashing to the ground.

"Bloody hell, I'm fine." Spike tried shoving his hands away only to fall to one knee.

"Oh yeah, you're doing really fine. Stop being an ass, Spike." Xander heaved him up onto the bed.

"It's passing."

"Is this a 'the First is telling you to slaughter us all' kind of pain or a 'damn I haven't been drinking enough blood' kind of pain?"

"Neither," Spike lay on his back in the middle of the bed. "Why's your shit in my room?"

"Because it's the only room with a private bathroom, and in case you haven't noticed, we're the only guys in a house full of girls.... Well, except for Giles, and I'm still a little pissed with him so I'm not counting him. I need to have a bathroom that doesn't threaten to suffocate me with the glorious stink of hairspray in the morning."
"So you took over my room?" Spike was looking unhappy at that…. Not homicidally unhappy, but more like the dog that got kicked unhappy, which was an expression that just did not belong on Spike's face.

"No, I moved in with you. Would you rather share a room with me or listen to the drama that will follow if Dawn and Buffy have to share? Personally, I happen to think life is too short to put up with Summers' drama."

Spike snorted. "Bloody right."

"So, we're back to what kind of pain you're having."

"I'm fine, Harris."

Xander didn't even bother to answer that. If Spike started calling him by his last name, Xander knew one of two things: either Xander had just done something stupid or Spike was about to do something even stupidier.

"Sod off," Spike suggested when Xander continued to just look at him. When Xander still didn't budge, Spike pushed himself up and stripped off his shirt. "Going to stay for the floor show then, are we?" he asked with a
salacious wiggle of his eyebrows. Xander could feel himself turn instantly red, his face burning.

Staring at the ceiling, Xander still refused to leave. "Something is hurting you, and I'm not leaving until you 'fess up. Unless you physically push me out, but if you do that, I'll just go get Buffy," Xander added when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

Spike sighed loudly. "You're a berk, Harris."

"Even without knowing what that means, I'm going to agree," Xander said. "So, what's up with the pain?"

That got an even louder sigh out of Spike. "Chip's firing."

Xander looked at Spike in horror. "The chip? The pain chip? It's just... just going zap for no reason?"

Spike shrugged.

"Well, shit. That's what they get for buying American," Xander said. "We need to tell Buffy."

"Why?" Spike asked.
Xander stared at him, his mouth open.

"She can't do anything, luv. This would just be one more burden for her to carry."

"And if you drop dead? Deader?"

Spike shrugged again. "Then you don't have to worry about the First using some soddin' trigger to turn me into his bitch."

Again, Xander was left just wordless for several long seconds as his whole image of Spike did a total and complete one hundred and eighty. Self-sacrifice and emo were not the first words Xander would have associated with Spike. "That's like curing the flu with a bullet to the brain."

"It's just the truth."

Xander couldn't even gather his thoughts well enough to answer that—it was just that stupid. Stupid and melodramatic and way more worthy of a hormonal pre-slayer than a century old vampire. "So, you're just going to brood yourself to death? Hey, I'll call Angel and you can show him how a real vampire does emo and
brooding." Xander crossed his arms and didn't even flinch when Spike flashed into game face and snarled at him. "Forget it, fangless. I am not intimidated by a drama-queen, teeny-bopper, suicidal vampire waiting to die."

Spike leaped forward and caught Xander by the shirt and slammed him back into the wall. Gasping for air, Xander clawed at Spike's shoulders as Spike snarled and twitched, the chip going off. "You're frying your brain, dimwit."

Suddenly Xander found himself flying across the room and landing on the bed on his back. Spike followed and pinned him down, and for a brief, blindingly panicked moment, Xander really thought he was about to get eaten. Then Spike sort of collapsed on the bed next to him. They both lay panting heavily, the sound of their gasping breaths filling the room.

"Soddin' little shit. Calling me Angel was a low blow."

Xander struggled to catch his breath and stared at the ceiling. "Consider it shock therapy."

"Prat."
"Are you over the epic brood?"

"Shut your gob," Spike snarled.

"I'll take that as a 'yes.' So, clearly we need to get your chip fixed or out or whatever you do with chips that aren't being chip-like. So, if you're done being a goober, I'm getting Buffy." Xander groaned as he considered getting up. Roughhousing with Spike was a little on the stupid side.

"You okay?" Spike asked.

"Just bruised and reminded once again that human strength is pretty much not strong," Xander admitted.

Spike snorted.

"And it is me or is it a little weird that we're laying on a bed together?"

"My head hurts too much to care," Spike answered. "We could take care of this without Buffy. The Initiative had some good drugs. When the soldier boys got a little too enthusiastic, they'd give me this shite that made
everything hearts and puppies for a while."

"Do I want to know what you mean by too enthusiastic?"

"Hell no," Spike quickly answered.

Xander sighed and thought back to his youth when he honestly believed that demon meant evil and human generally meant good. He'd been an idiot. "The drug won't stop your brain from getting fried."

"It'll buy us some time," Spike countered.

"Um... not really. Let me repeat this slower: your brain will still be getting fried."

Spike didn't have an answer for that, and they lay on the bed, their breathing slowing. Spike twitched again, and Xander wondered if the chip had fired again or if he was suffering through the aftereffects. "So, we tell Buffy," Xander said. Yeah, Buffy couldn't do much, but Willow and Tara might be able to come up with something or they might be able to call Riley and see if the Initiative had a mad scientist in the area or.... Or they were going to watch Spike die. That was bitter in Xander's mouth, and yeah, he saw the irony in that. At one point he
wanted Spike dead. Not now. Not like this. They'd lost people in battle—Ms. Calendar and Kendra and even Faith had, in a way, been lost in battle, but the idea of losing someone slowly scared the shit out of him.

"You okay, mate?" Spike asked. He sat up and swung his legs off the bed.

"Peachy," Xander answered. "Would more human blood help you heal?"

"You volunteering?"

"I have volunteered, dork. Who do you think has been spiking your O negative cow?"

"You, Tara and Buffy," Spike said simply. Xander sat up and looked at Spike, surprised for a second. Well, Tara didn't surprise him because they were family. Even back when Buffy and Willow were doing their whole dark quest thing, the three of them had been the left-behinds, the normal ones trying to find a way to just exist—well, except that Spike wasn't exactly normal. But if Buffy was slipping her blood into the cow supply, he was guessing that she'd come to terms with what Spike had done.
"Well, we're tired of hearing you complain about the lack of fine dining," Xander said. "So, would going to Willie's and getting you a steady supply of human help?"

Spike shrugged. "Some, not much. It's not just the fact that it's cow blood, pet. Vampires are used to drinking from the source when the blood is still rich with life."

"I'm not volunteering for that." Oh hell no. Especially not after the way he reacted the last time Spike bit him. He'd always thought he was pretty vanilla when it came to sex, but having a feral Spike holding him so close that he could smell the musk of his skin and then having Spike drink from him.... Well, it had made him question a flavor choice or two. When Spike had been sucking, Xander had been equal parts terrified and horny. Back when Riley had been letting vamps drink from him, Xander thought the man had lost his mind. Now maybe Xander understood the reason why he would do that.

"You didn't seem to mind that much last time, luv."

Xander glared at Spike. It was like he was reading Xander's mind or something. "Yeah, dream on drama-boy. Buffy will get this fixed and then that will be the last you taste of Xander blood pudding."
Spike's eyebrow twitched like a telegraph that seemed to say that it knew Xander was lying. However, this was not the time to deal with Xander's issues. Getting to his feet, Xander headed out the bedroom door. A dozen potentials had gathered outside his room.

"Are you okay?" the annoying one asked, her glare finding Spike. Spike was just pulling his shirt on, and Xander was suddenly hyper aware of the fact they were both flushed and rumpled.

"Oh, they look just fine to me," another said.

"We were just—" Xander stopped. What had they been doing? Fighting, yes, but not in the way the girls would take it if he said fighting.

"Oh, we can tell what you were doing." One of the girls elbowed her friend, and Xander gritted his teeth.

"That's gross. He's a vampire. That makes him like a dead body."

"A really hot dead body."
Xander ignored them all. God, if he'd been half this annoying when he was young, maybe he could understand why Giles got so frustrated. Instead of snapping at them, Xander headed for the stairs.

"Now, pet, don't be like that!" Spike called after him, teasing. Xander just walked faster. If Spike wasn't already suffering from the chip misfiring, Xander would be tempted to push him down a couple of flights of stairs. Behind him, Spike laughed.

Xander hit the first basement and headed for his old bedroom. "Buffy?" he called, knocking on the door.

"Xander?" Next door, Dawn opened her door and Bonnie peered around her.

"Hey, there you guys are." Xander smiled at them. Bonnie had taken his suggestion that she give Dawn a chance as some sort of order. He wasn't sure that was exactly the best thing because it meant she was hiding all her emotions, but when he'd tried to explain that he wanted her to forgive Dawn but that he was okay with her still being angry, he had just managed to confused the crap out of her. Yep, that was his special power: confusion.
"Clem was just torturing us with the history of crusades."

"It's interesting," Bonnie disagreed, but then Xander was pretty sure she was disagreeing on the principle of it, even if she was doing her best to play nice.

"I would hope so," Clem said from inside. "The history of the Buta clans' involvement in the battle over Alexandria is one of the great turning points in the human/demon world. I mean, before that, the demon communities lived openly, but after the Muslims and Christians were..."

"Clem, I love that you're so good at what you do, but seriously, I failed history the first time around. I'm not really cut out for it," Xander interrupted.

"You lot were too busy killing nasties to worry about rot like that," Spike said. "Slayer around?"

"Buffy?" Dawn's voice had an odd tone. "Oh, well, I'm sure she's around somewhere. Everyone wants her, so look where everyone else is." Dawn turned her back and flounced back into the room. From the pinched expression on Bonnie's face, she really wasn't okay with the attitude. Xander just sighed while Clem looked
confused as hell.

"Maybe we should go back down to your room," Clem whispered to Bonnie, clearly still confused. She nodded and caught his hand before pushing out between Spike and Xander.

"You aren't staying in my room, too, are you?" Spike demanded suspiciously.

"Nope. Xander told my whole clan we could have the dungeon. It's got great camouflage on the entrance, and Tara's spell covers the..."

"Don't care, mate," Spike cut him off. "Where's the slayer?"

"Still upstairs," Clem answered without getting upset.

Spike strode off toward the stairs. He may not have wanted to tell Buffy, but now he almost seemed in a hurry to get it over with.

"Sorry about that. He's just feeling extra-special rude," Xander told Clem.
Clem cocked his head for a second. "What rudeness?" he asked.

Xander opened his mouth to explain exactly why the bleached one was rude like a really, really rude thing, but then he just shrugged and headed upstairs. There were some things that demons and non-demons would just never agree on, and the definition of rude was one.

"Are we done with the history stuff?" Dawn asked in a tone of voice that made Xander cringe. Clem and Bonnie both flinched with him. Okay, so some kinds of rude crossed over the species line. Xander wished he had a way to make any of this easier on Dawn because he did understand how much it hurt when Buffy and Willow shut you out as the "normal" and "helpless" one, but he had no idea how to have that conversation with her. None. Besides, Spike's exploding brain trumped Dawn's teenage angst.

By the time Xander got up to the main floor, Buffy was on the phone. "Yes, Agent Finn, Riley. Tell him we're having a problem with Spike's chip. No his chip. Spike." Buffy was sounding pretty frustrated, and Xander exchanged a look with Spike. Yep, Spike was all kinds of pissed at the thought of asking Riley for help, but tough

"No, no, Finn is his last name. Yeah. Well, did he used to work there and then he got transferred?"

Spike jerked, and Xander thought for a second that he was going to make some rude gesture at the thought of Riley showing up in town, but the jerk became a thrashing and he hit the wall, his whole body convulsing. Rushing to his side, Xander got an arm around Spike's waist and supported him. Willow showed up in the arch from the kitchen, and Spike shoved at him. Yep, death before letting someone you don't like see you in pain. Xander wasn't sure if he was more bothered by the fact that Spike was hurting so much or by the fact that he refused to let Willow see it.

"Oh, is this actually a flower shop, or is this one of those things where I'm supposed to play along to show that I know it's really secret ops? Oh, maybe I shouldn't have said that. Oh, OK, right. Well, if some guy named Finn shows up to buy flowers— Yeah. Thanks." She hung up the phone and turned around, her eyebrows going up. "What's up guys?" she asked.

Xander realized he was standing close enough to Spike
for their shoulders to touch, but he wasn't going to back off just to have Spike hit the ground. "Just keeping Spike from—"

Spike made a guttural growl, and Xander swallowed his comment. "So, any word from Riley?" Xander asked, changing the topic.

"Wrong number. Or a giant government conspiracy, one or the other."

"I vote conspiracy," Xander said. He didn't know if it was true, but if it was a covert ops security office hiding behind a flower shop, then maybe—just maybe—word would get through to Riley. Xander thought about the last time he'd seen Riley, back when the man had been all worried about Buffy getting hurt in the Spike and Buffy show. Even then, there was some part of Xander that suspected Spike was the more vulnerable of the two. And boy was he never sharing that thought. Spike would gut him, soul or not.

"What's the what?" Willow asked.

"Nothing." After snapping out his answer, Spike turned to give Xander the hairy eye. Xander studied the pattern on
the gray carpeting.

"Spike's chip is doing a tango, even when he's playing nice," Buffy answered. Xander could practically see Spike sag.

"It's fine," he said without sounding like he meant it. Xander studied Buffy, watching as she headed for Willow, seemingly without even noticing that she's just stuck a pin in the balloon that was Spike's ego. Maybe he was wrong when he said that Buffy was getting more demonish, because Xander was thinking Clem or Bonnie would have noticed.

"Well, we'll fix it," Buffy said firmly. "We'll hit serious research mode—"

"Try Behavioral Modification Software Throughout the Ages," Spike muttered.

Xander put an elbow in Spike's side, and for a second, the two of them glared at each other. That seemed to make Spike feel a little better. "Been giving me a few jolts now and then. Not a problem, luv. Vampire here—we don't mind a bit of pain."
"Unless it gets to be a whole lot of pain." This time, Xander was muttering.

"We can find something. We can totally find something," Willow said. Turning around, she headed into the kitchen.

"Someone should tell Tara that Willow is going for the witchly research," Xander pointed out. None of them were particularly comfortable with the idea of Willow going off all witchy without someone to watch. Buffy looked at him, her expression making it pretty clear that she wanted him to be the one doing the telling, but Xander just looked right back at her. He wasn't leaving Spike, not when he was clearly feeling pretty shitty.

Buffy got a little exasperated, but Xander just crossed his arm.

"Bloody hell. You two should just take a piss on a tree or something," Spike complained before he walked right between them and dropped down into his chair—the chair he'd been chained to for the last week. "I know we talked about me going out with your kiddies, Buffy, but I think maybe I shouldn't go out terrorizing the potentials tonight," Spike said. "Having both the fighters out of the
house is bloody stupid, especially when we already know the First made a run at Glinda and Harris."

"It's not like either of us could stop that," Buffy said.

Xander flinched. "Hey, consider me happier to have someone around to tell me that I'm seeing things. Spike is weirdly good at comforting," Xander butted in. He got another exasperated and confused look from Buffy, and it occurred to Xander that Buffy might be hurt that he was turning to a vampire over her. "Not that you're bad at comforting, because you aren't. You were big with the comfort after the whole..." Xander's brain blanked for a second. "After the whole hyena thing... and the... the Glory thing." Xander sighed. So much for trying to play peacemaker. Some days he was just an idiot.

"I'm going to go get Tara," Buffy said. Her voice was flat, and Xander wanted to say something helpful and supportive and encouraging, but he was coming up blank. He collapsed on the couch and watched as Buffy disappeared downstairs.

"I fail at friendship," Xander complained softly.

"She's not the easiest to be friends with, pet. Got equal
parts demon and human going in there, and you're never sure which end of the beast you're going to get."

Xander sighed. Spike was right; he knew that. "It didn't used to be like that."

"Tinkers used to travel the high road, pet."

"What?" Xander had thrown his arm over his eyes, but now he lifted it so he could look at Spike with confusion.

"The world changes, luv. That's about the only thing you can count on in this world."

"Way to bring the Prozac moment," Xander complained, and Spike didn't have any comeback for that.

**Part Thirty-Two**

"How are you feeling?" Xander asked for the millionth time.
"Fine, Harris," Spike said, his voice tight with frustration. "If you don't stop fussing like a bloody housewife, I'm going to try out my new ability to hit you," he warned. Xander smiled at Spike. Yep, hell had frozen over, and somewhere out there, some mad scientist had pinned working wings onto a pig because he was relieved that Spike had his bite back.

"Riley really came through," Buffy said with a smile. "Go Riley, well except for the assface comment."

Spike didn't even bother to answer that; he just walked faster. Personally, Xander was surprised that Riley sent them a scientist to pull the chip out, and one little insult sent through a soldier didn't seem that big of a price to pay. Spike however, started walking a lot faster, and Buffy sped up to match pace.

"Hey, human legs here," Xander complained. Sometimes being the normal one seriously sucked. Without warning, both of them stopped, and Xander nearly ran into Buffy's back before he could get the brakes on.

"Buffy." Giles was there in the street, a stake in hand and three would-be-slayers following behind. Xander looked
around for cover because he really did not want to get in the middle of Spike and Giles. The two men definitely still had a hate-hate thing going on that Xander couldn't even understand. Besides, his own feelings for Giles weren't exactly a model of good mental health. He hated that Giles had left them to deal with all the adult-type stuff like mortgages and breaking pipes and Child Protective Services. Okay, actually, he hated that Giles had left Buffy with all that. She had enough to deal with; she didn't need those things crowding out all her other very legitimate fears like death and Armageddon and demons of all sorts.

Spike took one look at Giles and turned around, heading into the night.

"Buffy, should I?" Xander looked from Buffy to Spike's retreating back.

"You should head back to the house. I need to speak with Buffy," Giles said in that teacher tone of voice that warned of detentions and Saturday school... which wasn't fair considering that Xander was an adult. Giles' tone of voice shouldn't work anymore.

"Keep an eye on him, okay?" Buffy said, looking at Spike
who was halfway down the block.

"I fail to see how sending Xander to get killed will prevent Spike from—"

"Giles," Buffy cut him off, her voice weary. The potentials shifted uncomfortably.

Xander figured anything was better than hanging around for another version of Giles' old song: all the reasons we shouldn't trust Spike. Funny enough, they were the same reasons Xander hadn't trusted Angel, only there were more reasons for hating Angel. For example, Angel had a soul for like a century before he decided to do anything good with it. However, when Xander tried to point that out, he got the English tweed version of a shit look. Xander didn't need a second invitation to run for the hills. "Hey, wait up," Xander called, running after Spike.

"Buffy," Giles was saying behind him in a voice that was sharper than Xander had heard since Amy's failed attempt at a love spell.

"Hey, bleachbrain. Wait up."

Spike turned around. "Shouldn't you be more careful
with the insults now?" Spike put on his best scary face, but Xander wasn't buying it.

"Yeah, eat me, and you'll have to go home and face Bonnie."

"Bloody hell, that's hitting below the belt," Spike said with a sigh. "So, Buffy tell you to keep an eye on me?"

"Yep, just as Giles was pointing out that I was kind of worthless."

The snort was familiar, and Xander smiled. At least Spike wasn't actually calling him worthless, which was actually some pretty good progress on the friendship front.

"So, are you really okay?"

"Are you asking about the chip or the First turning me into his bitch?"

"Okay, seriously, you talking about yourself as someone's bitch is really starting to creep me out." Xander wrinkled his nose.

They had turned a corner, so it felt like they were alone
in the middle of abandoned houses when Spike turned to really stare at him. After several seconds, Xander reached up to wipe the sides of his mouth, afraid he had ketchup on them or something. "What?" he demanded.

Spike shook his head. "Can't figure you out is all."

"You never could," Xander said with a shrug.

"True enough. I just keep expecting...." Spike shook his head and started walking again without finishing his thought.

"Expecting what?" Xander asked, trotting to keep up.

"Nothing, Harris."

Reaching out, Xander caught Spike's arm, although he wasn't sure if he was trying to stop Spike or just holding on so Spike would pull him along at vamp speed. Spike really did have a habit of walking way too fast for comfort. However, Xander was completely thrown off balance when Spike whirled on him, game face on.

"Hey, whoa, no eating the escort," Xander blurted out. Shit. Why the hell had he followed Spike knowing that
Spike had some trigger? Instead of attacking, Spike stopped, his game face vanishing, and the human face underneath looked more confused than anything.

"Fucking hell."

"What is your problem?" Xander demanded. Spike got the sort of constipated expression that Xander usually associated with Angel. "Seriously? What is your problem?"

"I'm a demon, mate."

"Well, duh," Xander answered. "And if you're feeling triggery or hungry, please forget that I just implied you're a giant idiot."

At first, Spike just stared at him. Finally, he found a nice bit of curb and sat down, his legs sprawled and his knees sticking up. Silently, Xander sat next to him, and Spike gave him a suspicious look. Xander had discovered with Bonnie that if you just waited long enough, people would explain whatever weirdness they had in their brain. You just had to out-silence them. Xander lasted about thirty seconds.
"Spike, just tell me what we're arguing about. Please."

"We aren't arguing."

Xander thought about that for a second. "Okay, not in the screaming and insulting each other's parentage sort of way, but this is feeling like a fight, and I feel like I've been cast in the role of Tony Harris, the idiot who came home without flowers on his anniversary."

"Loon," Spike whispered.

"Loony is way better than Tony Harris. If I could, I would lock my father up with Bonnie's grandmother and set the building on fire. So, what have I done that's Tony Harris levels of stupid?"

"What makes you think it's you?" Spike asked, and oddly, that sounded like a question and not a trick to try and get Xander to say something stupid.

"Um, Spike, it's always me. Trust me, my feet are in my mouth so much that everything I eat tastes faintly of foot."

"You're bloody doing it again."
"What?"

Spike ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip. "You don't even bloody know you're doing it, do you?"

Xander mentally ran through all the things he was doing: breathing, freaking out a little, looking at an empty street, sitting on a curb, picking a hangnail... it all felt pretty normal to him. "Clearly, I don't," Xander said slowly.

With a shake of his head, Spike stared up at the stars. They were oddly visible since a whole row of streetlights had gone out. All in all, Sunnydale was starting to feel a little like a ghost town. "One second you're facing off against Buffy herself, and the next, you're ducking your head and making noises like you want me to take charge."

Xander waited, expecting some actual explanation in the explanation, but Spike fell silent. "And...?"

Spike looked over, his mouth coming open and closing without a word coming out. "Fucking hell, Harris. I can't tell if you're looking to take charge or follow. You break
every fucking rule that makes any sense at all."

That made Xander lean back as he thought about what Spike was saying. It sounded a lot like the conversation they'd had when they'd gone from enemies to friends. "Is this part two of the 'you can't figure out why I'm not dead' speech? Because honestly? It sounds about the same. You thought I was some victim, but you couldn't figure out why I wasn't dead."

"And now you walk around ducking your head like some minion, but every once in a while, you dig your heels in and take on the slayer herself."

"And? Can't I do both... follow and dig in my heel?"

"No." Spike answered simply. It was an answer, but not really one Xander could live with. Yeah, demons did the whole clan, ownership, slavery, dominance thing, but Xander wasn't a demon. He had been once, but the hyena had been out for a good long time.

"Okay, I can see where you're coming from," he said slowly.

Spike snorted. "You've been watching too much Phil
That got a sigh. "Nevermind. Look, I don't need you doing some emotionally supportive rot. You annoy the unlife out of me, and you always will. Problem solved." Spike stood up and brushed off his jeans.

"Oh no. No, it's not solved; it's all problemy. Spike, I'm not a demon."

"Bloody hell, do you think I haven't noticed that?" Spike whirled on him.

"I don't know," Xander answered honestly. "Sometimes you act like I should be, that I should be all dominant or all submissive or all into demony hierarchies and clans, only I can't be, Spike. Those are the rules for demons, not humans."

Spike didn't answer, but at least when he started walking down the street, he walked slow enough for Xander to keep up without running.

"With you and Dru, was it always one person in charge?"
Spike pursed his lips and seemed to think about that. "All the way up until the end, yeah," he said, his voice softer than usual. Xander cringed as he realized that Dru was probably not the subject to bring up. Some days, he really was an idiot. Spike sighed. "She was always my princess, and I followed her like one of the bloody knights out of some soddin' book. Tosser."

"Um, Spike...."

"Yeah, until we came here. I decided that Angelus was ten pounds of stupid in a five pound sack, and I sided with the slayer. Things weren't ever the same, luv. I tried being the head of the clan, and she tossed me out on my ear quick enough."

It was weird, but Xander hadn't ever thought about what it had been like for Spike to turn against his own family. "Well, you were right with the Angel stuff."

"Yeah, that I was," Spike agreed with a wicked smile. "But I lost my wicked plum anyway."

"No offense, but she was a fruitcake."
"That she was. But she was my princess. When I was with her, I knew where I fit."

"You fit in the family," Xander said softly. After all the shit they'd been through together, Spike was one of them. Hell, at this point, he trusted Spike more than Willow, and he wasn't sure if that was a comment on how little he trusted Willow or how much he trusted Spike, but it was true.

"So, if we had sex, would you be top or bottom?"

Xander started choking, the air refusing to go into his lungs as reality unwound. No. No no no. No, Spike had not just said that.

"Breathe, Harris."

"You can't say something like that and then just tell me to breathe."

"If you don't, you'll pass out."

"Which might be good."

"Bloody hell, you smell like desire every time I come near
"No. I mean... no." Xander cringed. Okay, it was true that he'd enjoyed the bite a little more than he should have, but that wasn't lust. That was addiction. That was bad. Very bad. Huge with the bad. Spike kept watching him, one eyebrow raised. "Not that you aren't attractive, because you're very attractive. And lithe. And strong and sort of compact while still being well-muscled." Xander snapped his mouth shut. Last time he'd said something like that to Buffy, she'd thought he was sleeping with Spike already. Spike's eyebrow went higher.

"It's just..." Xander struggled to find a way to make it clear that he wasn't ever sleeping with Spike without being offensive. "I liked the bite, which is unhealthy, and I'm dealing with it. Hey, if I ever decided to go the Willow and Riley route to mental unhealth, you'll be my first stop, but really, just... no."

Spike's second eyebrow joined his first. "Liked the bite, did you?"

"I didn't not like it," Xander admitted.
That made Spike purse his lips. "You're about as unpredictable as the weather, pet. I figured you were the sort who wouldn't take to the bite."

Xander looked at Spike. "Is that a compliment or an insult?"

"An observation," Spike said with a shrug. "Pushed hard enough, you come out fighting, even when you know you can't win, so I figured you'd be too bent on trying to get the upper hand to ever let yourself just slide under the bite."

"Riley likes the bite and he's very much not the sliding under anything type."

Spike snorted.

"Seriously, Spike. He's not. I understand that you hate him, and I'd be huge with the hate... monumentally huge with the hate... if he shoved a chip in me, but I'm telling you, he's a stand-up guy when there aren't demons involved. When there are, he's a bit of a jackass, but no one's perfect. But he fell for the bite without being the pushover type."
Spike started walking down the street again, strolling casually as he scanned the street. "I could break the git in under a week."

Fear curled in Xander's stomach, turning his dinner to pure acid. "Please tell me you aren't actually planning to try."

"I would if the bloody soul weren't wailing over the very thought." Then Spike shrugged as if it didn't matter to him. "Seems like we got off track a bit. We were talking about your raging case of lust for me."

"Raging?" Xander's voice rose. "Way to be delusional, bleachbrain."

"So, you fancy yourself the sort to claim top or bottom, pet?" Spike kept right on talking as if Xander hadn't denied all of it.

"Neither. I'm not interested."

"Back when we started our little arrangement—"

"Blackmail," Xander corrected him.
"Arrangement," Spike repeated, "I thought for sure you'd be the sort to lift your shirt. But the longer I was in the house, the more I started to think you were more the take charge type, only no one saw it because you moved when no one was looking."

Xander sighed. He recognized that he couldn't win this argument so he resigned himself to just listening and turning bright red until Spike finally finished.

"Now, I can't figure which side of the bed you land on."

"Um, neither."

"So, that's why you maneuvered your way into my bedroom and bed?" Spike looked over with another of those patented grins of his.

"I'm trying to avoid potential slayers. Avoidance good. Avoidance is particularly good when you're pretty sure you want to murder a number of them." The one with the rich parents and the one with the hairspray addiction—those two Xander could cheerfully murder—metaphorically at least.

"So, when you're having salacious thoughts about me,
are you on top or under me, feeling me holding you down?" Spike moved to a spot in front of Xander and stopped so that they were chest to chest before Xander could get stopped. Spike looked him up and down the way a kid eyes a lollipop, and that was really not the image Xander needed right now. His cock was definitely starting to betray him.

"What thoughts? Salsa thoughts? I like the hot stuff." Xander cringed again. Way to go with the double entendre. Even his subconscious was conspiring against him.

"I can play either part," Spike offered, and his cheekbones seemed to get sharper as his gaze travelled over Xander.

"You're switchy, good for you," Xander said as he took a step to the side. Spike sidestepped with him.

"Not really, pet. Drusilla, Angelus, Darla: they were all tops in every sense of the word." Spike brought his hand up and traced his thumb across Xander's cheek just under his eye. "I only took charge with minions, but old dogs can learn new tricks."
Xander stepped back, breaking the contact between them, but just when he expected Spike to pursue him, Spike stood, watching and waiting. "We're entering creepy land," Xander warned, but his body didn't agree with him. Spike was familiar and trusted. Spike was sexy, and most surprising, Spike wanted him. And boy wasn't that freaky.

"Wait... why do you suddenly want to have sex with me?" Xander demanded.

Spike cocked his head to the side. "Every guy likes to get his end off. I man gets tired of his hand."

"Yeah, but if you wanted to have sex with me, you would have when you were blackmailing me."

Turning around, Spike started walking down the street. "Probably would have raped you, only with the chip, it was sure to hurt."

"Really?" Xander had to run a few steps to catch up. "And seriously, I am screwy in the head because that almost feels like a compliment."

"You've been living with too many demons, luv."
"Hell, yes," Xander agreed. "You really did want me?"

Spike sighed. "Can I tell you something without you running back to tell your mates?"

"Spike, I'm not really talking to my mates all that much, in case you missed the memo. Buffy is freaking me out with her sudden detours into demon-think, Willow is trying so hard to be perfect that I keep waiting for the explosion, and Tara is spending all her time either with Willow or avoiding Willow, depending on where they are in their weird little courtship dance."

"Push comes to shove, you lot will pull together," Spike said with confidence.

"Yep," Xander agreed, "but until the pushing and the shoving starts, we're sort of keeping some distance. Besides, I don't think the girls have to know everything... not unless you're going to tell me you have some diabolical plan to end the universe, in which case, all promises are null and void."

"I didn't go after my soul." Spike whispered the confession so softly that Xander thought he misheard for
"But... how did you end up with one, then? Did someone leave a soul laying around and you tripped on it and it just sort of stuck?"

That earned a true shit-look from Spike. "You're the idiot who dated a vengeance demon. Did wishes ever go exactly the way the wisher wanted?"

Xander thought back to all Anya's stories. "Not really. I mean, plenty of time, the women were happy enough with the outcome, ecstatic even. But usually Anya got a little creative with the way the spell was worded."

"True enough. I wished to be the man I was. I planned on getting the chip out, coming back and claiming both you and Buffy, putting you properly below me in the clan and buggering you until you enjoyed it."

"Okay, that's sounding less complimentary than creepy," Xander said softly as he thought about what that life would really be like. It wasn't a pretty picture.

"I figured I could prove to you that I was a good provider once I had the chip out, only the demon took my wording
literally. He turned me back into the man I was before Drusilla turned me by giving me back my soul. Now I can see that I would have destroyed you—you and Buffy. But before the soul—" Spike shrugged.

"It made sense," Xander finished for him.

"Yeah," Spike agreed. "So, I still want to get my end off, but Buffy is..." he sighed. "I bollocked that up for fair. And maybe I figure I never had a chance to bollocks up my relationship with you, not considering you smell of lust every time I walk too near."

"So you just want sex." Xander was definitely not interested in that kind of relationship. Oh, his cock was. He was man enough to want sex anytime and anywhere he could get it. His whole relationship with Anya had pretty much proved that. Hell, if anything, Spike was being way more romantic in his approach than Anya had been.

"If that's all I can get," Spike said.

"Wait." Xander reached out and caught Spike's arm, pulling him to a stop. This time Spike stopped and just looked at Xander's arm with a cold expression that made
it pretty clear he didn't approve of Xander manhandling him. Xander pulled his hand back. "Just hold on. You're confusing me faster than I can unconfused myself. Are you only wanting sex or are you asking me out on a date in some sort of twisted demony way?"

"What would you say if I was looking for something more than just sex?" Spike asked.

"I have no idea," Xander said quietly. He might have once joked about being celibate until Bonnie was grown, but he was lonely and alone and at night, he was pretty desperate for someone to hold.

"Which isn't a no," Spike said.

"It isn't a no. It isn't a yes, either. It's more of a 'god I'm confused,'" Xander explained. "I have no idea what we're doing Spike, and maybe the little head is a little interested. Maybe." It hurt to admit that. "But the big head is pretty sure this is going to end badly. Like dust and blood badly."

Spike stepped back. "You don't bloody trust me."

"I don't trust love," Xander corrected him. "As far as I can
see, relationships never end well. Never. And when scary people are involved, they end in world-endingly bad ways. They end with mental rape and mind wipes and trips to suck houses and big stone demons with world ending portals. You see my point?"

Spike looked at him for a long time, and Xander almost felt strange that someone was taking so much time to weigh Xander's words. "You lot do have some bad mojo when it comes to love," Spike finally agreed. "Part of it is that you think you can control it. You can't. Love makes all of us her bitch, Harris. Every single one of us. The best we can do is submit to her and get as much joy out as we can, because the end will always be there lurking in the shadows. Living your life with one eye on the darkness at the edges... well, that's just a sure way to get the lady brassed off. Just live in the moment and wallow in the love when you have it, pet. It'll end on its own soon enough without you rushing the process."

Xander stared at Spike, not sure what to say. Spike had a way of making it sound all so... possible. But that made him even more confused because up until this moment, Xander had been totally convinced that Spike didn't want him. His own stray homoerotic twinges were far easier to control when the object of his desire was unattainable.
And now, all those little twinges were ganging up on him and threatening to stage a coup.

"Just something to think about, luv," Spike said with a smile before he turned to face the empty street. "We have company."

"We... what?" Xander's brain spluttered like a dying engine as he tried to focus on anything other than his rearranged world.

"Company," Spike repeated. He nodded at the street, and Xander watched as a man came out from the alley between two houses.

"Principal Wood," Xander said, wondering what the man was doing out here. Buffy said he was a vampire hunter, but as far as Xander knew, this neighborhood wasn't exactly known for vampires. Vampires usually hunted where there were people, and that wasn't this neighborhood.

"Gentleman," Principal Wood greeted them, and Xander put on his best at-work smile. As often as the school got parts of it blown up, they were a pretty big customer.
"Principal Wood," he answered. Spike remained silent.

"Robin," Principal Wood corrected him. "So, are you two out hunting tonight?" He closed the gap between them, smiling.

"Yeah, hunting," Xander agreed because that was way less awkward than trying to explain what they'd been talking about.

"Well, it's always good to meet other hunters," Robin said. "Maybe we should team up for the night," he suggested.

"Sure," Xander rushed to say, grateful for any reason to get out of the world's most awkward conversation with Spike.

"Right then," Spike said while making it sound like a curse word. Robin frowned for a second. "If we're hunting, you two need to get moving." With that, he started striding down the street with a blindingly fast loose-limbed gait.

"So... um..." Xander frowned, not sure how to explain Spike's pissy mood.
"Let's go hunting," Robin said cheerfully as he followed after Spike.

"Part Thirty-Three"

"How very trailer park," Xander whispered.

"You live in the garage?" Spike asked, looking around at the ratty old building. If he had his way, he'd tell Robin to sod off and just go home, but he didn't want to turn on someone Buffy put her faith in. The demon in him wanted to break Wood's neck to prove his own strength, and his soul wanted to creep away from the man who had stolen Buffy's affection. Instead of doing either, he pretended that he didn't give a rat's arse about the man.

"This is just a work room. Kind of my sanctuary," Robin said. As soon as I pick up a new stake, we can be on our way."

"So this is just a little place to unwind? A hard day's
principaling got you down, you need a place to cut loose, let your hair down." Spike looked Robin up and down as he followed him into the dark building. "So to speak." Spike smirked. He could hear Xander smothering a laugh.

"Something like that," Robin agreed. He flipped on the lights, and Spike flinched away from the sight of hundreds of crosses.

"What the fuck?" Xander snapped. Spike flashed into game face as Wood pulled out a gun and leveled it at Xander, and as luck would have it, the boy was too far away for Spike to reach him before Wood could pull the trigger.

"What the bloody hell is this?" Spike asked, careful to control his fury.

"Well, I told you. It's my sanctuary. Don't try it, Mr. Harris," Wood warned as Xander telegraphed his every move, his body tightening as he considered rushing the man.

"Don't," Spike said, and Xander glanced over before raising his hands and relaxing muscles that had been tensed for an attack. Clearly the boy was in a submissive
mood, but that worked for Spike, just as long as he didn't decide to rush Wood. "It's the hell mouth, Spike," Wood said with the sort of malicious glee Spike recognized easily enough. "You can never be too careful. Just stay away from the walls, and you'll be all right." Walking sideways in order to keep his gun pointed at Xander, he headed for a computer in the middle of the room.

"It's a bit much, isn't it?" Spike asked. "What's your story, Wood?"

"No story, really. Just trying to do what's right. Make a difference. How about you? What kind of man are you, Spike?"

"He's the one who has helped save the world a dozen times. What have you done lately?" Xander demanded.

"Is that so?" Wood asked, his gaze flickering over toward Spike. If the asshole would just focus on Spike long enough for Spike to move without putting Xander in danger, he could take care of Wood in a few seconds flat. Unfortunately, Wood kept his focus on Xander, making it clear that he would pay if Spike made a move.

"Sorry. Not much for self reflection," Spike said with a
casual shrug.

Robin typed on his computer one handed. "Yeah, makes sense. See, you strike me as the kind of guy who just careens through life." Wood opened a drawer and took stakes out, setting them on the table.

"Big talk from a man who pushes teenagers around for a living," Xander said with a whole lot more sarcasm that he should be using on a man with a gun. The boy had the survival instincts of your average fruit fly.

"And you," Wood said, "the slayer has made a deal with the devil to get a stronger fighter by her side. You, though—you have clearly given yourself to a monster that is completely oblivious to the damage he's doing to everyone around him."

"You don't know all that much, mate. In fact, it seems like you don't understand much of anything at all," Spike said, trying to get Wood's attention over to him. Spike's demon and soul both cried out for the blood of this man, but he wouldn't strike until he had better odds of killing Wood without getting Xander hurt along the way.

"Oh, I know more about you than you think, Spike. See,
I've been searching for you for a very, very long time, ever since you killed my mother."

"I've killed a lot of people's mothers."

"Pre-soul," Xander interrupted. "He killed a lot of people's mothers pre-soul, and post-soul he's much more about avoiding killing mothers or people in general. Actually, he's been murder free for over a year."

"Except that Buffy was telling me that he turned a small army of people just a couple of weeks ago."

Xander's jaw was twitching, and Spike could practically read the boy's mind. He wasn't the most trusting soul, and Buffy's willingness to share their secrets was going to cause the mother of all fights if they got out of this alive.

"Besides, you'd remember my mother. She was a slayer."

"So, that's it, innit? Brought me here to kill me?" Spike snorted in disgust. The second Wood made his move, Spike was going to take that gun and shove it down his throat.

"No, I don't want to kill you, Spike. I want to kill the
monster who took my mother away from me."

"Well then, you're a couple of years too late," Xander pointed out. Wood reached over and clicked something on the computer.

Old fashioned music spilled out into the air, and Spike fell back and shook his head. No. No, he was not going to lose control. He flinched as he felt his demon roar up in response to the words.

*Early one morning, just as the sun was rising,*
*I hear a young maid sing in the valley below.*
*'Oh, don't deceive me. Oh, never leave me. How could you use a poor maiden so?*

Spike gasped for air he didn't need as pain stabbed through him so sharply that he felt like he was dying.

"Spike!" a voice cried out.

"There's the monster."

"What the hell did you do?"

"Showed you what always existed just under the surface."
The music swallowed Spike whole, stripping him of every thought and every memory until he lost himself in his own past, the music still playing in the distance.

"Mother?" Spike could smell the heavy smoke and human musk and animal waste that filled cities.

"William." His mother's voice was stronger than he'd heard for years. She wasn't slowly dying, consumption stealing the color from her cheeks and making her hide the pain that showed in every line of her face.

"Look at you." William smiled. He'd finally done something to help her, and the power and pride surged through him.

"Mm, yes. All better."

"You're glowing." William held his hands out toward her.

"Who's glowing?" a strange young man with soulful dark eyes appeared in his mother's parlor.

"Am I? Well, I suppose I have you to thank for that, don't I?" his mother said, ignoring the stranger as she went
over to the music box and shut it.

"Mother is," William answered the young man. He cocked his head as he realized that he knew exactly what Xander's blood tasted like. How was that possible? Had he fed, the young man would surely be dead, would he not? There was so much to this new life that he didn't understand, and William truly hated ignorance.

"Mother? Your mother? Okay, glowing good or radioactive glowing? And please tell me you realize that you're seeing things because I'm pretty sure your mother died like a century ago."

"No, she will live forever," Spike said happily. Nothing else mattered.

"Oh shit. That's probably not good."

"You could have eternal life, too," William offered, walking over to the young man and running a finger over his neck. The smell of desire filled the air. William's eyes widened. "Are you an urning... a mandrake?" he added after the man didn't seem to react to the word. Most men would have been shocked at the very word.
"Um... I don't know?"

"Are you attracted to..." William looked over to his mother who seemed to have frozen in place, "to men?" he whispered.

"Way to get off track... or to have a one track mind, maybe," Xander said. "Can we table that whole discussion until you've rejoined reality?"

William was distracted by the voice of his mother. "How ever will I repay you?" she asked.

William's chest expanded with pride. He'd saved his mother. Years of impotence and fear fell away as he looked at her new-found strength. "Seeing you like this is payment enough."

"Oh, William, you're so... tender." She touched his cheek, and William's love unfurled and reached out for her. She was his mother, his life, the woman who had first taught him of love, and now he could give all that back to her.

"Well, this is as it should be, mother. You and I together. All of London laid out before us."
"Way to be creepy. Please tell me that the whole keeping it in the clan thing doesn't apply to your mother," Xander whispered.

"What?" William asked. To which clan did Xander refer? He had his Drusilla, his dark princess, and his mother, the woman who had always been the center of his world.

His mother continued to ignore the stranger. "Ah, yes. Us."

"First, we'll feast. Then the night is yours. Theater, perhaps."

"Whoa there. Spike, back up a bit," Xander said, and the human was daring enough to move into William's space, his warm hands pressing back against William's chest. William slipped into game face and snarled a warning.

"Killing people is bad, Spike."

"They are sheep, chattel designed to give their life blood to keeping my kind alive," William said dismissively. He was better than all those dying humans who had rejected him. Why, he ought to visit Cecily and show her the power he now possessed.
"Spike, you don't believe that. Yeah, you need blood, but killing people to get it... you don't want to do that," Xander said.

William darted forward and caught Xander by the arms and held him. "And could you stop me?" William demanded with a dangerous smile.

"No," Xander said, and that made William's game face vanish. This human was clearly touched in the head. "You're a good man. Bonnie adores you, and my daughter has good enough taste to know who's good and who's bad. I mean, she hated her grandmother even way back when." William's memory betrayed him, flashing on the image of a young girl with curls like Xander. She loved him. He suddenly knew that as surely as he knew that his mother loved him.

"And you love me," William said, looking at the man.

"I always had rotten taste in partners, but yeah. I mean, I see everything you're doing to try and change your life. And I've seen you sacrifice everything to try and take care of us. And I know that I'm only a small part of 'us' because most of what you did, you did for Buffy." Xander
sighed. "But yeah, I love the man who has sacrificed his family and his ego to take care of us. I love that you love Bonnie. I love that you were willing to die rather than betray Buffy to Glory. And I'm terrified because I love that you're the one who sees that I'm not the boy who was too scared to stand up for his own daughter. But don't assume that means anything because my terror is big enough to bury most of the love under layers and layers of self-doubt and issues.

"Pleasure?" his mother asked, and William suspected he had just skipped through time. "To take my leave of you, of course. 'The lark hath spake from twixt its wee beak?' You honestly thought I could bear an eternity listening to that twaddle?"

"But mother..." William turned to her, confused, but then another man was there—this dark Moor punched him in the face, and William growled and fell back.

"That's right, dog. Fight back," the Moor taunted.

"Spike, fighting might not be such a bad idea," Xander told him.

His mother, however, seemed to ignore the chaos that
had broken out in the parlor and the Moor walked through the couch as though it was a phantom. His mother, meanwhile, looked around the room with awe.

"I feel extraordinary. It's as though I've been given new eyes. I see everything. Understand... everything." William wondered if she could understand, then, these odd humans who had invaded their home.

The moor struck him again, and William retreated behind the armchair. His attacker walked through it, scattering the furniture as though it was no more than smoke.

His mother showed her vampire features now. "I hate to be cruel— No, I don't. I used to hate to be cruel in life. Now, I find it rather freeing. Nothing less will pry your greedy little fingers off my apron strings, will it?"

"Stop. Please." William was speaking to both his attacker and his mother, both of whom pummeled him, hurting him with impunity and reminding him of his own frailties and impotence. He didn't want to feel this way. He wanted the strength Drusilla had promised him.

His mother's voice had grown cold and hateful. "Ever since the day you first slithered from me like a parasite—"
"Mother, wha—" Spike was cut off as the moor struck him over and over.

"Spike, punch him!" Xander screamed. William's body reacted without his permission, and he struck out at the stranger, his fist contacting with the moor's face so hard that William could feel the flesh of the man's cheek pulp under his blow. The moor flew backwards, and the image of the parlor shimmered so that for one moment, Xander appeared manacled to empty air.

His mother continued to ignore everyone as she looked at William with scorn. "Had I known better, I could have spared myself a lifetime of tedium and just dashed your brains out when I first saw you."

The moor, bleeding with one eye already swelling, moved forward.

"Spike, get the stake!" Xander screamed.

William wanted to confront his mother, but Xander's voice pulled him into a world where crosses surrounded him, making his unholy skin shiver in horror. Despite the
fact that William was concentrating on his opponent, his mother continued her shocking diatribe. "God, I prayed you'd find a woman to release me, but you scarcely showed an interest. Who could compare to your doddering housebound mum? A captive audience for your witless prattle."

His attacker rushed him, and William focused on the stake. That allowed him to push Spike's back into the wall. The cross burned him so that William could smell his own burning flesh, but he ignored the pain.

"Kick him!" Xander yelled. William truly did not understand why a human would assist him in a fight with another human, but Xander's words had yet to lead him astray. William kicked as hard as he could, and the crack of bone and the scream suggested that he had made the right choice. The moor fell to the floor, and William darted away from the wall to stand in the middle, his mother's parlor appearing like ghost fog that drifted through the world. Memory. The word was bitter on William's tongue. He was trapped within this memory.

William turned to his ghostly mother. "Whatever I was, that's not who I am anymore."
His mother's malicious chuckle touched something deep in his heart. "Darling, it's who you'll always be. A limp... sentimental fool."

"What you are is a good man," Xander said, his voice drawing William toward a world he didn't understand. Old feelings crept into his heart—guilt, fear, shame. He didn't want such things. He had renounced weakness when he renounced his soul, but yet he could feel them, scratching at the inside of his ribs.

"Animal like you. Never cared for anyone but yourself. No one else mattered. Just all about the hunt. " The moor spat the words as he laid on the ground, his blood pooling under him. Spike could smell the warm copper of fresh blood, and his mouth watered.

"You want to run, don't you? Scamper off and cry to your new little trollop. Do you think you'll be able to love her?" The specter of his mother demanded. "Think you'll be able to touch her without feeling me? All you ever wanted was to be back inside." She rubbed her own stomach, and William fell back in horror.

"Whatever she's saying, it's not real." Xander sounded desperate, and William wandered closer to the young
man whose scent offered solace.

His mother's words hounded him, though. "You finally got your wish, didn't you? Sank your teeth into me. An eternal kiss." She arched her back seductively, and Spike shook his head.

"No. I only wanted to make you well."

"You wanted your hands on me. Perhaps you'd like a chance to finish off what you started." She twitched her body and moved in on him. His heart sickened as she moved to intercept him.

Pushing her away, he tried to escape to Xander's side. "I love you. I did. Not like this."

"Just like this. This is what you always wanted. Who's my dark little prince?" She tried to kiss him, but William turned his head and found Xander's gaze.

"I only wanted to save her. I never had unnatural desire for her."

"Of course you didn't. Geez, Spike, I would never even suspect that."
"I loved her. I wanted to end her pain—stop the consumption that was devouring her."

"Oh God, Spike. I'm so sorry." Xander reached out, but William's mother caught his arm and pulled at him. "It isn't your mother, Spike. If you turned her, it's a demon, not your mother. Don't listen to her, Spike." Xander's voice took on a tone of desperation. "Don't listen. She's just a demon."

"No!" William roared. Looking into his mother's face, he could see that Xander was right. His mother was gone. This was a demon using her memories to torment him. Grabbing her wooden cane, Spike broke it in half. He whispered a soft, "I'm sorry," before sinking the impromptu stake deep into her heart. She went from her game face to her human one for an instant before she turned into a cloud of dust that evaporated like London fog.

"I'm so sorry, mum," William told the air.

"Spike, it isn't your fault," Xander said.

"No?" William turned to the young man, and now he
could see the manacles that chained his wrist to a long metal structure. "I turned her. I had thought to spare her pain."

"And you did, only not the way you thought. You helped her die quietly," Xander said. William moved closer and raised his hand to cup Xander's cheek.

"I murdered my mum."

"Well, you were sort of a demon at the time. Right and wrong—not big on the demon curriculum," Xander said. William ducked his head as he accepted that tacit censure. He had been wrong. Xander's hand stroked over his cheek, the warmth sinking into him, and Spike looked up.

"Your soul, it knows that you were only trying to help."

"I failed to help anyone," William confessed in a whisper. Xander's hand continued to stroke his neck.

"You've helped me and Buffy and Bonnie. You saved Dawn and you were there when Willow wiped all our memories. You are the only person who has been there every time I needed you over the last two years. Oh
yeah, and there was this little thing where you saved the world."

"That doesn't make up for the fact that I murdered her."

"Well, I tried to get Buffy to murder her boyfriend, so I'm not going to comment on the morality of that. I just know that for a vampire, you love more than anyone I know, and your mom knew you loved her. Hell, even when you lose your temper and throw me around, I still know you love me in your odd and twisted way," Xander said with a grin.

"He's a murderer! How can you touch that disgusting creature?" Wood demanded. Reality flickered, and Spike realized that he knew the man—he'd been jealous of Wood's place in Buffy's life and he'd tried to find a way to find a truce with someone who seemed to be moving closer and closer to the rest of the clan. However, now Spike felt only contempt for a little man trapped within his own past. "He murdered my mother!" Wood screamed, his hands clutched around a nasty compound fracture of the femur. One wrong twitch and he was going to cut his own femoral artery on one of the bones' jagged edges, and Spike couldn't find the energy to care, not even with his soul.
"I don't give a piss about your mum. She was a slayer. I was a vampire. That's the way the game is played," Spike said coldly.

"Yeah, what he said," Xander seconded. Spike grinned at the boy.

"Loon," he complained. Then he stretched his neck and looked around the room. A crowbar lay on the floor near some of the crosses, and Spike walked over and picked it up.

"You took my childhood. You took her away. She was all I had. She was my world," Robin cried out, and Spike paused. He could understand a son devoting his life to his mother, but they were nothing alike.

"And you weren't hers. Doesn't that piss you off?" Spike asked with a nasty tone.

"Shut up. You didn't know her."

"I know slayers. No matter how many people they've got around them, they fight alone. Life of the chosen one--the rest of us be damned. Your mother was no different."
Spike walked over and put the end of the crowbar under the end of the cuffs that locked Xander to the pipe. One twist and the cuffs cracked. Xander's wrist was red and a small trickle of blood slipped down his sweat-slicked forearm.

"No, she loved me." Wood's voice broke.

"But not enough to quit, though, was it? Not enough to walk away... for you. I'll tell you a story about a mother and son. See, like you, I loved my mother. So much so I turned her into a vampire... so we could be together forever. She said some nasty bits to me after I did that." Spike turned away from the broken and bleeding man and looked at Xander. "Been weighing on me for quite some time."

"She knew you loved her, Spike," Xander promised, and for the first time in a century, Spike believed that.

"Well, this little exercise helped me figure that out." Spike turned to take one last, long look at the pathetic heap on the ground. "You see, unlike you, I had a mother who loved me back. When I sired her, I set loose a demon, and it tore into me, but it was the demon talking, not her. I realize that now. My mother loved me with all
her heart. I was her world." Spike walked over to the computer and clicked the program so the music started playing. Xander stood by the open door, the broken cuff still hanging from his wrist, and Spike noticed that he wasn't calling for anyone to come help the sod.

"You ready?" Xander asked.

"Yeah, pet, I am. There's nothing here that I need to worry about." Turning his back on Wood in a calculated insult, Spike sauntered toward the door. When he reached Xander, he threw an arm around the boy's shoulders and started out into the night. "Nice having my free will back," Spike said as they headed out toward the street.

"No more trigger?" Xander asked.

"Nope. Just a sad memory of a bloody awful day." Spike frowned as heard someone running at them with inhuman speed.

"Company," Spike said, and Xander fell back a step and pulled out stake. After a second, Buffy raced around the corner, running full out. She nearly tripped as she tried to stop at the sight of the two of them. "Spike? Xander?"
What happened? Where's Wood?"

"You knew!" Xander snapped. And in a moment he went from standing behind Spike, taking a clearly submissive role to stepping forward with an expression on his face like he was considering taking a swing at the slayer. Spike sighed. Clearly, the boy wasn't kidding when he said he just didn't play by demon rules.

"Not until about ten minutes ago. Giles was giving me this whole speech about sacrifice and generals and winning wars and Spike being bad for me. I was hoping that two and two were adding to five in my head, but maybe not." Buffy frowned as she looked down at Xander's wrist.

"Yeah, he chained me to a pipe and said he was going to let Spike eat me before staking him, but on the good side, Spike didn't eat me, and the whole trigger thing is far less triggery."

"What?" Buffy looked from one of them to the other.

"The song," Spike said, "it was playing a right mind game on me, filling me so full of guilt that I could make Angel look positively sane in comparison. Got that worked out,
though." Spike smiled. He did have it worked out. He wasn't happy about how things had ended with his mother, but he could feel her love warming him, even now.

"And Wood?" Buffy asked, her voice tense with emotion.

Spike shrugged. "I gave him a pass. Let him live. On account of the fact I killed his mother. But that's all he gets. He even so much as looks at me funny again, I'll kill him."

"Fat chance, bleachbrain. I'll shoot him before he gets near you," Xander said as they started down the street. "He tried to feed me to a vampire. Seriously, he is not good guy material... Not even close. I mean, he makes Angel look like Mother Theresa. At least Angel admits that he's an idiot, but that guy... what an ass. And I thought my boss sucked."

"He does," Spike said. "He's a orda demon. They're egg-suckers."

"Really?" Xander asked. "Wow... okay, that explains a few things."
"It explains why he puts up with you," Spike said, smiling when that earned him an elbow to the stomach.

"Wait, he's alive?" Buffy called from behind them.

"For now," Xander said. "He was bleeding, and if he's anywhere near my house, like ever, he's going to do a lot more bleeding, Buff," Xander warned.

Spike nodded. His boy did know how to do dominant when he was in the mood because not even Buffy had an answer for that. "So," Xander asked in a whisper, "do you think you can keep me from losing my cool and killing Giles as I kick his sanctimonious ass out of my house?"

"Sanctimonious, big word for you, pet," Spike whispered back, glancing over his shoulder to see if Buffy had heard them, but she was inside the garage, probably calling for paramedics. Wood wouldn't be walking for at least a month or two.

"I've been saving that word up."

"I'd rather let you kill him."

"Yeah, but then we'd both do the brooding thing
tomorrow," Xander pointed out. "Besides, I really don't think Bonnie needs to see her father go totally ballistic. A little ballistic will be enough."

"Right then. If I have to sit on you to keep you from killing the git, I will," Spike agreed. He looked over at Xander. "I'll even enjoy it." Spike wiggled his eyebrows, and the only answer he got in return was an exaggerated eyeroll. Things were moving right along now.

Part Thirty-Four

Spike stepped back, letting Xander hit the door first. This was Xander's battle—if Spike tried fighting it, he was going to bloody eat Rupert. The man had bollocks the size of a bloody bull to try that trick, and Spike's first instinct was to rip them off.

"Honey, we're home," Xander called as he walked in the door, bellowing like a sitcom father.

"Xander. Oh thank god," Giles said. Giles' smile vanished when Spike followed.

"Evening," Spike said, narrowing his eyes in warning. He wanted to kill, and Rupert needed to understand that the soul wouldn't stop Spike—not when he faced an enemy.
As far as Spike was concerned, putting Rupert down would be a favor to Buffy and Xander.

"Spike." Giles' voice was utterly devoid of emotion.

"Funny thing happened on the way to the forums," Xander said with a mock cheerfulness that reminded Spike eerily of Angelus, "and now it's time for all the little Watchers to get the hell out of my house."

"What?" Willow had been sitting in Spike's chair, a huge book in her lap, but now her head snapped up like a poppet's.

"Giles here is getting out of my house," Xander repeated. Giles appeared rather gobsmacked, but Spike could practically smell the aggression from Willow. She'd been keeping a low profile since her flirtation with power, but the boy had hit a nerve.

"Xander, what are you talking about?" she demanded. Witch wasn't happy.

"I assure you, I am not going anywhere. So, has the vampire killed Robin?"
"Robin? Robin Wood?" In a split-second, Willow went from aggressive to confused. Spike walked over to the couch and dropped down, dangling a leg over the arm of the couch as he settled in to watch the floorshow.

"No, he's not dead," Xander said. "He is, however, going to be in the hospital for a really long time. Considering that he tried to kill both me and Spike, that's actually not a bad outcome for him."

"He... what? Why would he do that?" Willow wrinkled her nose.

Oh, Rupert knew. "I assure you, our concerns centered around Spike and his growing influence over the group. I never intended for you to get involved, Xander, nor do I believe that Robin would have done you any harm." Rupert stiffened his backbone at that, but Spike couldn't tell if the git honestly believed what he said.

"Yeah, well thanks for being totally wrong on that one G-man, because he handcuffed me to a pipe and then used Spike's trigger to drive him batty, and I'm pretty sure there's a whole basement full of vampire dust that suggests that Wood was trying to make me dead."
"Xander!" Willow was out of her chair and holding Xander's injured wrist in the blink of an eye, and Spike had to rein in a wave of jealousy as he watched her concern. Harris wasn't seriously injured, but Spike disliked both Willow's proximity and the excessive fussing that suggested Xander was ready to drop dead from a raw and bleeding wrist.

Bloody hell, he really was love's bitch. Oddly, though, of all the lovers he'd taken and family he'd had, some willing and many not, Xander was the first being since his mother to claim any love for Spike in return. With Drusilla, he'd loved her with every ounce of his being. He would have died for her, and she had feelings in return, but none had been love. She'd needed him, controlled him, commanded him—she'd wanted him and lusted for him and wished he was Angelus. They'd had a complicated and passionate relationship, and he had devoted himself to her, but she hadn't loved him. Not only was Spike love's bitch, but the old lady had a wicked sense of humor.

"Giles, he's really hurt. Tara!" Willow yelled.

"It's just bruising," Xander said. "I'm way more unhappy about Giles helping someone try to kill me."
Tara came running up from the lower level just as Xander made his announcement, and she stopped dead in the middle of taking a step.

"There's no need for exaggeration," Giles said. "I never wanted you hurt. I attempted to call you back when I saw you foolishly going with Spike."

Xander pulled his wrist away from Willow, the broken handcuff rattling as it dangled from his reddened wrist. "Try yelling, 'Xander, it's a trap and the crazy guy is going to try and kill you two.' Trust me, I would have listened."

"Spike is a danger to us all. He compromises—"

"Hey!" Xander cut him off. "Let's play Jeopardy. For one hundred dollars, the idiot who got a soul and then spent a century doing absolutely nothing because he was a giant poop head without enough ethical sense to want to help anyone?"

"Who is the poof!" Spike answered happily. What a tosser. Xander smiled at him.

"Ding, ding. And yet despite Angel's moral lacking and
Angelus' habit of torturing you, you never tried to kill him. Actually, I would be way more okay with killing him." Giles opened his mouth, but Xander just plowed ahead. "Bonus round... the vamp who got a soul and immediately tried to help us?"

Spike raised his hand.

"Shut up," Giles said.

"Oh no," Xander said, stepping forward and getting right in Giles' space. The boy stunk of fear, but he didn't show it. "You don't get to tell people what to do. And hey, here's a Double Jeopardy question for you. This person is the only one who knows Spike's trigger."

Willow answered in a whisper. "The First."

Xander made a buzzing sound. "I'm sorry, but answers must be in the form of a question. The correct answer is 'Who is the First'? So, if Wood suddenly knows the name of the song that drives Spike 'round the twist, would anyone like to guess who he's been talking to?"

Giles shook his head. "No, while I admit that his motives might not be entirely pure..."
"Get out, Giles. Consider this an eviction... an invitation to get your shit and hit the street... consider this my last nerve failing under the pressure of you being a back-stabbing, back-turning, tea-drinking abandoner of ships."

"Xander!" Willow gasped. Tara's eyes were large, but Spike guessed that she would come down on the side of forgiveness. Thank god the boy wasn't that big-hearted. Xander had a streak of unforgiving bigger than most demons when it came right down to it.

"He's out. Out, Giles. Like get your stuff together now or I'm going to start drop kicking things into the front yard." They all stared at each other, Giles and Xander chest to chest, Willow clutching her hands like the classic 1940s bint, Tara with her wide eyes, and Kennedy and the newest potential peeking from the basement stairs. It was better than the telly. Considering Bonnie had her mother's sense of hearing, Spike was guessing that she was getting to see her father in full 'head of the clan' mode. Looking back, it was soddin' ridiculous how many times Spike had overlooked the boy, not noticing when he came up with the plan that brought the slayer back to life or destroyed the Judge. Spike stretched and watched all the little humans. Yeah, they'd all done the same
thing—they'd assumed that Xander didn't use his backbone because he didn't have one. The boy was schooling people today.

"This is not the time—" Giles started to say, his voice taking on the calm of a man who'd just figured out he was two feet from a volcano ready to blow.

"OUT. Go back to the council, or actually, scratch that since they're all dead, but go haunt Wesley in L.A. or something."


That made everyone turn toward him, and Spike suddenly realized that the rest of them didn't know about the move. Bloody hell, Spike had lived before the telephone, and people still managed to keep better track of each other using the soddin' post. "The Powers finally went too far, putting his rugrat in the middle of some soddin' prophecy. I could have bloody told them that Peaches does tend to fly off the handle once he decides to move his fat arse. He gave Cordelia free rein to pick a new home, and they packed up and headed for upstate New York. Sorry, luv, but they confiscated your van for their little desertion."
Xander's mouth was hanging open. "They... what?"

Spike shrugged. "Wesley and Jonathan were on the fourth or fifth murder plot before Angel blew, and when he did, apparently he ripped through a whole group of lawyers, a couple of seers and some bloke who wanted to cut off their scientist's head and use her giant brain. Don't you lot have email?" Spike asked them all. From the blank expressions, they didn't.

"Bloody hell, get with the times, people." Spike rolled his eyes at the lot of them, Xander included.

Giles was the first to recover. "We can talk about this when Buffy returns."

"Yep, we can," Xander agreed, "but you will be talking from a place other than my house."

"I call dibs on Giles' room," a voice called from the stairs. This was better than Faulty Towers, this was. Spike was smirking before Xander even managed to get the first word out.

"My house. Mine. What part of that do you not
understand? There is no dibs."

Kennedy's face poked out from the shadows of the basement stairs. "I'm oldest, and—"

"And I don't care!" Xander exploded. "I don't care if you're oldest or if you're rich or if you have the hots for Willow or for Tara, actually I do care about that. I'm creeped out by that. Seriously creeped out. Beyond the creepiness, I don't care. Newsflash: you aren't better than anyone else here. You're a potential, nothing else."

"At least I—" She got cut off as Xander really got going.

"If you're oldest, that just means you're most likely to be passed over because the Slayer magic goes to young girls, so that doesn't make you better. And all the crap about your houses and the wings on your houses and the beach place just makes you sound like an entitled bitch, which, quite possibly, you are. So, if we're having a fight about life and death, how about you not stick your nose in because you want something. I don't care what you want. If you have a roof over your head and no one currently trying to kill yourself, back off," Xander warned. Kennedy's mouth was open, and she might have kept trying to fight, but Tara slid over to her side, her hand
reaching out to touch Kennedy's shoulder.

"Your childish antics are simply proving that you do not understand what is required to win this war." Giles drew himself up, and the second he did, Spike knew the man had made a tactical error. The scent of Xander's fear vanished under pure, unadulterated aggression.

Xander whirled on him. "Hey, I'd way rather be the childish one than the one who co-conspired with the First to kill two of the people in this room. Right now, I'm not even sure I can trust you, Giles. I mean, it was bad enough when you were thinking of killing Dawn—"

Xander stopped when a loud gasp came from the stairs. There was a rearranging of bodies on the stairs, muffled thumps and the sound of shoving and then Dawn pushed her way up into the room.

"What?" Her eyes shone, and Spike hated that this worthless git had hurt one more person Spike cared for.

"Luv, he was a scared little man going up against a god. If he'd have tried it, I would have gutted him, chip or not," Spike promised. He and Dawn were still struggling to regain their relationship after Spike's failed attempt to rape Buffy, but at least she didn't reject his comfort.
Giles had turned a dangerous shade of white, and he was glaring at Xander. "You know nothing," he said, his voice a rough whisper.

"I know Anya was one hell of an eavesdropper. I know that when she came to me saying that the plan didn't sound half-bad, I sat down and explained human morals and right and wrong until I'm pretty sure I taught a former demon why we don't ever turn on our own. Either that or she just didn't want another lecture on the issue from me." Xander's mouth twisted unhappily. "Either way, I really don't trust your morals, Giles, and this is my home with my daughter. What would she have done if you'd managed to get both me and Spike killed?"

"And I have repeatedly said that I would never put you in danger," Giles snapped. "We shall wait for Buffy."

"Spike," Xander said, "dump all Mr. Stickuphisass's clothes out on the lawn. In fact, dump it all. I don't want a single reminder that he was ever in this house."

"Happily." Spike gave Giles a sadistic grin before heading for the man's bedroom. If Spike were still chipped, Rupert would have challenged him, but now that Spike
had his bite back, Rupert just watched with barely contained fury as Spike pulled an armful of clothes out of Rupert's closet and headed for the front door. Xander walked over and opened the door for him.

"Xander," Willow said softly, "I really think we should just sit down and talk about this. I know that you're angry. You have every right to be angry." She shot Giles a confused look. "But let's just sit down."

"Will." Xander stopped and just stared at her for a long time. Spike made another trip for Rupert's antique radio and took special pleasure in throwing it at the pavement. "Willow, do you remember when I said 'vampires, bad'?

She nodded, her face solemn. "Actually, I was more like 'demons, bad' but I grew up, Willow. You used to talk to me about how I should give Angel a chance because he had a soul. You were right, and I was wrong. I mean, I still hate his guts, but killing him is not good. Giles was willing to kill Spike, soul and all. He was working with someone who had the inside track with the First. He put me in the middle of Spike's insanity and a madman who can't get over the fact that a vampire killed a slayer. Newsflash—slayers and vampires have been killing each other for at least a thousand years."
"And Spike's sanity is still in question. He's not safe," Giles said, flinching when Spike sent the good scotch flying through the door.

"Actually, he worked through his trigger," Xander said.

"And you trust him?" Giles' tone of voice made it pretty clear that he considered Xander an idiot.

Xander turned to Giles with a barely contained fury that made Spike bounce on his feet. "Should I trust the man who has protected my daughter, kept my secrets, and fought through a bloodlust rather than killing me—or should I trust the man who left town when we needed him, who showed up without warning us ahead of time that the world was ending, and who almost got me killed? Tell me Giles, who should I trust?" Xander's voice had a deadly calm that sucked all the air out of the room. Spike watched gleefully as Rupert lost every bit of color in his face. Willow and Tara moved silently closer to each other, and Dawn stood with her back to the wall, slow tears slipping down her cheeks. Soul or not, Spike wanted to rip Rupert apart—he wanted to make him pay for every bit of pain the man had caused everyone in this room.
Spike felt Buffy before he saw her. Spiders ran up his arms, and his cock twitched in memory of all those days when the twinge of slayer preceded wild, demonic sex. However, when she stepped up the porch steps and stood in the open door, she didn't look demonic or wild. Her shoulders drooped heavily.

"Redecorating?" she asked, her voice deceptively cool because Spike could smell the emotion rising from her.

"Giles is moving out," Xander said. The nervousness returned to his scent, but his voice was steady.

"Because of Wood," Buffy said.

"Buffy...I—I understand your anger." Giles focused on her. "Please believe me, we did what we needed to in order to win this war. What I told you is still true. You need to learn—"

"No, I think you've taught me everything I need to know."

Spike blinked, shocked that she had sided with Xander. Bloody hell, all the rules really did change when the boy was in the mix.
"Buffy?" Willow asked softly.

"Does anyone want to say anything to me? Really?" Buffy demanded, crossing her arms. "I come home and find you're all fighting your own war. Giles decides to take out strongest fighter, Xander splits our forces. Willow is too afraid to use magic. I've been carrying you—all of you—to far, too long. Ride's over. I'm the slayer. I'm the one with the power."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "The way I see it, we have plenty of power in this room, luv." Between the witches' magic and Xander bloody habit of just not dying, Spike was starting to think they had more power than he'd rightly understood until recently.

"Then why aren't you using it?" Buffy demanded. "I use the power that I have. Spike, you just sit in that chair and wait for us to fix you. Willow, you and Tara won't even try magic—"

"The First wants us to use magic." Tara's voice might be soft, but it was steady, without even a hint of the stutter that sometimes made it so hard for her to get her words out.
Buffy threw up her hands. "The rest of you are just waiting for me."

"Well, yeah," Xander agreed, "but only because you kinda told us to. You're our leader, Buffy, as in 'follow the'."

"Well, from now on, I'm your leader as in 'do what I say'." Buffy's words shocked Spike. She'd never been one for power and shoving her minions around. When he'd first seen her, he'd thought that was the weakness he needed to destroy her. He'd been wrong.

"Ja wohl!" Xander snapped. The lines of power were straining, and Spike closed his mouth and just tried to let the others fight it out. It didn't matter what he said here, he was going to end up in the wrong, and he knew it. Bloody hell, he was starting to feel like he was back in France, caught between Darla and Angelus. Xander crossed his arms. "But let's not try to forget, we're also your friends."

"And you're all here because you're here because you're scared. That's fine. Be as scared as you'd like, just be useful while you're at it."
Willow twitched at that accusation, but then the witch wasn't exactly doing a whole lot to help lately. "Come on, Buffy. You know everyone here's doing everything they can," she said softly.

"By trying to kill Spike? By turning Giles out of the house? By doing a whole lot of nothing?" Buffy turned on each of them in turn. The First knows what we can do, and it's laughing."

No way was he taking this. Spike looked at Xander curiously, not sure which side of the boy was going to show up next, but he was just standing with his shoulders drooped as he took every hateful word like a whip. Spike turned and headed for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Buffy demanded.

"Out."

Buffy raised her voice, calling after him as he left, "Fine. Take a cell phone. That way, if I need someone to get weepy or whaled on, I can call you."

With a snarl, Spike whirled on the room. "If you've got
"Just said it. You keep holding back. The old Spike never would have sat in that chair for a week. You never want to train with the girls. So, if you plan to keep holding back, you might as well walk out that door and not come back."

"Buffy!" Xander's head snapped up and he took several strides closer to them.

Spike stepped up to her. "Holding back? You're blind. I've been here, right in it—I think your boy Wood would have something to say about whether I'm holding back."

"Exactly. Wood. You went after Wood."

"Wood went after us," Xander said, but Buffy kept right on talking, ignoring everything he said.

"You went after someone who was on our side, a human without half your strength, and yes, clearly he was an idiot on our side, but he would have fought against the First. While you were home tied to a chair and moping about your guilt, he was out there fighting with me, killing vampires."
"Sorry that my agony put a crimp in your style luv," Spike said coldly. Part of him still loved Buffy—her strength and her ability to survive. However, her sharp angles and wicked tongue were starting to sound a little too much like Darla for his comfort.

"You were a better fighter before the soul." Buffy's words were like napalm on the conversation. The whole room went silent. Tara's mouth was a shocked 'o'. Willow turned stark white. Xander, in contrast, turned brilliant red. However, none of them could find words to break the silence that fell after Buffy's statement.

Out of fear that his anger would roar out of control, Spike whispered, "I did this for you. The soul, the changes—it's what you wanted."

"What I want is the Spike that's dangerous. The Spike that tried to kill me when we met."

"You're about to bring him out," Spike warned. Rage was like a hungry beast in his chest. He knew the taste of Buffy's blood—he knew the sharp zing of the power that lay under her skin. She had willingly cut into herself and offered him a taste of that power in the animal's blood
he fed on, and his demon suddenly demanded more. He wanted to drink her dry and drop her limp body on the ground. He wanted to break her and leave her begging. And still, he loved her. He loved her with the same passion he still loved Drusilla—irrationally and completely.

Instead of recognizing the danger, Buffy looked at him with contempt. "I'm nowhere near him." She turned her back on him, and Spike's gameface came out involuntarily.

"Okay, you need to stop before you say something that can't be unsaid," Xander warned, holding his hands out toward her in a placating gesture. Spike was pretty sure that time was past, but Xander kept trying to play peacemaker.

"I'm saying what needs to be said... what I should have said a long time ago. Giles was wrong about Spike, but he was right about one thing: this is war."

"Which is pretty much like every other time we've gone to war," Xander said, but Spike figured that there wasn't a soul in the room who believed that, including Xander. The sour expression on his face made that pretty clear.
"Do you want to know what I see?" Buffy asked, her voice dangerously soft. "Do you want to know the dreams I have every night now? I see death, Xander. I don't see one uber-vamp, I see thousands flowing out of the hellmouth, their hunger consuming millions. I see demons crawling out of a hole and the world ending. Every night, I see that over and over, so no, this is not like every other time."

"Oh good lord." Giles sat down on the couch, a marionette with its strings cut.

"Then we get help," Xander said firmly.

"Who? I'm the slayer! The council is gone. Who do we call, Xander?"

Xander stiffened. "Riley. If you're right that humans are about to lose the earth, then we give humanity a chance to fight for itself."

As much as Spike hated the git, that didn't sound like a half-bad plan. However, Buffy was already turning away, a sneer on her face. "I'm the slayer. I'll fight this battle. And I will win it, but not if you people can't get one
simple rule in mind—I am the general. Spike, put Giles' things back in his room. Giles, you are not to tell Wood any of our plans from here on out. Girls, I need you to use your magic—you find out what the First is up to, and you find me a way to close the hellmouth once and for all, and I don't care what the price is."

Without waiting for an answer, Buffy turned and headed toward the basement stairs. Potentials scrambled on the steps, bodies flinging themselves out of the slayer's way. The rest of them were left just looking at each other.

"Are you—" Giles started to say.

"Sod off," Spike answered, heading for the basement himself. Part of him wanted to find Buffy and offer himself to her, which wasn't the most rational response considering that he was bloody pissed, but then love never was rational, and Spike truly wasn't good at falling out of love.

When he got to his bedroom, he threw himself stomach down on the bed with his arms sprawled out. He was soddin' exhausted. He hadn't been this bone-deep weary since Prague. Funny how every moment of utter despair in his life was tied to love. His door opened, but Spike
could smell Xander's musk, so he didn't bother moving.

"That was... uncomfortable," Xander said softly. Spike snorted. "Spike?" Xander asked, and his voice was so serious that Spike rolled over to one side so he could look at the boy. Xander wandered closer and sat on the edge of the bed. "Buffy has demon in her, doesn't she?" he asked.

Spike blinked as he thought about that. He didn't really think of a slayer as demonic—they were more on the side of the angels, they were. But now that Xander had asked, Spike could see some evidence. The blood had a slight taste to it that wasn't human. Oh, it gave him a buzz, no doubt. In China, he'd been delirious on slayer blood for a good two days, which is why he'd passed on a quick lunch after killing Wood's mother in New York. That city had entirely too many baddies for Spike to risk a two-day bender on slayer blood. And their speed certainly wasn't human—or their strength, for that matter.

"Probably," he agreed.

Xander nodded, but Spike could tell from his body language that the boy wasn't done yet. Boy. Age-wise, he was certainly younger than Spike, but under that façade,
he had more than just frogs and snails and puppy-dog tails. "There are demons that don't live very well together, right?"

"Like what, pet?" Spike pushed himself up so he was leaning back on the headboard, and Xander scooted farther back onto the bed, turning to face him.

"Vampires. If there are a lot of vampires together, and you guys don't know who's in charge of who, that's going to lead to ungoodness, isn't it?"

"It's going to lead to dust," Spike agreed.

"Could slayers be like that?" Xander blurted the question out.

Spike thought. "Could be," he agreed. It might explain why the slayer had been so rough on her little pals lately.

Xander's face fell, like he'd been expecting some other answer, and Spike tilted his head at him. With a sigh, Xander shrugged. "I was hoping you were going to say 'no'. I kind of want Buffy to be right and the rest of us to be wrong, because then the world makes sense. I'm supposed to be the one who's wrong."
"About Finn?" Spike guessed. Mutely, Xander nodded. He smelled of misery. If he were a demon, he'd be celebrating a crack in the defenses of someone above him, springing at a chance to prove he was stronger and smarter in order to claim a better position. Instead, he stunk of sorrow and pain. "As much as I hate Finn, I reckon you're right that the sod should know he's about to get dropped into hell."

"Decapitation killed the uber-vamp.... How many do you think a tank could dust? How many would a nuclear bomb kill? I mean, we're talking about losing a war when we're fighting with stakes and swords, Spike. Tell me I'm imagining things and that I should just stay out of it."

Spike snorted again. "You're the only one who doesn't have his head up his arse, luv, and I'm including myself in that number."

"So, I should call him?"

"Might be best to at least warn him to be ready for demons pouring out of the hellmouth like rats off a sinking ship," Spike agreed.
Xander sighed and let himself fall backwards so that he was lying across Spike's legs. "That's not the answer I wanted to hear," he whispered. "I mean, the Initiative tried to fight demons, and it turned out that stakes and swords were way better than trank guns and tracking devices. So maybe I'm just all twisted around." It sounded like he was quickly talking himself out of making the call, and Spike studied him. Maybe Xander wasn't as hard to understand as Spike had thought. Unless he missed his guess, Xander was a dominant, someone who took charge and did what he thought right and simply expected others to follow or not—their choice. However, he was a dominant convinced that he lacked the skills to lead. The fact was, he did lack physical skills; he'd never be able to compete with a slayer or a vampire in terms of sheer strength. However, this wasn't about strength. This decision came down to whether Xander trusted himself.

"Luv," Spike said, waiting until Xander looked up at him. "You saved the slayer from old Heinrich by doing what you knew was right, even when Angel and Giles were acting like tossers. Don't second-guess yourself now when you have even more on the line. If your gut tells you to call Finn, then call him," Spike said firmly. It wasn't something he would do—hell, he'd rather cut off his own bollocks than ask Finn for an inch of shade in the middle
of the day. However, if Xander's instinct was to call Finn, Spike could respect that.

"Right. So, call Riley?" Xander rolled his head to the side so his cheek was resting on Spike's knee. Spike nodded.

"Call Riley."

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**Part Thirty-Five**

Xander closed his phone, his stomach churning with acid.

"Well then, that's done," Spike said. Considering that he hated Riley, Spike was way too cheerful about the idea that Riley was going to be bringing in the cavalry. Now if he could just manage to do it quietly, maybe Xander could avoid having Buffy hating him.

"If Buffy finds out, I'm so very dead," Xander said as he fell back on his bed and stared at the ceiling. How had things gotten so very out of hand? This shouldn't be
happening. Buffy was their leader, and Xander wanted to be able to follow her, but she was losing her mind. Or she was finding her demon. One or the other. And while Xander had no problem with Buffy being demonic in general, he wasn't so happy to have her acting like an out of control raging demon. And as long as the First was out there hunting potentials, all of the would-be slayers were going to be living on top of each other.

Spike got off the bed and the mattress tilted, but Xander just threw an arm over his eyes. He shouldn't have called. Yeah, he felt better knowing that Riley was going to be setting up a perimeter of big ass weapons, but now he felt like he had to walk on eggshells as he waited for Buffy to find out that he was as big of a back-stabber as Giles.

The mattress tilted again as Spike got on the bed, and Xander ignored it. If he'd kicked Giles out, there would have been another bedroom open, but for now he and Spike were stuck sharing, which was way more uncomfortable now that Xander had opened his big mouth about loving Spike. He should have taken that particular secret to his grave.

Spike's hand rested against Xander's chest, and Xander
lifted his arm so he could glare at the offending hand. "What are you doing?"

"You're all worked up, pet."

"Yeah, betraying people does that, Spike. Benedict Arnold must have been a really emotionally wiped out dude."

"You need to relax."

Xander's eyes popped open as Spike ran fingers between the buttons on his shirt and started working his way up toward the first button. "Um... Spike?" Xander's voice squeaked, but he thought he was justified because Spike chose that instant to pull Xander's button free.

"Yes, pet?" Spike made his voice sound so very reasonable, as though this were a normal thing for them to be doing... or for him to be doing, Xander was doing nothing, which was pretty normal. Spike got buttons two and three going before fear kick started Xander's brain and he started scrambling to try and button himself up again.

"Touching!" Xander gasped, but his fingers were big and
awkward, too thick to get the buttons safely back into their holes.

"That's the way it's generally done, luv," Spike agreed.

"But.... You.... Me...."

"Breathe, luv. Usually a verb goes with a noun. Let me give you a sample. You and I should shag," Spike offered with a wicked grin. Despite Spike's earlier advice, Xander found all the air going out of his lungs. Maybe Spike took that as an invitation because he started to stroke the skin he'd exposed, his thumb rubbing over Xander's nipple, making it harden.

"But... Bonnie!" Xander arched his back and tried to push Spike's hand away, two actions which even he recognized were a little contradictory.

"Still not getting verbs in there, luv, but don't worry, I locked the door."

While that should have been reassuring, Xander's head felt like it was shrinking and his brain was getting smashed into a very small space, which might explain the stupid-sounding mewling he was doing as Spike's hand
travelled south and brushed over his lower stomach. "Spike," Xander gasped, and god his cock hurt now. Yeah, his big head was all about this being a bad idea, but his big head was losing the battle pretty damn fast.

"Yes?" Spike asked. Lowering his head, he ran a tongue over Xander's nipple, and a jolt went through Xander's whole body. His balls drew up, and his muscles tightened, and he really was not getting laid enough because for one second, Xander thought he was going to come right there in his pants.

"Wait, hold on, just wait," Xander begged.

Spike raised his head and quirked one eyebrow. "Don't want to," he answered simply. Leaning closer, he kissed Xander's slack lips. Xander's cock might be getting with the program, but most of Xander was suffering shell shock.

"But... but Buffy."

"She's not here, and not likely to come through a locked door, pet, so we're safe."

Either Spike was intentionally misunderstanding him or
Xander was sounding stupider than he was feeling—and he was feeling pretty damn stupid.

"No, stop," Xander said. Surprisingly, that actually stopped Spike. Shifting his weight, he lay on his side and watched Xander with both eyebrows up. "I saw how you reacted when Buffy said that stuff," Xander blurted out. Spike had been gutted when Buffy questioned his strength. Yeah, their relationship was over, but Spike's feelings weren't and Xander didn't want to be the 'also ran' in that little race.

"And?" Spike prompted him.

"You love her," Xander blurted out. If Spike denied it, Xander was ready to kick him out of the bed the second the lie passed his lips.

Spike sighed. "I always will, pet."

Xander's stomach grew a huge rock in the center.

Reaching up, Spike ran gentle fingers over Xander's cheek. "I'll always love Buffy, that doesn't mean I'd ever choose her again. I'll always love Drusilla, too. It'd gut me if I had to dust her, and I don't suppose I'd even consider
it unless I was trying to protect the family. Maybe it makes me a bad, bad man, but if I had to choose between a church full of good little hymn-singing women and my dark plum, I'd save Drusilla. I can't just stop loving her, and I just can't stop loving Buffy."

"But... you wouldn't... I mean, if Buffy wanted you—"
Xander stopped when Spike rested his finger on Xander's lips.

"Luv, that chapter is closed. Buffy never did love me, and before the soul, that was fine with me. For demons, knowing that someone wants you is enough, but—"
Spike stopped and looked off into the distance for several long seconds before he looked back toward Xander. "Different now, innit? So, you need to just relax."

"Spike..." Xander stopped, his voice breaking in the middle of Spike's name. "I don't know how this works."

With a slow, honeyed grin, Spike leaned closer. "Oh, I do, luv."

"But..."

"Shhhhh," Spike hushed him, and even with all the fears
churning through Xander's gut, he fell quiet. Spike's smile grew wider and his hands slid down over Xander's chest, pushing his shirt open. Xander fisted the sheets and struggled against an urge to call this whole thing off. His asshole ached at the very thought of Spike trying to get anything up there, but Xander just sucked his lower lip between his teeth. While most of Xander was caught between desire and unvarnished terror, his cock had definitely chosen a side.

When Spike's curious fingers finally found the zipper of Xander's jeans, each tooth of the zipper yielded with an audible click. Xander sucked in a breath as the pressure over his cock eased. His white briefs bulged up though the open zipper. Letting go of the sheets, Xander reached out and caught Spike's forearms and held tightly as he arched his back in need. He wasn't sure what he wanted, but he had to touch something. Even though Spike could have easily broken away from Xander, he let Xander hold his arms and he leaned down to mouth Xander's cock through the cotton.

A yelp slipped out before Xander could stop it. Spike made a sound that came suspiciously close to a laugh before he dropped down onto the bed next to Xander. "Good then?" he asked.
For a minute, Xander could only breathe fast and try to regain his sense of balance because he felt like the world was tilting and he was about to slide right off the bed. "Too good," Xander finally agreed.

"No such thing, luv."

"When my brain turns to mush and I can't move, that's too good." Xander reached up to touch Spike, running his fingers over the red silk shirt without touching the perfect skin. His cock was burning with need, but Xander was not going to be a selfish lover. Nope, he had lots of faults, but that wasn't one. He just wasn't sure exactly what he was supposed to be doing.

Spike caught his hand, and Xander looked up into Spike's eyes. They looked strange this close up, brilliant blue with a yellow halo around the dark center. Drawing Xander's hand closer, Spike placed Xander's hand on the curve where Spike's neck and shoulder met. After a few seconds, Xander started slowly tracing tiny circles over smooth, soft skin. Spike's eyes drooped like an overgrown cat's, and Xander let his hand wander up to the side of Spike's neck and face.
"I can do this," Xander whispered to himself. Yeah, if he just ignored the fact that there were two cocks in this bed, he could do this.

Spike's eyes slowly opened. "Just do what feels good, pet, nothing more." The request sounded like a promise, and Xander swallowed even though his mouth was dry as dust.

"I can do that," Xander echoed. He closed his eyes as he realized he probably sounded like a moron. However, when he opened them and looked at Spike, he could see the desire in the curve of Spike's neck and his half-closed eyes as Xander stroked his neck. Emboldened, Xander moved his hand down and touched the hollow of Spike's neck before moving his hand down to the first button. He had to slow his own breathing and concentrate to get the button to pop open, revealing a little more skin. Xander had seen more... a lot more actually. When they'd lived in his parents' basement, Spike had a bad habit of not getting dressed after showering, but the small crescent of skin revealed as his shirt fell open was so much more exciting than annoying Spike walking around in a towel. Back then, the annoyance had definitely outweighed the hot. Usually. Sometimes. He had gone on about Spike being well-muscled when he'd thought the Buffybot was
the real Buffy sleeping with Spike.

Xander pulled a second button open and traced the line of down the center of Spike's chest that traced the place where his muscles met. Instead of opening the third button, Xander reached up and traced the line back up to the sharp collar bone. "I'm really not sure what I'm doing here," Xander confessed in a whisper.

Spike caught his hand and kissed the palm. "Doing just fine, luv."

"We're both going to die of blue balls at this rate." Xander gave a desperate little huff of laughter. Maybe he would have sucked this bad in bed with girls if he hadn't picked girls who had just sort of taken charge.

Instead of agreeing, Spike smiled and stretched out, propping his arm under his head. "I'm enjoying it just fine." He reached up and traced the line of Xander's jaw. Xander opened his mouth to point out that Spike was being very unSpikelike, but the fact was that he either needed to come or get a very cold shower... one or the other... and he needed to do it in the near future.

Swallowing again, Xander reached out and opened the
last two buttons on Spike's shirt. Shit. The man really was well muscled. Xander ran his palm over the strong stomach and felt the muscles gather and bunch under the skin until he stroked his hand up to Spike's small nipple. When he ran a fingernail over the edge, Spike shivered and his eyes flashed yellow.

Xander stopped, not sure if that was a good or a bad sort of yellow. He watched as Spike brought his hand up and slowly closed his fingers around the back of Xander's neck and then slowly pulled him close. Yielding to the gentle touch, Xander leaned in for a kiss, and this time, he managed to actually participate. Spike gently sucked on Xander's lip, dull teeth running along the edge, and Xander pressed closer, his cock demanding touch. Rocking his body against Spike, Xander gasped, which allowed Spike's tongue to slip inside and suddenly Spike was pressing in, pushing Xander onto his back.

Xander squirmed and dug his heels into the mattress as he pushed up. Hands scrambled at his jeans, and Xander divided his attention between kissing the sensual mouth that was devouring him and raising his ass so Spike could get the jeans off.

Red silk slid over his arms, making Xander shiver as he
reached up under Spike's shirt, pulling him closer. This time Spike groaned in need as he thrust down into Xander's body. Fabric tangled around Xander's legs, and he struggled to kick free. However, Spike brought his weight down, and Xander suddenly realized that Spike's hard cock was pressed up against his. He had one second of panic before Spike wrapped his hand around both their cocks and started thrusting against Xander.

Arching his back, Xander thrust up so their bodies rubbed against each other, their cocks trapped in the heat and sweat that gathered between their bodies. Xander cried out softly with each thrust until he finally felt his balls tighten. Digging his fingernails into Spike's back, Xander pulled him close and thrust up wildly as need erased anything other than the movement of body against body. Spike thrust down hard, and Xander yelled out as he came.

His mouth hung open and he thrust into their slick bodies as he came with a flare of pleasure. Shit. Okay, he was not only gay, he was joyously, deliriously gay. As soon as he could breathe again, he was so gay he was going to buy every Judy Garland CD he could find. With a few more thrusts, Spike came, his back arched so sharply that he was nearly bent ninety degrees, his hands braced on
Xander's shoulders. He came and then dropped his weight down onto Xander.

Even if Spike didn't need oxygen, he was doing a good job of panting. Lethargy pulled at Xander as every muscle that had been tense for the last month all decided to relax at once. It was like his whole body just decided to go on vacation to its happy place, whether Xander wanted it to or not. Spike shifted so that their legs tangled and his weight slipped off to the side of Xander, only one arm still draped over Xander's stomach.

They lay still and silent, and Xander could feel the fever-heat fading as his body cooled. His cock itched, and Xander reached down to rub it and he came away with a sticky hand that he wiped off on his own hip.

"You okay, luv?" Spike asked.

"Seriously, considering that probably technically isn't past third base, that was just way too good. Way. Way way with a side of more way," Xander said without opening his eyes. He could almost feel Spike's smile, or maybe he was just imagining it. It took every bit of self control to keep from asking the world's most pathetic question: how was it. Xander knew he'd been way too
distracted to do anything fancy even though Anya and an internet connection had taught him a few really fancy moves.

"That was a homerun, Harris," Spike said with a little huffing noise. "Bloody hell, that was a right good home run."

Xander cracked his eyes open and tried to decide if Spike was still being unSpikelike and just offering pity compliments. He didn't look like he was saying it out of pity; he actually looked well-fucked with hair sticking up and mostly closed eyes and fingernail trails down one shoulder. Xander flinched at that.

Spike's eyes came open. "Pet, don't go getting insecure now."

"I..." Xander reached up and traced the three white lines that led from the top of Spike's shoulder down to just above his nipple. Xander didn't even remember doing it. "I didn't mean to mark you."

Spike looked at his shoulder and then he looked down at Xander's hip. "I could say the same," he said.
Pushing himself up onto an elbow, Xander looked down and found a perfect red thumbprint against his hip bone. He ran a hand over it and winced when he felt the heat rising from the bruise. That was going to hurt. "Sorry about that, luv. Got a little carried away."

"You... really? Honestly, I'm okay if I rate a Volvo to Buffy's Ferrari." Xander was, too. He was kind of used to not being able to compete. What he couldn't offer in terms of speed, he could definitely make up for with reliability, though.

"Loon." Spike shook his head and gave a dark laugh. "You're the first person in about a hundred and fifty years to want me that much. Trust me, that was perfect."

Xander frowned, but when he opened his mouth, Spike laid a finger on his lips. "You're not as strong or as demonic, but I'm not just a demon. What Buffy and Drusilla offered could never reach the soul. You did. So it was bloody perfect. Drop it before you ruin the mood and I have to torture you," Spike suggested.

That made Xander smile. Spike shook his head and got a look on his face like he was pretty sure Xander had lost his mind. "Get some sleep, luv."
"But Bonnie...."

"Is sleeping with Tara for tonight. After that lovely mess upstairs, we both need a night off from responsibility, so just take a break from carrying the weight of the mundane world on your shoulders."

"But that's my job," Xander protested even though he was already sagging back onto the mattress. He was tired. So very tired.

"I know. But sometimes you just have to let the load rest, pet." Spike's fingers ran through his hair, and Xander let his eyes fall closed. He could deal with Riley and Buffy tomorrow. Right now sleep did sound good.

"Just sleep," Spike whispered as he shifted so that he was pressed up against Xander's left side. Maybe he did need some rest. Xander felt the real world fade away as he drifted toward sleep in a tangle of limbs and clothing.
Part Thirty-Six

Xander woke up stiff and sore and tangled in knotted sheets and jeans that he hadn't fully kicked off yet. His shoulders throbbed from where Spike had grabbed him, and Xander wasn't even a little sorry because the various bruises just made the night before more real. He had sex. He had sex with Spike. Gay sex. Xander liked gay sex. A lot.

"Stop thinking so bloody loud," Spike grumbled. He rolled over and caught Xander in the ribs with an elbow, and Xander wasn't sure it was accidental. He grinned. Yep, Spike did like being chip free.

"It's almost three."

"In the afternoon. Sun's still up," Spike sounded grumpy, and Xander lay staring at the ceiling, a big goofy grin on his face as he traced a circle on Spike's bare shoulder. Above him, he could hear muffled voices, which meant someone was screaming.

"Spike?"
"Dawn figured out her sis was stealing her good shirts for slaying. The only person in danger of dying is any git stupid enough to jump in the middle," Spike muttered, his breath skittering across Xander's skin, making all his little hairs raise up and his skin turn to gooseflesh.

"So that would be one vote for butting out," Xander guessed. Spike didn't bother answering, but he did tighten his arm around Xander's waist, pulling him closer. Xander hadn't had that many lovers in his life: three in fact. Faith hadn't even given him time to dress, and mornings had not been Anya's best time of day.

"What ever happened to Anya after she kicked us out of the Magic Box?" Xander asked.

One bleary blue eye opened. Clearly morning was not Spike's best time of day, either. "We shag, and you start asking about the ex?" Spike asked, an eyebrow going up.

"Um... only in that I'm wondering if she's still in town."

"She took off about a month back.... Boarded up the place and said she'd come back if we didn't end up getting the whole town sucked into hell."
Xander thought about that. "Oh."

Spike's eyebrow twitched. He wanted to know why Xander had brought her up, but he wasn't coming out and asking. Xander wasn't used to that.

"Anya used to use mornings to set our goals for the day. It was a little... uncomfortable," Xander admitted.

"More uncomfortable than getting woken by some rude git who doesn't know to wait until sunset?"

Xander poked Spike in the ribs.

Spike narrowed his eyes, and Xander had a half second to worry before fingers found his side and started tickling. Xander gave a high-pitched scream worthy of a potential as Spike stole all control and Xander squirmed helplessly to get away. Luckily... or unluckily... someone started pounding on their door and Spike froze. Xander had one leg thrown off the bed and was even more tangled in the sheets than ever with Spike's arm pinning him to the mattress.

"Who is it?" Spike yelled at the top of his lungs.
Grandmother had some mighty thick doors down here, but Xander's guts tightened as he realized that Bonnie would hear them if she was outside the door. Shit. Shit and more shit. A voice called back, and Xander looked at Spike for a translation.

"Halvard came over wanting to talk to the slayer," Spike said with a frown.

Halvard. That was the boy from next door that had been spending more and more time with Dawn. "You don't think he's dumb enough to talk about officially dating Dawn, do you?" Xander asked. From the sour expression on Spike's face he wasn't ruling it out. Buffy might not kill Halvard, but Xander wasn't betting on whether or not she'd kill Dawn. The sister had been a little too sisterly lately, and not in a good way.

"Right then, move your arse." Spike got a wicked look in his eye that warned Xander about a half second before Spike lifted his arm and let Xander fall out of bed.

"Ow!" Xander complained.

Spike leaned over the edge and looked down with exaggerated sympathy. "No major injuries, I hope."
"I'm going to put Tabasco in your blood supply," Xander warned.

"Spices it right up when you do that." Spike wiggled his eyebrows before getting out of bed and going for his jeans.

"Annoying vampires," Xander muttered as he kicked off his jeans from the night before. He paused, and for a second, he could feel Spike against his skin, hands on his hips, their cocks pressing together, their breath heavy and sweat slicking his skin.

"Someone's feeling randy. I'll take care of you just as soon as I make sure the slayer doesn't kill her sis," Spike offered with a smile so really, really sharp it could cut something really, really tough. Xander was almost sure his blood supply was heading south again. "Or I could just take care of that now," Spike said. Pursing his lips, he stalked toward Xander, his hips rolling, and his open jeans framing his dark, curled hair and uncut cock.

Xander fumbled to his knees and then nearly fell over as he pushed himself up and kicked his last foot free of his jeans. "Buffy.... Halvard...."
"Lost your verbs again, pet." And then Spike was on him, pressing him back into the wall. Something tumbled off the bedside table and clattered to the floor, and Xander felt feverishly hot as Spike thrust into him, their bodies undulating against each other. Spike was kissing him, one hand behind Xander's neck, and Xander was almost sure he had meant to push Spike away, but instead, he was pulling him closer, his fingers scrambling at Spike's soft skin. There was something Xander was supposed to be caring about, but he pretty much couldn't remember what it was as Spike leaned his weight into Xander.

Strong fingers wrapped around Xander's cock, and in three or four pulls, Xander started coming with a shout. Backing away, Spike watched him with this expression that reminded Xander of a well-fed cat, but his cock was still jutting out. Xander leaned back against the wall gasping for breath as he tried to gather up brain cells that were as scattered as their clothing and his loose change which had hit the floor.

"You want some help with that?" Xander licked his lips and looked at Spike's cock. Oddly, he found that he wanted to touch it... to feel it when Spike came... he might want to taste it, but Xander was filing that desire
away for a little later after he could admit it to himself without a little hint of panic in the pit of his stomach.

"I'd love some, but the slayer's getting impatient, luv. I'll tell you what," Spike stuffed his cock down inside his jeans and zipped them up, an action that made Xander's cock ache in a sort of sympathetic pain, "it'll be even better after having to wait," Spike said. Walking over, he caught Xander by the back of the neck and pulled him close, and Xander thought they were going to kiss, but then Spike tilted his head down so they rested their heads together, and the gesture was both intimate and uniquely Spike. Xander leaned forward and brought his hand up to rest his bare palm against Spike's chest. "Let's take care of the slayer and then come back here."

"Good plan," Xander agreed.

"Yep." They stayed there for long seconds where Xander's body slowly cooled and he struggled to get his breathing back under control. If he walked out looking flushed and breathless, he was never going to live it down. Without warning, Spike turned and headed for the door, grabbing a shirt off a hanger as he passed the closet. "Have someone up there we don't know, Xander," Spike said, all flirting gone as he suddenly became a
He ripped the door open and slammed past whoever was outside while Xander dove for sheets to cover himself. Shit.

"Xander?" Willow stood in the doorway, her eyes so big that Xander was afraid they were going to fall right out of her head.

"Door, as in CLOSE THE!" Xander shouted.

Willow gaped like a fish for a second, her mouth working without producing sound, and then she turned brilliant red and backed out, slamming the door on her way. Sagging down, Xander rested his forehead against the mattress. Well, damn. Xander might have taken a few minutes to feel sorry for himself, but Spike had said there was a stranger, so Xander grabbed the first clothes he could shove himself into and headed for upstairs.

The basement was oddly empty when Xander came out, still trying to shove an arm into his shirt and his foot into his second shoe at the same time. On the stairs, he heard the first whispers of potentials, and a whole group of them were on the landing.
"It's some magic guy," one of the potentials offered, her eyes wide with fear.

"Buffy and Spike will kill him if he's a threat," one of the others said in the panicked tone of someone who really hopes that's true.

Xander stuck a finger in the back of his shoe and used it to pull the damn thing on before he raced up the last set of stairs. Spike and Buffy had the new guy and Halvard pinned near the door, and Dawn looked so angry that for one second, Xander considered that fleeing was the better part of valor where the Summers women were concerned.

"Halvard?" Xander asked. He'd always been a friend, but the guy standing next to him did not exactly scream 'friend.' The guy was over six feet with short cut hair and the wildest black and red tattoo Xander had ever seen running up the side of his neck and face. The same pattern of black and red symbols went down one forearm and onto the back of his hand.

"Watch out, pet. Halvard's brought a magusaean."
"Magawhat?"

"Magusaean," the man offered in a quiet voice. "One who uses ancient Zoroastrian magics to understand and sometimes even manipulate fate."

"A wizard?" Xander asked.

Everyone in the room except the new guy flinched at that word, but then Xander found that almost no one actually like to be called a wizard, which was odd because they were wizards. Male, cock-having people doing magic would always be wizards in Xander's book.

"Actually," this new man offered, "the term wizard comes from the root word for wise man, and was not strictly a term for those with magical power until the church started using it as a criminal charge and excuse for executing people with special abilities. Wizard came into use in the 1500s largely as a word that would be equivalent to murderer or rapist or Satanist. I try to avoid 'wizard'."

"Oh." Xander suddenly felt about two inches tall.

Halvard spoke up. "Mom and Dad wanted me to
introduce Vovka to you guys. He's really good with magic stuff, and he's the best at tracking down information. If we're all in danger of getting sucked into hell like Grandma says, then he's going to be a good help, right?" Halvard looked around, but his gaze settled on Dawn. He wanted to impress her by helping.

"She thinks we're going to get sucked into hell?" Willow asked. She was also carefully avoiding looking at Xander.

Halvard shrugged. "Grandma predicted that in the 1910s, too. Mom and Dad said that they'd take their chances on you fixing whatever has gone wrong.

"Which is why I came to offer my services—no strings attached, ma'am," Vovka offered.

Xander sucked in a breath, and Spike spared him a quick glance, but Xander had no idea how to explain his sudden realization without pissing Buffy off. The second Vovka had said 'ma'am', Xander recognized him. He was the wizard… magastein… magic dude that had been with Riley. This was the man who had cast the spell to protect the unit when they went to question Warren and Andrew.
"Well, nice to meet you," Xander said as he stepped between Spike and Buffy to offer the guy his hand.

"Very nice to meet you as well," Vovka said with a smile. Xander clearly had not redirected all the blood back to the big brain because now that he remembered the guy, he couldn't imagine how he had missed the whole military haircut, military physique and military polite thing the guy had going on. Xander backed away, and Spike was giving him an odd look, but at least he wasn't openly hostile to Vovka anymore. Buffy, on the other hand, was. "I have heard many great things about your guardianship of the Hellmouth," Vovka said, tilting his head toward Buffy.

"Right," Buffy said, her voice dripping with suspicion. "So, you're just volunteering to enlist?"

Vovka didn't have a chance to answer because Xander started choking on his heart which was suddenly in his throat.

"Bloody hell, breathe, Harris," Spike said, slapping him on the back. Xander gave Spike a wide, panicked look, but Spike just stared back blankly.
"No ma'am, I don't think I'll be joining your army. I was simply offering my services for a little reconnaissance."

"Reconnaissance?" Giles came out from the hallway, a crossbow in hand, but at least he was pointing it at the ground.

"Yes, sir," Vovka agreed. "Most of the demon community says that evil is rising from below, and I've heard more than one rumor that an apocalypse is coming." Vovka looked right at Spike. "Something about evil committing a purely selfless act and good committing one of ultimate evil." That was almost word for word what Xander had said on the phone, and Xander really hoped that Spike had gotten the clue, but he just stared at the magic guy who was now looking around the room again. "Both seem rather unbelievable, but then humanity always manages to do the unexpected."

"And you can help, how?" Giles asked.

"Beljoxa's Eye," Vovka said.

Giles straightened up. "That's a demon myth."

"Demon, yes. Myth, no," Vovka said. "Most demons
know how to open the portal, but trying to get a straight answer out of Beljoxa's Eye is a task that requires planning and decades of preparation. I had thought to offer my assistance in that arena."

"We need an eye?" Xander asked.

"Beljoxa's Eye is a myth… a story of a demon in another dimension who sees everything."

Xander thought about what he'd just done in the bedroom. "Okay, I'm really hoping that's an exaggeration."

"Beljoxa's Eye is no myth," Vovka insisted. "Ask the vampire."

Everyone turned toward Spike. "Don't bloody ask me," Spike quickly said. "Old Heinrich and Darla were all Beljoxa's Eye this and that, but vampires have too much of the human in 'em. They never could get the bloke to tell them anything useful. Dru with her mad visions was about a hundred times more useful."

"Yes, very convincing," Giles said dryly.
"It's real," Halvard said. He straightened up and looked right at Buffy. "Lots of demons treat it like it's some sort of god, deify it, but my family always takes the children to the Eye when they're three to find out if the Eye can see anything useful, like hidden powers, and the Eye said that I had great emotional fortitude. I've seen it." He just about oozed this desire to be believed. His gaze slid over to Dawn, and she was smiling at him.

God save them from adolescent romance. Halvard was cute and nice, and Xander actually didn't have any problem with Dawn dating him, or even getting more serious, but if Buffy ever found out that he wasn't quite as old as he looked, the nuclear fallout was going to level entire cities. Demons grew faster. Xander's daughter looked like she was ten or eleven, so it didn't exactly surprise him that Harvard had hit adolescence at age nine.

"You've seen Beljoxa's Eye?" Giles put his crossbow down on the table. "Good lord. If the stories are true—" Giles pulled his glasses off, and Xander noticed for the first time that the man looked exhausted—getting no sleep at all exhausted. Either his guilty conscience bothered him or the family ghost was getting the revenge Xander couldn't. Xander smiled at that thought. "We could find
out the source of the First's sudden power."

"The First always had power," Vovka said. "The question remains why it is suddenly able to strike so directly in this universe."

"Yes, yes," Giles said. "Can you open the portal?"

"Me? No." Vovka shook his head. Then he raised his hand and put it on Halvard's shoulder. "However, we have a young warrior ready to open the portal for us, so we only need a safe place to open a doorway between worlds."

"Which would not be my house," Xander quickly said.

Buffy glared at him.

"Buff, I'm sorry, but absolutely not, no, niet, non."

"I wouldn't ask you to do that," she said. "The park has an open space."

"And too many children," Vovka said. "Sometimes opening portals can cause a weakness in the barriers between worlds, and a park is not an appropriate place. It should be in a place where mostly adult demons go so
that if a portal rift opens, innocent kids aren't caught in it."

"That would be creepy," Buffy agreed. "But just so we understand each other, I'm going to pick the place, I'm not going to tell you about it ahead of time, you're not welcome to make any calls, and if I think you're turning on us, I'll gut you like a fish."

"Buffy!" Dawn said, her voice horrified.

"And that goes for you, too," Buffy said with a finger poke in Halvard's direction. Halvard normally looked like a fairly pale human with eyes so light blue they looked washed out. However, Buffy's threat made all of him blush blue.

"Oh my god. Why don't you just threaten to kill all my friends while you're at it?" Dawn demanded with true fury in her voice.

"Maybe I will." Clearly Buffy was not at her most rational right now. Xander looked at Spike, desperate for some advice about how to get them to stop, but Spike was busy looking at the window. The closed and shuttered window.
"You would. The slayer, the great massacrer of masses."

"Hey, I've never massacred anyone." Buffy made a face. "Except vampires."

"And in 1507?"

"I wasn't alive!" Buffy just about roared.

"But the slayer was. The slayer destroyed the entire Bauccil clan. Set fire to it and let them burn. Four hundred peaceful demons died so the Watchers could set up a monastery on their land." Dawn's arms crossed over her chest in a perfect imitation of her sister, and from the look of triumph on her face, she thought she'd just given the fatal blow.

"That is simply not true," Giles said, shoving his glasses back on his face so fast that Xander was a little surprised he didn't poke an eye out.

"Actually, she's right," Spike offered. "The slayer did that. 'Course, I doubt it was the slayer. I'm sure the Watchers told her some rot about how she was saving the world from grape-growing, tot-raising, peace-loving demons."
Spike gave a disdainful sniff.

Giles' eyes narrowed. "How dare you—"

"Tell the truth," Dawn cut him off. "Hey, I'm all about truth, but in this house, we clearly don't believe in truth. We're more about shooting it dead on sight so we don't have to deal with it." Dawn was yelling by now, and with one last furious look at her sister, she stomped off to the basement with an expression on her face that scared the shit out of Xander.

He looked around and one thing was clear: Halvard was in love. Well, serious power-lust anyway.

"I hate her some days," Buffy whispered as she sort of wilted onto one end of the couch.

"Teenagers. Every species, every time period, every culture—there's always this time frame when the family starts to consider murder. It's nature's way of making sure they move out of the house," Vovka offered. Buffy glared, and he held up his hands. "I'm the sixth child out of nine, and my oldest daughter just turned fourteen. Trust me... that is normal."
Xander walked over to the chair and dropped down into it. "Not to distract anyone from the... yeah... um, so if we do this thing with Beljoxa's Eye, could we really find out how to fight the First?"

Spike walked over and sat on the arm of the chair, and Xander noticed Willow turned three shades of red. And now, Tara was looking at him and Spike and giving them this smirk that really didn't look right on Tara's face. That was almost a Spike smirk. Luckily Buffy was too distracted to notice that the whole family seemed to be losing their minds. "Hopefully this thing can tell us how to take the fight to the First."

"We can't do that," Vovka said. "The First is an elemental, a being that exists both as thought and as a dimension of its own. He is a universe. However, the question is, why is his universe able to reach so far into ours. That is a question the Eye should be able to answer."

Buffy sighed. Last night she'd been demonic in her towering fury and strength. Today she was a limp dishrag. However, she pushed herself up and set her face into a determined scowl. "Then we go start asking
questions, and if I don't get the right answers, I'm going to start hitting something." Now that made Buffy smile.

**Part Thirty-Seven**

"Now, luv," Spike said as he caught Xander's arm. Xander's eyes were puffy and red, and Spike suspected that he was about to start crying. Truth was, Spike wasn't even sure he could blame Xander; it wasn't easy to hear that you had accidentally caused an Armageddon. Well, contributed, anyway. Spike was blaming this one on Red's manipulation and Tara's inability to tell her girl to sod off.

Xander tried to pull his arm away from Spike as Giles, Halvard and Vovka came out of the portal, but Spike hung on.

The portal spell had refused to let Buffy in, and now she was waiting for a report, her arms crossed. "Well? What's the news?"

Xander shied away from her as though she'd be able to see straight into his heart and see his guilt.

"It's not your fault, luv," Spike said. He hadn't exactly intended on telling the Watcher or Buffy about his
relationship this way, but Xander looked about ready to fly into a thousand pieces, and Spike wasn't going to stand on the sidelines and let the boy blame himself. Spike pulled him close despite Xander's desperate flailing.

"Spike," Giles said wearily.

"Sod off," Spike suggested. "It's not near as bad as all that," Spike lied. That made Xander stop squirming and just look at him with this expression of pain and self-hate that made Spike's soul curl up like a bug in the hot sun.

"Just...." Xander looked around wildly. "You tell her," Xander whispered. He tried to pull his arm away, but Spike held on and started dragging Xander toward home.

"Let the others deal with this rot," Spike said. He might love both Buffy and Xander, but he'd made his choice. Rupert would stay with Buffy, but Xander only had him. Red was sure to go on a guilt trip of her own and drag the boy in with her, and Spike didn't entirely trust Tara to stop that particular train wreck.

They'd nearly reached the end of the alley when Xander reached out and caught the edge of the building. "Spike,
no," Xander said. The others were still standing near where the portal had reopened, watching. Buffy's mouth was hanging open, so Spike was guessing she'd figured something out. "Spike, Buffy needs you," Xander said.

"You need me more," Spike countered.

Xander closed his eyes and leaned closer. For a second, he rested his weight against Spike, weariness and pain coloring his scent while his body heat soaked into Spike. "Yes, I do," Xander admitted. "But I can't be okay with needing you until I know Buffy's okay, and I just really can't face her. I can't, Spike." Xander's confession, given in a rough whisper, tore at Spike's soul. Xander had always tried to do the right thing. He was the first to admit that he sometimes failed, but the universe had played a nasty prank this time. "Please, take care of her. Please, Spike," Xander begged.

"Fine," Spike reluctantly agreed. He looked in the shadows, and a familiar face was watching. "But I'm coming back just as soon as she's sorted," Spike said.

Xander nodded. "Doritos, beer and country music."

"Wot?" Spike tilted his head.
"Guilt night," Xander said with a shrug. "Bring Doritos, beer, and actually, I have the country music."

Spike grimaced at the thought of a night getting his ears rotted out by that shite, but he had to admit the boy had earned a little wallowing. "Right then, just don't expect me to buy American piss water beer," he warned. "So, you're going straight home?"

Xander nodded, but Spike suspected that he was lying. It was hard to tell because his scent was so layered with misery that the tell-tale sour of his deceit couldn't come through, but Spike figured he needed time away from all those potentials.

"Be careful then," Spike said as he let Xander go. Xander left his hand on Spike's arm for a second before he turned to walk toward home. Of course, there were any number of parks for him to make a pit stop. Spike moved to the end of the alley and watched Xander drift toward the corner. The others could wait until Spike had a chance to see Xander taken care of. Spike moved farther away from the alley, keeping eye contact with the figure from the shadows. If the prat thought he could hide from a vampire, he was even stupider than Spike expected.
When Xander turned the corner, Finn finally drifted out of the shadows and trotted over toward Spike, his eyes on the mouth of the alley. Clearly he didn't want to have Buffy catch him lurking around corners.

"She's not coming, not yet anyway," Spike said.

"What happened?" Finn asked, but Spike didn't answer. He wasn't the git's messenger.

"Have someone keep an eye on him," Spike said with a nod toward Xander. "He's not thinking straight right now."

"Why?" Finn repeated without even trying to hide his suspicion.

Spike glared at him. With a sigh, Finn reached for his radio. "Delta, take the moat."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Moat?"

Finn shrugged. "When I briefed them, I said you had to get past Xander if you planned to get close to the girls, and sometimes there was more under the surface of the..."
water than you might think."

Spike pursed his lips. It was true enough, but he hadn't expected Finn to have that particular insight. "Xander's covered, Spike, so what the hell is going on? Did you get the intel on why the First is here?"

"Yep, your pet mage can fill you in," Spike suggested with a nasty tone. He turned to walk away, and Finn caught his arm.

"What the hell is going on?"

Spike snarled as he glared at Finn. "Might want to move your hand, mate. I'm not on the leash anymore." It was the only warning Spike intended to give the git. Even now, his demon raged at the injustice of a weak bit of prey like Finn having the balls to touch him.

"Then why are you here?" Finn asked. He took several seconds to pull his hand back, making it clear that he wasn't going to flinch away from Spike, even if he recognized the monster in front of him.

"I don't answer to you." In the distance, Spike could hear Buffy's voice and Giles' stuttered answers. He needed to
get back there before Vovka told her what the oracle had said. That was going to be a right explosion when she figured out that evil was slouching its way toward Bethlehem because she'd been brought back to life.

Spike had turned away when Finn's voice stopped him. "Is Xander addicted to the bite?"

Slowly turning back toward the soldier, Spike studied him with yellow eyes. "That's more your preference than his," Spike said with a smirk.

"Yes, it was," Finn agreed, and that admission caught Spike off guard. "That's why I know just how hard it is to break that habit. If you've gotten him addicted to the bite, that's not affection. That's addiction."

Spike crossed his arms. "Never bit him except when the First was clomping through my brain with his hob-nailed boots. I can make him cry out in pleasure in other ways." Spike looked Finn up and down as though considering him. Spike would cut off his own dick before he'd touch Finn, but good, corn-fed heterosexuals tended to flee from any challenge to their masculinity, and right now Spike needed Finn out of his face or the man was going to end up dead.
Instead of retreating, Finn took a step forward. "I'm giving you a pass because of Buffy and Xander—"

Spike darted forward, his hands reaching out. Without a second's hesitation, Finn reached for a weapon. He was good—good enough that Spike barely caught the man's wrist before he ended up with a tazer in his gut. Instead, Spike slammed Finn's hand against the brick building. The tazer clattered to the ground, but Finn twisted around, and a thin piece of wood sunk deep into Spike's gut. Maybe a fledge would let pain or fear distract them, but Spike was a master vampire. Fact was, this felt good. Pressing closer to Finn so that he used his whole body to trap the man against the building, he wrapped a hand around the soldier's neck.

Spike could hear four people moving into position, but Finn gestured, and Spike could hear them stop. Interesting. Soldier boy didn't think he needed backup. Spike leaned close so that he could smell the soap and desire clinging to Finn's skin. Oh yeah, the git remembered the bite. "Do you want to push until I'll sink my teeth into you?" Spike whispered in Riley's ear. "Is that your game? Do you envy Xander? Do you wonder how he managed to earn a spot in my bed? Is that why
you told your mates to back off?" Spike tightened his hold on Finn's neck just enough to remind the man that Spike could easily kill him. "You aren't as strong as him or Buffy or Drusilla or Angelus. So, until you think you can compete with them, you'd better watch your step around me, pet," Spike said in an overly friendly voice intended to warn Finn that he was treading on fucking dangerous ground. Spike's soul and his demon pulled at him, each demanding a different sort of satisfaction.

Instead of taking revenge, Spike let Finn go and took a step back, his body coiled for battle. If Finn was going to attack, this would be the time. Spike mentally mapped out the positions of Finn's mates. Even though he was outnumbered and faced with an enemy who knew vampires, Spike was confident that he could rip through all of them if it came down to it.

Riley rubbed his throat where vivid red finger marks were starting to appear. "I had to know if you'd kill given a chance," Riley said, his voice rough.

"So, this was a test?" Spike snorted. Moron. They had more important business, and if Buffy came around the corner and found Finn in her town, she was going to throw a bloody fit.
Finn took a step forward, closing the distance between them and putting himself within Spike's reach. "If you do anything to hurt them, you'll spend eternity in a lab that makes Maggie Walsh's place look like the Ritz."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Brave talk for a man I could kill as easily as a dormouse."

"You could," Finn agreed, "and you'd still spend eternity in that lab."

Spike cocked his head as he smelled the aggression and fear from Finn. "Then if we're clearing things up, let me make this clear." Spike stepped toward Finn so they were chest to chest. "If your bloody soldier-boys let Xander get so much as a stubbed toe, I'll turn you, Finn. I'll turn you and I'll spend eternity torturing you—soul or no." Spike smiled at the man and then he spun around and strode off quickly enough that Finn didn't have time for a comeback. Bloody cheeky of him, threatening Spike.

Giles was still managing to say nothing and Finn's pet shaman was staying mum as Spike came back into the alley. Buffy had an expression on her face that suggested she was considering slaying Giles if he didn't start talking.
"Just bloody tell her," Spike said as he strode toward them. Halvard was trying to disappear into the wall, but at least he wasn't running for it. It took balls to stick around when the slayer was brassed off, but then if he fancied Dawn, he'd better get used to scary women.

"Tell me what? Spike, what the hell is going on? And since when have you and Xander been touch-buddies?" Buffy turned toward him. Spike could still feel the pull, the desire to follow her. She was strong, so bloody strong, and Spike's instinct was to fight at her side. He stretched his neck one way and then the other as he reminded himself that Xander had just as much strength, even if he wasn't as quick to show it.

"We've lived together two bloody years, pet. At some point, we had to stop hating each other."

"That was not just not hating each other," Buffy said as she looked at him suspiciously.

"Talk to Xander if you want details, luv, not me. As far as that oracle goes, if Giles won't tell you the truth, I will."

"Now, we have no evidence that the oracle actually
spoke the truth." Giles pulled his glasses off.

Spike was about to say something rude, but Vovka spoke up. "Have you found any research to suggest that Beljoxa's Eye would lie? Everything I have found suggests that it will either tell the truth or simply refuse to answer at all."

If it had been just Giles, the thing would have clammed up tighter than a virgin's knees, but Vovka knew how to handle demons. Spike looked at him suspiciously. The bugger knew demons just a little too well for a simple human.

"Which does not preclude finding another solution," Giles said, his voice tight.

"True enough," Spike agreed.

"Another solution than what?" Buffy demanded. "Someone needs to start talking or get that portal open again so I can start punching that thing until I get answers."

"Bringing you to life threw the whole universe out of balance and started an end-of-world prophesy," Spike
answered.

Giles turned blotchy. The git had probably planned to lie to her. "According to a demon," he said peevishly.

"That matches with what Rack told me," Spike pointed out. Buffy was looking from one of them to another.

"Me? It's me?" Her voice sounded dangerously fragile.

"It was Red, luv," Spike said. "She killed an avatar as part of the spell."

"An avatar? You mean the deer?"

Spike rolled his eyes. It took more than a bloody deer to bring back the dead. His only question was whether Red knew that the deer was just a stand-in or if she'd been so bloody blinded by her need to bring Buffy back that she hadn't researched the spell enough.

Giles cleared his throat, and in that instant, Spike realized that he'd known the truth the whole time. Bloody moron. "Yes, well, that was a little more than actually... um... a deer."
Spike rolled his eyes. If Giles had called Willow on her bad habit of abusing magic when she'd first dragged Buffy out of heaven, he could have saved them a whole lot of trouble. Well, if Giles wouldn't tell the truth, Spike sure as hell would. "The deer was just a symbol. It takes a human life to return a human from the dead, luv. She may not have dragged some virgin out to the graveyard, but killing the deer allowed her magic to find a random person and drain his life force. Red committed murder. She was the good who committed the ultimate evil," Spike said without too much mercy. One day, he'd get pulled down into hell and pay for what he'd done—he faced that reality with as much calm as he could. If he could face his own evil, others bloody well could, too.

Buffy sagged back against the wall, her eyes searching for Giles. "Giles?"

Giles was cleaning his glasses. "I haven't actually reviewed the entire spell."

"Giles, did she kill someone?" Buffy's voice rose, and Spike noticed Halvard inching backwards, toward the far end of the alley. "Does she... I mean, on purpose?"

"I'm sure it wasn't intentional," Giles hurried to say. "The
spell was in Sumerian, and the references to the avatar simply offered it as an alternative to human sacrifice. There's every reason to believe she simply believed the deer's life was sufficient in and of itself."

"Intentional or not, she committed an act of pure evil while trying to champion good. The door's open, luv, and as long as Red's evil continues, the door stays open. So, we have to deal with that."

"As long as it continues?" Buffy's gaze found his, and Spike watched as resignation replaced the confusion. "Her evil continues because her spell is still working," Buffy said softly. "It's because I'm alive, and I'm not supposed to be." She sank to the ground, her arms resting on her knees as her heart pounded so loudly that Spike could hear it like a drumbeat.

"It just means we need to get more creative, luv," Spike said. Buffy looked up at him with eyes that shone with despair.

Giles shuffled a bit. "Yes, well, now that we have some information, we can start researching."

"You found a weakness?" Buffy's voice had such hope
that Spike could feel his own soul twisting in pain. Giles didn't answer; he stared at the ground and his shifting feet.

It was Vovka who answered. "We know where the enemy is coming from. Any information opens new avenues of research, so we might be able to look into some of the balance magics or nature magics to see if we can even the scales."

That seemed to put some steel in Rupert's spine. "Yes, quite right. We can research a number of new... um... avenues. While I appreciate your assistance, Vovka, I hope you'll respect that we are not ready to share resources with a new ally."

"I can understand that. Halvard's family can reach me if you need any assistance." Vovka looked around. "Where is Halvard?"

"He ran for the hills when things started to go pear-shaped," Spike said, nodding toward the far end of the alley.

"But.... He's a kid." Vovka's expression of horror was almost amusing.
"If he gets home without getting eaten, he's proved something then, hasn't he?" Spike asked. Vovka turned white, and Spike's soul gave him a twinge of guilt; however, Halvard was safe enough with most of the demons abandoning the Hellmouth faster than rats from a sinking ship. Besides, Vovka was one of Finn's boys, so Spike didn't feel any particular need to reassure him.

"I should make sure he gets home. His parents would worry if they thought he was out by himself." With an apologetic smile, Vovka went trotting toward the far end of the alley like the good little soldier-boy he really was. Personally, Spike figured Halvard's parents were probably more worried about their spawn spending time with the slayer and lusting after the slayer's sister. That sort of stupidity could get a demon killed.

"You should check on Xander." Buffy's voice was devoid of emotion.

"He'll be fine," Spike said without mentioning why he was so sure of that. Buffy didn't question him, but Giles gave him an odd look. Spike walked over to the wall and sat next to Buffy. "He's feeling like this is his fault. He wanted you back, so he figures if the world ends, he's to
blame. Personally, I'm blaming Red."

"Spike," Buffy said with a sigh. Spike swallowed the rest of his complaints.

"We should get back to the house," Giles said in his best authoritative voice. Spike wondered if Buffy could hear just how strained his voice was. The man was panicked and doing his best to hide it, but after listening to Beljoxa's Eye describe the hole ripped between dimensions, he'd have to be a total moron to not feel a little fear. Even Spike figured he might be finding out about hell a little sooner than he'd expected, and the worst part was that Xander and Buffy wouldn't be with him. Oh, he didn't want them in hell, but he wasn't looking forward to being alone, either.

"In a minute," Buffy said. Spike scratched the wound where Finn had stabbed him and watched as Buffy and Giles stared each other down. "We'll be there in a while, Giles." Buffy pushed herself up from the ground, but she didn't move, and Giles eventually had to start nodding.

"Right then, I'll head back." Giles waited, as if he hoped Buffy would stop him or offer to go with him. Instead she watched as Giles headed out of the alley, walking like an
old man. Giles turned the corner before Spike got to his feet, pulling at his shirt to hide the bloodstain.

"How bad is it, Spike?" Buffy whispered.

"Luv?"

Buffy turned to him. "I'm trusting you to tell me the truth, Spike. How bad is it?"

Spike sucked air in through his front teeth and wished he had cigarettes with him. He needed the distraction. "Pretty fucking bad," he admitted. "When Red committed evil in the name of good, after acting as a champion for good, she opened a hole. Bringing you back from the dead just ripped the hole bigger—too big for it to heal itself."

"If I'm dead, will that close the hole?"

Spike knew exactly what she was thinking. "Don't go there. Vovka asked, and Beljoxa's Eye said that wouldn't close the hole. You weren't the one who sinned, and you can't be the one to pay," Spike said firmly. "If you're dead, you're just leaving the rest of us to wander through the muck on our own." The fact was that she'd be in
heaven—she'd be better off if she was dead, but Spike wasn't going to let her sacrifice herself, not again. Watching her fall from that tower had ripped his heart out the first time, and having her die pointlessly would be about more than his soul could take.

Buffy let out a shaky breath. "So what do we have to do, Spike?"

"Buffy?"

She caught her lip between her teeth and closed her eyes tightly. Then she took a deep breath and met his gaze. "Does Willow have to pay, then?"

Spike rocked back on his heels. From the tone, it sounded like she was willing to be the one who made Red pay. "Beljoxa's Eye said the same thing as Rack—evil has to commit an act of goodness—that's the only way to seal the rift."

Buffy's expression cracked, and for one blinding second, Spike could see the fear and the horror and the helplessness all lurking just below the surface. This might not be her fault, but she was carrying the guilt. She wasn't all that different from Xander in that sense.
"We'll figure this out," Spike promised. He had no idea how they'd solve this, but he'd seen this group face the impossible too many times to believe that the First could win. He had to believe that. The alternative wasn't anything he was willing to accept.

Buffy swallowed and leaned toward him. Spike didn't even think; he stepped forward and took her in his arm. She was shivering, and he tightened his embrace. They weren't right for each other, but their connection would always be there, right under the surface like a violin string still vibrating after the note was finished playing.

"We should go back to the house, luv," Spike said gently.

She didn't answer immediately. Instead, she leaned until he carried most of her weight. Spike just waited for her, confused about what might be running through her head. His soul might have improved his ability to understand people, but he still lived with a demon and a hundred years of seeing humanity as cattle. There was just this gap he couldn't always bridge.

"Xander and Giles will be waiting," she said.
"With bated breath," he agreed.

Buffy stepped back and looked at him before nodding. "Then we'd better get home to them." Turning, she headed toward the end of the alley, and Spike couldn't avoid thinking that he'd missed something... something he still didn't understand. Pushing that thought to the side, Spike followed her out of the alley, distantly cataloging the soldiers who crept through the shadows in their wake.

Part Thirty-Eight

Spike let the potential get in a hit before he rounded on her and kicked her in the back, sending her flying forward onto the lawn. "Ow!"

"Ow?" Spike demanded incredulously. "You're showing your back to the enemy and you're going to lay there and say 'ow'?' If these girls didn't start taking this more seriously, they were all going to end up dead in the first
big battle before Finn had a chance to bring in the cavalry.

Molly rolled over onto her back. "I'm not a slayer. I can't fight you because you're stronger than me."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Harris!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Xander opened the door. "Did someone bellow for me like a stuck bull elephant?"

"Get your arse out here," Spike said. Immediately, Xander's expression turned suspicious.

"Why?"

"Making a point," Spike said, not really answering. The girls were going to get a lesson in survival, and he'd just have to make it up to Xander later. With a smirk, he imagined all the ways he could apologize for the bruises Xander was about to get. Xander inched out toward the edge of the porch.

"I've got a backed up toilet to deal with. What sort of point?"
"This sort." Spike darted forward and caught Xander by the front of his shirt and yanked him off the porch. Xander's arms flew out, and when Spike let go, Xander sailed toward the lawn. He crashed into Molly, but where she squealed and just lay on the ground, Xander twisted around. By the time Spike launched himself at Xander, Xander had his feet up and he braced them in Spike's stomach so Spike couldn't get in a good bite.

"Spike!" Xander yelled. Spike had to roll to the side to get past Xander's feet, and that gave Xander time to scramble up. He had one foot under him and was still on a knee when Spike caught him by the neck. He was about to pull Xander in when Xander's hand found Spike's balls and squeezed. Hard. Spike had no problem with a little pain, but surprise loosened his grip, and Xander fell back, crab walking away as fast as he could. In a split second, Spike threw himself forward and landed on Xander, pinning him to the ground.

"You goober! Get off me." Xander hit Spike in the neck, making Spike's eyes water, but Spike grabbed Xander's right arm and pinned it to the ground. Xander's left was caught between their bodies, and Spike dug his toes into the soft ground to control Xander's attempts to squirm.
free or toss Spike to the side. Spike could feel the instant that the squirming changed. Xander started panting, his eyes wide with panic. Oh, the boy was a lusty bugger, but he'd never forgive himself if he gave the girls a show. Spike used brute strength to roll Xander over to his stomach and then sat on Xander's ass. Let the boy cool his heels enough to lose the bulge in his pants.

"So class," he said, addressing the potential slayers, "what have we learned?"

"Get off me," Xander complained loudly.

"You're the dead victim, pet, so just shut it," Spike said as he patted Xander's side. That earned him a softly muttered series of curses.

"See, you beat him, too," Kennedy pointed out.

Spike looked up at her. Of all the slayers, he was least convinced she'd live just because she was so soddin' convinced she would. "Yeah, I beat him. I'm a bloody master vampire with over a century of hunting behind me; however, he held me off for so long that one of the others would have come to his rescue before I could nip in for a bit of dinner. More importantly, if I were just
looking for a quick snack, I probably would have passed him by when he came up from the first hit ready to fight. If I want a proper fight, I'll look for a proper opponent. If I'm looking for a quiet dinner, he's not what I'm looking for. He's a right noisy git." Spike smiled. Xander really was noisy, too. He mewled and cried out and gasped and sometimes, not often but sometimes, he even screamed.

"If you're done using me as a crash test dummy, can I get up now?" Xander asked. Spike leaned back, pushing his weight into Xander.

"I'm still making my point, luv, so settle down and be a good victim." Spike looked around. "Right then, someone better start getting the point, or I'm going to start using you lot as my crash test dummies."

"He kept fighting," Amanda quickly said.

"He grabbed your..." Rona paused and her eyes darted down to Spike's crotch.

Spike reached down and rearranged his junk. "Three soft targets: eyes, balls, and neck. If you can't get to one, get to another. That's just smart," Spike agreed. About half the potentials found something very interesting on the
ground to stare at. "If you don't, you're going to be dead quick."

"And when all else fails, tell the idiot attacking you that if he doesn't get off you, he's going to be sleeping on the couch," Xander said sharply.

Spike looked over his shoulder, surprised that Xander would be quite so direct about their relationship. He hadn't hid it, but he wasn't advertising, either. As far as Spike could tell, Willow, Tara, and Bonnie knew, and Buffy and Giles most likely knew, but Xander wasn't confirming or denying anything. A couple of the potentials giggled.

"Right then, that works too—under certain circumstances," Spike agreed, standing up and holding his hand out for Xander. He pulled Xander to his feet, and Xander punched him in the arm. "Goober," Xander muttered before rolling his eyes and heading back into the house.

Spike smirked and turned back to the class. "So, you lot ready to try this again?"

Buffy's car pulled up at the curb with a whine of belts
and an unhealthy rattle. She got out and looked at them all. Spike could feel his whole body tighten—there was a fight in her expression.

"Something new on the big and nasty front?" he asked.

Her jaw was clenched as she walked past him into the house without answering. Spike could see the potentials, their eyes searching each other out as they looked for some sort of reassurance that Buffy wasn't providing. Spike sighed. If she was the general like she kept saying, she needed to bloody pull her head out of her arse before all the corporals ran for the hills.

Spike strode in on Buffy's heels, letting the potentials sort themselves out. Buffy paced the room like a caged tiger, and the others came out like there was some sort of bloody bat signal Buffy flashed whenever she got too upset. Tara was wiping her hands on a towel, Willow creeping after her like a beaten puppy, and Xander came out of the upstairs bathroom, plunger in hand. Spike wrinkled his nose at the stink of human vomit.

"Hey, what's the what?" Xander asked. Willow pressed closer to Tara's side, acting like the others might beat her. Considering that no one had lifted a finger, Spike
wasn't sure if this new contrition and guilt was going to last, but at least Willow was taking it seriously that she'd killed some schmuck and triggered Armageddon because of her desire to get Buffy out of heaven. Spike had killed a good deal more innocents than she had, and he hadn't found whimpering and hiding behind some skirt really atoned for much of anything, but no one had asked him, and he wasn't sticking his nose in that kettle of rotting fish.

Buffy stopped. "Got a new player in town. He got to the new girl before I did."

"Dead?" Xander tossed the plunger at the bathroom before coming out into the living room.

"Gutted. I got her to the hospital."

"Oh dear. Will she be okay? I can get some healing salve together," Tara offered. Willow opened her mouth like she might say something, but then she closed it again and seemed to shrink farther into Tara's shadow. That wasn't going to last long; Willow had too much personality to vanish into anyone's shadow, and Tara wasn't the sort to put up with that behavior. Spike noted that Tara was already looking at Willow oddly.
"She's a potential. She'll pull through," Buffy said, but Spike wasn't sure if that was confidence or wishful thinking. "But apparently we have a preacher man in town who likes stabbing girls and who claims to have something of mine. He calls himself Caleb. I plan to find out exactly what he has."

"Um..." Xander raised his hand like he was a kid in class. "Am I the only one who smells the fishy and rotting stink of trap?"

"Nope," Spike agreed. It was a trap, and Buffy knew it. She knew it well enough that her mouth was a thin line and her eyes hard. She planned to try to rip through the trap using brute strength. It might work, but that wouldn't be Spike's first plan of attack. Then again, Spike figured enough of his plans had blown up in his face to suggest that planning wasn't his forte.

"It's a trap? So we aren't going?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, we're going. I'm going and you guys are coming with me." Buffy's voice was hard. More and more, Spike was starting to think that Xander was right about her demonic bits coming out because she was starting to
sound a whole lot like Angelus—no style, just a lot of ripping and tearing. The worst part was that she wasn't sounding much like Buffy. "Start arming the girls. We need to move when we find him," Buffy said. Giles had appeared in the shadows of the door to the kitchen, and Buffy included him in that command, her eyes going to him.

"But we don't know—" Willow stopped and chewed on her lip.

"Oh so many ways to finish that sentence," Xander said. "We don't know who he is, we don't know what he has, we don't know where he is, we don't know if he has a big nuclear bomb waiting to go off when we show up."

"I plan to do a little recon." Buffy turned to Spike. "You up for it?"

Spike blinked and traded a quick look with Xander. Xander didn't like any of this, but he wasn't saying anything against it, either. "I'm always up for it, luv," Spike agreed. If Buffy was walking into a trap, the least Spike could do was cover her back.

Giles stepped out from the shadows. "Are you certain
this is the best course of action? You don't even know what this man has of yours—if he, in fact, has anything."

Buffy's back straightened up a little at the implied insult. As far as Spike was concerned, Giles should just come right out and tell her she was going 'round the bend, but Giles remained silent, and Spike wasn't going to jeopardize their tenuous relationship. Besides, if he brassed her off, she'd still go hunting for this git, she'd just do it without backup. It took Buffy a second to answer Giles. "It could be a girl, a potential trying to get to us."

"Could be a stapler," Giles countered.

"Going in anyway."

"With the girls?" Giles tone made it clear he considered that idiotic. "Most of whom have yet to be in the field, let alone in a life or death situation?"

"Then it's time we test them. Look, I'll just take the ones that have been here the longest. The rest can stay behind."

Behind him, Spike could smell the burst of fear that came
from the girls; it was like catnip to his demon. If she took this lot into a fight, there was going to be a bloody massacre, and Spike was pretty sure they were signing up to be the victims

"Could be that's just what he wants you to do—the old bait-and-switch," Spike suggested as carefully as he could. After a decade with Angelus, he knew just how touchy an alpha could get when they were backed into a corner, and Darla had kept Angelus in a corner for most of the time Spike had known him. He had no idea what had Buffy feeling trapped, but from the way she was acting, she felt bloody powerless, and she was taking it out on everyone around her.

"It could be he lures Buffy away and then kills the girls we leave behind," Willow said softly. "Angelus did that."

"I know. That's why I need you guys to stay here with them." Buffy looked at Willow and Tara. "You're my most powerful weapons. I know you can keep them safe if anything happens."

Willow's eyes went big. "I can't.... I mean.... With magic?" Her voice squeaked at the end. Yeah, finding out her trick with the deer had actually led to a human death had
really taken the wind out of her sails.

"Willow, you can do this," Buffy encouraged her.

"But it's magic, and we don't know the consequences of it." She reached up and grabbed her Star of David necklace. "I don't think...."

Tara interrupted. "It's in the intent, Willow. If we only want to protect the innocent...."

"I only wanted to save Buffy, and look what happened. I can't do magic. What if it goes wrong again? What if someone dies?"

"What if I drop a brick when I'm working on the fourth story of the library building and kill some guy walking to his car?" Xander asked.

Willow's eyes got all big. "Xander!"

"Hey, I'm not planning to do it," Xander said, holding his hands up. "And that one time... that was totally an accident, and I want to point out that I hit the car and not the guy. However, my point is that crap happens."
"I triggered Armageddon!"

Spike wasn't sure if Willow was looking for reassurance or forgiveness, but her self-flagellation was starting to annoy him.

"Well, yes, but then you killed something and messed with the heavenly dimensions, so how about a rule that you avoid human sacrifice?" Xander's words caused Willow to lose all color out of her face. "And hey, I opened a little crack in a window when I brought Buffy back the first time, so it's not even like you're the only one in the room to let ultimate evil into the world."

"I didn't crack open a window; I threw the door wide open. I ripped the door down. I ripped the wall down and let the invading armies swarm. I'm a swarm-allower. I'm a swarm-facilitator." Willow wailed.

Spike couldn't take anymore. He turned and pushed his way through the crowd of potentials hovering at the doorway. If Buffy wanted him to kill something, he would, but he wouldn't listen to Willow's twaddle. She didn't know evil. Spike closed his eyes as a memory washed over him. A little girl no bigger than an elf looked up at him with wide brown eyes. She was so scared, and
blood ran down her arms from where she'd been holding her chum's dead body. Drusilla was laughing, dancing through the bodies of a dozen children, catching them by limp arms and dancing with them for mere seconds before dropping one to grab up another.

Back then, he couldn't feel anything for that girl with the big eyes. She'd been no more than a cow standing on the side of the pen waiting for the farmer to slit its throat. She was nothing. As she looked up at him, Spike had turned to Drusilla, wondering if his princess would be more pleased by a live victim or another limp body to carry in her dance.

Spike's guts twisted in guilt as he remembered Drusilla holding out her hand, and he'd gone to her, ignoring the terror in that girl's face. She'd survived that day, survived when Spike and Drusilla had slaughtered an entire orphanage because Drusilla had some vision.

Some days, Spike wished he could share those memories with Willow—that he could show her true evil so she'd stop nattering on about her bloody walk on the dark side. She'd been caught up in grief, and she'd acted like a fucking twit, but true evil was looking straight into the eyes of a terrified child and feeling nothing.
Pulling out a cigarette, Spike leaned against the tree and watched the neighborhood. Halvard's father came out of his house, his gait slow and careful, but then he was probably concentrating on looking as clumsy as a human. It couldn't be comfortable, being demon and living next to a house full of potential slayers. Sometimes Spike found his own skin itching as he longed to just take off and put as much distance between himself and this house.

"How goes the fight?" The elder asked. He stopped some distance from Spike, but then friendly demons weren't any more comfortable around vampires than they were around slayers.

"About the same," Spike answered.

"Should I take my family away?" The question came out of nowhere, and Spike looked at the man. It wasn't wise to ask someone a question like that—you were inviting them to take advantage of your indecision. Hell, even now, Spike thought about the convenience of having an empty house next to them, somewhere he could take Xander and bugger the boy without having to arrange for a babysitter or putting up with the salacious looks of girls
who weren't as old as his bloody boots. Actually, Xander wasn't as old as his boots, either, but at least he wasn't some bloody giggling schoolgirl.

Eventually, Spike shrugged. "I figure if the slayer loses this battle, you'll need to find another bloody dimension. Changing zip codes won't make much of a difference."

"A lot of people are leaving."

"I noticed." Huge chunks of Sunnydale were turning into a ghost town, but their neighborhood was still full of people who slunk to their house at sundown and furtively looked out windows. "If things look like they're changing, I'll tell you if I have time," Spike offered. He wasn't one for making alliances with random blokes, but if Halvard was going to court Dawn, their families had to make peace at some point.

Halvard's father nodded. "I appreciate that."

"Yeah, well I'm not leaving my own undefended to give you advance warning if the town gets sucked into hell."

"I never expected you would." Halvard's father tilted his head toward Spike, and for one moment, Spike
wondered if he should ask for a name. But then the man turned with a flexibility and grace a human couldn't match and ambled back toward his house, his mission complete.

Buffy came out of the house, and Spike focused on her. "So, are you going to try and talk me out of this?" she demanded, an alpha feeling a need to defend her prerogative to rule.

"I had my say. You tell me to bloody attack something, and I will," Spike answered. Immediately, all of Buffy's lines softened. Spike made a mental note to try and coach Xander in the finer points of dealing with a brassed-off alpha, but seeing as the boy had more than a little alpha in him, Spike just wasn't sure it was going to take.

"Xander, Tara, and Giles all think I'm making a mistake."

"I figure every move we make will be a mistake until we can figure out how to follow the advice that Eye gave us," Spike pointed out.

Buffy gave him a sharp glare and then started walking toward town, leaving her rusting, belching car behind.
Spike fell in next to her. They walked in silence, Spike waiting for Buffy to make her next move. Pushing her now wasn't likely to win any points. She might not string him up and strip the skin from his back like Angelus, but she wouldn't thank him for forgetting his place. They'd walked several blocks before she spoke. "We don't even know that thing was telling the truth."

"Rupert seems to think it doesn't lie."

"Giles doesn't know everything."

Giving a snort, Spike silently agreed with that. Rupert didn't know nearly as much as he thought. "Normally, I'd agree, but when the watcher and demons go agreeing on something, I tend to believe 'em. Besides, Rack said the same rot about evil having to perform an act of goodness."

Buffy looked over at him. "So, you think you're the one who has to stop the First? Newsflash, Spike, you have a soul. You aren't evil anymore."

Spike pursed his lips and thought about that for a second. "Soul just makes me feel guilty about what I've done, pet. It doesn't erase any of the choices I've made."
"You made those before you got a soul, Spike."

"Do you know who my first victim was?"

"Is this going to be a creepy Drusilla story?"

"Killed my mum. The demon doesn't give a rat's arse about humans, but I wanted my mum. Angelus killed both his folks and his little sis to boot. Darla hunted down every man who ever paid her a coin to spread her legs. All a demon wants is a good fight and a better fuck, and there we were focusing on the human bits. Trust me, luv, my demon was doing what I wanted. I was selfish—I never thought about what my mum wanted, only what I wanted for her and out of her. Angelus was a jealous, selfish git. Darla... well, she was just a right bitch. But the evil came from the humanity. It's my human that's guilty of turning a monster loose on the world."

Even though Buffy didn't say anything, Spike could tell from her expression that she didn't believe him. Spike wasn't going to beg her to understand.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Buffy finally said. "I mean even if you still want to claim evilness, that doesn't mean that
we can believe the Eye thingy or Rack."

"Rack was right about Angel."

Buffy stopped. Spike hated that Angel's name could still demand her complete attention. "What?"

He shrugged off that familiar feeling of inadequacies. When he got home, he could mention Peaches and listen to Xander verbally shred the git. That would make him feel better.

"Angel went off the rails. Bugger ate a parcel of lawyers and slaughtered some gits whose only crime was being in the same soddin' building. Wesley said that all the prophecies ended when he did that. The champion of good was a right and proper villain, and all the signs and portents just stopped. So, I figure if Rack was right about that much, he's right about the rest." Spike pulled a cigarette out of a pocket. It still infuriated him that Angel could be the champion of good. Those bastards who called themselves the Powers had pulled Peaches out of hell and knighted him, and that's all it took for him to become the quintessential white hat. It was bloody galling. Spike had never carried as much hate in him, but without getting sent to hell for a century, he wasn't sure
how to atone. It wasn't even like Angel had made a choice to go to hell. Xander had arranged that little side trip.

"Angel wouldn't do something evil," Buffy insisted. One mention of his name, and she was right back to being sixteen and staring at him with doe eyes.

"Well he did," Spike snapped. The softness that Buffy had been showing vanished, leaving behind all hard angles and narrow eyes that reminded Spike all too much of Darla. "Isn't that one of the minions?" Spike asked, jerking his head toward where a Bringer was lurking in the shadows.

Buffy hesitated for a second before looking over. "They get around pretty good for blind guys."

"Well enough to avoid us, at least until now." Spike didn't bother pointing out that the sudden appearance of a minion probably meant the trap was about to snap shut. He searched the buildings around them, smelling the air to try and spot any enemies stalking them.

"Let's follow," Buffy whispered, already moving toward the shadow of the bookstore so she wouldn't make as
good of a target. Spike wasn't going to hide from a blind man, so he continued to walk down the street, ignoring Buffy's critical glares. It bothered him that the Bringer was walking just slow enough to always be easily seen. It wasn't natural. When Spike had been hunting, he'd used minions as bait plenty of times, but five hours after hitting Sunnydale, he'd decided Buffy was too smart to fall for that old ruse. It bothered him she was falling for it so easily now.

"Home sweet demon home," Buffy whispered as the Bringer walked into a barn-like building.

Spike sniffed the air. "There's a lot of them," he warned. Flexing his muscles, he found himself wishing he had a flame-thrower and a grenade or two. They might not have a lot of style, but Xander's heavy artillery had done the Turok-Han a whole lot of damage. Spike would take substance over style any day of the week.

Buffy gave a wicked smile. "Let's get the cavalry."
Part Thirty-Nine

Rona crossed her arms. "You people are even crazier than her."

Xander sighed. Honestly he just wanted to get the girls to practice swinging big-ass sticks, but he'd learned a long time ago to just not fight the girl-urge to gossip.

"Than who?" he asked obediently, even though he was pretty sure Rona was insulting someone Xander didn't want her insulting. Unless it was Giles. She could insult Giles.

"Buffy, man. I mean, taking us right into the bad guy's lair." Rona looked around at the potentials, and Xander could see their faces, their doubt, their uncertainty. Yeah, he had some doubts himself, but he knew one thing: Buffy was their leader.

"Well, that's where, generally speaking, you'd go to find the bad guy. And I don't think you came here to fight plaque."
Instead of backing down, Rona seemed to verbally set her heels in. "No, I came here for protection."

"Well, you signed on to fight with—"

"Look, I know, but...." She sighed, and Xander could feel the mood in the room shift. One word wrong and the whole gaggle of baby would-bes was going to jump on the next plane for Timbuktu. In general, Xander supported the concept of running for your life. Hey, he was support boy when it came to Oz's decision to run for the hills—Riley's too. However, these girls weren't going to make it through customs before getting gutted like fish.

Rona looked at the other girls for support. "This plan is trouble. OK, Buffy doesn't care how many of us she puts in danger—"

Xander blew. After years of standing by her side, these girls thought they could come in and tell him about Buffy—tell him what kind of person she was. He'd seen her dive from a tower, giving her life for the rest of them. They had no right. "Let me tell you something about Buffy," Xander snapped. "In fact, you should all listen to this. I've been through more battles with Buffy than you
all can ever imagine. She's stopped everything that's ever come up against her. She's laid down her life—literally—to protect the people around her. This girl has died two times, and she's still standing. You're scared? That's smart. You got questions? You should. But you doubt her motives, you think Buffy's all about the kill, then you take the little bus to battle. I've seen her heart, and this time—not literally. And I'm telling you, right now, she cares more about your lives than you will ever know. You gotta trust her. She's earned it."

"You tell 'em, luv."

Xander whirled around, and Spike and Buffy stood in the open door. Buffy's eyes were shining, and in that one instant, Xander could see his Buffy—his shining girl. Her worries and all the hard, crusty edges she'd been growing vanished and she was the same person he'd met all those years ago.

She smiled at him, standing a little taller and looking a little stronger than she had in a while. "We found it. Let's saddle up."

Xander's guts twisted. Shit. He looked at Spike, searching for some sign that this was anything other than a horrible
mistake and clear trap, but Spike's expression wasn't giving anything away.

"I call the sword," Kennedy called. She grabbed it up, and took a few practice swings.

"Swing too near me and you won't have to worry about Bringers," Spike warned. For some reason Xander couldn't figure out, Spike had taken a special dislike of the girl, even more than Xander expected with all the bragging and the arrogance and the bragging.

"Just practicing," Kennedy offered sweetly. "Maybe I can be in a group with Willow and Tara." She looked over as the two of them walked into the room.

"Ew," Molly whispered, and Xander hoped that was an 'ew' at Kennedy's creepy interest and not any lesbian 'ew'ing. Choa-Ahn muttered something, and from the tone of voice, she was creeped out by Kennedy's tone of voice, even without being able to understand the words. That was Kennedy, such an overachiever, she even had to overachieve in the creeper division.

"You're with me," Buffy said. Kennedy's face registered the shock.
"Um, Buff, maybe we should call in the cavalry for this," Xander said.

"You are the cavalry."

"I've graduated from the guy with the rock to the guy with the big, studded, pointy stick," Xander said as he held up his weapon, "but I'm still pretty sure I suck as the cavalry."

Buffy moved closer, her hand coming up to rest on his shoulder. "Hey, you took on Angelus with a rock. Given a big, studded, pointy stick, you can take on the universe."

"Maybe we could call Angel," Willow suggested.

"In New York?" Spike asked. "He's not bloody likely to show up any time soon."

"But on the good side, if he does show up, now that he's evil, he can do the act of goodness. I vote he should stake himself," Xander offered cheerfully. Spike's smirk got a little wider, but when Buffy just stared at him with big eyes, Xander could feel guilt gnawing at the edges. It was only a joke. Sorta. "Or not," Xander added weakly.
"What about the other slayer?" Tara asked.

"Faith? She's in jail."

Xander stared at Buffy in horror. "Buff, she's still in jail? Jail jail? Still? Like behind bars where the Bringers can—"

Xander stopped. Wait. If she was in jail, the Bringers couldn't get to her. Okay, maybe leaving her in jail wasn't quite as bad of an idea as it sounded like.

"Bloody hell, you lot need to join the twentieth century and get soddin' email accounts," Spike snapped. "Angel broke her out when it looked like the world was going pear-shaped. Put that ankle-biter of his in danger, and he can't even see straight, but Wesley and Jonathan did some mojo to cover their tracks. Faith's with Angel and Cordelia and the others in New York."

"Oh." Xander closed his mouth, not sure what to say about any of that. A little part of him thought Faith should pay for all the crimes she committed, and another part wanted to be there when Faith drove Angel insane with all her sex jokes. Well, unless Angel had sex with her. That would be entirely too gross. Xander really didn't want to think about Angel sleeping with someone
Xander had slept with. Xander glanced over at Spike, and it suddenly occurred to him that he was sleeping with Angel's ex-lover. Spike caught his gaze and raised a single eyebrow. Now really wasn't the time for any sort of explanation, so Xander just gave a crooked grin and a shrug.

"Look, this is our fight." Buffy looked around the room at the potentials gathered in small knots and the old gang all gathered together. "The First came after us. Us. We can sit here and wait for it to clean up the last of the potentials out there before gathering all its forces, or we can take the fight to him. We can strike back now, before it's prepared, or we can die. That's our choice, and I'm making the choice for us. We strike. We strike now before this thing has a chance to call any more of its followers to town. If this Caleb wants a fight, we're going to take it straight to him and make him choke on it."

She gave the room a smile that seemed to make the air turn cold, but Xander had to admit that as far as pep talks went, that one worked. He was ready to go fight something slimy and preacherish.

"You have thirty minutes. Arm up and get ready to move out." Buffy headed for the stairs to the basement. For a
minute, no one moved, and then there was a scramble for weapons and shoes and hair ties. They weren't exactly a well-oiled army. Xander's Halloween night memories might have faded some, but units weren't usually this giggly or this willing to fight over the crossbows.

"Right then, I'm getting some air," Spike announced loudly before he headed out the door.

"Um. Me, too. Air," Xander said. Reaching out, he grabbed the crossbow out of Kennedy's hands and headed after Spike. Behind him, the girls twittered and someone made a salacious oooo sound. Xander fled.

Outside, the air seemed thick with the threat of rain, but only a few wisps of clouds drifted across the gray sky. A full moon made him feel like the sacrificial virgin in a horror movie, not that he was a virgin. Between Anya and Spike, he was more experienced than most, even if he and Spike hadn't yet worked up to putting cocks into things yet. As much as Xander loved touching Spike, and getting touched was even better, he was still a little nervous about how things fit.

Spike was standing at the very edge of the yard on the far
side of a tree. Xander trotted over, his crossbow bouncing against his leg. "Was that an awkward invitation for weirdly timed inappropriate touching or were you trying to tell me something important?"

"Can do both," Spike said. When Xander got close, Spike reached out and slipped a hand around Xander's waist, pulling him close. Xander yielded, leaning into Spike's strength and just taking a minute to pretend that the rest of the world would just go away if they wished it. "I want you to stay here," Spike whispered.

Xander stiffened. "What?" He wasn't the best fighter, but he never chickened out, not even when the girls thought he couldn't handle himself. But if Spike thought he was going to sit home and play helpless....

With a sigh, Spike let him go. "You're brassed off now."

"Well... yeah," Xander agreed. "I'm not the best fighter, but I can shoot a crossbow."

"Never said you couldn't, luv. But you're a father. We're walking into a bloody trap, and one of us has to think about Bonnie."
Xander sucked in a breath. "Oh no. You do not get to use my daughter against me in version 2.0 of 'Xander's not strong enough to fight with us.'" Xander crossed his arms, and then he realized that Spike was staring at him with undisguised confusion.

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"Um… you… thinking I can't take care of myself." Xander watched as both Spike's eyebrows went all the way up. Clearly, Xander's mind-reading skills weren't up to par.

"Oi! You survived me trying to kill you, so that's just an insult to both of us. If you were that fucking fragile, I should have been able to rip your guts out easily enough. However, I suspect Buffy's walking us into a trap, and strength might not matter all that much. I just don't think the poppet needs to lose you."

Xander shook his head. "No, I'm not leaving you to fight alone."

"I'm not exactly alone with a whole gaggle of potentials waddling after like little ducks."

"And they're not exactly good with the backing. Me? I'm
an expert in backing... not so much on leading, but damn good at backing. If we're going into this fight, I'm going to be there to make sure you guys don't get yourselves killed."

"And if we all die?" Spike asked without emotion.

Xander clenched his teeth. He felt nauseous at the thought of leaving Bonnie without a parent. She'd still have her mother if Xander had offered to get K'wani out of the house when she'd first gotten pregnant. He'd failed so many times, but all he could do was keep moving forward. "First, I'm voting we don't die," Xander said firmly. "Second, if we do, I'm putting my money on Tara. She'll take care of Bonnie, and I happen to know that she's got a portal spell in her back pocket, so if she needs to retreat, she can really, really retreat—like go to another planet or reality or universe or something."

Spike seemed to think about that for a second, and Xander's stomach twisted again. Spike was worried, and anything that worried Spike scared the shit out of Xander. "She's going to be in the middle of this fight with us. What if this Caleb has something waiting that even Tara can't escape?"
"Can I just pretend that's not an option?" Xander asked with exaggerated hopefulness. Spike just stared at him. Xander sighed. "Bonnie is going over to stay with Clem while we're gone. The one thing I know for a fact is that Clem will get out of here alive, one way or another. If things go that badly, I asked him to have Halvard's family grab Dawn, he'll take Bonnie, and they'll all run for the hills and dimensional rifts."

Spike leaned back. "You already arranged for all that?"

Xander shrugged. He didn't like admitting that he'd made plans for what would happen if they all got blown up, but he'd watched Buffy fall from that tower—he'd seen his world fall apart as demons rode through the streets. The days when he'd naïvely believed that good guys always won, well those days were dead and gone. "I just really hope that none of it ever happens," Xander said quietly. I thought about having Clem take Dawn, but I thought her habit of sticking out in a crowd would make Clem's family a little crazy."

Spike nodded. "Halvard's people are a better choice. They're right proud that Halvard has attracted the attention of someone with Dawn's background, and they like the bit. They'll care for her."
Xander could feel his eyes get warm, and he inched closer. Spike took the hint and wrapped his arms around Xander, pulling him closer. "I don't want to make these plans," Xander admitted in a whisper. He'd done it all, but now... talking about it... he hated himself for even thinking they might lose.

"You did good, luv." Spike held him tightly, and Xander just sagged into that embrace. "Finn, you out there?" Spike asked. Xander's head snapped up, and he looked around. Within a second, he spotted a man with wide shoulders trotting toward them through the shadows between their house and Halvard's.

The man wasn't Riley, but he was definitely military, and Xander straightened up and blinked away the strange warmth in his eyes as he moved to Spike's side. Shit. Some spying soldiers had just seen him fall apart. If there were some frat boys around to put him in a dress, his masculinity could really shrivel up and fall off.

The soldier closed the distance and stopped a few feet away, moving so the tree was giving him some cover from the house. "Major Finn is off taking a shufti at that site the slayer found," he said, a soft British accent in his
voice, and for a second, Xander wanted to make a joke about all the English people who seemed to land in Sunnydale. "I'm Lieutenant Hughes."

"Shufti?" Xander asked. "Is it too much to hope that means calling in lots of bombs and turning it into a smoking crater in the ground?"

The lieutenant stiffened. "Should we?" he asked in a voice that was way too serious.

Spike snorted. "He's taking the piss, mate. Now, if Finn wants to spring that trap and get himself killed, I wouldn't mind that." Spike gave a cold smile, and Xander planted an elbow into Spike's ribs as hard as he could, which probably wasn't hard enough. Spike rolled his eyes. "Just tell Finn to be on his toes. If he doesn't show up when we need him, he'll probably want to start running."

"Spike!"

"I'm just giving the git fair warning, luv," Spike said firmly without even a break in the glare he was giving the guy.

"Understood, sir." The lieutenant nodded in Spike's
direction, and then with a quick glance toward the house, he trotted back toward the shadows between the houses.

"How long have you known about our eavesdropping company?"

"A week or so," Spike answered without a trace of guilt.

"And you didn't tell me?" Xander aimed another elbow at Spike's ribs, and Spike caught his arm.

"I'd do bloody anything to protect you lot," Spike said, the seriousness of his tone making Xander freeze. "And if that means I have to play nice with Finn, I will. If that means that Rack is right and this comes down to me making a sacrifice, I'll do that, too." Spike's fingers tightened, pressing deeply into Xander's arm. "But your safety's not negotiable, pet. If you're gone, Bonnie's got no one, same for Buffy. Men come and go in her life, but you're the one who pays for the house and then fixes it when her slayer strength puts something through a wall. You put her back together when the rest of us bollocks things up with our good intentions. I need you safe. More importantly, your whole family needs you safe."
Xander couldn't breathe. Spike planned to sacrifice himself; Xander could see that in his expression. "Oh no," Xander said. He pulled himself out of Spike's embrace. "No, no, no and world's more of no. No as in 'that is not happening.' Do you hear me?" Xander squared his shoulders and glared at Spike. "You are not throwing yourself off a tower or into the sunlight or whatever else you had planned."

Spike's lips thinned, so Xander was guessing that he'd guessed right this time. "We all do what we have to."

"If you get yourself killed, I'm following you to the next life to torture you," Xander threatened.

That got a snort out of Spike. "Luv, where I'm headed, you won't be welcome."

"I'm not welcome most places; I still go there." Xander poked his finger at Spike's chest. "If you get dusted, I will follow you. I don't care what I have to do, I'll find you. I'll move to New York and torture Angel until he throws me into hell. I'll have gay sex on the Catholic church's altar and then kill myself. I don't care what I have to do, I will follow you. Do you hear me?" Xander's eyes got hot again, and he fought an urge to cry. He remembered the
feeling of despair as he watched Buffy tumble from the
tower, realizing that he could never fix things. That's why
he'd been so quick to follow Willow's magic plan. But the
idea of losing Spike—of losing someone he loved so
damn much—that was.... Xander's hiccupped as his body
tried to force him to breath, and a tear slipped out.

Spike reached out and caught him. While Xander was still
trying to push Spike's arms away so he could be angry,
Spike pulled him close, his voice crooning softly. "Don't
say that, luv. Don't say that."

"I will. I'm too stubborn of a bastard to just let you go."
Xander's gulped in air as his vision got a little splotchy.
"I'll follow."

"Bloody hell—"

"Nope, no logic here. Don't care about logic. I won't be
the one left behind. Not again. Nope. I'll just follow you."
Xander dug his fingers into Spike's coat and clung to it.

"Just breathe, luv. Just breathe. I won't do anything.
Promise. Even if we all get sucked into hell together, ya
glocky git. Twice as stubborn as Angelus, you are."
Spike's hand cupped the back of Xander's neck, pulling
him close as he crooned softly. "Bloody 'round the twist and twice as stubborn."

"That's me," Xander agreed, relaxing only when he could feel Spike's body sag. As long as the idiot vampire gave up his stupid plan, Xander was happy.

"Let's get moving!" Buffy called, and Xander could hear the sound of a dozen potentials all trying to sort themselves out with the usual complaints. Xander pushed himself away from Spike and stood facing the dark street. A curtain moved in Halvard's house, and Xander gave a quick prayer for Clem and Bonnie still in the house.

"Let's go teach Caleb a lesson and get my stuff back," Buffy said as she started down the street, a sword resting on her shoulder.

"Is there time for me to stop for a semi-automatic weapon?" Xander asked, wiping his arm over his eyes.

"Sorry, luv," Spike said. "Should have saved that for later."

"Well, just as long as you remember the whole me
following you rule, we'll be fine," Xander said firmly. Then it occurred to him that Riley's soldiers had seen him cry... again. Shit. He really should look into testosterone pills or something. But he didn't have much time to worry, so he rested his crossbow against his hip and fell in with the others.

Part Forty

Buffy stopped outside the building, and Xander could feel his heart like a little gerbil running in circles. That was either adrenaline or a really bad magic spell. "Okay, set up a perimeter. Guard the door. I don't want anything getting in behind us. My team goes in first, we check the place out." Buffy looked over toward Xander's team, including Giles, Tara, Willow, Amanda and a slayer whose name he still didn't know. "You guys are our safety-net. If this place is a trap, we give the signal, you guys come in, guns a-blazing."

"Perhaps we could—" Giles started to say.

"So, what's the signal?" Xander interrupted, his fingers sweating where he held the crossbow. He hated that Spike was going in first because Xander was feeling a definite lack of trust. He wasn't kidding about following Spike to hell, but he wasn't all that sure Spike understood
Buffy shrugged. "I'm thinking lots and lots of yelling."

"Got it." Xander gave Buffy a weak smile while the potentials shifted uncomfortably.

"Shall we?" Buffy asked her team. Spike had a grim expression on his face and Chao-Ahn looked around in confusion. Then again, considering she didn't speak English, Xander didn't even want to wonder what sort of conclusions she was coming to. For all she knew, they were going to a picnic.... a really well-armed picnic. Still, it hardly seemed fair to take her into battle.

Molly, Kennedy, Rona and Chao-Ahn followed Buffy into the darkness, and Xander was left with an itchy trigger finger and a whole lot of nothing to do. Tara and Willow were chanting softly, protective magic rising like mist from the ground and swirling around their feet. When Willow had raised Buffy, there had been snakes and choking and a sense of something slimy across his skin. Now Xander would almost swear that something warm and fuzzy was brushing across him, a rabbit maybe.

"How long do we wait?" Amanda asked. She was whiter
that some ghosts Xander had seen.

"Until the screaming starts or until Tara's head spins all the way around," Xander said with a shrug. The girls went from ignoring him completely to looking to him for all the answers. It'd be nice if they could settle somewhere in the middle. Actually, it would be nice if they bugged Giles, but the man seemed to spend less and less time with them. He was looking old, and that was more than a little strange because Giles had always been such a larger-than-life figure in his memory.

"Is that magic? Like rune stones?" the potential Xander didn't know asked. Xander would ask her name, but it felt a little rude to ask for someone's name when they already knew you well enough to follow you into a war.

"Less like rune stones than like real magic. I think most people just throw rune stones around and pretend to see stuff. Tara and Willow do real magic," Xander said. Instead of looking comforted, she looked a little creeped out. Xander sighed. If she had some religious objection to magic and demons and things that went bump in the night, slayer probably wasn't a good career choice. Actually, slayer kinda sucked as a career choice across the board.
"Kennedy!" a voice from inside screamed in fear.

"And that would be it," Xander said, rushing into the building before he even looked to see what the others were doing. Xander hit the main room and broke right to clear the door. Spike and Buffy were both down, and a preacher was just looking around like this was a picnic. Bringers had Rona on the floor, and she clutched a clearly broken arm. Xander put an arrow in the Bringers arm. The thing turned to look at Xander with eyes that didn't actually exist, and Xander barely had time to pull a sword before it was on him.

"Oh, good. There's more of you," the preacher said with a cheerful voice that made the hairs on Xander's arm stand up.

"Spike!" Xander yelled. "Buffy!" Both were struggling to get up. A flash of light filled the room, and Xander could feel a softness around him that seemed to envelop him in warmth. He turned to look, and the Bringer that was moving toward Buffy was going at half-speed now, like the world was some video game having a serious glitch. Xander killed his Bringer with a blow to the neck and then put an arrow in the crossbow, aiming at the gut of
the Bringer going after Buffy.

The girl whose name Xander couldn't remember threw herself at Caleb. "You're no priest!" she cried, her mace swinging in a slow arc, but then Caleb was just as slow to bring his hand up.

"Oh, I was. I just found the good book a little too limiting. Paul has some good stuff." He caught the mace in his bare hand, and Xander slid his sword to Buffy across the floor. Buffy's hand shot out and caught the handle, and Xander reversed direction to get to Spike's side.

Caleb pulled the weapon away from the girl and tossed it to the side, and as the mace flew through the air, whatever spell had caught them broke and the world sped back up to normal speed. Caleb's hand reached out and caught the potential by the throat. "But I prefer to keep things simple. Clean folk, dirty fold...." He twisted his hand, and the potential's neck snapped with an audible crack. He dropped her without a look.

"NO!" Molly screamed.

"Yes." Caleb took a step toward Molly. Xander looked from Spike who was still sprawled in the splintered
remains of what looked like a dozen barrels and Molly. He brought his crossbow up, and he saw Tara lift her hands and call out some spell. Light flashed, but this time there seemed to be a wall around Caleb, and the spell flowed around him like a river. The Bringers stumbled back and slumped to the ground or just weaved unsteadily on their feet.

"Ah, it's our own Jezebel allowing the temples of Baal to stand in the holy land. Well, you know what the good books says. 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

"Xander, get them out of here. We have to retreat," Buffy called. She was up on one knee, and from the looks of it, she wasn't strong enough to get herself out.

"What can I say? I work in mysterious ways." Caleb said with a shrug. Xander thought he was going to attack Tara, but his hand flashed out, and he stabbed Molly before taking another step toward Tara. "Also, some fairly straightforward ones."

Terrified, Tara fell back as Molly screamed and collapsed. Willow stepped forward, a wind whipping her hair and shadows making it look nearly black. "No!" she screamed. She threw her hands out toward Caleb, and a
shockwave slammed through the room. Casks of wine cracked and poured across the floor. Xander was thrown backwards so that his back slammed into the brick wall before he dropped to the ground unable to even breathe. Caleb, though, just laughed.

"Women. They're all the same. The world is full of their filth, and here you are, dragging evil into the fight when you claim to embrace goodness, a true daughter of Eve."

Spike grabbed Xander's arm, and the two of them leaned into each other. Xander was pretty sure they were both beaten up badly enough to be useless. "We're all leaving," Spike said, his voice grim.

"Kennedy," Xander said, pointing to where the injured potential was still on the ground.

"Don't care," Spike said, refusing to let go of Xander's arm. However, Buffy was up, her sword held in front of her as she moved to cover Kennedy. Spike looked over, horror on his face.

"Go, I'll get myself out," Xander promised, pulling toward the door. Spike couldn't protect him and Buffy, and Xander was pretty sure Buffy needed protection more
right now. He was a small fish in a huge ocean, but Caleb was going to want Buffy's bloody. Spike held him for a split second, and then he let Xander go. Xander scrambled for the exit. "Let's go! Come on!" he called as Spike ran for Kennedy and Buffy despite horrible wounds.

Xander got about three steps when Caleb unexpectedly turned. Xander tried to change direction, but he couldn't. Caleb caught him by the neck in a hold stronger than any vampire.

"You're the one who sees everything, aren't you? Well, let's see what we can't do about that." Caleb raised his hand, and then they were tumbling toward the ground. Xander heard a feral growl and then he smelled the smoke and leather of Spike. Flailing, he struggled to get out from the bottom of the pile, clawing his way along the floor until a hand caught his wrist and yanked him free. Xander screamed as his shoulder popped and started to burn, but he opened his eyes and realized what Buffy had pulled him free from. Spike and Caleb were rolling on the floor, Spike's teeth deep into the side of Caleb's neck, but Caleb didn't seem to be getting weaker. If anything, he seemed annoyed.
"Spike!" Xander called. He moved toward them, but Buffy caught his arm.

"We've got to get out."

"Not without Spike." Xander tried to pull away, but his ribs and shoulder hurt so much that he was like a fish caught on the hook.

"Retreat!" a new voice called. "Clear the line of fire!" Xander looked over, and Riley was standing there with a big ass gun. Xander opened his mouth, but then Riley fired, and the sound crashed into Xander, making his eyes water.

Bullets ripped through Caleb and Spike, blood splattering across the floor only to be washed away by the wine. Spike and Caleb broke apart, and Xander ripped his arm out of Buffy's grip, nearly falling to the floor in pain. However, he managed to stumble his way to Spike and get a fist around Spike's coat. He wasn't going without Spike.

A hand caught at him, and Xander whirled around, ready to fight. He saw Riley, saw his lips move, but he couldn't hear anything but blood rushing through his ears.
Shaking his head, he tried to clear his thoughts without letting go of Spike. Spike moved, and Xander looked to see Spike pushing himself up onto his feet with Buffy's help. Considering Buffy looked ready to fall over, Xander wasn't sure how much help she could be, but then there were other men there, big men with big guns, and Xander watched their lips, not able to hear anything as they broke into pairs. Two of them caught up Xander and Spike and hurried them out of the room. Someone else had Buffy, and two men had Molly between them.

Gunflashes lit their retreat as two of the soldiers opened fire on Caleb. Xander looked over his shoulder, and the force of the bullets made Caleb lose his balance and stumble back, but they weren't killing him. After that, Xander really didn't know much at all. He only knew he had to keep his hold on the leather jacket. He couldn't even quite remember why, but he did.

Part Forty-One
Spike snarled as a human stopped too near the door. "It's me," Finn said as he pushed the door open. The soldier boys had claimed a fair chunk of the hospital and brought their own doctors in, but Spike would cut off his arm before thanking the people who'd tortured him to get their rocks off. Those scientists and soldiers might have claimed some sort of higher purpose, but Spike could smell sadistic pleasure as well as the next bloke. When they'd strapped him down to the table and taken needles and knives to him, they'd bloody enjoyed it.

"That doesn't make me feel any better," Spike said as he shifted so that he was between Finn and Xander.

"How is he?" Finn asked.

Spike took his time answering. He hated thinking about how fragile humans could be, and Xander's injuries just reminded him of that. "Doc says he's beat up bad," he finally answered.

"His hearing was damaged from the gunfire. He may have some permanent loss. That seemed better than permanent death." Finn came in the room. "Medical personnel are hoping I can bribe you into leaving long enough for them to check on him." Finn offered Spike a
large container of blood.

"I remember that trick, mate. Drugging the blood supply won't work."

Finn's mouth came open and then he snapped it shut again. "It's not drugged. I just thought you probably needed to heal the wounds you suffered."

Spike snorted. The fact was that he needed a whole lot of blood and sleep, but he didn't feel safe enough to indulge in either.

"He wouldn't leave you," Finn commented. Walking over to the far side of the bed, he put the blood down on the side table, and Spike could feel an urge to throw himself between Xander and Finn, even if the soldier was Xander's friend.

"Even more surprising, you wouldn't leave him... him or Buffy."

"If you have something to say, you say it," Spike suggested darkly.

Finn looked down at Xander's pale face. He had broken
ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a ripped tendon in his elbow and a concussion. The boy looked like one of Angelus' victims. "I'm just offering a truce, Spike."

Spike narrowed his eyes. Finn never called him by his name. Finn looked away from Xander and at Spike. "I need allies right now. Buffy's mad as hell that I interfered and with Xander out cold, I'm fighting a losing battle with her. She never would listen to me."

"She doesn't listen to anyone, mate," Spike said. "She's more about giving orders."

Finn dropped into the visitor's chair on his side of the hospital bed. "But in the past, she always gave reasonable orders, Spike. What the hell is going on? Buffy won't listen to Giles. You're providing the voice of reason. Buffy is being irrationally aggressive, and I have a dozen teenage girls who need therapy. What the hell is going on?"

"The others okay?"

It took a minute before Riley answered. "Molly is still in surgery, but it looks good. Heather Goodman is dead, Giles has a concussion, Tara is fine and Willow is having
some sort of magical breakdown. Apparently she channeled too much magic. I also have trauma counselors with the surviving potentials."

Spike nodded. "Tara staying with Red?"

"Yeah."

"She was throwing some dark magics around in there, and she has some history with abusing magic." Spike wasn't ready to trust Finn with Buffy's or Xander's lives, but if Finn could deal with some of the peripheral damage, that would take pressure off Xander when he did wake up. Spike sniffed and tilted his head.

"What is it?" Finn's hand dropped to his sidearm.

"He's waking," Spike said.

Finn relaxed. "I should get a doctor in here."

"Be better if you could get Tara in here with some potions."

Finn shifted uncomfortably, and Spike gave a growl. "If you're hiding something..."
"No," Finn held his hands up. "I told you Willow is having some magical withdrawal. She's irrational and she keeps confessing to murder and saying that she's ending the world. Tara's dealing with the toads, snakes, cockroaches and slime that keeps spontaneously appearing."

"Bloody hell, we don't have time for this rot," Spike sighed. "Should ship her somewhere so she can self-flagellate to her heart's content."

"I considered that, but then I'm not going to try and move anyone who doesn't want to be moved," Finn said. Spike looked up, searching for some sign that Finn was playing nice to get something, but the soldier didn't smell of deceit. Xander groaned and one eye cracked open.

"Luv, can you hear me?" Spike asked, bending down over Xander's face. Xander's expression twisted with confusion.

"Someone...." He coughed as his voice failed, and Spike brought an ice cube up to his lips, letting Xander suck it into his mouth.

"You'll be right as rain, pet. You just got a little more bent
around the edges than usual."

Xander's eyes were tracking; he looked over at Riley, and that brought both his eyes wide open.

"Jig's up, pet. Buffy knows we called in the soldier boys," Spike said. Xander groaned loudly.

"Actually," Finn interrupted, "she doesn't. I told her that I started keeping a closer eye on Sunnydale after she called and wanted the chip deactivated." Finn shrugged. "That's technically true."

Xander closed his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice rough and strained.

"Hey, I owe you one or two. So, how's the headache? I have some docs who would love to see you, but Spike is scaring the piss out of them."

"Docs?" Xander seemed to look down at his own body. "How bad?"

Spike answered before Finn could. "Ya got the snot beat out of you."
"The others?"

"Mostly right as rain," Spike said, stretching the truth a bit. "It sounds like Willow's a right mess after throwing her mojo around, but we're all still alive... or unalive." Spike sat on the edge of the hospital bed and propped one leg up.

Finn sighed. "I'll have the doctor come in. Spike—" Finn just looked over, and Spike narrowed his eyes, daring the soldier boy to say anything. Sighing again, Finn shook his head. "Just don't eat him. In fact, try to not growl loudly."

"As long as he doesn't hurt Xander, we won't have a problem."

"That won't be a problem, not with Xander being one giant bruise. They do have to touch Xander, you know," Finn said. The boy was growing some balls, and a little sarcastic edge. Before Spike could answer, Finn was out of the room.

"He's right, you know," Xander said. "I'm pretty sure that breathing on me hard is going to hurt me."

"Good thing I don't breathe."
"Oh please, you're always breathing."

"Oi, am not."

"Totally are."

"Not."

"Am."

"Not."

"Well, it's good to see some things don't change." Spike looked over at Buffy, who was standing in the door.

"I don't bloody breathe," he defended himself. Buffy smiled, and Spike could feel the warm satisfaction of giving her a moment of joy.

"Right. Of course not," she agreed. Her smile faded quickly, though. "There's someone here to see you." She pushed the door open and Bonnie darted past her.

"Daddy!"
"Bonnie!" Xander called out, his voice nearly cracked with the strain of trying to sound normal. Bonnie threw herself over Spike's legs to hug her father, and Spike could hear the pained whine out of Xander.

"Daddy?" Bonnie leaned back and studied her father.

"He sailed right into the middle of a battle, and he came out the other end. He's just a little worse for the wear, poppet," Spike said.

Bonnie's cheeks darkened. She wasn't the cherub-faced child of two years ago. Already, her demon blood was starting to show along with the first signs of puberty, but when her cheeks darkened, Spike couldn't help but remember that little girl laying in a hospital bed saying goodbye to her mother. She had that same stricken expression now.

"Hey, I'm fine," Xander said.

"Halvard's family's leaving. They want to take Dawn somewhere safe," Bonnie blurted out. "They're scared that everyone is going to get sucked into hell and anyone with too much human blood will end up getting eaten."
Xander's face about fell open at that confession, but Spike wasn't surprised that she'd heard as much. Bonnie was a bit like her father—she stayed to the side and that meant that people didn't always notice her.

"They what?" Buffy demanded. "They're not taking Dawn anywhere."

"So, we'll take the bit into battle when we go up against the preacher man again?" Spike asked. "Or will we leave her behind without anyone to defend her?"

"The house has protection," Buffy said, but even as she said it, Spike could see that she was starting to think about just how the battle had changed. They'd thrown everything they had at the enemy, and the bloody arsehole hadn't even blinked. "There's a way to take him down," Buffy said firmly.

"There always is, luv," Spike agreed.

"Hey, we can totally take him out. I had him on the ropes there at the end. Quaking in his preacherly boots," Xander said, but his joke fell flat. Spike could still see the preacher reaching out to rip Xander's eyes from his head. Reaching up, Spike smoothed a few curls away from
Xander's face, and Xander looked at him oddly.

Pushing that fear aside, Spike called out. "Oi, Clem, stop hovering in the bloody hall."

Clem stuck his head around the corner. "Hey you guys," Clem said. He inched into the room and settled himself with his back against the wall. "Is it just me or are there a lot of really scary people around lately?"

"They're okay," Buffy said. "Pushy and sticking their noses in when they shouldn't, but okay."

"Buff," Xander said. "I hate to say this, but I think they're sticking their noses in when they should."

Buffy crossed her arms, and Spike rolled his eyes. Why the bloody hell had he ever thought the boy was submissive? Oh yeah, because he'd walked around showing his belly like a new-born fledge begging for mercy. The problem was the second you tried to poke that belly, the boy rolled over and showed his spines like a little porcupine. "Excuse me?" Buffy demanded.

"Think about it," Xander said, "Let's say that this vampire, I don't know, had sex with another vampire and they had
a mystical child, and that started all this end of world fun, and they didn't even tell you. So, you're home watching Oprah and all of a sudden, poof, the world ends. One second, you're watching some guy who weighs seven hundred pounds, and the next, demons are taking over the world and Dawn is at school, only demons rushed the school for all those young, tasty morsels and you never even had a chance. Maybe it's just me, but I think the schmuck who would do that is pretty much... well... a schmuck. A huge schmuck. Enormous even."

"I get it," Buffy interrupted. "Sure, Angel should have told us—"

"And we should have told Riley," Xander finished.

Buffy narrowed her eyes. "It's not the same."

"Um... kinda is. He's a fighter of things that go bump; we're fighters of things that go bump... or you are. I'm sort of the fixer of things after the fighters of things get finished wrecking things."

"Xander," Buffy said, exasperated.

"He should have a chance to fight for his world. You're
the slayer, Buffy. You'll always be the slayer, but you're not the only fighter in the world, and you're not the one who has to fix everything, and seriously you're starting to freak me out a little because Riley saved our asses, and you're making it sound like he crashed a sleepover and led a panty raid."

Spike could see the words hit Buffy, making her question her reality, which was more than Spike had ever managed. Oh, he'd tried. He'd bloody tried to reach her soul, to show her just how he saw her, but she'd always pushed him away. But now Xander's words sank into her, and her mood shifted.

Someone laid on a horn down in the street, and Clem moved to the window and lifted just the edge of the blinds. "It looks like lots of people are leaving town. Can you believe all this mishegaas?"

"Yeah. You'd think these people had never seen an apocalypse before." Buffy tried to smile, but Xander's words had sunk in too deep.

"It's getting bad here. Really bad. Hellmouth acting up again, people feeling it, getting crazier. You can't swing a cat without hitting some kind of demonic activity. Not

"I am not even going to think about that, and I really hope you never mention your cat habit around Willow. She'll bury you in PETA brochures, and Willow on a quest for the oppressed is never pretty."

"Actually..." Clem cleared his throat. "We've seen some bad stuff in this town before but, you know, this time, it's like it just seems different, more powerful. I don't think anyone's gonna be able to stop it." Clem looked over, and Spike could smell the resignation rising from Xander. He just didn't know if Xander was resigned to losing another ally or if he was starting to suspect that Clem might be right. Clem looked over and caught Buffy's eye. "I mean," he hurried to say, "I'm sure you'll do fine. Complete confidence in you. Hey. Uh, if anyone can do it, you can, because you...rock! If you save the world, I'll come back, we'll have drinks. When. When, I mean. When you save the world. It's gonna be great with all the... rocking." He stopped, his expression showing his horror. Spike was starting to think Clem and Xander were related.
"Appreciate you letting us know you're leaving," Spike said.

Clem ducked his head. "Maybe... maybe all of you should just get out of town this time."

Again, there wasn't an answer, and Clem shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"You're leaving?" Bonnie asked in a soft voice. It occurred to Spike that Clem had raised her as much as any of them. More maybe. The girl had certainly picked up some of Clem's religious beliefs about hiding and running. For someone as small as her, they were good strategies.

"Well..." Clem looked up. "I thought I would offer to take Bonnie. I know my clan doesn't have portal spells like Halvard's folks, but we're in a dozen dimensions. We're really good at surviving, and I'm going to really hate it if we lose all the humanity in this world because I like human stuff, but I could hide her, teach her to hide herself."

Spike could feel his vampire visage slip free and fury ripped through him. He might have ripped Clem's head
off right there, only Xander's hand found his arm and held him in place.

"Daddy, I want to stay with you," Bonnie said. Her cheeks ballooned up like little puffer fish.

"I know, honey." Xander kept one hand on Spike's arm, but he reached up and caught Bonnie in a hug pulling her down even though his breath grew ragged with pain. "I love you so much. You know I love you. You're my Bonnie, my good and smart girl."

Bonnie started softly crying. Spike grabbed Xander's arm, willing to bloody beg if the boy would just not say what he was thinking.

"Sweetie, you know how your mother left you?"

Bonnie's sobs grew louder.

"She knew she couldn't keep you safe. Now, I bet anything she tried her best to find a way to get back here or to make a safe place for you in the clan. I know she did because she loved you."

"I love you, Daddy. I'll be good. I'll be quiet so I don't ever
get in the way." Fact was, she never did get in the way. Spike realized now that she'd been quiet as a mouse ever since the potentials had shown up, and suddenly he hated every single one of the potentials. He hated that she'd turned into a ghost in her own home because she was trying to stay out of their way.

"I know you'll be good. You're always so good. You're so brave—braver than I was at your age. But here's the thing. Your mother knew she might lose, and she didn't want you in danger."

"I won't be." Bonnie was wailing now, her hands tangling in Xander's hospital gown, and Xander's eyes were shining.

"You will, sweetie. And I don't want you in danger."

"Then come with me."

Xander looked at Spike, and Spike was about ready to tell him to fuck the world. Fuck the world and let it slide into a fucking hell hole. They could run. Spike knew a few blokes who owed him favors—big enough favors that they might be able to get free of this dimension.
"I can't, honey. I'm your dad, and I have to try and make a safe place for you. That's my job. I love you so much, and if I can, I have to give you the world."

"I want you, Daddy. It doesn't matter about the world."

Spike looked away, not willing to look at Bonnie. Buffy stood, her back against the wall and tears slipping free as she watched, and Spike hated that too. This was Xander's moment. Not hers. Not bloody hers.

"The world does matter, sweetie. You know that. And I've won all kinds of fights that no one thought I would win. Hey, Buffy beat a whole god, so one preacher isn't anything to her."

"Then let me stay." Bonnie burrowed closer, and Spike's soul ached.

"But if we lose, if I lose, I need to know that my beautiful girl is still out there. I need to know that." Xander arched his back and got his hand under her chin so he forced her to look at him. "I love you, and knowing you're safe is all that matters."

"That's all that matters to me, too. I want you safe."
Bonnie's face was dangerously blotchy and her cheeks were bruise-purple.

"But that's not a parent's job. A parent has to be the one to fight. That's my job, sweetie. And I promise you, I will do my best to win. I want my Bonnie-girl back. I want you back so much." Xander let go of her chin and grabbed her in both arms, holding tightly as his tears finally came. "I love you so much."

"I'll rip the First right out of the world," Spike promised. He rested his hand on Bonnie's back, and her hand darted out and caught his coat, pulling him close.

"I love you. I want to stay with you."

"Hey," Spike said softly as he struggled against unfamiliar emotions that felt like they were crushing his chest, "what did I teach you about tactics. You find out what your weakness is and then you protect that weakness. You don't ever let the enemy see it. You remember that?" Spike blinked as he remembered teaching her to protect herself. Even before the soul, she'd owned some bit of him, and now his soul raged at the idea of sending her away. He knew Xander was right, but he didn't want to admit it. He wanted to snatch up his family and take
them far away.

Bonnie hiccupped. "I remember."

Spike leaned close so the three of them pressed together in the narrow bed. "You're our weakness, poppet. Your da and I, we'd do anything for you."

That didn't stop the tears, but her hands uncurled from Xander's hospital gown and Spike's coat.

"I could come back later," Clem said quietly.

"No. No, you guys need to get out of town," Xander said, his voice shaking. "Your clan is okay with her coming?"

Clem shrugged. "They like her. They think you're too human though. I tried to see if they'd let you both come."

Xander shook his head. "I have a job to do. So keep her safe." Xander slowly let go of Bonnie. "Sweetie, promise me that you'll stay safe and happy."

She looked at him, chewing on her lip as she stared at him from eyes that seemed to have shrunk back into her
face. Heavy ridges above her eyes had come out of nowhere. "I'll stay safe," she whispered.

Xander nodded. "Hey, why don't you let Buffy take you for a soda?"

Bonnie looked around. "You'll be here when I get back?"

"You bet," Xander said. His own eyes were looking a little less than human as they swelled. "I just want to have adult talk with Clem."

Tears were still rolling down her face, but she slid over Spike's legs and down the side of the hospital bed, going shyly to Buffy. Buffy solemnly offered her hand and the two of them headed out of the room.

Xander stared at the ceiling for a while, and Spike got off the bed and reached in his duster for his cigarettes. He wouldn't light one in here, but he needed to do something with his hands.

"Clem," Xander said, his voice carrying an awful calm, "you protect her or I will find you. I don't care if I'm dead, I will find you and I will make sure your life is both long and unimaginably horrific." Xander slowly shifted his
gaze down to Clem.

"He lets the poppet get hurt, and you'll have to fight me for the right to torture him," Spike said as he gave Clem a yellow-eyed glare. Clem's ears stiffened and he backed up, right into the wall.

"I wouldn't ever—"

Xander interrupted. "And when we win, you bring her right back here. I don't care what is going on in your life, you bring my daughter home to me."

Clem straightened up. "I'll bring her back the second it's safe. Xander... Spike..." Clem looked from one of them to the other. "You're the first people to trust me with something really valuable, and I love her. I promise I'll protect her like one of my own spawn. I promise that."

Xander nodded. "Do, Clem. She's the most important thing in my life, so please protect her." With that, Xander's gaze drifted back to the ceiling and an awkward silence filling the air until Buffy came back with artificially bright chatter, her hand around Bonnie's shoulders. Bonnie was nearly up to Buffy's shoulders now, and Spike figured if this fight took too long, she'd be as tall as Buffy
before she came back.

Bonnie was quiet now, only her shadowed eyes and bruise-colored face showing emotions that she seemed to have swallowed. Xander had swallowed his own emotions because he gave a synthetic smile and held out his arms. Bonnie came to him stiffly, but the second she reached her father, she sank into his embrace her fingers tangling in his gown. "You be a good girl," Xander whispered, "and as soon as it's safe, Clem is going to bring you right back here. We'll go back to the zoo, okay?"

"Promise?"

"I promise," Xander agreed. He let go of her, and Bonnie was slower to untangle herself. However, in the end, she obediently backed away. She looked over, and then she was running to Spike, careening into him, her arms going around him so tightly that he could feel her tremble. Spike snatched her off the floor, holding her as tight as he dared. He wanted.... He wanted too much. He wanted the world safe and Xander safe and Bonnie safe and Buffy safe. He wanted his family and his life. He wanted things that he could feel sliding away from him. Bonnie hiccupped again, and Spike carefully put her back on her
feet.

Bonnie gave him a sad smile and reached up to brush something off his cheek. Spike pulled back and wiped away a tear before he turned to the corner and fought against a surge of rage that left him trembling with an urge to rip someone apart.

"Hey, Bon-girl, I'll teach you to smell sewer exits," Clem said, and his tone suggested that he thought he was offering a treat. "We'll be back here before you know it."

Spike took a deep breath and turned to face the room again. Xander looked even more broken than ever, and Buffy... she looked empty. She'd thrown everything at the preacher, and she didn't have any bloody reserves left.

"You take care of yourself, okay?" Clem asked softly. "Bye." Clem and Bonnie headed into the hallway. "Oh man, you should hear the threats your father made. He can be seriously scary," Clem was saying in a tone of awe as he took Bonnie down the hall. Spike wondered if he'd see her again. The others might not be willing to see the truth, but two different sources had told them that evil had to make the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good, and Spike wasn't fool enough to misunderstand that. The
others could deny all they wanted, but if Spike had to give his life to give Xander his daughter back, to give Buffy her strength back, he'd do it. He had to. He was love's bitch, and love wouldn't let him do anything else.

"I need to go talk to Dawn before Halvard's family leaves town," Buffy said quietly. "Xander, you're the strongest man I've ever known." Her voice was unsteady, but she gave Xander a small smile before she turned to head out of the room.

Without a word, Spike crawled into the bed next to Xander. For a second, they lay stiffly in the bed, and then the first sobs hit. Xander turned and grabbed Spike, pulling him close and hiding his face in Spike's shirt. Spike crooned softly and just rocked as Xander cried until his exhausted body fell into a fitful sleep.

Part Forty-Two
Xander flinched as the doctor found a particularly sensitive rib, and Spike's glare grew colder.

"No eating the doctors," Buffy said without looking up from her magazine. Xander smiled at her.

"He wouldn't actually eat a doctor just for poking me," Xander said.

"Right you are. I'd just break his soddin' neck," Spike agreed. Oddly, that did not seem to reassure the doctor.

"No need. The patient is recovering nicely. He has a nondisplaced rib fracture; however, there are two bones completely broken and a second crack on your fifth rib, so I am concerned that a bone may become displaced, which would pose a danger to the lungs. I'm also concerned about pneumonia since you're having trouble using the full lung when you breathe. No doubt, it doesn't help when others continue to put pressure on the area." The doctor actually had the nerve to glare at Spike. "Human ribs are tough, but once they break, the body is very vulnerable to even light pressure."

"I bloody know that. I've killed enough humans to know what their innards look like," Spike said coldly. Xander
sighed. Yep, when Spike felt backed into a corner, say by a hospital full of soldiers, he got a little on the touchy side. Actually, he was acting a little like Buffy had been lately, but Buffy was almost back to being Buffyish. Xander wondered how much of that had to do with the fact that Riley had taken the potentials and Giles to a base outside of town, and Buffy refused to leave the hospital with Xander and Willow both getting patched up. Xander just hoped Tara was doing a better job of patching than the docs because Xander felt way worse than he had two days ago. Knowing that he didn't know where his daughter was... that was definitely not helping. Xander could feel this heaviness pulling at him until all he wanted to do was curl up in Spike's arms and sleep, but there were bad guys to kill and ultimate evil to stop. Some days, Xander really hated being responsible.

"Just try to avoid killing this human," the doctor said, and Spike's glare grew so dangerous that Buffy dropped her magazine and moved over to stand at his side.

"So, how about his hearing? I mean, ringing bells in the ears... that can't be good," Buffy asked, her voice oddly cheerful.

The doctor shifted his gaze. "That's normal after a
trauma. He seems to be recovering quickly, so he'll recover most if not all of his hearing." The doc started edging toward the door, so maybe he'd figured out that he'd pushed Spike to the limits of his patience. "You're cleared to get out of bed, but avoid strenuous activity, stay on the pain pills, and avoid having anyone put pressure on those ribs." The doctor gave Spike one more glare before he darted out of the room.

"Oi. That bloody git—" Spike looked ready to follow the guy and make a few comments about his bedside manner, either that or poke the man in the eye.

"Hey, he's getting Xander all fixed up, so we like the doc, don't we?" Buffy asked with a smile.

"Yep, big with the like," Xander agreed. "I would be very put out if someone ate him for dinner." Xander reached out and slipped his own hand in Spike's. Spike tightened his grip and rolled his eyes.

"I wouldn't eat the git, just put a bruise or twelve on him." Spike gave a sharp smile and then sat on the edge of the bed, still holding Xander's hand. Even if they hadn't ever made any announcements, Xander was guessing that Buffy had pretty much figured out they
were an item. Either that or she'd developed the worst case of stupidity in history.

"It's totally unfair that the rest of you came through with ears intact, by the way."

"Vampire here," Spike said at the exact same time that Buffy offered, "Slayer healing."

Riley cleared his throat, and Xander looked up, surprised to see him in the doorway. "Personally, I find ear protection works for those of us who don't have supernatural abilities." Riley smiled. "How are you doing? I figure you must be feeling better or Spike wouldn't risk threatening Dr. Davis."

"The git ran to daddy for protection?" Spike snorted in his disgust.

"Actually, I just happened to run into him. He thinks that if Xander were in any real danger, you'd know it, and that would make you a little more willing to accept help. You were polite enough to the audiologist and Dr. Rocker." Spike didn't have an answer for that, and Riley turned his attention back to Xander. "So, he thinks you're out of the woods, but he does want you to try and avoid
challenging any hellgods or demons for at least a month."

Buffy gave Xander a sad smile. "I've been trying to get him to do that for the last seven years."

"Hey, I'm not sitting on the sidelines while the world goes to hell," Xander said firmly. Junior year he'd won the fight about not getting sidelined. He'd earned his position in the group.

"I feel the same way," Riley said with a long look at Buffy. Xander had tried to smooth over that relationship, but it wasn't smooth as much as it was wavy and hilly with an occasional bump. "However, Vovka wanted to talk to you, maybe do a test or two."

"Vovka. Your spy." Buffy's arms crossed.

"No, Vovka the Magusaean who is friends with Halvard's family and who's been trying to help you." Riley gave Buffy a steady look, and even if it didn't look like a particularly unhappy look, Xander could feel the temperature drop in the room.

The sour expression on Buffy's face made it pretty clear
that she wasn't buying that. "Well, tell him Xander's too sore to put up with testing. Wait. Why would he even want to test Xander?"

Riley sighed. "Because the target referred to Xander as one who sees."

"Well, yeah he sees. He has two eyes. He also tastes and feels."

"And hears," Xander added. Right now that was the sense he appreciated the most. He'd never actually lost his hearing, but there for a while, the ringing in his ears had been driving him buggy.

"And hears," Buffy added with a smile.

"What does Vovka think he's going to find?" Spike asked. Xander looked over, surprised at the suspicious tone. Even if Xander and Buffy were treating this like a joke, Spike wasn't, and that made Xander worry just a little.

Riley shrugged. "He doesn't know. But that thing had an ability to go after anyone in that room, and he went after Xander."
"The weakest link," Buffy said, and from her 'no duh' tone of voice, Xander was guessing that she didn't even know how deeply that cut. Yeah, he was their weakest link, but that didn't mean she had to point it out. It was like calling the fat girl fat: true, but not high on the nice scale.

Riley was already shaking his head. "That makes no sense. Tactically, you take out the target that poses the greatest danger first."

"Well, sure," Buffy said, "if you're logic-loving and normal. This guy... not so much with the logic or the normal. Frankly, all his Bible talk is starting to really creep me out."

"I'm already fully creeped," Xander said softly, and Spike's fingers tightened around his hand.

"It's possible that Xander has some sort of power that would be applicable to this situation."

"If he had a power, he would have been all powered-up before now, Riley," Buffy said, and those same harsh tones she'd started using when the potentials first showed up were back in her voice. Xander sighed at the
return of General Buffy. "We've faced danger before."

"But not this danger. There could be something—"

"This is just like you. You walk in and all of a sudden you want to take over. You want to do things your way when your way clearly doesn't work," Buffy snapped. Riley's back stiffened, and for a brief second, Xander thought he was about to see the mother of all slap-downs.

Spike stood up. "Let's call in the others. If this Vovka wants to poke around Xander for whatever reason, I want the witches in here." Spike pinned Riley with a hateful look. "I don't trust you or your pet mage, so if he wants to prove something to himself, you make sure he knows that I will kill him in a second if this is a trick. And Willow and Tara need time to get some protective spells set up before I'll let him in here. We might even want to call Rupert in."

Xander stared at Spike, wondering what pod-person had just taken over his lover because that was not a Spike thing to say. Spike was usually more about keeping people away and Spike was definitely not okay with Giles. Nope, not even a little bit.
Buffy's mouth was hanging open. "You... you want him to look at Xander?"

Spike sucked air through his teeth and seemed to think about it. "Want? Nope. But when a magic-user sets his mind to something, he does it. If he's got some bee in his bonnet, I want allies close while he checks it out."

"Really?" Xander asked. "I thought you'd be more like the 'hell no' only with a few 'bloodies' and 'soddings' thrown in for color."

Spike shrugged. "Hell, pet, you know I can't figure out why you always come out of fights with creatures more powerful than you are. As far as I'm concerned, you should have been dead a dozen times already."

"Thanks, Spike," Xander said dryly. There was nothing like having your own friends think you were helpless.

"Oi, you aren't dead. I can count on one hand the number of people who could really brass off Peaches and live, and you're one. That was a soddin' compliment ya little idiot."

Xander frowned. He'd never heard a compliment worded
quite so much like an insult, but this was Spike.

"I can tell Vovka to wait. Meanwhile, I did pull some files on criminal activities related to churches. I suspect that this Caleb has not been quiet in the last few years, so maybe we can find his past and track down something that could help us." Riley held out a thick file for Buffy. "This is everything."

She nodded. "You're right. A guy like Caleb didn't just get in the evil game; he's been playing for a while." Buffy took the file and Xander could practically see her waver between her two sides: demonic General Buffy and a young woman just trying to find her way. It killed him that he couldn't help her, but he really didn't know how.

"I'll look these over later." She held the file tightly to her chest, and then her body shifted, her spine straightened up and she gave Riley a sharp glare. "You will not have Vovka or anyone else in this room until Willow and Tara have a chance to set up, and I want you to send someone out to pick up Giles."

"Understood," Riley said, his voice as crisp as if he was talking to a commanding officer. "I'll get a driver out to pick up Giles. I assume you'll take care of Tara and
"Willow?" he asked Buffy.

"Yeah, I'll talk to them. But if Vovka steps one foot in here, not only will I let Spike eat him, I'll hold him down."

"Oi, don't need help killing one bloke," Spike said, clearly offended at that suggestion. Buffy rolled her eyes and then she followed Riley out of the room.

The second the door drifted closed, the latch clicking in the silence, Xander turned on Spike. "Okay, spill."

"Wot?" Spike asked with exaggerated innocence.

Xander just glared.

With a shrug, Spike settled himself back down on the edge of Xander's bed. "She's alpha, pet, and Riley is coming in making suggestions. He's just lucky he's not trying to tell Angelus what to do; the git would be strung up from the rafters with his skin stripped from his back." Spike winced in a way that made Xander suspect that Spike had been in that position, possibly more than once. "But if she's on her turf with her clan around her, she'll feel more in control, especially if she has Willow."
"Why especially Willow?" Xander asked, wondering if he should be offended.

"Because that one follows Buffy like a good little lap dog. She pulled Buffy out of heaven, which was bloody idiotic, but she did it because she's Buffy's creature. Hopefully Buffy'll feel a little more in control if she can gather her minions back up."

"Minions like us?" Xander asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oi!" Spike aimed a punch at Xander's arm, but luckily, he didn't use vamp strength. "You lot can be minions; I'm the bloody lieutenant."

"Riiight."

"Git."

"Minion."

Spike flashed him a bit of fang, yellow bleeding into his eyes.

Xander rolled his eyes. "So, why would this Vovka want to poke around me, anyway?"
"Because the enemy claims you have some sort of power."

"Evil lies, Spike."

Spike stretched out on the bed, and Xander slipped an arm around Spike's waist, shifting until he was on his side, resting against Spike. It was weird. He'd spent months sleeping in the same bed with Anya, and the whole time he'd worried about morning breath and B.O. and whiskers. Now he hadn't bathed or shaved in days, he had to stink of fear, and he so didn't care. He just wanted to lay close enough to touch. Spike's hand found his back and stroked gently.

"Most times, you hurt people more if you use the truth, luv. If you told Buffy she was weak, she'd laugh in your face and then punch ya in the gob hard enough to send you into the middle of next week. If ya told her she was going 'round the twist and losing control, you'd bloody destroy her. She knows she's walking the edge, so that's the knife sharp enough to hurt her."

"Wait, are you telling me that you're taking psycho-priest seriously?"
"Yep."

"If you're doing this just because you want me to have some sort of special power, I'm going to poke you," Xander threatened. Yeah, he could understand that Spike's demon wanted him to be more powerful, but he wanted to think that his lover accepted him, lack of superpowers and all.

"Poke?" Spike wiggled his eyebrows. "Promises, promises, pet."

"Geez, Spike, do you always have sex on the brain?"

"Pretty much."

"Funny thing, me too."

"Oh?" Spike shifted around. "Fancy that—two randy blokes sharing a bed."

"With broken ribs."

"Oi. You don't have enough imagination if you think that's going to slow me down." Spike gave a wicked
smile, and Xander's ribs ached at the very thought of what Spike could do. Other parts ached, too.

"Maybe you could enlighten me," Xander suggested, "only maybe in a way that wouldn't lead to me having to stay in here any longer."

"You have no faith in me," Spike said with a snort, but his hands were already moving, stroking over Xander's chest and the contact made shivers run though Xander. His skin tingled, and he reached out and stroked Spike's cheek, his fingers trailing down over Spike's neck. Somehow it wasn't surprising that Spike had a kink for necks. The contact made Spike pause, and Xander took the opportunity to curl his fingers around the back of Spike's neck and pull him closer.

Spike followed his lead, leaning closer, and Xander kissed him slowly, stroking a thumb over the soft spot between Spike's neck and shoulder. Spike made a happy little noise. Oh yeah, Spike might tease Xander about being a Screamer, but Spike was a moaner. Finishing his kiss, Xander squirmed around to kiss Spike's jaw and then run dull teeth over Spike's neck. Spike's fingers found his arms and pressed deeply into the flesh.
With a smile, Xander sucked at Spike's skin just hard enough to make Spike squirm. Spike shifted closer, and his arm pressed ever so slightly against Xander's ribs. Xander whined in pain.

Spike pulled away. "So sorry, pet."

"I hate broken ribs. Actually, I hate broken anythings." Xander hissed as he tried to breathe though the pain. Weirdly, he was still hard, even though his ribs definitely did not want Spike touching him again. Having his lover in the same bed was definitely giving his cock naughty thoughts even if his ribs couldn't follow through.

"Just lay still, luv."

"Oh, I'm already there," Xander said through clenched teeth as he tried to take nice little breaths. Spike hadn't put much weight on him at all, but broken ribs were definitely worse than cracked ribs. Way worse.

Spike stroked Xander's cheek, long fingers sliding over his stubbled face, and Xander smiled at his lover. It couldn't be easy for Spike, knowing that Xander was a big old breakable tinker toy compared with just about everyone else. No wonder Spike wanted to think that Xander had
some sort of power. Xander thought back to his old theory... that Jesse was up there watching out for him the way he had when they were kids. If that was true, Xander really, really hoped that Jesse wasn't into spying because there were some things he did not want his friend to see. Spike gave him a wicked smile and a little wiggle of eyebrows before he started sliding down.

Taking a second to press a gentle kiss against Xander's ribs, Spike pushed the sheets down, revealing Xander's cock pressing up against the hospital gown. "I shouldn't be this horny when I hurt this bad," Xander said. Normally stubbing a toe was enough to make his cock retreat for the day. "You're a bad influence."

"Bloody right, pet," Spike agreed. Bending one knee, he braced his foot on the bed and wiggled around until he was on his side. "Corrupting is what I do best." Spike let his hand slide down over his chest, and Xander watched the fabric ripple and shift as Spike's hand traveled south until he cupped his own crotch, squeezing as his head tilted back in undisguised pleasure. Xander groaned, his own hard cock aching with need.

"Have a reputation to keep up, you know," Spike said as he slipped his fingers under the waist of his jeans and
popped the button. Xander's mouth went dry. Spike arched his back and slipped his hand into his jeans. He moaned as he massaged himself, the zipper slowly yielding to the pressure—opening one click at a time. Xander swallowed as Spike leaned his head back, his neck arching out and the head of his cock now visible.

Spike was breathing faster now, and Xander could feel his own breath speed up, the ache of his ribs a distant annoyance as he stared at Spike's hand around his own cock as the jeans slipped farther down so that Xander could see the darkening shaft, the head of the cock slipping out of the foreskin, the slick slit. "See something you like, pet?" Spike stroked his hand up and down his cock, the foreskin moving in ways that Xander hadn't ever really seen before. Usually by the time they were to the grabby part, the lights were down low and Xander was thrusting against Spike's hip or pinned to the mattress.

Xander licked his lips. He'd touched Spike plenty, but he'd never seen him or tasted him, and Xander was suddenly hyper-aware of that. "I see something I totally like," Xander said, reaching out to take over for Spike. He had to lean up a little too far, and he winced as his sore ribs complained.
"Oh no. You lean back and just watch." Spike reached out and put a hand in the middle of Xander's chest—above the broken ribs—and pushed him back onto his pillow.

"But."

"No buts. I'm not having you strain yourself. So, stop being a stubborn git."

"Hey, that's your lover you're insulting."

"Prat," Spike complained, but he managed to make it sound almost fond. He also started stroking his own cock faster. A tiny line of moisture appeared at the slit, and Spike squeezed his shaft hard enough to make Xander wince in sympathy. However, Spike started coming, white come spilling out onto Spike's jeans and the bottom of Xander's hospital gown and leg. Spike made a low sound like a growl and then sagged, his whole body going limp. Xander's eyebrows went up. Usually Spike was the marathon man when it came to sex; he never got off that fast.

Then Spike stretched his neck in each direction, the vertebrae popping. Since Spike had slid down on the bed,
he leaned forward and rested his forehead against Xander's stomach. "Smell good."

"I assume you're talking about yourself because I know I smell bad."

"Nope, I mean you. Someone smells randy." Spike lifted his head and gave Xander an evil smile before shifting just a little farther down the bed so that he was hovering over Xander's cock.

"Oh shit," Xander whispered.

Spike didn't answer, but he did chuckle as he slowly leaned in. Xander had leaked enough precum to make a small spot on the front of his hospital gown, and Spike mouthed the spot. The feather light pressure against his hard cock, and the feel of fabric across the sensitive head, made Xander gasp. Shit. That was good. Xander tried to thrust up and get more pressure, but Spike braced his hands on Xander's hips, holding him down.

"Now, luv, let me play."

Xander panted, his cock aching with need. "You're evil," he finally gasped out.
"Bloody right I am." Spike lowered his head and sucked harder, right through the hospital gown. Xander made a mewling sound as the pressure started building painfully fast. Spike was chuckling again, and Xander could feel the vibration of it through his cock. Spike's hands shifting, stoking up Xander's sides and dragging the hospital gown with them so that cool air drifted past his hot cock.

Xander pressed the back of his head into his pillow and fisted the sheets as Spike's hands moved up over injured ribs with a touch gentle enough that it was no more than a feather against his skin. When Spike's hands wandered back down Xander's body, the hospital gown was around Xander's waist.

Xander tilted his head up and looked at Spike. They hadn't done much more than mutual hand jobs and a whole lot of thrusting and squirming and sweating, but the look in Spike's eye was just so hungry that Xander wanted to reach down and grab him, kiss him senseless, taste him—all of him. Instead, Xander was stuck with broken ribs. Leaning down, Spike licked Xander's shaft—he started at the base and then, with infinite patience, licked his way up to the very head where the tip of his tongue ran along the slit.
"Oh god. Oh god." Xander cried out and squirmed, his ribs aching in a distant, 'who the hell cares' sort of way. Spike sucked at just the head now, his cheeks puffing out as he sucked at Xander like a candy. When Spike started lowering himself, taking more and more of Xander into his mouth, Xander had to close his eyes before he came right in Spike's mouth. But that made the rest even more intense. In the darkness of his closed eyes, he could feel the wet warmth as Spike slid up and down on Xander's cock; he squirmed as Spike sucked, and the suction made Xander's lungs lose the ability to breathe at all. Spike's hands rested against Xander's hips, and Xander struggled to throw his legs open. He had to come, but he didn't want to either. He wanted this moment to last forever.

Xander felt himself get dizzy, and he forced his body to suck in air as Spike teased him beyond all endurance. "Spike, please," he begged, his brain fogging with pure lust. Then his little brain hijacked the controls before the big brain could react. "Bite me."

Spike froze. It could have been comical: Spike's shocked face hovering just above Xander's hard, spit-slicked cock that was turning a nice deep pink. However, Xander needed to come too badly to really appreciate the
humor.

"Xander?"

For one shining moment, Xander wanted to lie or just tell Spike to forget it. He never did his best thinking with all his brain in his cock, Cordelia was proof of that. However, this was Spike. If he couldn't be honest with Spike, he had issues because Spike had kept every secret and honored every deal they'd ever made. So Xander whispered his request again. "Bite me." Spike looked just as shocked the second time around.

Moving slowly, he crawled up to Xander's side, leaving Xander's cock feeling very neglected. "Luv, that's...." Spike fell silent.

"You don't want do." Xander closed his eyes and embarrassment managed to make his cock start to soften where the pain of broken ribs couldn't.

"Bloody hell, yes I want to. I'd love to, luv, but that's not something you just ask a vampire."

Xander cracked his eyes open. "Are you just a vampire?"
"No, but Xander, for vampires, sharing blood means something."

"Does it mean we can finish?" Xander asked with his best puppy dog look, his hand reaching down to grab his own cock.

"Bloody hell. You're going to be brassed off when the blood gets back up between your ears, but you just remember that you brought this up," Spike said as he shifted closer and caught Xander's wrist, forcing Xander's hand away from his hard cock. Now Spike was nestled close to Xander's side, one hand resting against Xander's hip as Spike started peppering Xander's shoulder with soft kisses.

Now that Spike was closer, Xander ran his hand over Spike's back, feeling the strength under his palms. Spike made a happy little humming noise and his kisses moved up onto Xander's neck. Xander remembered how it had been when Spike bit him last time. There'd been fear, but there'd also been this incredible pull, this desire like an itch that he couldn't quite reach. It'd felt so damn good. When Spike started sucking at the tender skin, Xander turned his head away to give Spike more room. The teeth slipped in like two little stings, and Xander sucked in a
breath, but then the itching returned, and Xander arched his back and strained as he could feel pleasure building up through his whole body.

He reached for his cock, but Spike's hand was there, skillfully rubbing up and down as he fed slowly, and before Xander realized that he'd reached his limit, his whole body spasmed in pleasure and he came all over Spike's hand and his own stomach. Xander cried out loudly and then lay in bed panting as his remaining brain cells tried to rearrange themselves. Most had leaked out his cock.

Spike settled down next to him, his head resting on Xander's shoulder. The sounds of the hospital slowly started reminding Xander that they were in a semi-public space, and Xander definitely looked... well, he looked like he had just had sex with his lover. With a happy little hum, Xander reached down and flipped his hospital gown down before he could scandalize some nurse. Or worse, Willow. He was definitely not okay with Willow finding him naked. Again.

"You should get dressed before Willow or Buffy show up," Xander said sleepily. The hospital had given him lots of drugs to get him to sleep, but none had worked as well
as one really good orgasm. They should market Spike. Xander tightened his arm around Spike as he thought about Spike having sex with all the patients to help them sleep. Actually, Xander was a jealous bastard, so the hospital was on its own trying to find something equally as good at the happy, sleepy making.

"You okay, pet?" Spike's voice sounded wary enough to cut through Xander's happy haze.

"Yes. Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"You're not going to throw a wobbly?"

"What's a wobbly and why would I throw one?" Xander asked.

"A fit, luv. You aren't going to throw a fit over the bite?"

Xander thought about that for a second. "Nope."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "No?"

Xander sighed. "Spike, you've been hanging out with girls too much. My thought process is pretty much... 'Mmmmm that felt good, must try again.' I'm the angst-
For a second, Spike just stared at him as if he didn't believe Xander's answer. Then, with a laugh, he shook his head and shifted around so he could zip up his jeans. "You never stop surprising me, luv." Xander just smiled and let sleep pull him down as Spike wrapped strong arms around him.

**Part Forty-Three**

Vovka was in uniform when he walked in next to Riley, and Xander could see Buffy stiffen up almost immediately. If Spike was right about her feeling backed into a corner, uniforms were probably not of the good. Spike sat on the arm of Xander's chair, and he looked like he'd just sunk his fangs into a lemon, so Xander was guessing he thought the same thing.

"Buffy," Riley said in a cautious tone.

"Hey, Riley," Willow offered with a smile. Her and Tara sat on the edge of Xander's bed with Buffy and Giles both acting like a big old roadblock. Xander wasn't sure when Riley had become the enemy, but Buffy wasn't being exactly fair.
"Willow. How nice to see you again," Riley said with a little more genuine warmth in his voice. Willow's gaze slipped down to the floor and she frowned. Clearly she didn't know how to handle this any more than Xander did... or Buffy for that matter. But Giles was there, and he stepped right into the void.

"So, I understand that you suspect that Xander may hold some latent power?" Just from the tone, Giles managed to make it pretty clear he thought Vovka was a big, huge idiot.

Vovka nodded. "Perhaps. Maybe Caleb had some reason for wanting Xander in particular dead."

"Like?" Giles demanded.

Vovka took a deep breath and glanced over toward Riley for just the briefest of seconds. "I don't know. That's why I want to do a few simple tests."

"Such as?" Tara asked. She'd been here for hours preparing counterspells, but Xander wasn't exactly sure what she was countering. It made him more than a little nervous because in his experience, too much magic in one place was never a good thing.
"A little passive exploration." Vovka held his hands out to show he had nothing in them. "Some hand spells to check for magical auras and emanations, and just some talking about Xander's experiences with the supernatural."

"His aura isn't supernatural," Tara said.

"So, this guy is full of shit?" Buffy asked, jumping on that. She desperately wanted Tara to say 'yes', and that desperation was written all over her face.

"Not necessarily," Tara finally admitted. "I know folk magic, but the Zoroastrian mages have different spells, different ways of seeing the world."

"So, he needs to see for himself that I'm just boring old me," Xander summarized. Spike's hand tightened on his shoulder, but then Spike probably thought Xander was insulting himself. He wasn't. He was the normal one, the boring one, compared to just about everyone he knew, and he'd come to terms with that.

"You fight with a slayer. I don't think anyone can call you boring," Vovka said. Xander frowned as he tried to figure
out if the guy was sucking up to him or to Spike. "You may feel something like spiderwebs across your skin if my magic finds any inherent magic inside you."


"Know this, mate," Spike interrupted before Vovka could do anything. His voice had a deadly quiet to it that made a shiver go down Xander's spine. "You do anything to hurt him, and I will gut you so fast that Finn won't have a chance to even raise a hand. Got it?"

"Very much so," Vovka agreed. Vovka waved his hands, and Xander braced himself for the creepiness. Vovka looked a little like a deaf guy trying to flag down a bus with very enthusiastic sign language, but as far as Xander could tell, nothing happened.

He looked up at Spike. "Anything?" Spike asked.

"Nope."

"This really is a waste of time," Giles complained softly.

"Oh, I don't know. We get to see how very wrong Riley's guy is," Buffy said. Yep, General Buffy was making her
"Hey, Buff," Xander said. "Is that a bruise on your chin or just really bad makeup?"

Her mouth fell open. "Xander!"

"Hey, just asking. This is my concerned face. See?"

Buffy rolled her eyes, which is pretty much what Xander wanted. "I went to get my stuff out of the school since they've closed it down. Dawn says it's unfair because Et'an and Ria are making her and Halvard go to school and she seems to think she should get a holiday on account of imminent world ending." A shadow crossed Buffy's face, and Xander could understand that. It hurt to know that the best way to protect your family was to stay the hell away from them. He wanted to think he could always protect his daughter, but then he had more practice feeling helpless than Buffy did.

"So, a student at the school tackled you because he was so happy to see you back?" Xander guessed with an idiotic smile.

Buffy glared at him this time. "Caleb was there."
"Caleb?" Giles blurted out. "My God, is he—"

"Still able to make me see cartoon birdies all around my head? You betcha," she joked. "The short lack of consciousness was nice. I feel rested. But hey, how about we not talk about this right now?" She looked right at Riley.

That got a sigh out of Riley. "Buffy, we're here to back you up. If you feel that you should confront Caleb on your own, I'll support that position, but if you want backup, we are here to provide that."

"So he can kill you guys? This isn't someone you can handle," Buffy said.

Xander snorted. "This isn't someone a nuclear bomb could handle. But hey, maybe we could try."

"I think the President might have a problem with bombing California," Riley said with a small smile.

"Oh I don't know. We totally didn't vote for him. My guess is that he would love to bomb California."
Riley really smiled now. "He probably would, but I think nuking California would be bad for his reelection chances."

"Probably," Xander agreed. "So, since you got a big nada out of the whole hand-waving thing, maybe we can call all this off," Xander said to Vovka.

"Most likely it was just a game Caleb was playing," Vovka agreed. "But before I give up, maybe we could talk about your experiences with the supernatural."

Spike draped an arm over Xander's shoulders. "Ask him about Angelus. Git talked Angelus out of eating him, and I still don't know how he managed that."

"He... what?" Giles pulled his glasses off, and Xander cringed.

"Ixnay on the N-gelus-say." Xander stopped. Clearly he didn't know pig Latin as well as he thought he did.

"Xander? When did you talk Angelus out of eating you?" Giles pinned Xander with an unhappy look, and both girls avoided eye contact. He'd come clean to them about facing Angelus in the hospital, but they'd never gotten
around to telling Giles. He'd been all caught up in Jenny's death, and Xander just didn't feel like going into it.

"I didn't really talk him out of eating me," Xander said.

"Yes, you did, pet," Spike interrupted. "He came home mad enough to spit nails. Spent the whole night and day complaining about you, he did. Drove Dru right up the wall."

"What?" Giles turned an interesting shade of red.

"It was when I was sick," Buffy said.

"Traitor," Xander whispered.

Buffy ignored him. "Angelus came after me, and Xander made him leave."

Giles looked from one to another, his eyebrows just about crawling up into his hairline. "But... how?"

"I really should be offended that you're all shocked-man, but really, I'm not exactly sure how I did it," Xander admitted. "He said I couldn't stop him, and I told him that was true, but that I could scream like a little girl, and that
he could take me and maybe he could take everyone else in the lobby who would come, and maybe he couldn't, but I was willing to try." Xander shrugged. "He decided he wasn't as willing to try."

"Brassed him off no end, having to back down to a human," Spike said with more than a little satisfaction in his voice.

Xander snorted. "That was called luck."

"No, that was you pointing out that the prat is really just a big coward at heart. Give him an easy victim, and he's as happy as a pig in the rubbish bin, but he doesn't want to work for his meal."

"Well, yeah," Xander agreed. He'd known Angel was a coward even before the soul took a coffee break. "He left Buffy to die alone with the Master, so I think cowardice was pretty much a given."

"He was not a coward." Buffy crossed her arms. "How long do you plan to hold a grudge?"

"Pretty much forever," Xander answered honestly.
"Xander," Willow said in that tone of voice she used to use to warn him when teachers were about to give him detention until the next ice age.

"Hey, I'm just saying what I think is true. Angel or Angelus, he never had a whole lot of courage going for him. Even ignoring the age thing and the slayer thing, having him dating Buffy was majorly creepy."

"Xander!" Buffy and Willow both blurted out.

"Oi, you tell 'em. That just about put me off my feed," Spike encouraged him.

Giles cleared his throat. "Be that as it may, why didn't anyone inform me that Xander had such a direct conflict with Angelus? The watcher diaries were very explicit about the methods Angelus used to take revenge any time he felt he'd been slighted."

"We were already doing our best to stop him," Willow said, her voice sounding hurt as Giles accused her of... well, Xander wasn't entirely sure what Giles was accusing them of. It sounded like Giles was upset that they'd left him out of the loop, but Xander seemed to remember that Giles was actually pretty happy to be loopless in high
school as long as it wasn't something relating to Buffy.

"At the time, G-man, you seemed more interested in what Angelus was doing to Buffy."

Giles shoved his glasses back onto his face. "I always made time for the rest of you."

"Of course you did," Willow hurried to say. "You were big with the support." She gave Xander a fierce look. He hadn't seen the old confident Willow around for a while now, and Xander wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Being fair isn't exactly his strong suit," Xander blurted before his good judgment could cut off his mouth.

Willow's eyes got large. "Yes it is. It totally is. He's fair squared, not that he's square, because he's not. Xander, you need to be nice."

"And hey, nice isn't my strong suit."

"Nice is overrated, pet. You're a right treat in bed, and a great da."

Buffy threw her hands up. "Okay, too much information."
I really don't want to know about you and sex."

"I second that," Riley added with a disgusted expression.

"Oi, there's nothing wrong with two blokes in a bed."

Riley's expression didn't change. "I don't have a problem with two men, but I don't want to think about Spike and sex."

"You didn't seem to have minded when you used to go to the suckhouse," Buffy said quietly, even so, her words made the whole room fall absolutely silent. Even Spike. Xander thought he'd be jumping right in there with the Riley hate, but he was utterly still.

Xander looked around at the group that had gathered in the room. "We all screw up, Buff. I'm an expert at it."

"You never screwed up that bad," she said, her gaze going everywhere except to Riley, who had turned gray.

"Hey, I slept with Faith and nearly got strangled to death because I was an idiot, and then there's the whole lying about Willow trying to resoul Angel, and I went along on the plan to pull you out of heaven, so I'm saying that I've
screwed up way more than Riley. And while we aren't going into Spike's many horrible, failed plans, we all know about them."

"I wasn't that bad," Spike complained, but he did it softly enough that Xander could tell he wasn't actually disagreeing. Xander reached up and rested his hand against Spike's knee.

"You kinda were, but hey, you're a master of planning compared to Willow, so don't feel bad."

"I... but... Xander!" Willow blurted out.

"The spell had the Sumerian word for 'avatar,' and you thought could bring Buffy back with a dead deer. Willow, that's something stupid like I would do."

Willow turned white, and now Buffy was turning red. Xander sucked in a breath. What the hell was wrong with him? He so totally should not be saying any of this, not when he had broken ribs, at least.

"We all have done our best," Tara offered softly.

"Indeed we have," Giles agreed, nodding furiously. He
wanted the fight over, too.

"And Willow has contributed more to this group than anyone," Buffy said, but her glare pinned Xander to the wall, so he was guessing she meant that Willow contributed more than he had.

"Way more than me, obviously," Xander said with a shrug. It was the truth. "But I know my weaknesses, and maybe I'm alone in thinking that she's going to make the same mistake again if she doesn't learn to admit her weaknesses."

Willow had been sitting on the bed next to Tara, but now she stood up and took a step closer to Xander. "You think I'd kill again? I made a mistake. You murdered Warren."

"Yes, I did," Xander agreed. "And I'm still saying that I did the right thing because he was a raping, murdering bad guy who was chasing us, and I'm okay with defending family."

"He was a human," Buffy said.

"Good lord. I'm in hell and trapped in this same conversation for eternity." Giles walked over to the
second hospital bed and dropped down onto it, laying sideways on the bed with his feet still on the floor.

"Did you know that Warren had killed three people to summon a demon from hell just to kill you?" Riley demanded.

Buffy turned on him. "How would you know?"

"Because I arrested Andrew Wells for attacking me. He lasted less than four minutes in cuffs before he started confessing to everything. If you had allowed us to come into town, if you'd told me that you were having a problem with a human, I could have set up surveillance and taken care of the problem before Warren murdered people, before Xander was forced into a justified kill. Instead, you only call me when you want me to help with Spike." Riley waved an arm in Spike's general direction, and Spike flipped him off with two fingers.

"Because you were so much help the last time you were here?" Buffy asked.

"Actually, he was a help," Xander said. "He made you happy. Well, until you two started questioning your relationship and getting weird, anyway. But there was
happiness, and you haven't had enough happiness, Buff."

"Yes, let's now all whinge about our social lives, shall we?" Giles asked without moving off the bed.

"It frightens me how alone you are, Buffy," Tara said softly.

"Buffy's not alone; she has us," Willow insisted. "We're a family."

"A dysfunctional family, but a family. And as the idiot brother of our little family, I'm going to say this only once. Something is seriously screwing with our heads and making us all say stupid shit that we should not be saying... or thinking."

"Yes, and it's time for it to stop," Tara said. She threw a powder up into the air and called out a word. Xander felt a shockwave go through the room, nearly shoving Spike off the arm of the chair. "Enough is enough," she said as she crossed her arms and stared at Vovka.

He nodded. "That was a stronger reaction than I expected."
"What? He put a whammy on us?" Buffy's fists clenched, and Riley's hands flexed like he wanted to make a fist, but maybe he knew that would really not be big with the helping right now because he didn't.

"Inhibition spell?" Spike asked. And oddly, he didn't seem very damn upset about Vovka being all spelly.

Tara nodded. "It reduced everyone's inhibitions and allowed them to let their true natures out."

Willow turned tragic eyes toward Xander. "And your true nature thinks my true nature is to blame for the spell?" Her eyes glistened.

Xander cringed. "Honestly? Yes. Willow, there are tons of things you're really, really good at. I mean, you understand science and computers and which demon bits fell off which demon, and demon forensics is really not exactly a booming science. You're great with the magic and the school work and the begging. You're really good at begging, but there are some things you really just aren't good at, like reading Sumerian. And it scares me that one is that you're not good at recognizing what you're not good at."
"Xander, enough," Buffy said wearily.


Xander looked at his best friend, the girl who had cried because she broke a crayon and in her five-year-old brain, that was an unforgivable sin. "Do you remember that yellow crayon?" Xander asked. "When we first met, you had broken a crayon, and you were crying and I had to offer you my crayon because it was like the worst thing in the world to you. Do you remember?"

Willow didn't answer, but she nodded—her lower lip still caught between her teeth.

"That's you, Willow. When you make a mistake, you think it's the worst thing in the world. And instead of dealing with your mistakes, you hide them or magic them away or just don't admit to making them at all." Xander looked at Tara, and suddenly he could see that Tara really was just Willow's new yellow crayon. Willow was so convinced that if she made a mistake that no one would forgive her. Growing up, Xander always thought Willow's parents were the good ones, always hovering over her
and pushing her to do her best. Right now, he was starting to think his parents might have gotten one or two things right. He couldn't imagine living in Willow's brain, always afraid of making a mistake. "We're going to love you even if you break every yellow crayon in the world, but you don't seem to believe that, so you act like you never screw up, Willow. That scares the shit out of me."

"We could have asked someone for help with the Sumerian," Tara said softly. "I thought it was a d-d-difficult dia… dia… dialect," Tara finally stuttered out, "but you said you understood, and I wanted to be… be… believe you could do anything. I thought I couldn't do anything, and I wanted to believe you could do anything."

Willow's eyes got big as she looked at Tara. "But… you can do all sorts of things. You're way better than I am at tracking spells and auras and you know all these potions that I wouldn't even dream of trying." Reaching out, Willow caught Tara's hands and held them tight.

"I am good at some things, and I'm not good at others, just the same as you," Tara said softly.
"You're really good with bringing the magical kick-ass to the party," Xander offered with a smile. "Only maybe you should just admit that you aren't always the best at..." Xander stopped, not sure how to say it.

"Reading Sumerian?" Willow guessed with a twist to her mouth.

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "I mean, you wouldn't let me go in on the front lines of any fight, and you wouldn't let Spike make the plan..."

"Oi!"

"... and maybe you shouldn't be the one to read Sumerian. Ever. And it's okay to admit that you're really not good at Sumerian."

Willow nodded. "I do know."

"And you know we're not really talking about Sumerian?" Xander asked hopefully.

Willow gave him one of her patented looks—one that meant he'd just given a teacher a particularly stupid answer. "Yes, Xander, I know we aren't really talking
about Sumerian."

Spike made a little huffing noise. "My plans are not that bad. I'm a master vampire—I've taken two slayers."

Xander smiled at Spike. "I love you dearly, but your plans suck hairy monkey balls."

"Xander!" Willow gasped.

"Actually, I think that's the technical term for how well Spike's plans go," Buffy said with a smile.

"You lot just... you never followed the rules is all. I would have killed Buffy the first time I met her if her mum hadn't gotten involved."

"Go, Mom," Buffy said with a sad smile. Spike pursed his lips, his own expression turning sad.

Xander poked Spike in the side. "Besides, you're still the idiot who thinks he can kill himself and close the hole we ripped in the universe, and that is one dumb idea."

In a split second, Spike went from sad to frustrated. "Fucking hell, people. Two different sources told us that
evil had to make a sacrifice for good in order to close the hole. Do you see any other evil masterminds who might be willing to sacrifice for the good of others? I'm the only one that fits that description."

"But sacrifice means you give up something that means a lot to you, and every time this subject comes up, you act like you're already tied to the sacrificial fire. You're not sacrificing anything... it's like you're just laying down and saying that you'll take your lumps from the town bully. That's not sacrifice as much as just giving up."

Spike's whole body was stiff with emotion. Yellow bled in along the edges of his blue eyes and his one foot shook like the energy was just slipping out of Spike without permission. Slowly, Spike reached up and rested his palm against Xander's cheek. "You're the most important thing in my life, luv. Giving you up, dying before I've spent every minute with you that I can, that would be the sacrifice."

Xander was caught in Spike's gaze, lost in the love and the despair he could see. "But if you get yourself killed, you're not going to lose me because I will find a way to follow you. Not kidding, Spike."
Spike didn't have an answer for that and the room fell silent again.

"Can we talk about Magic Mike doing a spell on us?" Buffy asked. "I seem to remember that I said Spike could eat him if he tried anything."

"I did warn you that I planned to try a spell to bring out any of Xander's qualities, and your witch did stop the spell the second she chose," Vovka defended himself with his hands raised, but Xander wasn't sure that having a hand-waving magician raise his hands really meant surrender.

"So you just started a fight for no reason? Riley, I want you and your men out of town," Buffy said firmly.

"I had a reason," Vovka said, stepping forward and forcing Buffy's attention back on him.

"To prove Xander didn't have magical powers?" Buffy demanded.

"To prove he did. He's a soothsayer."
Part Forty-Four

Spike stared at the mage.

"Xander knows the future?" Giles demanded. He wasn’t being very polite about it, either, but Spike figured the bloke had enough problems without Spike breaking a couple of his bones for rampant rudeness. When the spell had made people's true natures come out, Giles had just folded up like an empty sack. He might be putting on a front, but he was a broken man struggling to get through without letting people see that he'd just lost too much.

"Soothsayers don't see the future," Vovka said, his voice gentle, so maybe he'd seen the same thing in Giles' reaction to the spell.

"Um, isn't that what soothsayer means?" Willow asked. Spike ignored her and focused on Xander who was already shaking his head like he could just deny it and his
denial would change reality. His scent started to sour.
Some days Spike truly could not understand Xander.

"Yes, that is what it means," Giles said.

"Actually, the origin of the word 'sooth' comes from 'santh-az,' an old Germanic term meaning 'true.' A person who soothsaying is telling a profound truth, not telling the future."

"So, what he says is right?" Spike asked Vovka.

"No, no it isn't. What I say is often stupid or ignorant or both. Spike, you should see my report cards because, trust me, there was not a lot of truth in anything I said. I once said on a quiz that the first President of the United States was Evel Knievel. I am not big at truth-telling at all. In fact, I lie. A lot. I once told Willow that Jesse ate all her cookies because I didn't want her to hit me."

Vovka moved closer, and Spike looked up with yellow eyes, silently warning the man off. He stopped and then reached over and pulled the second chair away from them so he would be sitting at a fair distance. After sitting down, he really studied Xander. "There are many kinds of supernatural vision. Some people have an ability
to see better, farther. Other people can see at night or through objects. Others have some sort of ability to see across dimensional barriers or to 'see' an object even if it's miles away because they have this inner sense of where things are. People can learn to see the dead, see others' emotions or see the future. For some people, they can see the past in an object, every person who ever touched it. 'Sight' is used for so many different abilities that it's not surprising that the term is a little difficult to understand."

"And I'm not good at any of those," Xander pointed out.

"No, you aren't." Vovka leaned forward, and Spike gave into his instincts and stood up so he was between the two of them. Vovka leaned back again, and Spike crossed his arms and waited for something that sounded like an explanation.

"True soothsaying is the only magic power with roots in humanity."

"Now I know you're fabricating all this," Giles interrupted.

Vovka looked at Giles for a long time before he slowly
turned back to Spike. Spike figured that he was about the only person in the room still listening. Well, Glinda might still have an open mind, but Red and Buffy were both looking mad as pin-stuck cats and Giles had his arms crossed in his best imitation of anger. He just didn't have enough energy left to even imitate that particular emotion. Finn looked interested, but Spike definitely didn't want the army-boys interested in Xander.

"So, what exactly does that mean?"

Xander spoke up before Vovka could answer. "It means nothing. It means he's a really, really bad magician, Spike."

"Xander...." Vovka stopped and shifted his gaze from Xander back to Spike. "A soothsayer can say things they don't mean, they can be ignorant of facts, they can get test questions wrong and lie just like any other person. The truths they see are the profound ones. When they speak from the heart, they will always be right. It's sometimes called the Curse of Cassandra, and believe me, it is the least popular, most avoided of all the mystical powers."

"Least popular. Finally, something sounds like it matches
me," Xander joked weakly.

Spike took a second to thread his fingers through Xander's hair, soothing the boy the way he once might have soothed Drusilla. He'd seen Xander reach Buffy when no one else could get her to listen to a bloody thing. He'd seen Xander recognize truths the others just wouldn't or couldn't acknowledge. After decades of living in the same house with Angelus, Spike knew better than most that the idiot had a streak of cowardice, but Xander was the only other one in this room to recognize it. And after the chip, the others had kept forgetting that he was evil. Even though it pained his soul to admit it, at the time, he would have cheered and brought popcorn if some big bad had found a way to tie them all down and eat them from the feet up as they screamed in agony. Xander had never forgotten what he really was.

"Why is it so unpopular?" Tara asked.

Vovka looked over toward her. "Do you always want to know the truth?" She flushed white, and Spike could understand that reaction easily enough.

"I want to believe that I can end this by sacrificing myself, but he says that's rot. So, you're saying he's right?" Spike
Vovka nodded. "If he's saying it from the heart, yes."

"And what if he's saying it because he's a selfish git who doesn't want to be alone again?" Spike asked.

Vovka didn't have a quick answer for that.

"So," Giles said, "there's no way to tell what is soothsaying and what is simply Xander having diarrhea of the mouth."

"Why are we even believing what this guy says?" Buffy asked.

Finn moved to Vovka's side. "He's one of the best. He's protected the team from incredible opponents, and I've never seen him present anything as fact unless he knew it to be fact." Finn took a deep breath. "Buffy, I know we've had our differences, but I brought only my best team, I only brought the teammates I knew I could trust to listen to both me and you. I left my wife behind because I'm trying to do the right thing for you."

Spike nodded and tried to take the conversation into a
new direction before this turned into another. "It makes sense to me."

"It does?" both Buffy and Xander blurted out.

Spike shrugged. "He does have a habit of blurting out the truth."

"And stupidity. I also have a habit of blurting out stupidity," Xander pointed out.

"You aren't half as stupid as you let on, pet."

"Oh, trust me, I am," Xander argued.

"Look," Buffy interrupted them all, "arguing about this isn't getting us anywhere. Either Xander is or isn't a soothsayer, but that doesn't change anything. We still have Caleb out there, and I plan to see him dead. So, Xander, do you have anything wise to say on the subject of gutting Caleb?" Buffy turned toward Xander, and Spike could smell the instant bloom of panic and fear.

"No," Buffy said. "So we're back to square one. But I came to a realization when I was at school. We've spent all this time worrying about the seal and the Hellmouth.
Why isn't Caleb guarding them? Why doesn't he have someone there protecting it? Why is he camped out at the vineyard? The bad guys always go where the power is. So if the seal was so important to Caleb and the First, they would be there right now. They're protecting the vineyard or something at the vineyard. I say it's their power, and I say it's time we go in and take it away from them."

For long seconds, the whole room froze. Spike didn't know about the rest of them, but he was reliving those minutes as he'd felt Caleb throw him around as casually as a ragdoll. Not even Glorificus had managed to make him feel so small, and it wasn't a feeling he was in a hurry to experience again. He also couldn't deny that Buffy had good instincts, and if she said they had to get in there, they did.

"The vineyard?" Willow finally asked, her voice going up into squeaky territory.

"I'm not saying it's going to be easy," Buffy agreed, her expression turning soft.

"The phrase 'tilting at windmills' comes to mind," Giles whispered, but then he seemed to brace himself and
stand up a little straighter. "This is a hell of a lot to ask when we have no evidence that there's anything there."

"Evil likes to use the truth, twist it around until truth and lies are so tangled ya can't see one for the other," Spike said slowly. "If he says he has something that belongs to Buffy, he most likely does. There are spells to check for that."

"They why haven't we done them?" Buffy asked. She looked over at Tara and Willow.

Tara ducked her head. "It's not part of folk magic." She looked over at Willow.

Willow's eyes got big. "But... I'm trying to not do magic. There was the spell and the blaming and the—"

"Will," Xander interrupted, "just because you really suck at translating Sumerian doesn't mean you aren't totally kick-ass at doing the magic. So, you do the magic, and check with someone else about the Sumerian."

Willow lost a lot of her color. "We need a new metaphor because I can translate Sumerian."
"Will," Xander said in an unhappy tone of voice.

"I can try," Willow answered before Xander could say more.

With a wide smile, Buffy rested her hand against Willow's shoulder. "Thank you."

Willow sighed. "Hey, no problem," she said, only her tone made it clear that she did consider it a problem. "Just, if I start glowing or floating, maybe someone could pull the plug?"

Tara moved in on her other side until the two women leaned into each other. Slipping a hand around Willow's waist, Tara promised, "I will."

"Um, not to be the wrench in the wheels, but we just survived one ass kicking, only not so much with everyone surviving. Does this plan involve more random flailing and screaming?" Xander asked. Spike could smell the fear rising from him, but Spike wasn't sure if he was afraid of Caleb or just afraid of pointing out some important truths. Buffy wasn't thinking clearly on this, that's for sure.
"We need to get in there," Buffy said firmly.

"If you say that, we believe you, luv," Spike soothed her. "Just it might be we should try something a mite different than last time. We're the only two fighters, and if we're looking for a distraction so we can slip past Caleb, we just don't have one."

"Not one distracting enough to distract, anyway," Xander whispered so softly that Spike was pretty sure he was the only one who heard it.

"Yes, you do," Finn said. "If you need a distraction, my men and I can provide one. You lure Caleb to us, and we will keep him busy."

"This isn't your fight," Buffy told him in a tone sharp enough that soldier boy should have been smart enough to back off. He wasn't though. He kept right on pushing.

"This is my world. This is my fight."

"No, it's mine. I'm the slayer."

"And I'm not trying to step on your toes...."
"And yet, stepping is happening," Buffy snapped back.

"Hey!" Xander called out, but Buffy and Finn were too busy fighting to listen to him.

"Do you want to take a bunch of girls in there again? Get more of them killed?" Finn demanded. Spike had wondered how long soldier boy would be able to keep up his submissive act, and now he had his answer. Finn had just run out of patience.

"They're slayers!"

"They're children!"

"I was fighting vampires by their age, but you don't understand that. You never understood that because you don't have a destiny. I trust them at my back more than I trust you." Buffy stepped forward, closing the distance between them, and Spike could smell the aggression on the air. She wanted a fight.

"HEY!" This time Xander physically pushed past Spike and got between the two of them. "We're not the ones fighting! Well, we are right now, but we shouldn't be." Vovka was leaning back in his chair, his expression
entirely too interested for Spike's comfort.

"She's being unreasonable," Finn said, appealing to Xander, and Spike narrowed his eyes and glared at the git.

"We're on the slayer's side, so don't expect any of us to agree with you," Spike warned. Buffy raised her chin and crossed her arms as she glared at Finn.

"Hey, she's a slayer, it's a little like being a lone wolf, so having an army team back her up probably isn't lone-wolf easy, but Buffy," Xander turned to her, "you can't go into that vineyard with the potentials again. They just can't back you up. So, I know it's really uncomfortable—"

"I need some air," Buffy said, cutting Xander off, but she had something in her expression that Spike didn't recognize.

"What? Buffy?" Willow called, but Buffy ignored Willow as she strode out of the room. "Oh goddess. Riley, why did you have to push?" Willow demanded, turning toward Riley with an angry expression. "Maybe Buffy's right and you should just leave."
"Sweetie," Tara said softly, "your Sumerian's showing."

Willow turned and looked at her with a confused expression.

Spike nodded. "It's not Finn's fault," he admitted, even though it pained him. "He was only saying the truth, and Buffy needed to hear it."

"Spike," Xander asked softly, "keep an eye on her?"

Spike hesitated. It made him nervous, leaving Xander with all the soldiers, but Buffy wasn't at her most rational, either. Xander's pleading expression won him over, though.

He moved right into Finn's personal space and let his demon face slip out from behind his human disguise. "Anything happens to him and—"

Finn held up his hands. "I got it. I actually do like him, Spike, so I wouldn't let him get hurt, even without your threats. Go help Buffy." He reached into his jacket, and Spike braced himself for a weapon. Instead Finn pulled out a soddin' business card. "If you need us, call, and I can get a team together in minutes."
Spike took the card and tilted his head as he studied Finn. "Not bloody likely, mate," Spike finally said, but he kept the card. With one last look back at Xander, he strode out of the room, following Buffy's scent down the hallway. Two soldiers saw him coming, and they stepped to the side of the hall to allow him to pass. Spike's shoulder blades itched at having them at his back, but he was too busy trying to chase down the slayer. He didn't have time to wonder if their supposed allies were about to tazer him in the back.

Spike pushed past a nurse and headed into the lobby. Buffy had come through, and her scent had moved toward aggression, so he wasn't buying her rot about wanting to get some air. He spotted her heading out the doors and into the night, and Spike broke into a run.

"Buffy!" he called as the doors slid closed behind her. Spike cursed as he had to wait for the automatic doors to open. He thought he was going to have to chase Buffy down, but she was standing outside, leaning against one of the steel posts set into the side of the drive to keep drivers from sending their cars straight through the glass doors.
"If I wanted backup, I would have invited you," she said, but at least she didn't sound brassed off.

"So you are headed for a fight," Spike said as he took a careful step forward. Something had changed. She had the sort of barely contained energy he hadn't seen in her since she'd dug her way out of her own grave.

"Do you believe this stuff about Xander?" Buffy asked.

Spike tilted his head, confused at her attempt to distract him from the subject. It wasn't Buffy's style. "Seems about right."

"It does." Buffy looked up at the sky, or the reflection of the city lights off the smog anyway. "I went into that room planning to give you guys all the reasons why we have to attack the vineyard."

"If you say we have to, then we do," Spike said. He'd told her that in the room, and he still meant it.

"But Xander said something up there."

"He said a lot of somethings up there, pet."
Buffy looked down at Spike and smiled. "He called me a lone wolf, Spike. He said that Riley couldn't expect me to be comfortable with having back up. I mean, I've been pushing everyone away, and maybe part of that was the fact that I've been afraid of some of them dying."

"Reasonable enough, luv."

Buffy shook her head, "But that doesn't explain the rest, Spike. I can't connect with people."

"We did some connecting," Spike pointed out.

"No, we didn't, Spike." She sighed and moved closer to him. "I never let you close, and I know that you would have done anything for me, but there were these defenses that I would never let you through."

"Without the soul, I wasn't the best partner for you," Spike admitted. Back then, he'd known how to feed her demon, but he hadn't ever recognized the damage he was doing to her more human bits.

"And with the soul, you're better off without me," Buffy said. "But Xander said I was a lone wolf, and I realized something, Spike."
Spike raised his eyebrows and waited for an explanation.

"I've been trying to lead an army, Spike. I was planning diversions and thinking of tactics, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure out a way to get in there and find what Caleb's hiding, not without getting someone else killed."

"People die in war," Spike said slowly. He really didn't like where this conversation was going.

"In war, sure, but this isn't a war, Spike. This is... this is good versus evil, not North versus South. The second Xander called me a lone wolf I realized why this fight is going so much worse than the other fights. I should be fighting this. Me. It should be the slayer versus evil."

Spike's gut twisted as he realized what Buffy was planning. She planned to go up against Caleb on his own turf... just her without anyone at her back. It'd been a long time since Spike had felt panic, but he remembered the feeling as his muscles started trembling and he scrambled to find some way to talk her out of this stupidity. "Xander was the one who organized the potentials to take out the uber-vamp, so if you're
listening to Xander as a soothsayer, you listen to that bit," he pointed out.

Buffy nodded. "He took out the First's cannon fodder, Spike. But Caleb's mine, Spike. I can feel that."

"And if you die?" Spike demanded, panic rolling through his guts.

"Then a new slayer will be called." Buffy frowned. "Maybe. Faith might technically be the slayer, so you might have to go break her out of prison."

"She's in New York," Spike reminded her.

"Oh yeah."

Spike's brain struggled to find an argument that she would listen to. The problem was, he was a bloody rank amateur when it came to convincing her of anything. This was Xander's territory. "If you do this, if you get killed doing this, it's going to gut Xander. He'll never forgive himself for saying something that could send you off to your death," Spike warned.

"Ah," Buffy said with a smile, "I'm almost sure I'm not
going to die." Her smile faded. "But if I do, you can't ever tell him. You can't let him feel guilty about this because it's my gut telling me to go on my own."

"After hearing his comment."

"Which would be where the you not telling him comes in." Buffy reached up and touched his cheek. She hadn't touched him since the night when Spike had lost his bloody mind and attacked her, but now she smiled at him. "Take care of him, Spike. Caleb is my fight."

"I could—"

"No," Buffy cut him off. "No army of slayers, no army, no souled vampire at my back. He has something of mine, something he doesn't want me to have, and it's at the vineyard. He's about to find out what it means to challenge a slayer to a smackdown." Buffy pulled her hand back. "Tell me I'm going to kick his ass, Spike. Just tell me that." She looked at him with this intensity that Spike hadn't seen in her for years.

He wanted to scream, to argue that he was a good hunting partner, to call bloody Finn and have the soldier boys lay their lives down for Buffy. He wanted to do all
that. Instead, he smiled at her. "You're going to eviscerate him, luv."

"I really am," she said happily. Then, with a little bounce, she turned and headed down the street. Spike watched her, his heart breaking as he discovered the true meaning of fear. He couldn't do a bloody thing for her, not without betraying her faith. Swallowing all his fears, Spike turned and headed back into the hospital. Maybe he could prick Finn into starting a fight and get some aggression out that way.

Part Forty-Five

"So, I'm standing there at the top of the stairs, and Caleb has this look on his face like someone just peed in his cornflakes. The panic sort of passes, and then he threatens to kill me, and I point out that he has to catch me first."

"Oh goddess."
"No goddess needed. Just me. I was jumping and somersaulting and leaping over barrels of wine. And the First is still sitting on a barrel at the side of the room wearing my face as he told Caleb how embarrassing it is to watch him get his ass kicked."

"Wait, the First looked like you? Okay, distumbo."

"Yeah, Caleb thought so, too. He told the First that it was confusing to have both of us in one room, and can I just say that I'm really, really glad the First is not big with the touching because the idea of someone running around with my body touching Caleb, that's therapy inducing."

"Nice, Buff. Way to give us all nightmares."

"What happened then?"

"The First went 'poof' and that's when the fight was really on. He kept taking swings, and I kept ducking. Fast. Really fast. I am really tired of getting hit, so we are definitely going to be doing more ducking in the future."

"Go team Buffy. We can get t-shirts. Ducking good."
"Yeah, and once I learned to duck fast, things went way better. Anyway, I saw this trapdoor, so I did a running slide right through it into an underground cave. And that's where I found this baby." Buffy held up her new toy, an ax-like weapon that made Spike feel uncomfortable whenever he looked at it too long. Clearly Xander, Red, and Tara didn't feel the same way because they were all huddled up in one of their little puppy piles. Spike sat on the arm of the couch and watched them settle into roles they'd all abandoned a long time ago. Giles and Riley sat at the kitchen table and watched through the arch, but Buffy had refused to let Vovka come in, and Xander had backed her, so the mage was at the army's main base with the rest of the potentials. If fifty men with machine guns and tanks couldn't protect them, no one could, but Spike was happy to have them out of the house.

"It came right out of the rock."

"Long live King Buffy." Xander's wide smile immediately faltered. "Queen Buffy. Definitely Queen Buffy, only I was thinking King Arthur, and King Arthur and Queen Buffy sort of met in the middle."

Tara and Red both smiled, and Spike leaned back. It was
unsettling to watch Xander slip back into the group, particularly when Spike felt like he had no place in it. He'd slept with half of them, and still, he just didn't quite fit. And that hurt because he still bloody loved them both.

"Okay, finish the story," Willow said. Buffy's audience all leaned close, like children wanting to hear a bedtime story, but then after all the loss and pain, they deserved some time celebrating this victory.

"So, Caleb follows me, and he looks at me and says, 'I'm still not impressed, girly. Can you pry that out of solid rock before I come over there--' and right in the middle of his whole speech about how I can't pull it out, I reach over and pull it out. You should have seen his face. And then all he can say is 'darn.'"

"We get the politest serial killers around here," Xander pointed out.

"We do, don't we?" Buffy wrinkled her nose. "The mayor, Ted, Caleb. I suggest a new rule. When polite people come to town we just... I guess killing them would be too much, huh?"
"Probably," Willow agreed.

"You shouldn't worry. This whole town is dreadfully short of any sort of manners," Giles said softly. Then he went back to eating his Jaffa cakes. Riley looked amused at that.

Spike started when Xander suddenly crab-walked back several feet so he could lean against Spike's leg. "So, finish the story, Buff." Xander's heat soaked into Spike, and Spike reached down to finger a loose curl. Buffy watched them both, her eyes focusing on Spike's fingers and Xander's curl for a second before she looked up at Spike and gave him a soft smile--it was the sort of expression he'd always wanted from her back when they'd been lovers. The sort of expression he'd never gotten. She blinked, and the expression vanished. Instead, she gave Willow a bright and cheerful grin.

"Oh, this is where it gets good. He looks right at me, and says that I should just 'do myself a courtesy' and hand the weapon over. I mean, what kind of idiot falls for that sort of line?"

"An idiotic one?"
"Yeah, well I clearly passed that IQ test. I suggested he come and take it from me, and he starts backing away like I had my finger on the button for a nuclear bomb."

"Do nuclear bombs have buttons?" Xander asked. He looked over at Finn.

"Not usually. Most soldiers try to avoid blowing themselves up," Finn offered. Xander clearly didn't recognize the indulgent tone that bordered on impertinence. At one point Spike had been equally as dismissive of these strange little rituals, but they pulled some sort of strength from each other when they all curled up together like this.

Buffy laughed. "Well, this really put fear into a bad guy who didn't blink at nuclear fusion, so I'm calling it good."

She held up her newest acquisition.

"It is an ingenious design," Giles agreed. He seemed much more comfortable now that they were talking about the weapon.

"Kills strong bodies three ways," Buffy agreed.

Willow reached over and ran a finger along the ax. "And
you say you sense something when you hold it?"

"Not much, but it's strong. And I knew it belonged to me. I just knew it."

Giles got a thoughtful look on his face. "In addition to being ancient, it's clearly mystical."

"Yeah, I figured that one out when I King Arthured it out of the stone." Buffy gave the other Scoobies a conspiratorial smile. It was like they were all kids again, sharing their secret contempt for the adults.

"So maybe it's like some kind of traditional slayer weapon," Willow suggested.

And Giles had fallen back into his role, too. Before Willow stopped, he was already shaking his head, dismissing her idea. "I can't imagine how something like this could exist without my having heard of it."

"I don't know about that. The good guys are not traditionally known for their communication skills," Buffy pointed out.

"That's sadly true," Finn agreed.
Giles had a flash of something that looked like genuine anger, but then it just sort of faded, and he sagged in his chair. The bloody truth of it was that the Watchers had buggered themselves with their games and their lies, and Rupert had to know that.

"I want to hear the end of the story," Xander said, leaning forward, taking his warmth away.

Buffy smiled. "Okay, so now we're really getting into it. I swing, but it turns out that he knows the whole 'ducking good' rule, too. I get in a punch, but I can't seem to get my ax in his neck, and then the next thing I know, he grabs me by the lapels and throws me into a cask of wine so hard that the barrel splits open, and that is one stain that is never coming out. And I am blaming the slipperiness of merlot for the fact that I dropped the ax."

Willow gasped and grabbed Tara's hand so hard that she flinched. Spike just rolled his eyes. Obviously it had all turned out okay or she wouldn't be sitting on the floor around the coffee table eating popcorn.

"So, I climb out of the splinters, dripping wine and smelling like one of those guys who drinks out of a paper
bag, and before I can even get my bearings, Caleb points the sharp end at me and charges. Well, I dart to the side, and he stakes the rock."

Xander whistled. "Okay, as the construction worker I feel a need to point out that stone trumps wood. Are you saying that the wood cut through the stone?"

"Does the word mystical mean anything to you?" Giles muttered, but he did so softly enough that Spike suspected no one else had heard it.

"That would be why this is my new favorite toy. This is the gift that just keeps giving, because once he got it stuck, he couldn't get it out again. It was like playing a round robin version of King Arthur, so I got to pull it out a second time. This time, I swing, and catch him in the stomach, a pretty shallow cut. I figure it's not fatal, and he does too because he starts to laugh and he wags his finger at me like some sort of teacher who caught me cheating, and then, without warning, he just collapses. The fight is just... over. Bam... one little paper cut and he's out." Buffy's hands fly up to show how suddenly the fight ended, and Spike instinctively jerked back from the ax.
"Achilles' stomach," Willow says with the sort of grim pleasure that sometimes worried Spike. She had darkness, but she also had a strength in her to fight it. He could only hope that the strength kept winning over the darkness.

Buffy just smiled wider. "Yeah, well this play needs a third act. Act one, Caleb kicks my ass. Act two, I kick Caleb's ass."

"Act three?" Tara asks with wide eyes.

"So, I'm ready to climb up the ladder and here Caleb comes again. He looks like an Ebola patient with blood dripping out of his eyes and nose."

"Ew." Willow made a face.

"I was a little too worried about the big, brass candlestick he was swinging at my head to really get too grossed out," Buffy answered. She was in her element, describing the fight with a sort of wild energy that made her hands fly as she mimicked each punch and each throw. It killed Spike that he hadn't been there for her, but her gut and Xander's soothsaying had been right; she was the lone wolf, and she had to fight this battle on her own.
"So, I ask him for a ballpark figure on how many times I have to kill him before he stays dead, and he gets all up in my face with the insults... and calling me a girl, which now that I think about it, is not really feeling very insulty."

"He should know the girls I know," Xander agreed as he looked around the room. The women might have the more obvious powers, but Spike figured Xander could hold his own. Xander, however, wasn't mentioning his new-found ability. Actually, since the conversation with Vovka, he wasn't talking about soothsaying at all. If it weren't for his sudden habit of shutting up in the middle of conversations, Spike would assume he'd dismissed the whole business as gibberish. However, the fact he was watching what he said, editing himself, well, that did suggest Xander believed a mite bit more than he was willing to admit.

"Yeah, well all the cracks about girls gave me an idea." Buffy wiggled her eyebrows as she glanced down at her lap. Spike noticed that she had the attention of all the men now. "He slammed me back against the wall, and I swung the ax right up between his legs. It slices, it dices, it makes julienne preacher." All the men cringed, and
Xander actually cupped his genitals as if they needed protecting. Spike just gave a grim smile. He'd always known Buffy was a ball-buster; he just hadn't expected her to be quite so literal. "And then I just kept pushing it up and up and he just split like an overripe watermelon."

"Okay, now I'm officially grossed out," Xander complained.

Spike was a little more concerned about the practical matters. "Right then, did that end the fight?"

"He was in pieces, Spike," Buffy said in a contemptuous tone. Spike sighed and tried very hard to not point out that plenty of baddies could get up from a wound like that.

"And it's Buffy for the win!" Willow said happily.

"It's a significant victory," Finn offered, but he wasn't ready to throw the victory party yet.

"Heck, yes. Way significant," Xander agreed. "This calls for root beer floats all around. I would say beer, only I've seen Buffy with beer, and Buffy, beer, and big-ass weapons are not sympatico if you know what I mean. So,
as the host of tonight's victory celebration, I am offering beer of the root kind."

"I can go for the root kind," Buffy said as Xander used a hand on Spike's knee to push himself up.

"Will? Tara?" Both witches nodded.

Giles seemed to pull himself up a little straighter. "Yes, perhaps we can focus on the weapon. We need to find out whatever we can. Who made it? What is its source of power?"

"What's its credit score?" Buffy asked. The second she did, Giles just wilted a bit, and Spike could practically see the guilt clinging to her.

It wasn't her bloody fault that everyone and everything Rupert had ever known had gotten blown to bits, but he was so soddin' busy feeling sorry for himself that he never did notice how the others reacted. That was the one thing that made Spike hate the man. Yeah, he'd tried to kill Spike, but at least Spike could respect that. Hell, he was downright complimented that Rupert still respected him enough to consider him dangerous, but this self-pity was about more than Spike could take.
"Sorry, Giles," Buffy offered. "You're probably right that we should have some sort of intel, but you know me; I'm not really big with the research."

"I could search through some old books on ancient weaponry." Giles almost looked hopeful.

"I could help," Willow offered brightly. "Since I'm trying to break my habit of using magic for the not-so-magical parts of life, it'd be good for me to crack some books."

Tara smiled at Willow. "I could help, too," she said.

"Well, count me out," Xander shouted from the kitchen. "No more paper cuts or drooling on pages or getting incantations tattooed on my cheek from falling asleep on ink printing. Nope. I will be spending the night trying to fix all the things the potentials broke."

"I think I'll help Xander," Riley said.

"Suit yourselves." Giles didn't even bother feigning disappointment. "I should get some books from my room." He got up and hurried toward his bedroom with a bit of fire in his eye.
Buffy sighed. "I don't actually care where it came from as long as it kills bad guys. Is that wrong of me?"

Finn shrugged. "A Kalashnikov assault rifle kills as well as the M-4 combat rifle."

Buffy blinked at him. "And I think I'm not alone in saying 'huh'?"

"Even if it's an enemy's weapon, it'll still work for you," Xander offered as he walked in, carefully balancing four root beer floats. "Spike, I have your blood in the microwave, but I ran out of hands along the way."

Standing up, Riley helped him get the floats on the table. "Should you be doing that with your ribs?" he asked.

"Ah, the advantages of knowing a really good witch. Or a good witch who's really good at witching. Tara managed to get the bones to start their knitting a little quicker. I hurt, but I'm not in the sort of pain that makes me wish I could just stay unconscious for a month or so."

"You know, something occurs to me," Buffy got up from the floor and headed for the table to claim her float.
"We're going to win."

"We always do," Xander agreed.

"Yeah, and this bad guy can't even touch us. That's not all that scary," Willow added.

Buffy nodded. "He's like the giant taunter. He just says really crappy stuff to make you feel crappy."

It was Tara who pointed out the obvious. "If he can make us not trust ourselves, not believe in ourselves, then he's won."

"Psychological warfare," Finn agreed.

"Warfare shmorefare. We're the Scoobies," Xander said before taking an obnoxiously loud slurp from his root beer float. Spike rolled his eyes and got up to go fetch his blood. "Snyder spent three years trying to destroy all our self-confidence and joy in life, and he failed. Snyder was way creepier than the First."

All four of them were gathered around the table now, and Finn sort of backed himself up to the wall. Spike was guessing that he'd be a lot more comfortable back at the
army setup north of town, but Spike had to give him some credit for sticking it out. He definitely wanted to help.

"You know what might be helpful?" Buffy asked. Her tone was still light and airy, but it had a sour note just under the surface, and Spike turned and leaned against the counter as he studied her. "Wouldn't it be great if we could activate all the slayers? Then we'd have thousands of slayers to go to battle against the First's army."

Finn's spine straightened up so fast that Spike was surprised a vertebrae didn't pop.

"What do you think?" Buffy asked the group.

Xander blinked like a deer caught in headlights. "That depends. Are you in any way... I don't know... kidding?"

"You don't think it's a good idea?" Buffy asked. Immediately, Xander snapped his mouth closed.

"Could it even be done?" Tara asked softly, looking to Willow. Magic that manipulative would have to come out of Red.
She wrinkled her nose. "Not to poop on the party here, but I'm thinking that would be pretty much impossible. It would go way beyond anything I've ever touched, and face it, I've touched stuff way bigger and way darker than I ever should have."

Buffy made her own face at that news. "I'm not saying we should do it. It's just nice to think about, you know, like we used to make up vacations in all the really great places we were never going to go." She was saying the right words, but Spike wasn't so sure she was just bringing this up on a lark.

"Disneyland," Xander said in a wistful tone. "But seriously, it's probably good that we can't do it. No offense, but the potentials pretty much drive me crazy with just their potentialness. If they were all actual slayers, I might have to change sides."

That forced a snort out of Spike. "Bloody hell, Kennedy alone would be enough to make me go after my third slayer," he agreed.

"Halleluiah!" Xander raised his root beer float and waved it in Spike's direction as if making a toast. "But honestly, Buff, using CPR to bring you back from the almost-dead
opened a crack for the First to slither through. Dragging you out of heaven opened a door. I'm pretty sure that turning all the potentials into slayers would... I don't know... blow up the universe or something."

"Or trigger more prophesies," Finn added. "The number of mystical events has been rising exponentially in the last five years. This is highly classified, so it does not leave this room, but certain members of the government are busily working to find an alternative dimension in case all this escalation turns out to herald the end. One side increasing weaponry always causes a response in the enemy. I'm not sure that using what would be, in essence, a magical 'nuclear option' would be the best solution. I would rather roll in here with a thousand tanks and blast Sunnydale to rubble."

"It pretty much is turning to rubble," Xander pointed out. "Although I could do a heck of a business flipping houses. I would just have to make sure I sold them over the internet so the buyers wouldn't realize that big chunks of the city are becoming wastelands of the Mad Max variety."

"Xander, that would be like cheating people," Willow said with horror in her voice.
Xander gave her a disgusted look. "Which is why I'm not doing it, Will. Although technically perfectly legal, it wouldn't be nice. So, short of destroying the world by turning Kennedy into a slayer, what's our next step?"

Buffy stretched her neck. "I was going to say sleep, only now Giles is going to be all 'mystical this' and 'magical doo-hicky that.' I see a future of sleeping on open books in my future."

"Look at the bright side," Xander offered. "Most of his books burned."

Right on cue, Rupert came into the living room and waddled toward the table with a stack of books that reached nearly up to his nose. "I found a few tomes that might shed light on a mystical weapon. If we can find the name, we should be able to cross reference easily, but I fear finding the name may prove the difficult portion." He put the stack of books on the edge of the table.

"Did anyone hear that?" Xander asked with great seriousness. The others looked around in concern, but Spike didn't bother. His boy was playing with them; Spike knew that tone. "I think I hear a hole in the drywall
calling my name. You guys have fun now." With a bright smile, he grabbed his root beer float and headed for the basement door with a little more speed than strictly dignified.

Finn seemed to study the size of the stack with some dismay. "I can take a book if you tell me what I'm looking for," he offered unhappily. Giles smiled and then turned toward Spike.

"Leave me out of it, Rupert. I don't give a flying fuck what the weapon is called as long as it kills things dead. You lot can play Nancy Drew. I'm going to drink my blood and then go shag my boy." Spike enjoyed the sight of Rupert turning vivid red before he headed into the kitchen to grab his dinner. The slayer was hiding something for sure, but he wasn't going to get it out of her in the middle of a research session. He'd just have to bide his time, and meanwhile, he had an empty basement and a lover with mostly healed ribs. Spike could definitely think of something better to do than fixing walls or researching bloody weapons.

**Part Forty-Six**

Spike leaned against the tree and blew smoke into the night air. The house was about as frustrating as when the
potentials had been running around like rabid mice. Xander and the others might enjoy celebrating Buffy's victory, but the fact was, they still didn't know how to deal with the First. Spike could admit that they took strength from each other, and as humans they no doubt needed some time off from the fear, but he would rather be fighting. Instead, he was smoking, feeling the hot air fill his lungs as he wondered where Bonnie and Dawn were. If things didn't work out here, more likely than not, they'd end up in some other dimension, refugees from their own world. That was better than the fate most of humanity faced if this all went pear shaped.

Maybe it made him evil, but Spike couldn't bring himself to care about the rest of the world as much as he did those two. It bloody killed him that he didn't know how to protect them or Xander or Buffy. He'd been so sure he needed to sacrifice himself, but unless Xander's soothsaying was on the fritz, killing himself wouldn't fix this mess.

Spike thought about what Xander had said: him dying would be more like giving up than sacrificing anything because he expected to die. Spike wasn't sure he believed that. He really didn't want to die. He had a family, a clan for about the first time in his whole bloody
existence. It seemed unfair to tell him that it wasn't enough for him to give up his life for them... what more could the bloody universe expect from him?

Spike would be tempted to try a little self-immolation anyway, but Xander was just stubborn enough to try and follow him to hell. Saying the little git had a stubborn streak was like saying Angel had a touch of vanity. A familiar scent drifted toward him on a gentle breeze.

"Hey."

Spike nodded at Buffy. She walked over and hopped up on the fence, her feet dangling. For a time, she just sat with him, sharing the silence. There wasn't much to say, at least not now that she was away from the others. Spike suspected that all of them were playing at being so happy. "I haven't seen you smoke for a while," she eventually offered.

"Haven't felt the need."

"Oh."

After that, there was more silence. Down the street, a couple was shoving everything they owned into a silver
Toyota. This neighborhood had held out longer than others, but after Halvard's family had left, the others started following. Spike was pretty sure that was their last neighbor running for the hills.

"Do you get the feeling that maybe the ship is going down?" Buffy asked. Spike didn't bother answering. "Riley's bosses sent in another unit. I'm not sure if that's because they think it's all going south or if Riley's guys are just having as much fun with the potentials as we did."

Spike was pretty sure she hadn't come out to talk about the army, but she sure wasn't getting to the point.

He waited, and eventually Buffy sighed and blurted out, "Want to go for a walk?"

Spike tilted his head at her, but Buffy was already hopping off the fence and starting down the dark street. She'd gone about two steps when the street lights all flickered and died. Spike looked and the two last lit houses on the street were dark. He couldn't even see the glow from downtown.

"I guess the last of the rats have fled the sinking ship,"
Buffy said sadly.

"Seems like." Spike threw his cigarette down and crushed it as he considered going back to the house. The steel shutters hid what was going on inside. A spark appeared and then Spike could see a flickering candle through the small slits in the metal.

"They'll be fine, Spike. I really need to talk to you."

Spike looked over at Buffy, confused by her tone.

"Couldn't hurt to check in, let them know we're going somewhere."

"I told Xander I needed to talk to you," Buffy said.

"Something up?"

"Could be." Buffy chewed her lower lip.

"Is this something I'm going to need weapons for?" Spike asked. He frowned as a new scent drifted in on the breeze. Narrowing his eyes, Spike looked around in disbelief as he tried to spot the newcomer.
"Spike," Angel said as he stepped out of the shadows.

Spike looked from Buffy to Angel and back again. She wasn't even a little surprised, so clearly she'd set up this little reunion.

"Peaches," Spike said warily. "You come to offer up your life to close the door now that you're evil again?" he asked. That made Angel draw back a bit, which felt bloody awesome, but it also made Buffy frown at him.

"I'm not evil," Angel defended himself. "I came all the way from New York to help."

"After giving up the champion of light gig and eating a whole gaggle of humans," Spike pointed out. Angel's cringe made it clear that every rumor Spike had gotten out of Jonathan and the cheerleader were true.

"Yes... well..." Angel turned to Buffy. "I told you we should meet on neutral territory. Spike always was overly aggressive when he was on his home turf."

Spike's eyebrow went up. This was familiar turf, but it wasn't Spike's. Hell, if Spike were the one in charge, he would have gathered up every human he loved and
hauled them all off to a dimension less likely to get blown to hell in the near future.

"I was planning on bringing him over to the park, but someone had to get all impatient," Buffy muttered.

"What? You two plan on sacrificing me to the angry gods or something?" Spike asked, half wondering if it wasn't something like that. Hell, if he had any evidence it would work, he'd offer himself up as the bloody sacrifice. New scents moved through the air—human scents.

"Actually, I wanted to make sure you didn't threaten anyone unnecessarily," Angel said, giving Spike the sort of gaze he had a hundred years ago when Spike had been on the verge of offending Darla. Spike just snorted his disgust. Angel didn't have half the balls Angelus had, so the glare didn't mean all that much.

"You don't seem to remember who won last time we had a problem," Spike pointed out, remembering the way hot pokers had slid through Angel's flesh.

"And yet you didn't get the ring of Amara," Angel said smugly.
"Good job there, mate. You destroyed the only weapon that might have given us a chance to win. Bloody brilliant, that," Spike snapped back. Angel had the good sense to look a little pained.

"Oh my god. Are you two really twelve years old or do you just like to pretend total immaturity?" Buffy demanded.

"I'm getting attitude from Captain Peroxide. It doesn't necessarily bring out the champion in me," Angel said.

"Neither does eating lawyers," Spike said with his sweetest smile.

Angel glared for a second. "At least I would rather strike out at enemies than attack an ally," Angel said with a meaningful look in Buffy's direction.

"Great. Hey, you two just keep going because I haven't had enough jealous vampire crap for one night. I should let the two of you fight it out, but in case you've forgotten, we have a little problem."

"Is that why Peaches brought his human minions?" Spike asked with another cold smile for his sire. The poof
always loved his power too much—his demon would want to turn the humans into minions, that was for bloody sure. So he wasn't surprised when Angel's expression turned stony.

"Are they always this confrontational?" Wesley stepped out from the shadows.

Buffy smiled. "Oh, this is them playing nice. You should see them when they really get going."

"Yes, I remember. Hot pokers were involved," Wesley said. "I believe it's relatively safe."

"Relatively would be a relative term." Jonathan stepped to Wesley's side, his eyes darting around. So Angel had brought his magic users. Spike wasn't sure what that meant, but he'd be a lot more comfortable if he had Tara and Willow out here to meet them.

"Spike won't hurt you again," Buffy said in a soft voice.

Spike rolled his eyes. He'd never hurt the man; he'd just driven the get-away car when Xander had kidnapped Jonathan before shipping him off to L.A.
"Spike never hurt me," Jonathan protested. "If Spike and Xander hadn't gotten me away from Warren and convinced me that I had choices other than his twisted offer of friendship—well, I don't know where I'd be."

"Dead," Spike offered. Jonathan was just too soft, too unwilling to defend his own power for that friendship to end any other way.

Instead of protesting that, Jonathan just nodded. "I know. Is Andrew okay?" he asked with a hopeful tone that revealed a huge, soft underbelly.

"We can go in the house and ask Riley that," Spike suggested. He might love Buffy, but he wasn't trusting her reasons for setting up a meeting this way. Jonathan's eyes darted to the house before he looked to Angel for some sort of permission.

"Perhaps we should pool our resources," Wesley agreed, his own gaze going to Angel.

Spike rolled his eyes again. Leave it to the poof to find some way to set himself up as the king of his own little kingdom. For a second, Spike thought Angel was going to agree; then Buffy spoke up. "No. Not yet. Jonathan, did
you bring the spells?"

"Right here," Jonathan agreed patting a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Luv?" Spike asked Buffy, his instincts jangling as he fought an urge to get the hell out of Dodge.

Buffy reached out and rested her hand against his arm for a second. "Trust me?" she asked, her voice a plea that cut down to Spike's soul.

"Of course," he agreed, and it gave him more than a little satisfaction that Angel looked downright disgusted. And he should. He'd walked away from Buffy, and Spike was the one still here, fighting by her side. He should be disgusted with himself for bloody giving up.

"We can use Halvard's house," Buffy said with a gesture toward the empty home. She led the way with confident steps, but Spike hesitated, waiting until the others moved toward the door before he followed, and even then he sent up a silent prayer that someone would glance out a window and see them. Right now, Spike would even settle for having Riley nearby. He trusted soldier boy more than he trusted Angel.
Inside the house, Wesley and Jonathan moved into the empty front room and started unpacking their bags as Buffy and Angel watched.

"Are you sure you can trust this power of Xander's?" Angel asked. Even though he hadn't technically said anything against Xander, Spike could hear the disrespect in the tone.

"It got him past you more than once," Buffy pointed out, and Spike grinned as that hit registered on Angel's face.

"Bloody right. When you tried to kill Buffy at the hospital, Xander used a bit of the truth to twist you around." There was nothing quite as satisfying as kicking a man when he was down.

"That was Angelus," Angel said darkly.

"It would explain why he's drawn to conflicts and the supernatural," Wesley offered. "Soothsayers are often attracted to major conflicts, which is ironic considering that so many soothsayers throughout history have been soundly ignored in those same conflicts."
"Not a fun magical power," Jonathan agreed. "And I'm sorry because I really like Xander."

Spike frowned. "He doesn't have a bloody disease, you nit."

"No, he has soothsaying," Jonathan said in the same tone someone else might say cancer.

"Spike, it's a power that often leads others to hate the bearer, not that Xander needs help getting people to dislike him." Angel looked supremely pleased at himself for using that insult.

"No, not like some people who have to murder soddin' fish to really brass off some witch," Spike responded. That took the starch out of Angel's spine.

"I'm about to get two bars of mouth-sized soap," Buffy warned, her sharp gaze going from Spike to Angel. "Spike, if we believe Xander's a soothsayer, we may have a problem."

Spike tilted his head. "A problem? A problem this lot is supposed to solve?"
"A problem Xander can't know about," Buffy said quietly, and the disquiet in Spike's gut got a whole lot worse.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because Xander once said that I have to die to stop the evil."

Buffy might have said the words calmly enough, but Spike could feel cold panic clawing at his stomach, and from the gobsmacked expression on Angel's face, he hadn't expected that any more than Spike had. Jonathan froze, a candle in his hand, and Wesley reached up and ripped off his glasses.

"Xander... Xander said that?" Wesley finally managed to stammer out.

Buffy nodded. "It was right after we found out that bringing me back opened the door. He got this confused look on his face and said that if having two slayers around unbalanced the universe, how could we ever get the world back on balance as long as I was alive. Willow hushed him, and we all just dropped it after that, but now..." Buffy stopped, and for the first time, Spike could see past the façade to the pain she was hiding
underneath. He took a step closer, and so did Angel.

"We'll find another way. Xander doesn't know anything," Angel offered. Spike couldn't agree with the second part, but he sure as bloody hell agreed with the first.

Buffy shook her head, and that flash of pain vanished. "Angel, who's with Connor right now?"

"Connor?" Angel managed to look even more confused for a second.

"Connor," Buffy repeated, "the baby you gave up redemption for. Who's with him?"

Angel seemed a little confused, but he answered anyway. "Faith, Gunn, Cordelia, Groo, Nina, Lawson..."

"Lawson? Sam Lawson?" Spike demanded.

Angel cringed.

"Bloody hell, mate. He'll stake you and your ankle-biter the minute your back is turned."

Buffy frowned in confusion. "Who's Sam Lawson?"
"A vampire," Spike answered. He remembered the bloke from the submarine Angel had stolen from the Nazis. Spike never could figure out why Angel had bothered with it, and as much as Spike liked to pretend Angel had come for him—to save him from Nazi experimentation—he just couldn't honestly believe it.

Buffy gave him an indulgent look. "So are two of the people in this room. I used to go for the vampires-bad theory of life, but these days I seem to be a little short on absolutes. So again, why the major freak out over Lawson?"

It was Wesley who answered. "Angel turned him in the 1940s."

"Angelus turned a lot of people." Buffy looked to Spike.

"Drusilla turned me," Spike said, "and Angelus sired me. Angel there doesn't have the rocks to sire a fledge, which is why he made Lawson and then dumped him."

"Which was kinder than staking the two of you," Angel said darkly. Then he sighed. "I thought maybe you..."
"Wot? I'd clean up your mess? Not bloody likely," Spike snorted. He might feel off-balance with Buffy's little bombshell, but torturing Angel was familiar territory. "Angel needed Lawson to fix something on this submarine he was hijacking, and the git got hurt. Angel and I could have just gone for a swim, but that would have left the humans rotting at the bottom of the ocean and Lawson asked to be turned."

"Melodramatic much?" Buffy asked softly.

Spike snorted. Lawson had been a self-sacrificing git. The reference to sacrifice made Spike suddenly uncomfortable and he shook his head to force his thoughts away from that old memory. "Anyway, Angel tossed him out on his ear, and last I saw him, he was on the west coast spending half his time swearing to find Angel and prove himself and spending the other half planning tortures for him."

"While Lawson has certainly proved challenging, I do believe he is a useful if not entirely trustworthy member of the team," Wesley offered. Spike just raised his eyebrow at that. He'd been the vampire trying to fit in with humans, trying to understand their rules, and before the soddin' soul he'd been a failure. He couldn't
imagine that Lawson was any different. Oh, he'd kept plenty of the human bits, just like Spike had right after getting turned, but feeling the human bits and being human were different beasts.

"Is there a point in all this?" Angel demanded.

Buffy gave him a small smile. "If you thought you had to die to save Connor, you would, wouldn't you?" she asked. Angel just frowned. "I'm saving Dawn and Willow and Xander. I'm saving the whole world, and if Xander's right about this, I would rather die than know my life makes their futures impossible."

"That's why you wanted access to the oracle," Angel said wearily.

"Oracle?" Spike crossed his arms. They'd gone to an oracle already, and they knew what had to be done. Evil had to make a sacrifice, and Spike sure as bloody hell hadn't heard anything about Buffy dying.

"I have a really good relationship with the Loxian oracle," Jonathan said in a very proud tone of voice. Spike's eyebrows went up. The oracle had a reputation for being accurate, but opening a portal was next to impossible,
and the oracle had a bad habit of slamming it shut the moment someone asked a question that offended some set of internal rules that the bloody oracle never explained.

"And after the First tried convincing me that the problem was that we didn't have enough power on our side, I got to thinking..." Buffy shrugged.

"That's where you got the plan with making all the potentials into slayers," Spike guessed, "the First put it in your head?"

"Actually, I thought I came up with that one on my own, but I came up with it right after talking to the First, and now Xander seems to think that it's end-of-the-world badness, so... yes, I'm guessing that the First put that plan there, so I'm going with the opposite. The First wants me to scramble for power, so I'm giving up power." Buffy made an odd face. "The plan was more logical when I was only saying it in my head."

"It's insane," Angel said, and Jonathan paused in his work. He'd cast salt and what looked like abraus seeds across the room, but now he stood clutching a red candle as he watched the conflict.
"So, we ask the oracle," Buffy said, "but we don't tell Xander. Agreed?" Buffy looked right at Spike.

Even though Spike didn't want to, he nodded his head in agreement. It would bloody kill Xander if he knew Buffy was even considering suicide because of some random comment he'd made. The Loxian oracle had a good track record, so they could just let the oracle tell Buffy she was 'round the twist.

"So, we just ask this thing how to defeat the First?" Spike asked. Jonathan went back to placing candles, but his hand looked like it was shaking. Spike was feeling a need to light a cigarette himself.

Jonathan shook his head. "Asking an oracle to solve your problems is like cheating at life. If we want to save our world, we have to figure that out on our own, but we can ask the oracle whether certain statements Xander's made are true soothsayings or just... well..." Jonathan's eyes darted toward Buffy. "Whether they're just Xander."

"Maybe I should go get him," Spike suggested. He didn't like having Buffy keep secrets from Xander. "We don't have to tell him why we're doing the spell."
Buffy's hand darted out and caught his arm. "Spike, if you gave Xander a gun and told him he could save the world by shooting Willow dead, what would he do?"

"Wot?" Spike reared back. Willow dying... honestly, it was one of the possibilities he'd considered. He didn't really consider her evil as much as just manipulative and ignorant, but she'd been the one to murder in the name of goodness. If the universe wanted a sacrifice from evil, he'd wondered if she should offer up her life or her powers. But to ask Xander to do it would be flat-out sadistic. "If something needs to be done, I'll do it. You leave him out of it," Spike said, staring at Buffy through narrow eyes.

Instead of getting upset, she nodded and gave Spike another of her rare, soft smile. Spike really did not understand what the hell was going on. "Which is why he can't be here to hear this, Spike. I'm right. I know it." She gave a small shrug, and Spike's guts tightened more.

Spike opened his mouth, but he really didn't have any arguments against this. He could only wait for the oracle to tell her how wrong she was. Unfortunately, Jonathan didn't seem to be moving very fast as he set out candles
and stones and crystals. He rang a bell and then a small triangle, letting each one reverberate until the last note faded before setting it down on the ground. Wesley followed behind him, muttering supportively and handing Jonathan various magical tools as they slowly turned the front room into a suitable portal.

"I'm ready," Jonathan finally said. Spike's fingers twitched and he wondered if Angel would have a bloody cow if he just lit one cigarette.

"Finish the spell," Angel said.

Jonathan nodded and then called out in Latin, and a small windstorm raced through the room, making all the candle flames dance without putting them out. Jonathan chanted above the din and the air started to split open revealing a mass of moving colors, like a giant kaleidoscope. The wind started to settle, and the edges of the portal shimmered as they stabilized. Spike got his first good look at the Loxian oracle—an undulating mass of colors. It didn't look exactly impressive.

"I come bearing gifts and gratitude," Jonathan said. He stepped forward and pressed his hands against the surface of the portal and the colors flashed a vivid green.
Wesley held out a small red bag and Jonathan took it, holding it against the surface of the portal for a moment. Then Jonathan backed away and the bag slowly sank into the horizontal surface. Hopefully that meant the oracle liked whatever Jonathan had offered.

"We have a few questions," Jonathan said. "We trust you to give us the answer."

Spike snorted. He didn't trust anyone, but an oracle this strong didn't have much of a reason to lie, either. This wasn't his home dimension. Spike wondered if the creature would even register Earth's demise as more than a blip on its radar. "You see, we have a soothsayer, only it's hard to know for sure and we aren't sure when he's soothsaying and when he's talking out of human fears and needs," Jonathan explained.

The oracle's voice boomed out of the void. "Children of Cassandra speak only truth, whether the sons of Adam wish to believe or not."

"Okay," Jonathan quickly agreed, "but he refuses to say if he is a child of Cassandra. He doesn't even know."

That seemed to stop the oracle. The swirls of colors
seemed to stop for a moment, and when they resumed their movement, it was a slower, more deliberate pattern.

"Since you are more reliable, we had hoped you would simply tell us whether Xander was soothsaying when he made some statements," Jonathan said.

"Petty concerns are of no interest to me."

"This concerns an entire dimension dying," Jonathan blurted out as the edges of the portal began to shimmer more brightly.

And again, the oracle seemed to simply pause for a moment, all the shining colors freezing in place like an expressionistic watercolor.

"The dimension protected by the slayer—this one—the First is trying to destroy it," Jonathan said with a little more calm.

"The First evil will always yearn for destruction and despair." This time the oracle's words were a tuneless chant, a litany that seemed to bore it.
"But he's going to get it. Xander said that Buffy's life would always keep a door open for evil to try and destroy the universe." The oracle's colors shifted, and for a moment, Spike had the impression of a thousand eyes looking out at them, at Buffy. She stood up a little straighter. "Will it? Will Buffy's life keep the door open?" Jonathan sucked in a breath and held it, and the impression of surrealistic eyes remained even if Spike couldn't actually see any individual color in the shape of an eye.

"It will." The oracle's colors shifted again, erasing any feature.

"Will her death close the door?" Angel asked. The oracle didn't respond, and Jonathan gave Angel a desperate look, one that made it clear that he wanted Angel to just shut up.

"Will Buffy's death close the door?" Jonathan asked.

The oracle seemed to ignore that as well.

"We already know that evil has to make a selfless sacrifice," Spike pointed out. "This is bloody pointless." If Angel thought he was going to come in here and help
Buffy commit some sort of mystical suicide, Spike was going to hogtie the vamp and leave him outside to wait for sunrise.

"Would her death keep the door closed if we could find an evil willing to make a sacrifice?" Jonathan quickly blurted out.

"Yes." The oracle's single word fell like napalm. Spike stared at it, a growing horror in his heart as he realized that Buffy would never live if it meant keeping that door open. She was going to die, sooner rather than later, and there was fuck-all he could do about it. Instead of getting upset at the oracle or Buffy, Spike glared at Angel. He'd brought this confirmation of a truth none of them had wanted.

"Would Spike sacrificing his life be enough of a sacrifice?" Jonathan asked.

"You have your answer already."

Spike sighed. "It isn't. Xander already said that I'd just be bloody giving in and that he'd follow me to hell."

"A vampire has no life to sacrifice. The vampire must
sacrifice what it values most." With that, the oracle flashed with a light so bright that Spike was blinded and fell back. Then there was absolute darkness as not only the oracle but also the candles all went dark. Spike was blinded for a moment, his demon eyes unable to adjust to the change in light so fast.

"Okay, that was less than helpful," Wesley said.

"We may not like the answers, but we have them," Angel said, his voice quiet. He looked from Buffy to Spike, and Spike straightened up.

"What the vampire values the most?" Wesley asked. "What, should we have a ritual sacrifice of his coat?"

Buffy looked at Spike with wide eyes. "Oh Spike, I’m so sorry," she whispered. Spike clenched his teeth because he knew what he valued most, even if the nit in the corner didn't.

"Spike values something much more than his coat," Angel said softly.

Spike closed his eyes and nodded. It was true enough. There was only one thing he valued more than his life.
Love. He'd been love's bitch since he'd been turned, and he'd never tried to pretend otherwise. The universe didn't want him to sacrifice his life—it wanted him to sacrifice his love.

Part Forty-Seven

"Are you sure?" Angel asked again.

Spike whirled around, fury making him see the world through the slightly yellow tint of a demon's eyes. "Ask again, and I'll bloody sacrifice you as the warm up act, mate."

"Hey, just calm down," Buffy said, darting between them.

"I'm not entirely sure..." Wesley started saying. "I could reopen the portal," Jonathan offered at the same time.

"Enough," Buffy shouted over all of them. "Angel, just go."
Angel's spine went stiff and his mouth turned into a hard line.

"Seriously, Angel, this isn't your fight. You fixed your unbalanced half of the universe, and now we have to fix ours." Buffy glanced over at Jonathan. "Thanks for lending us an oracle opener, but Spike and I need to talk."

"About this plan of yours?" Angel demanded.

"About reality. Seriously, Angel, leave." Buffy walked to him and looked up into his eyes. "Please, Angel. We have different lives, and you just don't fit back into my life anymore. I'm sorry."

Angel looked down, and Spike tried very hard to bite his tongue because he knew how it would tear him up if she sent him away. For a long time, they stared at each other, and then Angel nodded, his gaze dropping to the floor for a second before he looked over toward Jonathan and Wesley. "Let's go."

"But Angel," Wesley started to say. Angel shook his head. "Not now, Wes. We can talk in the car."
Spike stepped to the side and let them pass. "We should talk to the witches," Spike said the second the front door clicked shut behind Jonathan. This was too big of a decision for them to make alone.

"Did you know in 1211 the slayer at the time closed the Antioch hellmouth altogether by sacrificing her life on top of the seal? She traded herself to a demon who was going to use children to open the seal. The kids all got out of there, and apparently the demon thought the slayer blood would supersize the spell. The surprise was on him." She gave a crooked grin.

"1211?"

"Hey, I can research. I hate research, but I can do it when I have to," Buffy said.

"You've been planning this for a while."

Buffy nodded. "I have. I just didn't think—"

"That the universe would want me to sacrifice my love?" Spike asked. He reached in his pocket for a cigarette. "You should say goodbye to the others."
"I can't, Spike. They'll try to find another way, and I'm tired of them all putting their lives on the line when this is my fight. I've put them in danger long enough."

"They bloody deserve—"

"To not have to live with the guilt and the fear that they could have stopped me if they only knew the right words. Do you want Xander to live with that for the rest of his life?" Buffy demanded.

Spike's hands were shaking as he tried to light his cigarette. He'd been willing to sacrifice himself, but this... this was harder. "He'll forgive you," Buffy said softly.

Spike gave her a wry smile. "Thanks for offering the comforting lie, ducks, but he really won't. He loves you. Fucking hell, I remember how he tore himself up about killing Warren, so if we do this, I'll be losing two people I love."

Buffy didn't answer, but her hand reached out for his. He hated that she could feel him tremble, but he didn't argue as she intertwined their fingers. "I left Dawn a letter, explaining why I had to do this, explaining that the
spell took me off my path, and I had to get back on it, even if it killed me that I wasn't going to be here to give her a hard time. I also might have threatened to haunt Halvard if he ever hurt her."

Spike snorted. He'd offer to make that threat in person, but Dawn would probably stake him next time she saw him. Hell, she'd been ready to stake him for hurting Buffy before he'd had a soul that allowed him to even understand what he'd done. If he did this, he did it knowing just how much pain he was causing.

"I left letters for the others, too. Even you. I guess that one isn't really important now."

Spike wanted to make a joke, to pretend that none of this was happening, but he just couldn't. He just held her hand.

"I feel guilty about what happened between us, you know."

"Wasn't your fault," Spike hurried to say.

"It wasn't only my fault, but partially my fault? Sure it was. I guess... I just wasn't ready to look at myself or at
my life, and you were sort of my drug of choice. It wasn't fair to either of us."

"I never minded helping you through. Don't pretend it didn't help you," Spike begged her. He had to know that he had done something right for her.

"It did help. I thought I was ready to stand on my own, but I just wasn't grown up enough to see I wasn't grown up. I see you with Xander, and maybe now I can see how much wasn't right between us." She squeezed his hand and Spike stood with his cigarette in his other hand, not sure what to do with the ash. It seemed a mite impolite to go burning holes in the neighbor's carpet. Spike knew he was trying to distract himself from the horror staring him in the face, but he needed to do something.

"I have a theory," Buffy said softly. "I'm cookie dough. I'm not done baking. I'm not finished becoming whoever the hell it is I'm going to turn out to be." Her voice got softer. "Who I might have been. But you can't blame cookie dough for being doughish and you can't blame other people for seeing cooking dough and thinking that it's good to eat because lots of people like to eat—" Buffy stopped. "I really should have chosen another analogy."
"You're psychologically traumatizing me with cookie dough," Spike agreed in a pathetic attempted to get her to smile. It didn't work.

"This is going to work because there is love between us," Buffy said. "You're going to make it through this, and so is Xander... and Willow and Tara... and Dawn and Bonnie. You're all going to make it through."

"But you aren't," Spike said.

"I had two years that I never should have had. I had two years to watch Dawn grow into a young woman that terrifies me and to meet Xander's daughter and to see Willow learn to have a slightly healthier relationship with Tara. I had two years to get to know the real you."

Buffy reached up and stroked her fingers along Spike's jaw. "It's worth it."

Spike clenched his teeth to keep from spewing out all the fury and pain that he could feel growing in his chest.

"So, we need to get to the hellmouth."

"Now?"
Buffy looked up at him with such sadness that Spike's soul felt like a weight crushing his chest.

"Right then," Spike said with as much bravado as he could. If he couldn't talk her out of this, the least he could do was make it less painful. He stood looking at her, waiting for her to make her final choice.

"Showtime," she said gently and she turned and used her hold of Spike's hand to tug him toward the front door.

Outside, the night was unnaturally dark and Spike could hear scuffling in the shadows, but nothing stopped them as they walked empty streets hand in hand. Spike remembered the first time he'd come to town with Drusilla in tow. He'd been so sure he could take the hellmouth and hold it for his princess, despite the fact he'd never held a territory. Dru liked moving, so he'd moved. If he could go back to that version of himself, a demon unburdened by soul or guilt or pain, he wondered what he'd say. Would that version of himself even believe how much it hurt to hold a slayer's hand and walk down the street toward her death? Could that version understand how much Spike already grieved for Buffy and for the loss of Xander's love? Probably not.
The school was a hulking dragon in the night, a huge shadow with one wing that was really the auditorium that rose above the squat body. Like the rest of the town, it was absolutely dark, but Buffy led them surely through unlocked doors and empty corridors. Spike could feel the frisson of fear that ran down his spine when he caught the first scent of pure evil rising from the basement.

Buffy didn't hesitate as she led them down the stairs and into the room where the seal of hell lay under a foot of dirt. She stopped just inside the door and looked around. "Well, this is it."

"We don't have to do this here," Spike said as he considered the dirt and the spiders and the endless stink of evil. This wasn't a proper place for Buffy to lay down her life. Spike blinked as his emotions threatened to slip free of the tight reins he was trying to keep hold of.

"Yes, Spike, we do. If this works, then something should happen. This is the battlefield. It's the right place for me."

Spike clenched his jaw as he tried to avoid screaming a dozen curses. "You shouldn't be alone," Spike said slowly. If not Dawn, then Xander or Red should be here.
Buffy stepped close. "I'm not." She rested her palm on Spike's chest, right over where his unbeating heart felt like it was getting squeezed into a space half the size it needed. Spike hadn't ever realized that grief could cause such intense physical pain.

One of Spike's tears slipped loose, and he took a deep breath in his struggle for control.

"Spike." Buffy stopped and then she looked away, her eyes scanning the ground where the hellmouth was buried under that great seal. "I know in my heart I'm right. And hey, I understand if you don't believe me because I'm not exactly the great leader. I tried to be, but 'tried' would be the significant word there." Her grief and her belief in her own failure clung to her like a cloak.

Spike shook his head and reached out to gently cup her cheek and pull her gaze back to him. "You listen to me. I've been alive a bit longer than you, and dead a lot longer than that. I've seen things you couldn't imagine, and done things I prefer you didn't. I don't exactly have a reputation for being a thinker. I follow my blood, which doesn't exactly rush in the direction of my brain. So I make a lot of mistakes, a lot of wrong bloody calls. A hundred plus years, and there are very few things I've
ever been sure of," Spike looked into her eyes, willing her
to believe him. "One of them is you."

Buffy's breath caught in her chest. She blinked and
looked up at the ceiling. "I don't—" She stopped and
struggled with herself for a moment, and Spike ached for
her. He wanted so much to say the right thing, but he
didn't know what that was. "I haven't been the best
person since coming back. I feel so much, and I can't—."
She reached up and stroked Spike's cheek. "I love you."

Spike looked into her eyes. There was some part of her
that believed that—that felt that—but it wasn't the sort
of love that Spike needed. It wasn't the all-consuming
love he felt for her. It wasn't the sort of love that made
her want to give up the whole bloody world. Maybe he
was selfish, but that was the love Spike wanted. And
after he did this, he doubted he'd ever have it again.
Xander loved Buffy as much as Spike—more maybe. He'd
never forgive Spike for doing this. Maybe that would be
sacrifice enough for the universe. Spike was killing one
love and giving up another. More tears slipped free as he
thought of losing not only the two loves of his life, but of
losing Bonnie and Dawn, too. They'd never forgive him.
Never. And they shouldn't. If he was smart enough, he'd
find another way. Only he couldn't.
Reaching up, Spike caught her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her palm. "I love what you are, what you do, how you try. I've seen your kindness and your strength. I've seen the best and the worst of you. And I understand with perfect clarity exactly what you are. You're a hell of a woman. You're the one, Buffy."

Buffy's eyes were red and swollen, but she didn't cry as she gave him a nod. "I remember telling Dawn that living is harder than dying." She looked down, and Spike understood. Buffy knew what Spike was giving up, what he would live with for the rest of eternity. He'd dealt in death—delivered women and children to reaper, and he felt every one. But only his mother's death had the power to destroy him because he'd loved her. With all his soul and all his demon, he'd loved his mum, and now he was doing it again—killing the woman he loved.

"It'll be fine, luv," Spike lied.

She looked up at him. "No, it won't. But thanks for trying to lie to me. Spike, I'm so sorry. I could have Angel—"

"No," Spike cut her off. "If this is the sacrifice the universe wants, I'll bloody give it." Spike was willing to
die to save Xander and Bonnie, so he couldn't balk at this.

"Not really the way I had this planned. But I think this time, it's your move."

Spike nodded and wrapped his arms around her, desperate to feel her warmth and her strength one more time.

"It's peaceful on the other side," Buffy whispered, still trying to reassure him. Spike didn't try to stop the tears that fell now. She couldn't see them. Spike reached up and brushed sun-blonde hair back from her shoulder, and she tilted her head to the side. He could smell her blood running just under her skin, and it sickened him. She was Buffy, the woman he loved, she was the champion and part of his family. She wasn't food, but the demon rose to the siren's call of blood.

"Thank you," Buffy whispered, and Spike's mouth opened in a silent scream of grief and pain. She'd given too much. Why did the universe demand her death? She leaned into him, and Spike forced himself to let fangs touch soft skin. For a second, he just stood, his fangs at her neck without breaking skin. Then, pushing aside all
the pain that threatened to crush him, Spike slid his fangs in and started drinking.

Buffy gave a little gasp and then pressed closer, her arms going around his waist. Her blood was even richer than his first slayer, and Spike could feel the power making him light headed, but still he drank. The walls of the room began to glow just as Buffy's heart starting pounding rabbit-fast, the last trick of a dying body desperate for blood.

The glow intensified, and Spike opened his eyes. Every brick, every mote of dust in the air and speck of dirt seemed to glow. Spike took one long, last fatal drink and then pulled his fangs out, sliding back into his human visage as he slowly lowered Buffy to the ground. She was still clinging to life with the tenacity of a slayer, but she was dying. She tried to raise her hand, but she wasn't strong enough. Spike picked it up and held it.

"Thank you," she whispered again.

"I love you." Spike leaned down and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek as he watched the light slowly fading from her eyes. The school started to rumble, and Spike knelt next to Buffy, brushing the hair back from her face
as he watched death claim her again. This third time was final, and the world had lost one of the greatest slayers—one of the greatest women—to ever walk it. And most people would never know her name or the sacrifice she'd made.

The first stone fell, and Spike just sat as dust rose from the shaking ground. Being buried alive would be a proper ending for him as well. Some old culture had done that—buried the loved ones alive so they could protect the dead in the next world. Part of Spike wanted to just lay down with her and go to the next world at her side, but he knew that he'd never go to the same place as someone like Buffy. That just wasn't his fate. Even so, he couldn't find the strength to move.

"Spike!" a voice called. He ignored it.

"The building is collapsing!"

That was so obvious that he didn't bother answering. A strong hand caught him under one arm and yanked him upright, and Spike snarled, finally recognizing Angel. A stone fell and caught Angel on the back, sending him to one knee, but with a snarl, Angel fought his way back up to his feet and grabbed Spike again.
"Just get the bloody hell out," Spike said, pulling to free his arm, but Buffy's blood had left him just a bit out of touch with his own body, and he lost his balance and went to one knee right next to her lifeless body. With a sob, he reached out and gently closed the eyes even as dust settled across her as if the earth was trying to bury its favorite daughter.

"Come on, you idiot," Angel said, pulling again, and Spike snarled as Angel pulled him away from the body. A beam cracked loudly and one end fell to the ground, spilling bricks and chunks of concrete into the room. Spike threw himself toward Buffy, unwilling to see her flesh and bones broken, but then he was flying in the opposite direction, out the open door.

Spike hit the far wall and shook his head as he tried to figure out what was going on. He'd drunk so much slayer blood that he felt a bit like he had at Woodstock, unable to really get his bearings. Then Angel was there in front of him, grabbing his arms, and Spike snarled again.

"You'll thank me when you've sobered up," Angel said, and then a huge fist was heading for Spike's face. Normally, Spike would duck, but for the briefest
moment, he was caught in a spell of wonder at the idea of someone punching him, and that was long enough for the fist to connect to his face. With the wall behind his head, there really wasn't anywhere for him to go, and the hard blow stunned him enough that when Angel picked him up and flung him over a shoulder, Spike couldn't protest. He couldn't do anything. He'd killed Buffy.

Part Forty-Eight

Spike watched the town speed past, and he really wanted to just throw himself out, to let the car crush his bones before he had to face Xander and the others knowing what he'd done. He might have tried it only he knew he couldn't win a fight with Angel, not right now. His chin throbbed from the last blow, and Spike's pride kept him from throwing a wobbly in front of Angel's minions. His pain was his, not some bloody sideshow for them to gawk at.
Angel pulled up in front of Xander's house and got out, but Spike just groped through his pockets blindly searching for a cigarette. "Should we..." Jonathan started to ask.

"Wait here. If he tries running off..." Angel sighed and Spike paused in his search long enough to give Angel a two fingered salute. "Just yell or something," Angel finished.

"Of course," Wesley agreed. Then again, he would. Angel ran his own little group. He was an alpha equal to Buffy and he could have bloody challenged her daft ideas. Spike's fingers shook. Why hadn't he asked Angel to stop her? Spike finally found a cigarette and brought it up to his lips, struggling to control limbs that seemed to want to twitch and shiver uncontrollably.

"Angel?" a surprised voice said. Willow. "Oh goddess. It's so nice to see you."

"Speak for yourself, Will." That was Xander, and Spike's hands started shaking harder. His memory brought up the image of Buffy falling from the tower after Glorificus opened the portal. Except this time, instead of landing in a tangle of broken limbs, her body was carefully
composed, the way Spike had last seen it with the dust from the falling ceiling just starting to settle over her cooling form. He wrenched his eyes open before the vision could swallow him whole.

"Spike?" Xander asked from about two inches in front of Spike. Spike jerked and realized that he'd lost some time. From the tone, Xander'd been calling for a while.

"He had a bit of a shock," Angel said. The wanker always was one for pulling a plaster off slow. Spike preferred to get the pain over quick and move on to the drinking and immolation portions of the evening.

"I killed Buffy," he announced in a voice as strong as he could make it.

Xander reared back, his outstretched hand jerked back as though about to get bit by a snake, but then Spike had expected that.

"You what?" Giles demanded, his voice rising like some prat still going through adolescence.

"He didn't have any choice," Angel tried explaining. Spike snorted. Right, like Rupert was going to accept that
explanation from anyone, much less Angel.

"But—What?" Willow's voice was small and lost, and Spike looked over at her. She was the only one he really worried about. Oh, Rupert might stake him, but Spike couldn't really bring himself to give a toss about that. Willow, though, Willow could do some mojo to Buffy's spirit again, and Spike couldn't have that.

"She's where she wants to be, so don't go mucking with her soul. Understand?" Spike demanded, his demon face coming forward.

"She... she... but..." Giles ran out of words. Spike looked slowly over at Xander, and he was just staring at Spike, his scent stained with grief and shock.

"We called the Loxian oracle," Jonathan offered in a small voice. "It said that the door between the First and us couldn't be closed as long as she was alive. Or it couldn't be kept closed, anyway," he finished, his voice a whisper.

Giles' back went stiff. "So you lot decided to kill her?" His eyes narrowed and if he'd had a crossbow in that moment, Spike had no doubt that someone would have
been dust.

"Giles," Wesley said gently.

"And you," Giles turned on Wesley, "have you any sense? Surely you have read the stories of how oracles can twist their answers around to confuse the issue. One oracle says she has to die, and you all trot along like the good little sheep you are."

Wesley's face lost most of its color. "I am very aware of the dangers, both of true oracles and of the sort of false oracles and prophesies that can trick the unaware. I assure you—"

"I don't care about your assurances. Where is she?" Giles demanded. Willow was sobbing softly, and Tara came out, a confused look on her face. "Where did you leave her?"

No one seemed too quick to answer, so Spike did. "At the school, right over the seal."

Giles turned white. "Good lord. What have you done?"

"We can take her car. Tara, lock the door behind you,"
Xander said, but what Spike really noticed was the way Xander wasn't looking at him, the way his voice trembled and he kept his physical distance as if Spike was something too disgusting to touch. He deserved it. Spike bloody deserved to be hated, so he didn't even flinch from Xander's pain.

Maybe this was his fate—to always end with the people he loved hating him. Buffy had flinched from his touch after he'd first got back with his shiny new soul, his mother had rejected him after he'd turned her, Drusilla had torn her hair and screamed when he got near, and now Xander looked as if he might be physically ill. Of all the people he'd loved in his life, all the people he just couldn't stop loving, Angel was the only one who didn't loathe him. And it wasn't like Angel was rolling out any welcoming mat. Five people in a hundred years. Five people who bloody hated him. Spike watched as Xander hurried to Buffy's car, the others tumbling after him, Giles and Willow and Tara.

"They'll understand once they have time to think about it," Wesley offered.

The last thing Spike wanted was some false assurance from a git who hated him. "Sod off," Spike snarled.
Angel just sighed and got behind the wheel of his car as Xander started Buffy's old heap and lurched off into the night. She'd been so proud of that car and her job at the school—they were proof that she was more than just a slayer, more than just the bringer of death. Spike had promised her that he'd get under the hood and really tune up the old lady, but he never had. It just seemed like there'd been more important things.

"You did the right thing." Angel started his car and pulled out into the empty street. The red tail lights on Buffy's car were already vanishing into the distance, and Spike felt a small twinge of worry that Xander was driving recklessly. He was human, and human bones broke entirely too easily, but Spike smoked his cigarette and stared out into the dark.

The town felt different. The drifting wisps of power that always caught against his skin like free floating bits of spiderweb were gone. "Feels different," Spike commented.

Angel glanced over. "The hellmouth closed, Spike."

"Oh." Made sense. Spike wondered if Buffy knew that
her plan had worked, at least in part. He didn't know if the First still had a way into the world, but the hellmouth and the army of Turok Han that had filled her nightmares were locked away, trapped behind her sacrifice. They drove in silence, the distance seeming to grow, or maybe that was just Spike's dread of having to face Xander again. He hated seeing the old animosity in those brown eyes.

"Give them a chance to recover and to read the letters," Angel suggested when the silence went on long enough. Spike didn't bother to answer, and Angel gave a long-suffering sigh as he pulled his car in behind Buffy's. Xander, Giles, Willow and Tara all stood at the edge of an enormous crater that had opened, swallowing the school, a large section of the road, and half a house that had been ripped in half so that it looked like a child's dollhouse with one side open, all the furniture still visible in the dark ruin.

Willow's sobs were loud enough to sound like they were echoing through the night, and she slowly slid to her knees, clinging to Tara, pulling her down so they knelt together on the edge of the crater. Giles was silent, but Xander's breath came so hard and fast that Spike could hear it.
Angel closed the car door as softly as he could after Jonathan and Wesley got out, leaving Spike in the car. Spike looked over to see if he had the keys, but the wanker had taken them with him. Eying the street, Spike wondered if he should just get out and walk away, but then again, the others deserved a chance to vent their spleen on him.

Angel joined the four while Jonathan and Wesley found the shelter of a tree. "She said she left all of you letters." Looking down into the pit, Angel just waited.

"Why?" Xander asked, his voice so pained that Spike ached to reach out for him.

"She knew what she had to do. Her life was keeping the door open for the First. Her death could close the Hellmouth."

Xander was shaking his head. "We could have found another way." He turned toward Angel in fury. "We would have found another way. Why didn't you stop her?" Xander demanded, and he threw himself against Angel, his fists up. Spike was out of the car before his common sense reminded him that Xander didn't want
him anymore. Xander had pulled back in horror from him. But still, he stood some distance and watched while Xander flailed in some attempt to attack Angel, and Angel held his wrists as gently as he could. Wesley had moved closer, his hands coming up like he wanted to do something—protect Angel or hold Xander, maybe. Instead, he just stood watching.

"You could have found another way," Angel agreed. "But would it have been the right way? Would it have been the best way?"

"If it kept her alive, yes!" Xander screamed, but Spike could hear the lie even from a distance.

"Xander, she closed the hellmouth. She did that without putting any of you in danger by giving her own life."

"Only a willing sacrifice of great worth could even hope to close a hellmouth," Wesley agreed, but Giles was now backing away from the edge, shaking his head.

"1211 in Antioch," Giles whispered. "Please tell me that she didn't suffer like that."

"Suffer?" Xander froze in place, Angel's hands still around
his wrists. "She suffered?" His voice carried so much pain that it hurt Spike's soul. For a second, it looked like Xander was just going to collapse; Spike could see his knees tremble.

"Not for one second," Angel promised. "She was happy and content up to the end, Xander. She never suffered."

"You're lying," Giles snapped. "As much as I hate to admit it, if a slayer's death alone could close a hellmouth, the council would have sacrificed the girls. It only worked in Antioch because of Rashmoni's great suffering."

"She wasn't the one who suffered," Angel said. He turned and looked at Spike. "The oracle said that a vampire had to sacrifice what it loved most, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't sacrifice my son, not even if it meant saving the world. So, Spike sacrificed his love."

Xander's eyes found Spike, and Spike braced himself for the hatred he'd see. He wouldn't defend himself from Xander's blows the way Angel had.

"You sacrificed—" Xander's words were cut off by a hiccup that turned into a sob. Spike just stared at him. Xander took a step back, pulling his hands free from
Angel's tight grip, although Angel watched like he wanted to reach out and grab Xander. Maybe he thought Xander had a stake. Spike still wouldn't be defending himself, even if Xander did.

Taking a step closer, Xander stared at Spike, his face a twisted mask of pain. "Why?"

Spike shrugged. "Because she asked," he answered. He didn't have any answer other than that. "I knew when I did that you'd never forgive me, pet. I'm not asking that you do."

Xander's expression twisted and his mouth came open in a silent cry as tears slipped free. His hands curled into claws, and he threw himself forward. Spike braced for pain, but instead Xander clutched Spike's shirt as he finally found his voice and wailed out into the night.

"I told her that. I said it. I said it didn't make sense, that if her life opened the door, it didn't make sense that we could close it. Oh god. I said it." Xander's knees failed, and he collapsed, his hands still tangled in Spike's shirt. "I killed her."

Spike wrapped his arms around Xander and pulled him
close. Xander's muscles were shaking violently, and he hid his face in Spike's shoulder as they sank to the ground together. "My fault," Xander whispered into Spike's neck.

"No, luv. No, I did this. I laid her out over the seal and left her for the earth to bury. I did that."

Xander was trying to shake his head, and Spike held tighter, wishing that he had a way to just squeeze until he pressed out all the guilt. He'd made this choice—him and Buffy. Xander hadn't had any part in this. Spike smoothed Xander's hair, but the boy was still trembling just as hard.

"My fault," he whispered over and over like a mantra, and Spike didn't know what to say.

"Oh god." Giles turned his back on them and walked away, his shoulders slumped and his gait the shuffle of an old man. Willow was still crying, and Tara's breath came in little pained gasps. Spike looked up at Angel.

Angel slowly crossed the distance between them and crouched down so he could rest a hand on Xander's back.

"My power killed her. It's my fault," Xander whispered in
a voice tight with pain. Spike closed his eyes again his own pain which felt like it was swallowing him whole, but he didn't stop stroking Xander's hair and making a small crooning sound, even if it didn't seem to do much good.

"Your power saved her," Angel said. "You saved her from the Master and from me."

"I killed her," Xander disagreed.

"You told her the truth," Angel said. "She chose to die because living meant that Dawn would be in danger. She died for Dawn, for the world, to serve her sacred duty. She didn't die because of the truth, the truth just showed her the only escape from the trap the First had built. You showed her out of the trap, Xander."

"Listen to him, luv," Spike said. "She chose this, wanted this. It broke my bloody heart, but I'm not going to deny her a chance to save the world again. She was the slayer. She had a right to die the slayer."

Xander looked up with swollen eyes. "I made you kill her. Oh god, Spike, I'm so sorry."

Spike felt tears slip loose and he cupped the back of
Xander's head, pulling him close so that he didn't have to look into the depths of pain in Xander's eyes. "I thought you'd hate me. I thought I'd lost you, pet," Spike confessed. Xander untangled his fingers from Spike's wrinkled and torn shirt and reached around Spike's waist to hold on tightly.

"Never," Xander said. "But how can you look at me? It's my fault."

"It's the fault of the First. It's no one's fault. It's just—" Angel sighed. "I hate this. Look, Xander, your power sent her to heaven after she had a chance to save the world and close a hellmouth that has plagued humanity for hundreds of years. In the final analysis, that doesn't seem as bad as sending me to hell for a century. You did that, too."

Spike noticed that some of the trembling slowed even if the tremors still made his body shiver. Rolling his head to the side, Xander looked at Angel out of one swollen eye. "I don't like you, though."

Angel got a wry grin on his face. "I noticed. But you were right. When you told Buffy to kill me instead of stalling me for Willow's spell to take hold, you were right. Every
time Angelus fought Buffy..." Angel paused. "Every time I fought Buffy, I could see her hesitate. I could have killed her, and I would have except that I was having so much fun... and I was a little nuts. But if she had a moment's hesitation that day, I would have killed her. I would have snapped her neck if you hadn't used your power to see the truth. Hell, she would have been dead inside her first year as a slayer if you hadn't shown up in my apartment with a whole lot of truths I didn't want to hear. You're right to not like me because I always hated you for saying truths that I didn't want to see. So, if you want to blame your power for killing her, you go right ahead, but your power kept her alive more times than not." Angel stood up and brushed his pants off. "And now I'm going home."

Wesley cleared his throat. "Perhaps we could stay and help them to—"

"They'll take care of each other, Wes. We have our own problems to deal with. Let's go." Jonathan hurried toward the car immediately, but Wesley paused, looking around at the crater and the ruins of the school and the crying mourners. "Now, Wes," Angel said, and Wesley backed away.

"If you need us," Wesley said to Spike, but Spike ignored
him as he rocked his boy and just let Xander cry. "Yes, well, you do know where we are," Wesley said as he got in the passenger side of Angel's car and Angel pulled out into the street.

The sliver moon gave over very little light, and Spike watched Tara's cheeks shine with tears and listened to Willow's inconsolable cries and felt Xander shake until he finally cried himself to sleep.

**Part Forty-Nine**

Xander sat by the edge of the crater, flowers in hand. "I wish you would have talked to me," he told the ground. Buffy had explained in her letter, but it wasn't the same as talking to her. Honestly, he was a little angry with her for not giving him a chance to talk to her, and a whole lot guilty for feeling a little angry.

"I thought I'd find you out here." Xander looked up to see Riley ducking under the yellow caution tape. "Spike is chain smoking and snarling at anyone who comes near him, so I figured you were out sitting in the sun where he couldn't follow."

Xander turned back to the crater. "I had to say goodbye."
Riley walked to Xander's side and looked down. "Buffy," he said solemnly, "you are the greatest soldier I've ever fought next to and the greatest leader I ever had the pleasure of following." He stiffened and saluted the hole that would be Buffy's grave forever. The state inspector was calling it a sinkhole and calling for it to be filled in as soon as they could find any of the city employees, so there would be no recovering her body. Riley put his hand back down to his side. "And when I get to heaven, I'm going to kick your ass for not giving us the chance to say our goodbyes."

A snort of laughter slipped out of Xander before he could stop it. Riley got a crooked smile on his face. "Or I can try anyway. My guess is she'll be able to kick my ass, even in heaven."

Xander reached up to wipe away a tear. "I'm turning into a girl. I just can't stop crying."

"Crying over a lost friend is the healthiest reaction you could have, Xander. I'd cry over her myself, only I lost her a long time ago." Riley carefully settled in next to Xander, pulling his legs up under him as he stared at the hole in the ground. "Vovka says that the window to the First is
truly closed. The evil is still there, but it can't invade our universe again, not until it finds another opening."

Xander nodded. "Buffy always was right once she came up with a plan. It was annoying," Xander admitted. More than once he hadn't liked her plans, but they always managed to turn out for the best once all the dust settled. He just wished that there'd been any other way to end the war with the First. Buffy had brought up activating all the potentials. Maybe Xander should have really listened to her plan before calling it crazy. "Did you find Giles?"

"He took a redeye flight to New York, where he got thrown off for being drunk and disorderly. He was trying to fly to England."

"Oh." Xander frowned. He had trouble thinking of Giles as disorderly, even when drunk, but it wasn't like any of them were doing well. They were all just muddling through, trying to not get sucked under by the grief of losing Buffy again.

"The military offered him a ride on a C-130 cargo plane. It won't be comfortable, but no one will care if he gets drunk and curses them all out."
Xander fingered the pedals of the daisies he'd brought to Buffy's grave. "I wish he'd stay."

"He needs time, Xander."

Xander nodded. He didn't say that Giles wasn't going to be back again. Buffy had been the sun that he orbited, and now he was lost and either unwilling or unable to find a new center to his personal universe. Giles had always been more about mentoring Buffy and Willow than him, so he hoped that Willow wouldn't suffer too much, losing someone else so soon after losing Buffy.

"Xander," Riley said, his voice carefully neutral. Xander turned and looked at him. "Vovka would like your permission to stick close and make sure that Willow's grief doesn't lead to any more problems. When she pulled Buffy out of heaven, she almost ended the world, and there are certain people, including me, who are a little nervous about what she could do this time around."

"And you're asking me?"

"I asked for Spike's permission, but his answer was profane enough that I really don't want to repeat it. He
then said it was up to you."

Xander sighed, wondering if this was more of Spike's 'who's in charge' weirdness or just his grief showing through. "I wish I could say Willow wasn't dangerous."

"We're all dangerous under the right conditions," Riley pointed out. "I just want to make sure these conditions don't push her past her breaking point."

Xander nodded, understanding the reason why some people might worry. "I think Tara will help her keep her balance this time, but Vovka is welcome to hang around. Just... just not too close. Spike isn't exactly his most reasonable right now."

"I noticed." Riley reached up and rubbed his shoulder, a weary look on his face. Xander turned back to the crater.

"In her letter, she didn't even mention what I'd said to her, about her life holding a door open."

"She probably hoped you wouldn't remember," Riley said. Spike had said almost the exact same thing, but Xander believed it more coming from Riley. When it came to guilt, Spike was trying too hard to take all of it
on himself.

"I should have stopped Willow when she talked about the first spell to bring Buffy back. I had lots of bad feelings, but I just kept my mouth closed."

"Would she have listened to you? Would she have stopped?" Riley asked.

"We'll never know."

Riley nodded. "In battle, you never have the pleasure of knowing how things would have turned out if you'd made another choice. So, you take your losses and you celebrate your victories and you remember that as a soldier, you have a job you need to keep doing."

"I'm not a soldier, Riley."

"Sure you are, Xander. You always have been, since you were fifteen. I doubt there's a man in my unit who wouldn't be willing to walk a border with you, and that says something about what kind of soldier you are because my men are the elite soldiers from three different branches. They don't respect just anyone, but you were outgunned and still fighting to cover the
wounded, even when wounded yourself. You are a soldier. You just haven't signed up for the medical plan."
Riley stood up and brushed his pants off so that gray dust swirled in the gentle breeze. "I'll tell Vovka he can stay, and I'll leave three or four men with him. If you have trouble show up, they should be able to help you handle it." He turned to leave.

"Riley?" Xander called. Riley turned and looked at him. "Thanks for coming."

Riley smiled. "Thank you for trusting me enough to call me." With that, Riley turned and headed back toward his jeep. A few cars were out on the road, driving slowly past the crater as if checking to see if it was real. Not all the faces were human, so Xander was guessing word of the hellmouth closing would get out to the demon population faster than the human one.

Untangling the stems and leaves of the daisies, Xander laid them out side by side. "I miss you Buffy. I promised myself that I wouldn't spend all my time thinking about how much I hurt, because I think that will hurt you. I have to think you're up there watching, after all." He blinked back tears. "So instead, I'm going to think about all the good times we had."
He picked up the first daisy. "The first time I saw you, you were so beautiful that I rode my skateboard into a rail and had bruises the size of dinner plates, and it was so worth it because you looked at me." Xander smiled as he remembered her looking so young on the steps of their first school. Then he tossed the daisy toward the center of the crater. I remember that day when nightmares came true and you stood by the hospital bed of that little boy, and I could see that you had this huge heart. That, and I learned that you carried all these fears, like the fear of getting turned into a vampire. You'd be a scary vamp, Buff. But you know, you're heart would be too pure for you to ever give in to a demon." Xander tossed the second daisy. Sitting at the edge of the crater, he felt a little stupid remembering all this stuff, but it was like if he didn't hold onto the good parts, all this pain was just going to swallow him whole.

"The first time you died, you know, with the Master? I remember seeing you in that water, and I think my heart broke. Just like now." Xander could feel the tightness in his chest as he tossed the next daisy. He'd saved her that time, and there was this little voice that told him that he should be able to save her again. The only difference was that this time, he knew he couldn't.
Xander sniffed and pulled himself away from that memory. "Hey, how about the time we dirty danced? I know you were just trying to torture Angel, but..." Xander cleared his throat. "You can't kill me now, so I'll confess that I had... um... yeah, you know what I did. Sorry, Buff, but you can't do that to a teenage boy without him doing that. A lot. A whole lot." Xander smiled as he let the next flower follow its mates. "And the first time Spike came to town, I remember the two of you facing off. It was like watching an episode of Wild Kingdom with the leopard and the lion trying to eat each other. I think that's the first moment when I realized that you were so totally out of my league. Actually, Spike is out of my league, too, so I'm not sure how that works. But you were so strong, and I'll never forget your strength." Xander tossed the next flower. A car pulled up, and Xander glanced over at a family of Monda demons gazing over the hole. They looked familiar. Xander was pretty sure the father was one of the electricians at the site. The other man half raised his hand like he was going to wave, but Xander just turned back to the crater.

"So, where was I?" Xander asked. "Oh yeah. Halloween. I remember seeing you in that noblewoman's dress, and honestly, that's when I really, really started to hate Angel
as an individual instead of just hating him as a vampire in general. You were willing to make yourself into something smaller just to fit into his life, and I think that's the day I realized that you were too big to ever fit into anyone's life. You weren't just out of my league, you were pretty much out of everyone's. But then the spell broke and you did your quip-fight dance with Spike, and that was really beautiful. Because that's you, Buff. Beautiful.

"And when you were under that love spell and you came after me, I realized that any man who could have you for even a moment—that was the luckiest man in the world because you are so very perfect. I know you never saw yourself that way. I remember when Riley left, and you were all self-blame, but Buffy, you should know that you were always perfect. You were just a little too perfect for the rest of us." Xander let the next flower go. He had three left and he thought about all their years together.

"I know," he said suddenly. "Do you remember that stupid trial thing Giles had you go through? You were back to being normal-girl, and you were so scared, and I remember thinking that you were helpless, and I wanted to protect you because I was finally going to be the strong one, and then that vamp took Joyce, and it turned
out that you didn't need your slayer powers at all. Buff, you taught me that having heart meant more than all the big muscles in the world. And that's good, because that's the lesson I needed when I went up against O'Toole and his zombie boys. I don't know who I would have turned out to be if you hadn't been one of my best friends."

Xander tossed one flower and was left with two.

Xander fingered the soft pedals. It hurt to let go of the flowers, and yeah, he wasn't stupid. He was really hurting because he wanted to hold onto Buffy. But that was the sort of thing that led to pulling her out of heaven, and Xander wasn't going to repeat that mistake. It was time for him to let her rest.

"I remember finding out that we'd pulled you out of heaven, and Buffy, I don't think I ever apologized to you for that. We were stupid and scared, and really, that was extra special dumb because you'd taught us everything we needed to know about doing the right thing, and we ignored it all. You taught us to care more about others than ourselves, and to always fight the right way for the right reason, and we pretty much turned our backs on all that. The bad that happened? None of it was your fault. I should have apologized for it. A lot. I should have engraved an apology in gold and delivered it in person. I
should have known better, and I'm so sorry that I didn't listen to all the things you taught me."

Xander let one daisy go and held the other, unwilling to part with it. Not yet. He put the daisy on the ground in front of him. Footsteps moved slowly behind him, and Xander checked over his shoulder just to make sure the Monda wasn't about to stab him or something. The Monda father was standing with his hat in his hand, his family still standing by their car.

"Did the slayer—?" He stopped and looked at the crater.

"She sacrificed herself," Xander said.

"If... I don't want to intrude." He glanced back toward his family. "I just recognized you from the site, and I thought maybe you know something."

"I do." Xander put the flower down in front of him. "Take a seat," he invited the man. A breeze swept through and caught Xander's last daisy. He grabbed for it, but the flower twirled up and out of reach before the wind took it over the crater and the flower slowly settled down, floating and dancing like a leaf in the wind before it settled in the crater. Xander smiled and looked up
toward the clouds. She was watching.

"Did you know Buffy?" Xander asked.

The man shook his head.

"Well, she was the oldest slayer ever. This is the third time she died, and about the tenth time she saved the world. It all started about seven years ago...."

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**Part Fifty**

Spike crushed his cigarette out on a plate and watched as Tara and Willow chanted softly. The healing magic might have been meant to guide the soul to peace, but it was sending cold shivers over Spike's skin. For a second, he wondered if the soddin' spell wasn't trying to help his own soul reach the other side. He wondered who he'd be without his soul at this point. The demon wanted to belong, and the soul wanted to do a runner.
Every time Xander forgave him, Spike just seemed to feel worse. He'd bloody killed Buffy, but Xander kept acting like he'd been the one to do it. It tore his heart out to know he'd hurt Xander so much. The man had given about everything to make Spike happy, and that wasn't something Spike was used to.

Giving up on being social, Spike headed for the basement. He could use the escape tunnel into the sewers to get out. Maybe he should map out any places where the school's collapse had compromised tunnels. You always wanted to find out about blocked tunnels before you were running for your bloody life.

Spike hurried through the house, past empty rooms that suddenly felt so very wrong. True, having a house full of potentials hadn't been fun, but now that they'd all been sent toddling home with Finn's phone number in case they needed help, the house felt bloody empty, hollow. It made Spike wonder if they should find a dozen more annoying teenagers to fill the rooms. The worst part though was that Buffy and Dawn's rooms would never be filled again. Spike might have misjudged Xander a mite, but then he'd never been good at knowing how Xander would react. Dawn, though... she was going to blame him for fair. She'd probably keep blaming him for a long time,
maybe forever.

But maybe the day would come when she would have a tyke of her own and she'd look at her baby and realize that she'd happily lay down her life for family. Maybe, if he was very lucky, on that day she'd call him and forgive him. Maybe she wouldn't. Either way, Spike had done what Buffy wanted: he'd protected her. A little hatred was a small price considering what Buffy had given up.

The door to the escape tunnels swung easily. Spike had kept it in good repair when he'd thought he might have to get his little family out fast. Buffy had saved them, too. She'd saved him. Spike clenched his teeth against a string of curses that wanted to fly out of him. He was too bloody old to expect the world to be fair, and too fucking smart to let the death of one human throw him this much. Humans died. Slayers died even quicker. That's just the way the world worked.

Randomly choosing the left branch, Spike headed into the sewers proper, locking the grate behind him before heading underground.

If she hadn't died, how many days or years would she have had left? Would she have grown old enough to get
those wrinkles at the corners of her eyes the way her mum had? Would she have wanted a child of her own, the way Nikki had? Spike felt a warm flash of guilt over that death. True, Nikki was worn down to nothing. She'd given everything to the fight, and the demons were closing in on all sides. She'd reached the end of the trail, and she'd been looking for a quick death by the time he'd taken her.

Would Buffy have lived long enough to get that tired? Would she have searched out any death that promised her a chance to just rest?

Spike wished he had answers, but he didn't. The first human he'd loved since his own mum was gone, and there weren't any words to make it better. No wonder Xander had fled the house as soon as the sun had come up.

Spike sniffed the air as he caught the scent of k'mata. They were nasty buggers—carrion eaters who didn't mind their prey still squirming a bit as they ate. They'd probably been drawn to the promise of a slaughter, and if they didn't get one, they were just as likely to create one. Well, they were going to find another sort of slaughter.
With a grim smile, Spike reached for his knives and trotted down the tunnels, not even bothering to mask that sounds of his boots splashing through the water that seeped through the stones. He needed a bloody fight. The sewer tunnel curved slightly, so Spike couldn't really see much until he got within fifty feet of the nest. Only then did he spot the first k'mata.

They looked more like aliens than demons with their low, squat bodies that could bloat as they devoured their prey, leathery skin stretching out and armored scales sliding to make room for nearly three times the k'mata's normal body weight in food. They had a dozen or so tentacles around their gaping maw, each jointed like a spider's leg to grab the pray and shove bits into the toothy mouth, and their six legs each had claws that could rip. One at a time, they weren't particularly dangerous, but there were fifty or sixty of the buggers wallowing in the shallow water, their mouth tentacles snapping with frustration at the lack of food. Left alone, this nest was either going to turn on each other or risk heading out to kill their own prey. Spike didn't intend to let them alone.

The first k'mata clicked a warning and then launched
himself the way a bug would, pushing off on all six legs to make a weird hop that covered more ground than Spike had rightly expected. He twirled and used his flapping coat to distract the beast until he could drive his doc martins into one of the leg joints. It gave with a crack, and the clicking of dozens of k'mata's filled the tunnel, echoing off the stone walls. Either Spike had just hurt their leader and they wanted revenge, or they wanted first dibs on eating the injured—Spike didn't have time to worry about which was which.

The first demon hit him, and Spike slammed a knife up under a scale before those tentacles could catch him, and then he was twirling away to land a kick on a second demon before swinging his knife like a short blade and cutting off the claw of another. The animal shrieked a second before it went down under a half-dozen of its fellows.

Spike used the distraction to leap over the pile of feeding demons, landing on one's back before vaulting to the other side and attacking the creatures from the opposite direction. He caught one by the claw, enduring a nasty gash that cut through his shirt and side. Then, using the captured demon as a weapon, he swung it at the others.
The demon flailed and snapped its claws and grabbed random bits with its tentacles—and every bit it snapped at grabbed was one of its own nest mates. Between the demon's razor claws and Spike's wide swings, the captured demon cut through its fellows.

"Not bloody fair," Spike screamed as he slammed his unwilling partner into the stone wall. Shell and scales snapped and purplish blood seeped out of long cracks. Spike flung the broken body as far as he could, and excited k'mata clicked and chattered as they followed the blood trail. "You shouldn't be alive." Spike snatched a second k'mata and repeated his attack. The morons were so brainless they didn't change their attack at all... they were still all grouped up nicely, and Spike aimed his reluctant ally at the clump. "What the fuck use are you? You're worthless. You're fucking worthless."

Spike's shoulders ached as he smashed the creature into the wall over and over again. Razor sharp pinchers caught his leg, and Spike swore as he discarded his victim and brought his knife down on the k'mata that had ripped through the flesh of his leg and shredded his boot. "You'll die for that, mate." Spike aimed the knife at an eye, but the creature flinched, and Spike drive the knife right through the center of an armored scale. The blow
jolted his arm painfully, and Spike ripped the knife back out with the sound of metal scratching over an old fashioned blackboard.

Whirling and kicking and stabbing, Spike tore through the nest, ignoring all the injured he collected along the way. He was down to pummeling the last few twitching survivors before he realized that the screams echoing off the walls were his own. "Why'd she have to die while you still get to slime your way across the bloody earth. What the fuck kind of God allows that?"

Spike leaped up and came down on the last living k'mata, breaking the creature's last leg so that it quivered and mewled helplessly in the middle of a cooling pile of k'mata bodies. "What the fuck kind of God lets you fucking live while she has to die to restore some soddin' ridiculous balance? What the fuck kind of God is that?" Spike's screams ended as the sobs hit him. Leaning back against the bloodied wall, Spike slowly sank to the ground. It wasn't bloody fair. It just wasn't bloody fair.

For a long time, he watched the demon bodies, their husks settling as the blood seeped out into the sewer water, turning it a pale lavender.
What the fuck kind of God would let demons walk the earth and take Buffy away? Spike didn't have an answer, so he sat and watched the carnage he'd created.

Epilogue

Spike walked out of the bathroom, a cloud of steam following him as he opened the door. One step into the bedroom, he stopped as some of Xander's wretched music drifted out of the player. "What the—"

Xander sat on the bed, a sad look on his face, and Spike swallowed his complaint. "Luv?" Spike asked.

"She's coming home today," Xander said.

Spike frowned because he couldn't figure out any reason why Xander would get sad at the thought of Bonnie finally coming home. As far as Spike was concerned, Clem should have had her back two minutes after the danger had passed. Halvard's folks had already gotten back with
Dawn, and Bonnie's absence was right annoying—and about to drive him to homicide.

"Listen to the lyrics, Spike." Xander sounded just so tired. Spike walked over to the bed and sat next to Xander, listening to the music for a bit.

_with all that I've done wrong
I must have done something right
to deserve her love every morning
and butterfly kisses at night._

_all the precious time
Like the wind, the years go by.
Precious butterfly.
Spread your wings and fly._

Spike turned and looked at Xander. "Wot? You're all worried about her growing up in the last three weeks?" As much as Spike loved Xander, he didn't understand him.

Xander sighed. Scooting around, he leaned back on the pillows and seemed to search the ceiling for some universal truths. Cocking his head, Spike tossed his towel to the floor and climbed in bed next to Xander, perfectly happy to soak up a little warmth. With the construction
company starting up again, Xander was going to be too busy to laze around here soon.

"It's just... Time goes faster than I ever thought. I mean, it's like Buffy. It seems like yesterday she was this really cute fifteen year old girl who complained about not getting to go to parties, only... that wasn't who she was in the end, Spike. I don't know when she grew up, but I think I missed a memo about who'd she become when I wasn't looking."

Spike sighed. "She was a grand lady."

Xander nodded. "I'm always going to miss her."

"It'd help if you weren't always listening to your soddin' music of pain."

With a twisted grin, Xander shrugged. "I guess I just like hurting right now, you know?"

Spike didn't answer, but he did know. Buffy was important enough to grieve. He didn't want to forget her any more than Xander did. It hurt remembering. It hurt like a bitch. When Dawn had raged and stormed out of the house, unwilling to listen, even to Xander... well, that
had cut pretty fucking deep. But to forget the pain, that would be like forgetting the sacrifices Buffy had made, and she deserved to be remembered.

Oh, with all that I've done wrong
I must have done something right
To deserve your love every morning
and butterfly kisses
I couldn't ask God for more, man this is what love is.

I know I gotta let her go, but I'll always remember
every hug in the morning and butterfly kisses.

Xander sang along. He couldn't really carry a tune, but then neither could the bloke singing on the CD. Groping with a blind hand, Xander finally found the remote on the end table and hit the stop button. He sighed. "Butterfly kisses."

Spike wanted to argue that. He wanted to point out that he'd had passionate kisses with Buffy. He'd let her demon loose on the world, but that wasn't something to be proud of. The fact was that the small pecks on the cheek or her shoulder leaning into his... those fleeting touches at the end meant more than all the sex they'd shared. Maybe that was love—not the wild passions but the slow, soft moments.
Xander dropped the remote on the side table, and Spike captured Xander's hand. He brought it up to his lips and kissed the palm. "Luv you, pet."

Xander smiled at him, the pain fading for a moment. Spike knew it would return eventually, but they were both getting better at living between those moments of pain and loss. "I guess we all need to take advantage of the time we have before we have to let go, huh?" Xander asked, the shadow of sorrow in his voice even as he smiled.

"Bloody right," Spike agreed as he tried to ignore the truth that was staring him in the face in the form of two very human, very mortal eyes. "Have to enjoy the butterfly kisses." Spike leaned down and placed a soft kiss right on Xander's chest.

Xander's breathing hitched, and Spike smiled as he placed a second, equally gentle kiss just an inch lower. Xander's hands fluttered over Spike's shoulders, and Spike smiled. His boy always needed a little time to really get involved. It was like he didn't know how to get started, but then once he did.... Spike placed a third kiss just above Xander's bellybutton.
"Spike," Xander said, his voice breathy. That might have been because he was gasping for air after three fluttering kisses. Oh yes, Spike still had the touch.

"Yes, luv?" Spike arched his back so that he was posed like a cobra next to Xander, his shoulders up and his head lowered as he considered Xander through half-closed eyes. Xander's breath hitched, and he swallowed several times, his Adam's apple bobbing comically. Spike smirked at the evidence that Xander wanted him so very much.

"Come here," Xander finally managed to say, but his voice broke in the middle. Never one to disappoint a partner, Spike undulated his body and moved smoothly up to Xander's side, resting his palm right over his heart. Spike could feel the heart beat rabbit-fast, and his memory tried to trip him, but he pushed the sadness to one side and breathed deeply of the lusty musk that Xander was putting out. His boy was randy.

"You called?" Spike asked, raising one eyebrow curiously. Xander swallowed again, but at the same time, he reached out and ran his fingers through Spike's damp hair, separating the curls. Slowly, he smiled and then he slipped his hand behind Spike's neck and pulled him
Their mouths met, and Xander sighed, his lips parting. Spike took the invitation and pressed closer, his tongue exploring Xander's warmth. He may have lost a lot, but he had more in his life now than he ever had. Spike wasn't fool enough to forget that. Xander's hands slid down over Spike's bare back and came to rest on Spike's ass, his warm hand leaving a trail behind. Spike shivered in desire, and Xander thrust up into him at the same time. Oh, his boy really was randy.

Spike ground himself down into Xander's body, and Xander arched his back and pressed his head back into the pillow as he made little gasping noises. His neck arched out invitingly, but Spike just pressed a quick kiss to the place where shoulder and neck met before he slid down Xander's body, rubbing himself on Xander's warm heat. Peppering hot skin with a trail of cool kisses, Spike inched his way south until he was faced with Xander hard cock pressing up into the air.

"Someone's feeling needy," Spike teased. Xander's whole body squirmed, and hands blindly groped for him, but Xander's eyes stayed closed and his neck still bowed out as he strained against invisible bonds. The boy was better
at controlling himself than most, that's for sure. By now, Angelus would have grabbed Spike, flipped him over, and buggered him raw.

When Spike leaned down and ran the tip of his tongue over Xander's hot erection, Xander made a pained little mewling sound; Spike smiled wolfishly and braced his hands against Xander's hips. He was going to enjoy this.

Xander's breath came in heavy gasps now, and Spike licked up the side of Xander's erection, taking time to suck at the tip before pulling back to consider his handiwork. Precum gathered at the tip of the erection, and Xander's mouth opened and closed like a hungry fish. His boy was going to bloody forget his pain... for a while at least. Spike was resolved on that issue.

Moving in, he took the head of Xander's cock in his mouth, sucking hard until Xander gave a strangled scream, and then sliding down to take as much of the shaft as he could into his mouth. Xander's hips twitched in a mindless need to thrust up, but Spike kept his hands braced on Xander's hip bones and slid deliberately up and down, teasing Xander by moving far too slow for Xander to finish.
Xander's breath grew ragged. "Spike," he cried out, his voice just short of a shout. His boy was a screamer. However, Spike had his mouth full, so he didn't answer. He just started bobbing up and down a little faster—not enough to bring Xander off, but just enough to really drive him out of his mind. Xander started making a little cry with each breath, his body stiffening as little beads of sweat gathered in every dip of skin: his bellybutton, the valley that ran between his pectoral muscles, the small depression just under his collarbone.

"Oh god. Please. Shit." Xander gasped each word, sucking in air between them.

Taking pity, Spike moved into a faster pace and sucked enthusiastically. With a full-voiced scream, Xander came, feeding Spike his second favorite bodily fluid. Xander was just a buffet of vampire goodness, and Spike licked his lips as he pulled away. Xander's whole body was covered in a sheen of perspiration, drops escaping to run in salty lines over his body.


Spike gave a satisfied grin and shifted up to lay next to
Xander and soak up some of the heat the boy was radiating like a little furnace. "Good then?"

"Only completely and totally," Xander agreed with a grin, his voice still rough as he tried to catch his breath. He turned to Spike with a sadistic grin. "But you forgot one thing, Spike."

Spike's cock twitched at that particular tone and that particular expression on Xander's face. "Oh, what's that?"

"Now that I've come, I can really take my time." Xander wiggled his eyebrows as he reached down and ran a finger along Spike's hard cock.

Spike reached for his own cock. "Or I could just—"

"Oh no. I want to play. You got your fun, and now it's my turn." Xander gave him a smile and slid down the bed until he could plant a kiss along the shaft of Spike's cock.

"Bloody hell," Spike breathed. "Don't be sadistic, luv."

"Oh please. You like it," Xander said with confidence as he placed a second kiss just on the side of the head.
Spike grunted as his balls drew up tight. He wanted to come. Then Xander blew gently across the head, and the drop of come that had leaked from the tip evaporated, cooling the cock and denying Spike his orgasm. Spike swore colorfully and fisted the sheets.

Maybe Xander had some mercy because he took the head in his mouth and sucked gently. It was enough. Spike shouted and came, thrusting his hips up toward that warmth. The pleasure and release was so great that it took a second to notice that Xander was coughing.

"Sorry about that, pet," Spike offered as he realized he'd shoved his cock up into Xander's mouth.

Xander was already moving to lie next to him. "Note to self. Hold the hips. Actually, now I know why you do that."

"It's hard to not thrust when you have someone sucking on you," Spike agreed. "I didn't mean to, pet."

"Hey, I made a century-old vampire lose control, that's worth a little come up the nose. And actually, come up the nose is not as bad as soda up the nose, and I used to do that on a regular basis." Xander rubbed his nose and
laid his head down on Spike's chest. Spike traced figures on Xander's back, feeling the fevered heat slowly fade. "I really love you, Spike."

"I love you, too." They lay in the dim room, the light spilling out from the bathroom the only illumination in the room, and that cast long, odd shaped shadows. Xander's hand crept over until it hugged Spike, and Spike traced patterns on Xander's skin. This was good. No matter how complicated the universe became, they would always have this—cooling skin pressed together in a bed that smelled of more lust and satisfaction than Spike had ever smelled, and he'd smelled plenty of people getting their end off.

Xander sighed. "So, Bonnie is going to show up soon, and I'm not sure we have time for a shower."

"Good," Spike said.

Xander raised his head and looked at him oddly. "That's my daughter, Spike. My daughter who can smell sex. My daughter who I want to never ever have sex or to think about me having sex. Ever."

Spike rolled his eyes. Some days, Xander was just this
side of Dru in terms of sanity. "Your daughter whose world has been upended, who is now coming home to find that her folks are still her folks and whose bonds are stronger than ever."

"Oh." Xander frowned. "This goes under 'demons just think different,' doesn't it?"

"Yep," Spike agreed.

Xander pushed himself up and scratched his stomach. "I still don't want her having sex until she's about ninety."

"Why? Dawn's technically three years old, and Halvard's buggering her."

Xander had been getting off the bed, but now he utterly and completely froze. Slowly, his head swiveled around to stare at Spike with undisguised horror.

"I already told him that even if she wasn't talking to us, I still considered her clan. I made it clear that if he hurt her, I would hunt him down, eviscerate him slowly and carefully, and leave him out to die with his guts tangled around his feet." Spike settled back onto the bed. That was a good memory, and from the way Halvard had
turned a nice shade of purple, he had clearly believed Spike. Dawn might hate him, but Spike was always going to love her. Like he'd once told Xander, he wasn't good at letting go once he'd decided to let someone in his heart.

Xander rubbed a hand across his face. "I am going to try to pretend I don't know anything about that. Which, actually, shouldn't be that hard. Dawn does have a habit of disappearing when I go over to Tara and Willow's place."

"Because you keep trying to get her to forgive me," Spike pointed out. Xander might be a right treat in bed and a soothsayer with more honestly than anyone Spike had ever met in a century, but there were days he wasn't known for methodical thinking. In fact, sometimes he was downright thick as pig shite.

"Because she should."

Spike stood up and walked around the bed so he could sit next to Xander. For a minute there was silence as he planned his words. "We need to feel sad sometimes, luv. We need to just let that out before it eats us alive. Dawn needs to feel angry. Fury rolls under her skin, and if she isn't angry at me, she's going to turn that anger on
herself. So, you just let her blame me if that's what she needs."

"For how long?" Xander looked at him with brown eyes torn by indecision. He wanted to make everything right, but sometimes you just couldn't.

"As long as she needs, pet."

"And if—" Xander stopped.

Spike knew what he was thinking. He reached over and rested a hand on Xander's knee. "If she stays angry forever, then she does. Don't you worry about that. I hated what I did... hate myself some days... but it had to be done. I wouldn't have let Buffy live knowing that the cost was her world. I couldn't have hurt her that much. And maybe Dawn will see that someday, and maybe she won't, but that doesn't change what happened or why I did it."

Xander let his own hand rest on top of Spike's. "She'll realize the truth one day, Spike."

Without answering, Spike got up and headed over to the dresser. She might. He wasn't going to hold his breath,
though. However, he had a Bonnie-girl coming home, and he didn't intend to be starkers when the bell rang. "Are Tara and Willow coming over tonight?"

Xander shook his head, accepting the change in topic with only a slight frown. "Nope. I told them that we wanted to eat popcorn and watch TV and curl up on the couch together. I said they could come over tomorrow when I'd gotten over being all twitchy about losing my daughter for a month."

Spike's eyebrow twitched. Xander wasn't exactly the one known for getting twitchy.

"So, they're bringing lasagna tomorrow. They invited Dawn and Halvard to come along."

Spike snorted.

"And actually, that's the face Willow made when she said she'd invited Dawn, so maybe that's a 'no.'"

"You can't bloody fix everything, pet. That's what got us in trouble in the first place."

Xander reached past Spike and grabbed a shirt, pulling it
over his head before he answered. "And weirdly, Tara is sounding a whole lot like you, only without the British accent."

That made Spike feel a bit better. Tara needed to speak up and get a little blunt. The world wouldn't survive another round of Red mucking up the universal balance of good and evil.

"I was thinking of invited Vovka and the guys," Xander blurted out. Spike pulled his jeans up and buttoned them as he studied Xander. He was all stiff with worry about something, but Spike couldn't figure out what bug was up his butt.

"Okay," Spike answered.

Xander blew out a big breath. "You really don't mind?"

Even if Spike did mind, he'd put up with it. It was Xander's house, and his demon had come to terms with that a while back, and his soul was just so weary of making decisions that it was ready to follow for a time. However, Xander was asking if he minded it. Spike shrugged. "Not really. Vovka wasn't part of the Initiative. Hell, if he'd been around, they would have shoved him
into the cell next to me. As long as the soldier boys remember their manners, I don't mind."

"And if they forget their manners, you can offer to train with them again," Xander said with a smirk. Spike started smirking, too. That had been bloody amusing.

"I still say you should go out with them more, luv. You're better than both of them put together. They could stand to have a little of that starch taken out by having a human civilian kick their arses."

"They're special forces, Spike. They would not be the kickees in that scenario."

"They bloody well would, and I think they both suspect the truth of that," Spike said with some satisfaction. Xander might be waxing poetic about how Buffy had grown, but he never did notice how he'd grown out. Construction work had put muscle on him until he looked like a pea in a pod with the soldier boys, and training for the end of the world had given him more than a few moves. Spike would never want Xander out hunting alone, but if Xander did go out after vampires, Spike figured he didn't have much to worry about. Spike grabbed a shirt and slipped it on, buttoning it up as
Xander seemed to think about what Spike had said.

"Today, let me worry about being a father. We can talk about me getting my ass kicked by Riley's guys later. Deal?"

"Deal," Spike agreed. He sat on the side of the bed and pulled his socks on before pulling on a new pair of doc martins Xander had bought him. The old pair had died after fifteen years, sacrificed to his grief for Buffy and a demon's claw.

A bell rang, the tone for the front door, and Xander made a little noise and raced out the door without putting on his shoes, his hair still sticking up in clumps. Pulling his laces tight, Spike followed as fast as he could without losing all dignity. Still, using vampire speed, Spike still ended up a foot or two behind Xander when he threw the door open. Clem stood there with a huge smile, his hand resting on Bonnie's shoulder.

"Daddy!" Bonnie sang, throwing herself forward. Xander made a strangled cry and bent down to wrap his arms around her. Lifting her off her feet, he swung her around.

"Bonnie! Sweetie! I am so happy to have you home!"
Xander stopped twirling her, and Bonnie reached out an arm for Spike.

Stepping closer, Spike reached for her hand. Instead of letting him take her hand, Bonnie reached out for his neck. She pulled him close and hugged his neck with one arm and Xander's with the other. She squeezed so hard that Spike was grateful that he didn't actually have to breathe. Spike wrapped his arms around Bonnie and Xander, not even caring if he looked like an utter git in front of Clem.

For long minutes, they held each other. Xander's ragged breathing finally slowed, his heart calming into familiar patterns before he lowered Bonnie's feet to the ground. Another foot or so, and she'd be as big as her da, Spike realized.

"I told you they'd save the world," Clem said smugly.

"Yeah? Then why run for the hills, mate?" Spike asked with a narrow glare. Clem had been their backup plan in case they needed to get Bonnie to safety, but as far as Spike was concerned, they hadn't been to that point yet. Spike would have waited until things were definitely going pear-shaped before doing a runner and taking a
friend's child along for the ride.

"Better safe than sorry," Clem answered without apologizing. "When you aren't strong or dangerous or even particularly fast, you learn to get really good at hiding and moving out of the way of trouble. So, it looks like life is getting back to normal around here." Clem turned his back in order to look out at the street. From another demon, Spike might have taken it as an insult, but from Clem... Spike figured that was Clem's way of calling them family—family he trusted at his back.

Spike glanced out the front window and about half their neighbors' lights were on. Families were drifting home and slowly repairing damaged homes and cleaning out refrigerators that had gone to ruin when the lights turned off.

"Seems like," Spike agreed.

Xander moved close and slipped an arm around Spike's waist, leaning into Spike. "Yep, lots of normal," Xander agreed. Bonnie looked from one of them to the other, smiling brightly.

"Normal's good," she said. She made eye contact with
Spike, her grin widening. Oh yes, the poppet knew what they'd been up to. However, when Xander looked down at her, her expression shifted, the knowing grin settling into something more innocent—something that reflected only a pure love for her father.

"Normal's very good," Spike agreed as he slipped his arms around his little family. No matter what the cost, butterfly kisses were always worth the price.

"So, what's for dinner?" Clem asked. Closing the door, he headed for the kitchen, and Bonnie started telling them all about the subway system and Xander tried talking to her and shouting for Clem to not move the damn pots at the same time. The solemnity of the moment slipped away into the chaos. Spike dropped down into his chair and watched with a smile as his life settled back into what passed for normal.

The End