Changes
Book 1 - Something Rich and Strange

by
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Prologue

Xander knew exactly when it happened - when he first tasted desolation, and realized that the world was never, ever going to be the same. It was the night Jesse died. Not even a week into their friendship with Buffy and someone was already dead. He cried silently in bed that night, the taste of ashes in his mouth and the deconstruction of his best friend's face reeling and unreeling in his head. A scene worthy of a multi-million dollar summer blockbuster and all his, to cherish forever. Xander remembered lying there and hating everyone. But mostly hating Buffy, for making it all real - for embodying the worst moment of his life. He hadn't thought he'd be able to face her the next day at school without wanting to slap her. He armored his heart in ice, that night - ice to keep the sullen rage from blasting
everyone around him, and ice to keep the burning pain of loss from consuming him.

But after a few days he knew that Buffy hadn't actually caused any of it - her presence had just made it all real. They'd all lost friends over the years; they'd all averted their eyes from milk cartons and leaflets tacked to telephone poles, so they wouldn't have to really see... And now he was seeing and now, he realized, he could do something about it. So he did - following along behind, doing his best to not get vamped or killed, doing his best to do something, to help. To make that taste of ash go away, and to make the picture-screen in his head go dark, so he didn't have to watch the special effects festival that spooled out in his sleep night after night.

The thing with the hyenas actually kind of helped. It was a little easier, after that, to feel that he was part of something. To have that belonging feeling. As if he'd gotten into a tight little nest and every time he moved or turned he could feel them, and he was safe in the middle. Once the spell was broken, the dark, hungry thoughts of the hyena persisted. When he brought an axe down on the neck of the monster-of-the-week, part of him howled in triumph and pushed aside the thought that these things - these demons - perhaps had packs of
their own...Jesse's of their own. He had his pack, and all else was not-pack, and it was good.

It was even better when it was him Me, I did that! who brought Buffy back to life after fighting the Master. That it was himself - Xander Harris, guy in the middle - who had shamed a centuries-old demon into helping. He'd told Angel that night that he needed proof; proof that Angel was a person and not a monster. He wasn't sure he'd gotten that proof - he still didn't trust Angel - but at least Angel had come; at least he'd been there, because of him.

Things had changed more, though, after Spike had come to town. It sure hadn't helped Xander's trust issues with Angel when the older vampire had offered him up like a snack to his...not friend, no... Things were just not right when you almost felt you could trust the psychopathic vampire over the souled one. Spike and his Drusilla managed to almost kill Angel. Luckily Kendra was there - poor, dead Kendra, another Hellmouth casualty that Xander tried not to think about too much.

And then there was that thing with the Judge. But by that time, Angel was Angelus and Angelus had kind of screwed the whole Judge thing up in that gloating, overconfident way the demon had. Xander remembered
being angry at Buffy again when she just couldn't seem to kill Angelus. When Ms. Calendar being murdered and the end of the world coming didn't seem to make a dent in her self-pity. He'd agonized over telling her about Willow and the spell she was doing, but in the end, he hadn't. Angelus had to die - even Spike - Spike! - wanted him dead, so who was he - middle-guy, tagging-along guy - to thwart that?

But that feeling - the feeling that all was not right - had come over him again, and again it was because of Spike. Supporting a half-fainting Giles, desperate to get away from the mansion, Xander had watched as Spike had tenderly lain Drusilla in the seat of that battered DeSoto. Watched Spike brush her hair back and arrange her dress, watched his fingers linger on her cheek. And then Spike had driven away into the sunlight, and Xander had gotten Giles to the hospital. Lying in bed that night he remembered what Buffy had said - that Spike had made a deal: all, everything, Angelus, this place...all for Drusilla. The books and Giles said vampires didn't love; they were sharks, out for the blood and the kill, and nothing else. But that hadn't been what Xander had seen, and now sometimes even the hyena didn't seem so triumphant when another vampire - another demon - fell at the Slayer's feet. He didn't love them. He didn't want
to be friends with them, or let them roam his city unchallenged. But he wondered if the black-and-white version of the world that the Council and even Buffy and Giles seemed to embrace was really the best way. The soldier - who lingered long after that Halloween, just like the hyena - seemed to think he was crazy. There was the Enemy and there were Friendlies, and that was that. Xander tried to persuade him that some enemies might be friendlies but the soldier sided with the hyena on this one, and Xander grimly ignored his own confusion, knowing hesitation could kill him one day.

It got more muddled when Spike came back - snatching Xander and Willow away, ranting drunkenly about Drusilla. She'd left him and he wanted her back. Love spell...and wasn't that just too hysterically familiar. As Willow looked through the box of supplies, Spike leaned unsteadily against the musty bed, broken bottle clutched loosely in one hand and the other going out to twine in Xander's hair.

"My Dru...she's got dark hair too, did'ja know? Just like this...dark eyes..." Xander had stared up at the vampire - his heart pounding and his breath coming in frightened pants - and seen devastation in wide blue eyes. Devastation and fear and a frantic need. Xander understood those things - understood what drove the
vampire to such an extreme even as he plotted how to knock him down and get Willow to safety. The long fingers petting through his hair had been...gentle. Then Spike left to get more components for the spell and never came back. In the insanity that followed - Cordelia lying bloody and dazed in the rubble, Oz grim-mouthed and solemn - he'd not thought about the vampire at all. But the look came back to him in the night, and the fingers, so gentle in his hair. More fodder for the nighttime horror-show. Only he wasn't horrified. In fact, he found himself thinking about the blonde vampire a lot. It was - confusing.

Xander was glad when school was over; their final year had held so much pain and so much anger and so much despair. The new Slayer showing that she could be as evil as the demons she fought. Angel coming back and all, seemingly, forgiven. Even a Watcher who somehow had given in to the 'dark side'. And seeing childhood friends on the front lines of the final battle with the Mayor. Knowing he'd put them there, and seen them die, only added to the armor on Xander's heart. The soldier, whispering about honor and duty and acceptable losses only made him sick and angry. Xander hoped that a few months away - *Anywhere but here*... would help
him put things into perspective. And they had, only in ways he'd never imagined.

And now he was back in Sunnydale, trying to slot the new shape of his life into the old space and it just wasn't a fit anymore - he just couldn't do it. He was trying, trying so hard. But the looks he got from Willow and Buffy, when he couldn't contribute to their college talk... And Giles' little sighs when he made some joking remark, trying to be that same old Xan-man. Even Anya, pushing and pushing at him for something...and a few months ago he would have jumped at that, been Xander-and-Any and told himself he was happy. But he couldn't, not after Oxnard, and it made the former demon confused, unhappy and angry, and it made Xander just want to hit something.

Lying on Giles' couch, wracked with chills from the Chumash-inflicted illnesses, he'd thought his life couldn't get any more surreal. Until Spike Spike, for god's sake! was at the door, babbling something about needing help, being...broken? Looking different - thinner, and ragged around the edges. He barely rose to Buffy's taunts, didn't even fight back when she decked him and Xander finally understood that Spike couldn't. Something in him raised a cheer even as something else cringed in disgust and horror at the thought of a secret military base and
white-coated scientists cutting open the vampire's *head*, for fuck's sake, and sticking some sort of silicon chip in there. That was so - 1984, or something - and it gave Xander the creeps. What if they thought *Buffy* was a threat? She could as easily kill a human as a demon - what if this military group decided they were *all* a threat? Would they stoop to doing experimental surgery on *humans*?

When the fight with the Indian spirits was over and the fever was finally gone, Xander helped Giles get the Chumash arrows out of Spike, wincing inwardly as they pulled them free from pale, pale flesh. Spike didn't act like it hurt too much - he just bitched on and on about being tied up, being left in harm's way - but Xander saw the little lines of pain around his eyes and felt...something. Something he shouldn't feel. He squashed it viciously and concentrated on the food Buffy'd made, and tried not to care that Spike looked like a fallen angel; bloody and disheveled, bound to Giles' chair and looking at them all with eyes dark with pain and hate.

Not long after that Spike was sent to live with him and then, well...things just got weirder. And Xander finally admitted to himself that he was falling for William the Bloody.
1 Hunted

"C'mon, Spike, you gotta help me out here." Xander heaved at the mostly-unconscious vampire he was struggling to lift out of his truck. Spike mumbled something and made vague swimming motions with his arms. His legs didn't even twitch, and Xander took a breath and bent his knees a little and just hauled, getting the shorter man up over his shoulder and thank you god for construction that had put some muscle on him. He staggered up his walk and then bent down, propping Spike against the wall as he fumbled his key into the lock and got the door open. Good thing Spike had been over a couple times since Xander'd moved to his new house; getting blood and stealing food. Xander wasn't sure if the invite thing worked on a vampire that was mostly out of it.

Spike managed to keep his knees from bending and Xander half-dragged him into the front room and let him go with a sigh of relief onto the couch. Spike sprawled
there, one leg and one arm dangling over the edge, the other arm caught at a funny angle against the cushions. Xander stretched his back a little and then went back to the door and locked it. He shut the curtains over both windows and debated the likelihood of getting the duster off Spike without actually getting him up again. In the end he just knelt down and removed Spike's boots and then straightened him out on the couch, laying his arms comfortably across his stomach, getting a pillow under his head. He pulled his Made-in-Mexico Navajo blanket off the back of the couch and draped it over the vampire.

*Do vampires get sick in their sleep when they're this drunk?* Xander eyed the motionless form for a moment then gently turned Spike's head just a little on the pillow, just in case. *Wouldn't do to have him choke...guess he wouldn't, though...doesn't breathe, duh* Xander just stood there, watching Spike for a long moment. Looking at his face, which for once had no expression of malice or anger or hate on it - it was just...peaceful. Beautiful.

*Stop that. Need to - oh yeah, need to go wash up, vampire blood on the hands, not of the good* Xander shook his head and went to his kitchen - looked down at himself and decided that a shower would be better. He detoured around the kitchen table to the bedroom,
stripping as he went, kicking his shoes off towards the bed. He tossed his clothes at the laundry basket *Two points!* *Well, almost* and flicked on the bathroom light. One of the best things about this house was that the rooms were all the same size, so that meant the bathroom was as big as the bedroom. Xander liked that; cramped bathrooms sucked and here he had a shower as well as the original cast-iron claw foot tub. Plus, a washer and dryer, which he'd gotten second-hand just this week. And thank god for that. The laundromat was kinda - creepy.

He opted for a shower, too tired to mess around with a bath. As he stood under the spray, lazily soaping his belly images from the night flashed through his mind. Spike - bleeding and desperate - giving Giles his money back, his face so full of anger and hatred that Xander had actually been afraid of him. The long sweep of Spike's naked back, smeared with blood, the muscles jumping and twitching every time Giles dug a little deeper for the tracer that had been shot into him. His eyes, fathomless and dark as lapis, staring at Xander - no anger, for a moment, just pain and...

*He looked so tired, tonight. Frayed around the edges. He must have been...terrified. Those soldiers...* Xander cursed a little under his breath at the thought of the
Initiative soldiers. Bad enough they were running around Sunnyhell, putting everyone in danger; stirring up the demons and the vampires and making every patrol a game of Russian Roulette - would they interfere? Would they hurt one of the Scoobies? Tonight, though - they'd gone too far. Tried to murder Buffy. And even though he was feeling less and less of a Scooby, Xander still felt like punching someone punch Riley for that. For casually wanting to take a life because it interfered in their ultra-secret plots to do... who knows what. And Spike - tagging him like he was a damn animal - hunting him down. Who knows what they would have done to him if they'd caught him again? And what would they have done to Giles, the girls - himself - finding them 'consorting' with Hostile 17? Xander shook his head, taking deep breaths - trying to get the anger out. No point in being so pissed that all he wanted to do was smash things. He had to think.

So...think. Think about... Spike. No. Well, ok. Why not? I've been thinking about him. Been thinking about him since...since forever. Since Angel almost got me bitten. Since I watched him being so tender with Drusilla. Since he tried to kill himself and I...kissed him. And he kissed me back. That memory was the
strongest - the best - and Xander leaned against the shower wall and closed his eyes, remembering...

*There's been an earthquake* - not Xander's first, but the first that did real damage. He comes downstairs to find busted pipes and water everywhere, and Spike as pissed off as a wet cat, ranting. He tells him to try and fix the pipes - to earn his blood, for god's sake, and goes out to work. Comes back home, and his dad yells at him from the living room. Xander goes in to see what's up. His dad looks up at him from the couch, bleary-eyed and pissed off, and growls out something about what the fuck was he thinking, loaning money to a foreign faggot? and he'd better get the damn pipes fixed fast. Xander feels a little sick, staring back at his dad, wondering what the hell prompted him to go downstairs, and what has Spike said to him, and damnit, has his Dad done something to Spike?

Xander goes down the stairs slowly, bending to look under the rail - bracing for the worst. The basement is wetter than before guess Spike didn't have a go at those pipes, after all and the vampire is standing over against the far wall. Xander thinks everything is okay for a minute until he realizes there's blood on the wall and that Spike has battered the paneling and the concrete behind it with his fists until he's gouged chunks out. Spike stands
with his fists and forehead against the wall, blood streaking down the backs of his hands and wrists, shaking. Wearing...

Why in hell is he wearing my clothes? Xander comes down another stair, licking his lips, wondering what he's going to say. Then Spike starts talking. Xander doesn't know if Spike knows he's there or not. He sounds furious and terrified at the same time, his voice shaking. He's talking too fast, but there's the groaning rumble of a growl in there, too.

"Bloody fuckin' miserable old piss-pot of a fuckin' drunken bastard. Didn't even try to hurt him, just pushed him back, just got him out of my fuckin' face, the bastard, fuck... Can't stand this, can't do this, miserable human mongrel telling me...touching me...break his soddin' head open, skin him alive, I will...get this thing out of my head, out of me, fuckin' soldier bastards won't see me comin' next time, end of them, end of all of them..."

Spike rears back and bashes the wall again, bits of paneling and concrete flying off, the blood on his wrists trailing up his arms. Xander bites his lip and wonders if he should leave or go on down; thinking back to the night he did vampire-sitting duty. Xander had let him have his dignity - pretended he hadn't heard the broken voice,
whispering and desperate. But then Spike turns around and sees him. Instantly his face changes, and he roars and leaps across the room so fast Xander barely sees him coming. He's on Xander in an instant, baleful yellow eyes boring into Xander's startled brown ones; fists coming to snatch his shirt and shake him, slam him back into the stairs.

Then Spike is gone, crouching in a ball at the foot of the stairs; holding his head and moaning in agony, blood smearing back through his hair. His eyes tight shut and the demon gone.

"Damnit Spike." Xander walks down to him, shaking off his fear; angry with his father for coming down here and messing with Spike, angry at Spike for hurting himself. He doesn't notice, until he's standing over the hunched form that one of his stakes from patrol is fastened to the coffee table. Then anger explodes in him, and he reaches down and drags Spike to his feet.

"What the hell is that? What are you - what were you going to do? Huh?"

"Leave me alone, Harris. Fuck off." Spike twists out of his grip and staggers back a step, one hand still pressing tight to his head, eyes narrow in pain and rage.
"No, I won't! What the hell were you thinking? Seriously, were you going to - to kill -?"

"Fuck off, Harris! You gonna tell me now that you care? Eh? You don't give a tinker's damn what I fuckin' do, you don't care if I live or die so Sod. Off." Spike throws himself down onto the couch, head in hands, and Xander just stands there, staring at him for a minute.

"Ok - first: you're wrong, I do care if you live or die. You can believe that or not, whatever you like. Second - what the fuck did you say to my dad? He thinks that you're gay and that you owe me money, and I know he didn't think that stuff up on his own. And third - why the fuck are you wearing my clothes? You look like some kind of demented cabana boy."

Spike glares up at him, blood streaked over his cheek now and Xander can't help it; he starts laughing. Spike does look funny. The knee-length khakis and the Hawaiian-style shirt - both of which are a couple of sizes too big - are ridiculous, and made Spike look about 16. Spike looks down at himself - rubs a hand over his face and snorts in exasperation.

"Not my damn fault. Your soddin' drying machine ruined my clothes. Didn't think you'd want me loungin' around
down here starkers - that'd give your Dad a real shock, eh?"

"Jesus, Spike, how'd the dryer ruin your clothes? It's not rocket science."

"No, maybe it ain't, but it's not like I did my own laundry ever, is it? Back when, that's what servants were for, and then there was always minions and the like or just get new if the old is too bloody...bloody to wear. Fuckin' thing..." Spike sighs and looks at his hands - starts licking the blood off, looking more like a cat than ever. Xander starts to say something and then stops himself. After all, when he impaled his finger on a bent industrial-size staple the other day, the first thing he did was put his bloody finger in his mouth.

"As for your soddin' wanker of a soddin' father, I dunno why he came down here but he was yellin' at me and wantin' to know who I was. Didn't think you'd be too happy if I told him I was the fuckin' vampire you were keepin', so I told him I owed you some money and was gonna wait for you to come home." Spike glances up at Xander and away, and Xander wonders if his dad hit him. It wouldn't exactly be a surprise.

Xander sighs. "Well...come on. You can't wear that out, you've got blood on that shirt now. Let's get a different
one and you've got to rinse your hair out, it's got blood in it, too. And Spike?" Spike looks at him, his mouth open, his tongue going out to lap at an oozing knuckle. "Next time you decide to hit something, hit the couch or something, because that wall is a load-bearing wall and I really don't want to have to dig you out of the rubble, ok?"

Spike just looks at him. Gets to his feet suddenly and advances on Xander, his hand still to his mouth, his tongue-tip just touching his top lip, poking at a smear of blood there.

"You said you care if I live or die. Why do you care, Harris?" He is so close - inches away, really - and Xander suddenly feels all the blood rush to his face and his groin. He doesn't think that's possible but there it is; painfully blushing and painfully aroused in 3.2 seconds.

And the crowd goes wild! "Umm. I..."

"You...what?" Spike's eyes really are an amazing shade of blue, and Xander chases several color-names around and around his head, wondering which is the most accurate.

Sky? Azure? Baby? No, not baby... Spike was saying something. "What?"
"I said, what's goin' on in that soddin' lump of fluff you call a brain?" Xander snaps his mouth shut and glares at the vampire. The tantalizingly close vampire. The vampire who smells subtly of smoke and leather and...

What is that? Not aftershave...just him... "Why I care is none of your business. I - it's a long story and - it doesn't matter anyway, just - oh, fuck it." Xander reaches out, grabs Spike's head, and kisses him. As his tongue strokes inside the vampire's cool mouth, the soldier screams at him.

What the fuck! This is Spike! This is a vampire! Are you insane? But the other voice in his brain - the Xander voice - says: Mmmm... tastes good. Spicy. Like cloves and cream and ... oh ... blood, too, mmmm

Neither voice is particularly helpful, but they both shut up when Spike starts kissing him back. The kiss seems to last forever and Xander gasps when Spike pulls away, the some-color-blue eyes wide and shocked.

"Right. Ok. Listen, Spike, I don't want to hear a word out of you. Not one word. I'll explain all this later, I really, really will, but I stopped by Giles' house on the way over here and there is, apparently and 'Oh dear', some sort of apocalypse happening and we need to go." Fuck, I just kissed him, I just kissed him, oh my god...
Spike blinks at him - looks down at his mostly-clean hands - looks back up. "Apocalypse? Again?"

"Yeah."

"You're just sayin' that to make me feel better."

Xander gasped in a breath of steam and shampoo-smell, his hand slick and tight around his erection. Oh, yeah, why the fuck not...he tasted like...cream and cloves and...ooh... Xander arched against the wall, his orgasm nearly silent - ferocious. He panted there in the spray for a moment then finished his shower and got out. He dried off and slipped into the robe that he kept on the hook on the back of the bathroom door. Combing his hair, looking at himself in the mirror, he raised a sardonic eyebrow at his reflection.

Buffy'd tear you a new one, after all your crap over Angel. Wait. Are you planning on telling Buffy? The soldier's voice, sharp and stern. Xander blinked at himself, and finally shook his head.

No. About the whole guy-thing, maybe. I'll have to talk about Oxnard eventually and I'm not ashamed of that. But about Spike...no. It was just one kiss. And even if he did kiss me back...it doesn't mean anything. And thank god the whole 'I can hit demons' thing distracted
him so he didn't ask me about why I kissed him. He still talks about Drusilla... still loves her, probably. No point in losing... Well, fuck.

Xander shook his head, reaching for his toothbrush. Too damn late. Already lost my heart. Already gave it right to him. Fuck, I've only been thinking about him - dreaming about him - for two years. Even when I had no clue why I was. Even when I kept my heart as cold and hard as I could, he was still in there. That night...

Xander brushed his teeth, lost to memory again, unaware that Spike was standing in the doorway to the bathroom. Xander saw only himself in the mirror, and the movie that played out in his inner eye; a night at Giles' house, and the first crack in the armor that had gotten him to this - to love.

Giles has decided Spike 'can't be trusted on his own'; something that makes Xander shake his head in exasperated amusement, as if Spike is five and not allowed to be in the kitchen by himself. Xander still can't get his head around the why - why has Spike come to them? To the people he's tried to kill, who've tried to kill him? To the Slayer, for god's sake! Did he have the biggest fuckin' balls on the planet, or was he just insane? Had the military chip made him crazy as well as
biteless? Xander is still creeped out over the whole 'mad-scientist' thing and he likes it even less when Riley starts hanging around. Something about the soldier makes Xander's hackles - the **hyena's** hackles - rise. The soldier - who comes out more now that there's another soldier to stir him up - makes Xander want to snap at Riley. Tell him to straighten up, fix his collar, shine his shoes. It's hysterically funny and totally horrible all at the same time, and Xander finds himself taking his nerves out on Spike as the most defenseless member of their weird little group. Only not that defenseless, is he. He's gotten some damn nasty digs in at you - at all of us.

So over at Giles' house that night, on 'vamp-sitting' duty; listening to Spike yell and curse from the bathroom, shouting that he's hungry, that he's bored. Xander has been irritated at once again being told, basically, to 'run along', and is one more time taking it out on Spike. He delays getting Spike's blood to him - delays, and gets involved with a show on the TV - and when he finally realizes how late it is, he gets up and hastily gets the blood, feeling a little guilty for forgetting Spike. He walks quietly along the hallway to the bathroom, mug in hand and hearing something strange from down the hall. As he reaches the door, he realizes Spike is crying - not just
crying, but gasping in great, wrenching sobs, muttering to himself between hitching, painful, unneeded breaths.

"Bloody bastards...don't care if I starve...can't do this, can't do this...oh fuck let me out, let me out, letmeout...gotta be...gotta s-stay calm...can't let - can't let'm see..."

There is a rattle of metal on porcelain, and Xander imagines Spike is wrenching on the chains. He bites his lip, hesitating - imagines how awful it must be to be imprisoned in there. Like being back at the Initiative, alone and hungry... He puts his hand out to open the door and then realizes it would be even more awful to be seen like that. That Spike would hate him even more if he walked in and saw him crying - saw the desperation. Xander knows how much he would hate that.

And a memory comes to him, unbidden; of Spike gently touching Drusilla's hair, smiling softly down at her, settling her into the front seat of the DeSoto and driving away from Angelus, from his third Slayer - from everything. For love. For his girl

And now he's chained up like a dog and Xander is not - is not - going to take away his last scrap of dignity. At that moment he realizes he just might not be part of the
'Scooby gang' for very much longer, and he stands there stunned, thinking about it as Spike continues to mumble to himself, voice thick with tears. Xander feels - physically feels, like a needle-stick - the ice around his heart crack. He imagines it; silvery-white and hard, crazing out from the little dart that is Spike's low, exhausted voice babbling words like a child trying to psych himself up.

"Just don't think about it, right? Just don't...they didn't - didn't forget, aren't...aren't gonna leave me here... Fuck, I gotta get out of here...what'm I gonna do, what to do, can't fight, can't kill...just stop that, you fucking wanker, you're William the Bloody, you can do this...been through worse...been through worse..." His voice trails off into a strange keening sound, and Xander slips away, back to the kitchen; still musing over his sudden revelation. He really doesn't think he can do this anymore - blindly kill what's out there, when what's out there loves and laughs and cries and is afraid, damnit. Buffy is the Slayer and he understands that means killing things - saving the world. But lately it's her automatic response to everything, and he's getting so tired of it. He's tired of pushing Anya off him with excuses and lame jokes; tired of not measuring up to expectations, and of being left behind. Tired of it all. He doesn't want Sunnydale
overrun with monsters but he doesn't want to be the one
deciding which ones live or die anymore,
either. Especially since they mostly die. And he's tired of
hiding himself - of hiding what's different - hiding what
makes him not-quite-human, anymore.

He gets out a second mug and pours more blood into it
from the waxed carton that comes from the butchers. He
heats the second mug up and slams the microwave door -
shouts down the hall.

"Hey, Spike, soup's on! You still hungry in there or not?
" He slams around in the cabinets, getting a straw;
making noise and taking his time, hoping Spike can pull
himself together enough by the time he gets there so he
can pretend nothing's wrong.

He walks down the hall and bumps the bathroom door
open. It's dark in there, and Xander pokes around for the
light switch with his elbow.

"Close your eyes, I'm gonna turn on the light," Xander
says, finding the switch. The lights flickers on and Xander
looks at Spike, who is lying with his head back on the
edge of the tub, eyes shut. His wrists look raw and red
under the chains, and his face is raw-looking too, as if
he's scrubbed at it. Xander notices crescent-shaped cuts
along Spike's forearms where he's dug his nails in.
"Come on and eat, now, b'fore it gets cold," Xander says, sitting on the edge of the tub and holding the first mug out, straw bent. He notices his hand is shaking a little and decides to ignore it. Maybe it will go away.

Spike lifts his head and opens his eyes, looking at his hands - the straw - anything but Xander. He leans forward and drinks fast, as if afraid Xander will snatch the mug away. When the blood is gone Xander puts the empty mug on the floor and transfers the straw to the second one.

"Sorry it's so late - I got kinda - distracted."

"Oh, sure, no problem, I'm only locked up here starvin', no worries, you tosser." Spike glares at him, drinking, and Xander glares back, glad that Spike is more himself. A Little Bad, if not the Big Bad.

"Oh shut up. It's not like this is some big funfest for me - I actually have a life, you know. Don't exactly enjoy sitting in Giles' house watching over you."

"Can't have much of a life if you can be spared to sit here, eh? What, they didn't want you taggin' along, gettin' in the way? Got sent off with a pat on the head and a lolly?" Malice sparks in Spike's eyes, and Xander feels his own anger rising, but he pushes it back. They stare at
each other for a long moment until Xander hears the door opening and Giles and Buffy coming in. He rises and picks up the first mug and backs out of the bathroom, leaving the light on. It's only a week later that Giles tells him Spike is going to come stay at Xander's house.

Xander spat into the sink, rinsing his brush and using his hand to scoop water and rinse his mouth. Spike moving in with him and then the earthquake and that kiss, dear god, and now, tonight... Spike on his couch, Spike looking like Lucifer himself - light-bringer, tempter - so beautiful and so vulnerable...

Maybe it's just 'cause he's...hurt. Maybe that's all it is. He'll get better, he'll be back to himself and I won't... Xander wiped his face on his towel and turned around and let out a small shriek as he caught sight of Spike, leaning there in the doorway. Spike's eyes were dark, squinted a little against the light, staring at him.

"What'm I doin' on yer bloody...couch?" he mumbled, and Xander shook his head, catching his breath.

"Christ, you scared me. You're on my couch 'cause you were mostly passed out and after tonight, we didn't think it would be safe for you to go back to your crypt. The
Initiative might find you there and you wouldn't - you could get caught again."

Spike just stared at him, swaying a little, his duster half-off the wounded shoulder, his hands clenched tight into fists. Xander met that furious, unblinking gaze and watched in amazement as the anger faded and something else came up in them - puzzlement, and maybe...maybe gladness.

Oh, right. You'll be able to shake this off no problem. Keep tellin' yourself that, Harris. Xander snorted at that particular inner voice. If even the soldier could see how lost he was, it was hopeless. He was...hooked. Xander walked towards the door, wondering if Spike would let him pass or not. "C'mon Spike. I've got blood here. Come and have a pint or two and lay back down, you'll feel better. Gonna have a hell of a headache when you wake up. Unless - do vampire's get headaches? I mean, does -"

"Shut up, Harris," Spike whispered, and Xander froze, barely a foot between them and the smell of smoke and whiskey and Spike around him like a fog; comforting somehow, and arousing. He wanted to put his face into the space between Spike's shoulder and neck and just breathe. The hyena approved of that, a subdued
grumble of pleasure somewhere in the back of his mind. Spike reached out and pushed a lock of hair off Xander's face - tucked it behind his ear - and Xander thought of Drusilla, and how careful Spike's fingers were being; that they were trembling, and that Xander was.

"You - you - thought it wasn't safe for me at the crypt."

"We - we all d-did, I mean..."

"Lie. You're lying, Harris. It was just you. The bloody Watcher and the Slayer don't give a toss about me, we both know that. And the witch'll do whatever she's told, she don't have any backbone. It was just you."  Spike's gaze was tracking over Xander's face - caressing him with insubstantial smoldering blue touches. His fingers were still in Xander's hair, trembling there, unmoving, his other hand still fisted at his side. He tipped his head a little and Xander shivered, wondering what Spike was going to do; wondering if he dared take another kiss.

Spike took a deep breath in, scenting the air, and Xander knew his arousal was evident. Spike had told him, a couple weeks ago, how much he could tell from scent alone and Xander had considered bathing in cologne after that.
"Sweet as honey from the rock," Spike murmured, and Xander swayed a little towards him, wanting...

Oh yeah, want... Then Spike was turning; a swirl of black and white walking erratically into the kitchen. Xander heard him flop down into a chair and he leaned in the doorway for a minute, shaking all over. Oh god. Oh fuck! Pull yourself together, c'mon - deep breaths... oh, his voice... Xander scrubbed his hands back through his hair and followed the vampire into the kitchen. Spike was sprawled in a chair, face down on the table, his arms folded over his head. Xander hesitated for a minute, then crossed to the counter and turned his boom box on, fiddling with the tuner until he got an 'alternative' station, keeping the volume low. He got a bag of blood from the 'fridge and put it in the microwave to heat.

A negative. Isn't that rare? I wonder if it tastes... The DJ chatter stopped and music started to play, and when the first line of the song came growling out, Xander felt himself smile.

"Here comes Johnny Yen again... With the liquor and the drugs... And the flesh machine... He's gonna do another striptease... "
"Hey, I remember this - from that movie we watched. You remember, Spike?" Xander carefully cut the corner off the warm bag and poured the blood into an extra-big coffee cup. Remembering the Basement of Doom and movie night. He'd rented *Trainspotting* and had actually seen Spike laugh; a full-on laugh of pure fun. At him of course, because Xander had had to pause the movie again and again and have Spike translate for him. The thick Scottish accents and unfamiliar slang had been confusing as hell. But Spike had translated and expounded and taught him a few slang words, and they'd both liked the movie a lot.

Xander put the mug on the table in Spike's reach and leaned against the edge, humming with the radio. Spike propped himself up on his elbows, eyes half-shut, and reached for the mug.

"Yeah, I 'memeber. This's Iggy Pop. Saw him at CBGB's ages ago...when I killed my second Slayer. Bloody good show, him an' the *Ramones.*" Spike gulped the blood, the mug chattering a little against his teeth.

"Want some more?" Flicker of blue eyes, tongue going out to lap a drop of scarlet from the corner of scarlet-stained lips.
"Yeah, gimmie 'nother one, my shoulder still hurts. Bloody soldiers. Bloody Watcher - what'd he use, a damn soup spoon on me?"

"It was pretty deep," Xander said, getting the second mug-full ready, looking over at Spike where he was twisting in the chair, taking his duster off and going through the pockets.

"Your skin starts itching once you buy the gimmick... About something called love... Oh love love love..."

Xander slammed the microwave door, glancing in irritation at the radio, as if Iggy was betraying a confidence. Then he heard the familiar snick of Spike's Zippo and he crouched down, poking at the clutter of cleaning supplies under the kitchen sink. Know it's in here...ah ha! He found the ashtray he was looking for and slid it onto the table in front of Spike, then turned to get the blood. This time he sat down opposite the vampire and watched him as he sipped the blood and smoked, looking better already. He'd actually been too pale there, for a little while, and the pain and exhaustion in his face were fading now. Spike watched him back, silent, and they both listened to Iggy sing.
"I got a lust for life... A lust for life...lust for life...lust for life..."

The song ended and something came on that Xander didn't recognize and he found himself yawning hugely. It was well past midnight, and he had to work in... *Fuck, four hours? Four and a half.* "I gotta go to bed, Spike - gotta work tomorrow. Listen - why don't you get a shower and go to sleep? I'll find a new shirt for you to wear and you can just camp out here for a few days. Tomorrow's payday so I can stock up, and...

"Xander's too-fast words petered out under Spike's wide-eyed stare, and he tapped nervously at the tabletop. "What? Why are you staring at me?"

"What're you up to, Harris? Bein' - awfully friendly, lately. You thinkin' maybe...you're gonna get more'n a kiss outta me? That what you're fishin' around for?" Spike was back to looking pissed off, and Xander stood abruptly, snapping off the radio.

*Now he remembers. Great.* "NO, Spike, I'm not - 'fishing around' for anything. I'm offering - I'm offering hospitality, like I did back in the damn *basement,* you remember that? I told you then what I thought, and I haven't changed my mind, I still think the same. You're not a child, you're not an animal, and after tonight...as
far as I'm concerned, after tonight the fucking *Initiative* had better stay the *hell* away from you *and* from me, because I have *had it* with those bastards. And that includes Riley. Fuck, Spike... "Xander leaned across the table, looking the vampire straight in the eye, knowing his heart was pounding; knowing he couldn't really lie to Spike but doing his best to *convince* him. "Can't you just - *take* what I'm offering? Just take it and be -"

"Grateful? Want me to be soddin' *grateful*, Harris?" Spike sneered at him, the cigarette punctuating his words. Xander hung his head for a minute, then he stood up straight and pushed his hands back through his hair.

"No. I don't want you to be grateful - I don't *expect* you to be. You're... I can't *imagine* what you're feeling and I have *no* idea what this is like for you. But I want to help you, Spike. I'm not - expecting anything. Just take it, ok? I'm going to bed. There's extra towels in the bathroom, right there on the shelf." Xander walked away, to the bedroom, and Spike's quiet voice stopped him.

"You said - back in the basement... You said you cared, if I lived or died. And you said - you'd explain it - explain
that bloody kiss n'all." Xander stood in the doorway for a minute, then he sighed and turned around.

"I will. I promise. But not tonight. I'm just - I'm too tired tonight. I'll tell you tomorrow, ok? I promise."

Spike looked at him, then he ducked his head and stabbed out the cigarette - sat staring at the ashtray. "Night then."

"Goodnight, Spike." Xander turned and walked across the room, tossing his robe onto the foot of the bed and sliding between the cool, worn sheets - settling the weight of the quilt over him. He willed himself to relax, taking several deep, long breaths. But even as his body drifted, leaden from exertion, his mind raced. *What was that all about? Did it mean... Does he want me as much as I want him? Fuck, he could probably smell what I did in the shower, no wonder he... No, come on...young single guy, here, we do that all the time, doesn't have to mean anything at all - even if it did... Oh fuck, shut up, go to sleep, just go to sleep...* Xander tried to make his mind go blank but he couldn't, and the same useless drivel kept running around and around his head. The soldier was silent but the hyena wanted resolution *Pack or not-pack!* and Xander didn't know what to tell it.
He listened to Spike in the kitchen; smoking another cigarette, pushing his mug or the ashtray around on the table, a gritty slithering sound. Then the scrape of the chair moving and the kitchen light snapping off. Spike moved through the bedroom into the bathroom and Xander watched his shadow under the door; listened to the shower and then the sink running. He jumped up out of bed and pulled the heavy curtains across his windows and then got back under the covers, doing the deep breathing thing again; wishing he could fall asleep before Spike was finished in there. But he couldn't, and when the light went out in the bathroom Xander couldn't help but strain his eyes to see the vampire. He could vaguely make Spike's shape out - a paler blur against the darkness of the bathroom. Hesitating in the doorway.

"Come on, Spike. Come to bed. Just like the basement, huh? I won't kick you and you won't hog the covers."

A disembodied snort of laughter and Xander's bed creaked and dipped under Spike's weight. After a moment's shifting around, Spike was still. They lay silently for what seemed like hours. Xander was finally starting to doze off when he heard a sigh from his left, and a slight shifting.
"Thanks, mate," Spike whispered. Xander grinned into his pillow, and was asleep.

2 500 Channels

When his alarm went off the next morning, Xander reached over and slapped at it, then just lay in the bed for a minute, smiling to himself. Spike was curled around him, chest to back, knees tucked behind Xander's knees, one arm curled under Xander's pillow and the other over Xander's waist, folded up against Xander's chest. This had happened every morning down in the basement, and Xander had known it would happen again. Had counted on it. On Spike seeking warmth, seeking...contact.

Seeking you? That what you're hoping? That if he was in bed with anybody else this wouldn't happen?

Shut up, Xander thought to the soldier. It's too early for that shit. Just let me...savor this. Just one more minute...
The soldier was silent, and Xander did savor, concentrating on feeling every inch of Spike's body pressed against his; on filling his lungs with the scent of him. He and Spike had never talked about this - in fact, Xander had often wondered if Spike really remembered. Sometimes he moved when Xander got out of bed and occasionally even talked, but Spike had never actually mentioned it.

The first time it had happened, Xander had about had a heart-attack. But it had gotten...comfortable, over time. Then he'd craved it. When Spike had moved out Xander had missed it fiercely, but hadn't ever expected for it to happen again. Now that it was... he would savor. He could feel his arousal growing, and sighed. Time to get up, start his day, go to work.

Reluctantly, he pried himself loose from the vampire's grip and slithered out of bed. He opened his dresser drawers, trying to be quiet while grabbing underwear and jeans, socks and a t-shirt. He turned towards the bathroom and noticed Spike had shifted in the bed, moving over into the warm place left by Xander's body, cuddling his pillow close and burrowing down. Xander couldn't help it - he grinned, and kept grinning as he dressed and washed and got ready for the day - grinned
at himself in the mirror until the soldier barked at him to hurry up. Six o'clock - gotta be on site by six-thirty.

Xander went quietly out to the kitchen and even grinned at the mess Spike had left; duster crumpled over his chair and smokes, lighter, ashtray, dirty mug scattered on the table with random ashes and a few drops of dried blood. Xander put the mug to soak in the sink and dumped the ashtray, then put it back with the cigarettes and lighter near Spike's chair. Then he got some cereal and a glass of grape juice and turned on the radio to hear the weather. Mild and sunny - chilly after the sun went down. Christmas was past, and it was still cool enough to wear a jacket, even during the day. Xander loved this time of year, when the relentless California heat took a break and they got the merest hint that there were actual seasons out there. Then the weather was over and the DJ got on, loud and obnoxious - the 'morning wake-up' thing that Xander hated. Finally the DJ announced the next song - Nine Inch Nails - and it started playing. Xander hadn't heard this one before. He listened to it, crunching, and it seemed...eerily apt.

*Trust Trent to have a song about my personal angst*

"I can't shake this feeling in my head... There's a devil sleeping in my bed..."
He's watching you from across the way... I cannot make this feeling go away...
I know it's not the right thing... and I know it's not the good thing...
Kinda I want to..."

Xander finished his cereal and washed the few dishes, stacking them in the drainer and wiping the counter and table down. He'd only lived here a few weeks - had, in fact, moved out of his parent's house the same week Spike had - but he loved his little house already and felt the urge to take care of it. So different from the basement. He reached to turn off the radio, pausing to hear the end of the song.

"Kinda I want to... Maybe just for tonight...
We can pretend it's alright... What's the price I pay...
I don't care what they say... I want to..."

Xander sighed and turned it off. *You and me both, Trent* He crept through the bedroom to the bathroom and brushed his teeth, then got a heavy flannel jacket from the closet and searched around for his work boots. They were half under the bed on his side, and he sat down on the floor and pulled them on, lacing them up, going fast. Done, he lifted his head to take a last look at the sleeping vampire. Cobalt eyes peered back at
him, tangled hair like a dandelion clock, pale-satin skin... Xander blinked, and put his finger to his lips.

"I'm just going. Back before six. I'll have more blood and some Chinese or something, ok?" he whispered.

"Dumplings and lots of soy sauce," Spike whispered back, and Xander grinned. Spike nestled back down into Xander's pillow and Xander stood up and walked out, grabbing his keys and wallet from the kitchen counter, stuffing a couple of apples into the pockets of the flannel. He stopped just inside the living room - went back and pulled the blinds shut in the kitchen, window and door, and made sure the chain was across the kitchen door. Then he was gone, grinning so hard he thought his face would crack. Spike would be there when he got home.

Some time after noon and Spike startled out of sleep. *What was that?* He lay frozen, listening, but after a moment realized he'd only been dreaming. *Yeah. Dreaming. Nice word for...* The house was silent except for the wind and the dry rushing of the surf, rolling in somewhere nearby. Spike relaxed, stretching hard, luxuriating in the softness of the bed. He hadn't got a bed at the crypt yet, and Xander's was nice,
just soft enough to burrow into. He closed his eyes and lay there for another minute, but sleep was elusive and finally he decided to get up. He took another shower

*Don't know how bloody nice it is, to have all this hot water at their fingertips* and used Xander's toothbrush, wondering if the boy had figured out he'd used it the night before. Probably not. Maybe he didn't care, though - not if what Spike had scented and heard in the shower last night was because of *himself.*

*And wouldn't that be bloody ironic. A 'Scooby' lustin' after a vamp. And has been since the basement, unless I miss my guess. Can't say as I blame him.* Spike smirked. He hadn't seen himself in a mirror in over a century, but he knew he looked damn good.

He wandered out to the kitchen, noticing his lighter and smokes stacked by the ashtray, his duster folded over the back of the couch. Even the bloody mug clean and in the dish-rack. *Least he knows how to keep a place. 'Cept he never kept the basement like this. Guess he likes this place.*

Spike heated up a mug-full of blood - *human* blood, and that made him grin - and settled into a chair to smoke and drink. He noticed that even if the house had had all its blinds up it was still pretty gloomy, surrounded as it
was by eucalyptus, sycamore, and pine. Their shadows danced behind the blinds and the steady breeze from the west added the soft susurrus of rustling leaves to the ambient. Blood finished, smoke clenched in his teeth, he got his jeans out of the bathroom and pulled them on, then surveyed with distaste his bloody, torn shirt.

Said he'd find me a shirt - guess I'll just have to find one fer myself. Hope he's got something besides those bloody monstrosities I had to choose from in the basement.

Spike threw his shirt away and went into the bedroom. He opened the top drawer of the dresser and found piles of t-shirts: white, blue, green, a red one and a yellow one. No black. Wait - there was a small pile of undershirts, the kind people called wife-beaters, and he pulled one of those out. It wasn't as big as the t-shirts would have been, and he smoothed it down over his belly. White, but better than baggy. He fixed another mug of blood and went into the living room - clicked on the TV. It took him just under two minutes to realize Xander didn't have cable and got about five channels. He switched off in disgust. Great. Bloody wanker. Who has a TV and no cable? This is gonna be a bloody boring day. He got up, abandoning his empty mug on the coffee table, and lit another cigarette. Nuthin' to do but snoop he thought, smirking.
Snooping took about an hour. He turned out every drawer and cabinet, went through the closet and all the boxes that were piled in the corner by the washing machine - boxes Xander hadn't unpacked yet. He didn't find much. In the bottom of the last box, amidst worn paperbacks and book club hardbacks were some matchbooks from a place called the 'Fabulous Ladies Night Club'. And a picture of Xander with his arm around the shoulders of a handsome, black-haired man. Spike looked at it closely.

*Never seen this bloke before. Looks like they were close, though* For some reason that thought unsettled him. He shoved the picture away.

Done snooping, he wandered back into the kitchen, bored and jittery. The confrontation with the soldiers the night before - the damn tracer and the Watcher being such a bloody prick had all left him on edge. He felt like kicking the living shit out of something. *Bloody fuckin' bastards. The lot of 'em. And the damn Slayer, serves her right, too bad that demon didn't slit her gullet for her and be done. Get this thing out of me, I'll show 'em how it's done, the fucks...* But while he pictured bloody havoc and screaming vengeance on all and sundry, another voice in his head - a tiny voice, but
But are you going to do that to him, too? He's taking care of you - he's being good to you. And he doesn't have to, you know that. He kissed you...don't you want to know why? Spike snarled to himself, the demon coming to the fore and then flickering away.

Course I want to know. Doesn't mean I don't want to kill his bloody gang, though. He's not even part of the gang so much anymore. Got that job, got this place, doesn't seem to care fuck all about them. Skipped some meetings, didn't patrol - pissed Red off when he told her cookies did not make up for gettin' every demon in Sunnyhell after him that day, or blindin' the Watcher. Been natterin' at the Slayer about that Riley bastard, too. Doesn't trust him, as well he shouldn't... Curiouser and curiouser

Spike snatched his duster off the couch and slumped into a kitchen chair. He went through his pockets, piling all the odds and ends on the table; picking through them, discarding a few things. He fanned through a pile of business cards and stopped on one he'd gotten just a few days ago. Clem. Yessss. This is exactly what we need here  Grinning, he got up and grabbed the phone and
diale the number on the card, ignoing the little voice that said We? How'd that happen?

"Clem? It's Spike. You were just over at my crypt the other day. Right, in Memorial Gardens. I got another job for you. Yeah, hang on..." Spike grabbed a stack of mail and read Xander's address off an electric bill.

"Right. Bloody brilliant. See you in a bit, mate." Satisfied, he lit a cigarette and sorted his things back into his duster. Then he grabbed a box of Graham crackers out of the pantry and rooted out a jar of peanut butter and a knife and started making sandwiches.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Xander drove down his street, fighting the urge to floor it and get to his house quicker. He'd thought about Spike curled up in my bed all day - had, in fact, almost cut his hand open on a circular saw and had stumbled around the site in a daze. Manny his foreman had noticed and made him sit down and go over blueprints for the last couple of hours.
Xander smiled, thinking about Manny. He was the owner's father and was teaching Xander woodworking skills - how to make custom cabinets, tables, desks. It was amazing and interesting. *And I'm good at it, which is really amazing*  Manny owned Xander's house - all the houses in this cul-de-sac - and had helped Xander do a few repairs before he'd moved in. 'Shotgun houses', Manny called them. Built during the war, when military and civilians alike flooded into Sunnydale to train and to work in the factories. The tiny lots had been planted with trees and the whole street was shady and green. And the best part, to Xander's way of thinking, was the bluff and the beach, barely a quarter of a mile away. Just outside his back door, really. And even if it was a small, rocky beach, the endless whisper of the surf was comforting and relaxing. Xander loved it.

As Xander neared his house, he spotted a rusting white panel van parked outside. He pulled into the drive and got out, frowning at it. The van had a ladder and a couple bundles of cable attached to the roof, but no company name or logo on its dusty sides. He felt his stomach clench up, paranoia kicking into overdrive. *What the hell is up with that van. Is it - could it be the Initiative? Are they in the house? Did they find Spike? Oh fuckfuckfuck. Breathe, damnit, get inside and*
Xander grabbed his cooler and the big bag of Chinese in one hand, and his tool belt in the other. At the very least, he could swing it, sending the hammer and screwdrivers into someone's face. He walked up to his front door, took a deep breath, and opened it. Stepping inside he was temporarily blind in the dimness and he blinked furiously, trying to clear his vision. The first thing that he could see was a pale blonde head and the body beneath it, sitting at the kitchen table wreathed in smoke. There was someone on the other side.

"Hey, Spike," he called, shutting the door behind him.

"Did'ja get dumplings, mate?"

"Course I did... We got company?" Xander approached the kitchen warily and felt the knot in his stomach loosen a bit as he took in the visitor. A humanoid figure, with drooping ears and folds of loose skin and big eyes like a puppy. A demon. *And when your company is a demon and that's a relief you know your life is too twisted for color TV*

"Yeah - mate a' mine. This is Clem. Clem, this is Xander."
The floppy-eared demon grinned nervously at him, making a small wave with his hand. "Hey there, Xander."

"Hey, uh, Clem." Xander dropped his tool belt and came all the way into the kitchen. He put the Chinese on the table and went to unpack the cooler. Spike watched him, grinning, and Xander noticed suddenly that the vampire was wearing one of Xander's undershirts. Spike's pale arms glowed in the dim, greenish light that suffused the shuttered house and Xander stared at him for a minute before turning hastily and unpacking the cooler into the 'fridge. He grabbed two beers and a soda and shut the door, then turned to Spike and Clem.

"So - have a good day?" He set the beers on the table and pulled a chair out, just then noticing that Spike and Clem already had beers. But theirs are mostly empty, so that's ok. Fuck, he looks good in my shirt. Hastily, he opened his soda and took a long drink.

"Bloody boring. That's why I called Clem. He works for one of those satellite companies. Got us a satellite."

"Oh? He - a satellite? What're you - "
"You know - satellite TV? I set up accounts, mount the hardware, that sort of thing." Clem bobbed a little in his seat, as if Xander were making him nervous. "Now you've got, oh, about five hundred channels."

"Five hundred ch - ? Uh - Spike, I really can't afford that many channels. I mean, that's kind of why I gave the whole cable thing a miss, you know?"

Spike puffed on his cigarette, elbow-deep in the bag of food, setting the little red and white cartons down in an ever-expanding circle around him. "Don't worry 'bout it, Xander, Clem an' me have an understanding, okay? Can't sit around here all bloody day watching five channels. I'd go barkin'. Ah, dumplings."

"Hmm. Okay... This 'understanding' won't get me thrown in jail, will it, Clem?"

Clem jumped a little, eyeing Xander over his beer. "Uh, no. Not at all."

Xander looked at him and Clem grinned. Just go with it. Spike's staying so he can watch five hundred channels! Ahem. Xander tried to quell the excited fluttering that his stomach was doing. Suddenly, he felt giddy. "Great. That's great. Hey, Clem, want to join us for dinner? Got plenty."
"Oh no, no, no. Can't do that. Got another installation to make today. Thanks anyway, though. It was, uh, real nice to meet you, Xander. See ya, Spike. You call me if anything isn't working, ok?"

"Right, mate. Thanks." Spike waved a chopstick-skewered dumpling at Clem and watched as the demon let himself out. "That Clem's a good guy," Spike mused, and stuffed the dumpling in his mouth.

3 Secrets

When they'd eaten all the Chinese, and flipped through at least three hundred of the five hundred channels, Spike finally turned the TV off and looked at Xander. Xander immediately felt his stomach clench tight.

Now it comes. The moment I have not been waiting for. Ok - bare essentials and we'll be fine. Oh, fuck

"Now what's gotten you into such a tizzy, mate?" Spike was looking at him, and Xander tried to slow his heart down by sheer force of will.
"I - uh - n-nothing at all, I'm fine." He gulped the last of what was probably one too many beers and set the bottle down a little too hard. They both winced at the sharp crack of it, and Xander had to check to be sure it wasn't broken.

"I wanna know - what's goin' on. That kiss - you takin' me in - everything. Right?"

"Right," Xander echoed faintly. He was less then delighted about telling his 'story', but he had to tell someone. If only to be telling someone. It was lonely, having a secret. And it wasn't one he was willing, right now, to share with the girls or Giles. It'd mean a lecture from at least two of them, and pouting and hurt faces from the girls. Maybe even yelling from Buffy. And he just wasn't up to it. He shifted a little on the couch, tucking his feet under him, and Spike shifted too, so they were facing each other.

"Ok - I went road-tripping this summer and didn't get very far - Oxnard, to be exact. And...stuff happened and...the night before I left to come back here, I met someone - helped someone out, actually. And he - he had this - he gave me..."

"Just tell it. Start at the beginning and go on until the end, right?" Spike looked only serious and interested, no
smirk and no snark, so Xander took a deep breath and told him.

It's a chilly night, and Xander walks fast, hands stuffed in his pockets, tired from bartending and cleaning up - his head still rings a little from the blaring music of the club. He's gotten almost 200 dollars in tips tonight, and is looking forward to using it to go home. Oxnard - this time, these things - are over. He's about a block from his place when he hears the noise: flesh on flesh, low cries, harsh voices. For a moment he freezes, panicked, and then he's running, grabbing up a discarded length of board from a bin, his heart going double-time and his mouth dry. He comes around a corner and sees two guys; one with a knife, one with a length of chain. And a third, huddling back into a wall, arms over his head and is that blood? In the orange glare of the streetlight it's hard to tell. Xander yells and dives in, striking wildly, managing to hit the guy with the knife first; a lucky blow to the arm that makes the man grunt in pain and drop the weapon. Xander swings again, hitting the chain-guy, screaming at the top of his lungs. He's decided that 'homicidal maniac' might work to his advantage, so loud and wild it is. The soldier is bemoaning this lack of plan, but the hyena yips excitedly, ready for a fight. The two attackers don't even try to fight - they just run off, the
knife-guy clutching his arm, both cursing. They were two of the same guys from...before, and Xander figures they just didn't want extra trouble. He stands staring after them, panting, until they're out of sight and then he turns and crouches down next to the guy on the ground.

"Hey - are you ok? Are you hurt?" Xander sees the knife out of the corner of his eye and pushes it away with the board, under a nearby dumpster. He pushes the board under there, too. The other man slowly slides down the wall until he's sitting, his legs bent up and his arms across his knees. He has blood on his face and staining his jacket sleeve, and his dark eyes are a little wild.

"Listen - I live real close to here. Why don't you come home with me, get cleaned up. We can call the police if you want - " The man doesn't look happy about that, so Xander adds , "- or you can just get a drink, relax for a few. Up to you. But I don't think we should hang around here. Ok?" The man wipes his hands over his face and looks at the blood on his fingers, then up at Xander.

"Ok," he says, and pushes himself stiffly to his feet. He looks around for a minute then bends and picks up a worn leather knapsack. Slinging it over his shoulder, he gestures to Xander and they both walk away, up the street and over one to Xander's place.
In the bright light of the kitchen the wounds didn't look too bad, and Xander gets a clean washcloth and shows the man to the bathroom. While his guest cleans himself up, Xander washes his hands in the kitchen sink and gets a couple of beers out of the fridge. His hands are shaking - his stomach is in knots. He really needs to get the hell out of Oxnard.

The man comes out of the bathroom, blood gone, and Xander finally gets a good look at him. He's maybe Xander's age, maybe a little older - it's really hard to tell. His skin is dark and his hair, and he's wearing jeans so old and battered that it's amazing they hold together. The undershirt he wears is no better, and the denim jacket over it has a new, blood-stained tear in an already ratty sleeve. Homeless, maybe - or a migrant worker. There's duct-tape holding the soles of his dingy high-tops on, and Xander thinks about the money in his pocket. The man puts his knapsack down on the table and settles into a chair. He reaches out and picks up a beer, and Xander notices a ring on his left hand - worn silver, etched with flowing lines; a design he couldn't quite pick out.

"This for me?" the man asks, tipping the beer, and Xander blinks.
"Huh? Oh - yeah. Sorry. Just - tired. Been a long night. So are you ok? Looks like the bleeding has stopped."

"Oh, I'm fine. Hard to hurt me." The man smiles and opens the beer - looks around the kitchen. "Got any salt?"

"Salt?"

"I like it in my beer. Just a pinch." Xander hasn't heard of that before but he gets up and gets the salt shaker from the stove and hands it over. The man pours a little into his hand and sprinkles it into the beer - carries the last grains up to his mouth and licks them from his finger.

"It's good you came along. Those men - they had their iron - I was going to be in a bad way."

"Yeah - those guys. They've...done that before. I thought they were in jail or something but I guess not." Xander opens his own beer and takes a long drink, watching the man do the same. He has a different look about him. His narrow, foxy face is maybe American Indian, maybe Mexican, maybe Middle-Eastern. Xander can't place it, but his Hellmouth instincts - not to mention the hyena - are stirred up. This guy might not be 100 percent human. But he doesn't seem to be a threat, either. At least, Xander hopes he isn't.
"You have had trouble with these men?"

"Oh, yeah, I have - me and a friend... The worst part was - I'd seen those guys around. One of 'em works at the hardware store and he helped me figure out how to fix the wiring in here." Xander gestures around at his kitchen. "And the other guy likes to play pool, and we had a few games when I first got here. I thought - they were ok guys." Xander shakes his head and takes another pull of the beer. It hurts, to see the violence and hate that lurks beneath the pleasant exteriors. The man drinks his beer as well, watching Xander. He has feathers in his hair, Xander notices suddenly. Two black ones, like crow's feathers, and a blue-jay feather, tangled in the mop of black hair that falls over his shoulders and obscures half his face.

"I'm a bit - weak in the stomach from that fight... Do ya think you'd have a bit of bread? It'd help calm me down." The man pats his flat belly and Xander frowns at him for moment, then shrugs. Whatever will make him feel better, that's fine. Xander gets up and gets the loaf of bread from the counter and sets it down on the table.

"Help yourself." The man does and they sit quietly for a few minutes finishing the beer, the man eating the bread in small bites, obviously not liking it very much. When it's
done, he sweeps the crumbs away and puts his hands on the table, looking up at Xander through the tangle of hair.

"You've given me bread and salt and drink. Invited me into your home - most importantly, intervened for me when I was in peril and could not defend myself. You have offered me the hospitality of your house freely, and for all these things I am in your debt. A debt you may call in at any time. Don't call for it lightly, or frivolously."

Xander stares at him as he speaks, feeling his stomach go tense and his heart start to pound. The man's voice is changing - his whole demeanor seems to be subtly different. As if he's settled solidly into himself, suddenly. He sits straighter and his voice takes on a solemn, deeper tone. And Xander is quite sure that there's a glint of red in those dark eyes, like coals glowing out at him from behind the thicket of hair. Xander blinks and the man settles back in his chair. He is...the same. Some homeless guy, with dirt under his nails and duct-tape around his shoes.

"What the hell was that?" Xander asks softly, and the man grins. His canines seem overly long, and Xander stifles a small gasp.
"That was me. Taking care of business. You helped me, I'll help you. That's all. And as for the calling - when you want to call in this debt - you just say my name. For you, it's... Jack Green. Don't forget that."

Xander studies the man sitting across from him. He doesn't feel a threat from him. Just - otherness.

"I'll make you a gift, too, for your gifts to me."

"What gifts?"

"Your hospitality. It's a gift few care to give. And here is yours." The man - Jack - rummages in his knapsack and finally takes out a small pottery jar, stoppered with a cork. For extra security, rough hemp cord is wound around it, making sure the cork stays in. Jack unwinds the cord - uncorks the jar - and a sharp gingery odor permeates the air. Xander breathes it and it smells like something good - something from when he was a child. It makes him smile, and Jack smiles back at him.

"Now - lean closer. You have been hurt; people hiding behind masks, showing one thing and doing another. Never again." Jack dips one long finger into the jar and then extends his finger towards Xander, a small smear of pale green jelly on the tip. "Close your eyes. It won't hurt you."
Xander looks at him for a long moment, and then takes a deep breath and does it, ignoring the hyena that growls and the soldier that makes his fists clench down tight on the table edge. Coolness touches his eyelids - his forehead - and then his nose and mouth and his tongue licks out before he can stop it. He tastes sharp and sour and fresh and...life...before the taste fades completely away. He opens his eyes and Jack is there, smiling, putting the cork back into the jar.

"What was that? What did you do?"

"A gift. To see the truth. Now, when you want to see you say this - taisbean. Say it now, Xander."

"I - I haven't told you my name."

"You didn't need to. It's written on the air. Say it, Xander. Taisbean."

"Ty-ben," Xander whispers, and everything...shimmers. And Jack shimmers and Xander's eyes go wide. Jack is wearing a velvet coat; it's a little shabby and worn, but the deep green is thickly embroidered with leaves and flowers in dark blues, purples, and reds. The linen shirt underneath is also embroidered, white on white, an interlocking pattern. The feathers that had seemed tangled in Jack's hair now seem to be part of his hair,
and there are more of them - many more, mostly black but also red and yellow and a few mottled black and white. His face has thinned - his whole body is thinner and longer without him seeming to be any taller - and his hands are almost spidery. His eyes glint a deep red and then are only black, glittering with good humor. And is the jacket actually velvet? It looks like - leaves stitched together - bits of ragged leather, pressed flowers... Xander blinks, and the velvet is back.

"What - what are you? What did you do?"

"You said 'reveal'. You're seeing - me. My true self. If you looked at anyone else right now, you'd see what was in their heart - you'd see their soul. You would have known the true self of those men that attacked... You can see anyone's soul, this way. Anyone's true heart."

"My...god..." Xander stares at Jack, seeing a glimmering swirl around him; motes of light that seem to dance around and through his body - green and white and yellow. And he feels... Age pours off Jack - age and darkness and something both fierce and jovial. It makes Xander think of a cat at play; able to kill with a swipe of its paw, but in far too good a mood to actually do it.

"What if I - what if I look in the mirror?"
"You won't see anything. You can't see your own soul. Doesn't work that way." Jack cocks his head, watching him. "You'll be able to see the true heart of demons, as well. What they really are."

"Demons?" Xander says weakly.

"I know where you're from. The mouth of Hell. That sink - it distorts the very air. I don't like it there. But the demons do."

"Who are you, really?"

Jack smiled at him. "Say this now - ceil."

"Keel." The shimmer again, and Jack is the homeless man, denim and patched shoes; just a man.

"That is 'hide'. I think you'd find it a bit distracting to see like that all the time. Don't forget those words, now. Taisbean. Ceil."

"I won't."

"I know." Jack smiles at him again and closes his knapsack, buckling the flap down. "Now I really must go. You be careful, Xander. Use my gift. Let it help you. And remember - I owe you one thing, one great thing to repay you for your help tonight. Don't use it lightly. Hold it to
you, think on it - wait. I'll always come to you if you call. Here. Keep this close." Jack reaches up and pulls the blue jay feather from his hair and hands it to Xander. The rich blue and black of it is beautiful and Xander runs his fingers over the vanes, feeling the merest tingle of...something. When he looks up from the feather, Jack is gone.

The next day, Xander goes home.

When he finished his story, Xander was staring fixedly at his hands, and he felt rather then saw Spike move towards him. Move and then stop, and then take an unneeded breath. Xander finally risked a glance up and saw Spike just sitting there, looking...

That's thoughtful. Not pissed and not sneering and not...pissed. Thoughtful. Which is...good? Spike stretched to the coffee table and got a cigarette. He lit it and puffed on it for a minute, staring into space. Finally, he looked over at Xander and Xander flinched from the look in his eyes. Anger. Calculation. And was that...fear? Damn. Thoughtful was NOT good. Here it comes

"Ssssooo..." Spike hissed like a snake - a big, blond, scary snake, despite the Initiative hardware. "You can see someone's 'true heart', huh? Their soul? Demons
souls? And what makes you think *demons* have souls, mate?"

"Ummmm. Actually - Giles."

"What?"

"Well - ummmm - before you got here - to Sunnydale, I mean, there was this - incident. Willow scanned this book and it turned out it was this demon and he got into the computer and then he was in the Internet and he was, uh, tricking Willow and a couple guys into doing stuff for him and one guy tried to kill Buffy and - "

"Stop, stop. Bloody hell. What did the Watcher say to make you think demons - that demon - had a soul?"

Spike sucked the last half-inch of his cigarette down to ash and stubbed it out fiercely, his eyes never leaving Xander's face.

"Uh, well, he was explaining that the book had been a trap - these guys had 'trapped the demon's soul for all eternity' in the book and the only way to let him out was to read him. It. The book. Which the computer did when Willow scanned it." Xander examined his fingernails, then looked up hastily when Spike spoke again.

"So, you been usin' this...gift. Been lookin' at things?"
"Yeah."

"Been lookin' at me?"

Xander flinched a little and looked back at his fingernails. "Yeah, actually. Once."

"Not your business, lookin'."

"I know, but... I'd used it out on patrol with Buffy a couple of times and I had to see...if you were..."

"Good? Evil? Fucked? Which would it be?"

"Uh. None of the above?" Spike looked surprised at that, and Xander straightened a little. He wasn't going to be intimidated - Jack's gift was amazing, and he wasn't going to be afraid of using it, or of telling Spike what he'd seen.

"Listen. Giles is right - demons do have souls. Demon-y souls. They're different than people souls...I mean, obviously...but they're there nonetheless. A lot of them are really - horrible. The ones Buffy kills are mostly pretty bad, and a few that are just...around - they're scary. But a lot of them are...well, take Manny."

"Who the bloody hell is Manny?"
"He's my boss. He owns this house. His son owns the company I work for. He's from Portugal - left right before the war and moved here. And he's - a demon. His whole family is - are. He told me what kind, I can't remember right this minute. But he's - he's a nice guy. He's teaching me stuff. I even got invited to do Christmas Eve at his house." Xander smiled at that memory - he'd never spent a Christmas that didn't involve drunks, fights, humiliation and a fun-filled night on the lawn in his sleeping bag. When the terrors of the Hellmouth paled in comparison to a holiday get-together with your nearest and dearest, you were in deep trouble. Xander had to shush the petty little voice that reminded him that neither Buffy nor Giles or even Willow had ever done anything to make a sleeping bag on the lawn in vamp central unnecessary.

"You still with me, mate? 'Cause holiday bloody cheer and all aside, what the fuck does this have to do with me?"

Xander laughed - of course, that was how Spike would see this. "Well, lots, maybe. I'm trying to say, Manny and his family are good people - demons - whatever. I looked at them. And I could see their hearts, and I could see their souls. They want what most of us want - a place to live, their family safe and happy... Just normal.
I mean - half his family is human, they did the inter-
species marriage thing. About half the demons at Willy's
are like that -"

"You keep the fuck away from Willy's. Bad element in
there, could get you...hurt." Spike looked discomfited by
what he'd just said and lit another cigarette, frowning.

Xander ruthlessly squashed the little voice that burbled
happily in his head. *Worried about me, he's worried
about me!* "You go to Willy's."

"I'm a *demon*,. It's the kind of place demons go. 'Sides, I
don't go there anymore, and you better not, either."

"Why not?" Xander asked, and Spike looked at his
cigarette, looked at his nails - the black polish was badly
chipped, and he picked at it - looked at the ceiling.
Looked sheepishly at Xander when Xander cleared his
throat.

"Not real popular in Sunnyhell just now, am I? Been seen
'helpin' the Slayer', killing my kind - they don't trust me.
Got banged about a bit, last time I went there.
Blacklisted, as it were." This recollection seemed to piss
Spike off and he scowled at Xander, taking a deep puff of
his cigarette, blowing smoke across the couch towards
the mortal. "Back to the point. What do you see when
you look at...vampires?" Spike said 'vampires', but Xander heard the 'me' in there, and he looked down at his hands again for a minute to hide the smile.

"I see mostly what Giles says. Animals who want to kill and destroy. The part that's human - whatever makes them remember stuff from before they were turned - it's tiny. It's all - dark and squashed and...hurt. It's like the demon rips it apart and keeps what it needs and the rest just gets - locked away. But some vampires are different. It's like the human soul was strong enough to fight the demon off - or like the demon didn't mind the human, or something. The ones that still have a human soul - they've got the demon soul too, they've got both. You'll laugh, but Harmony still has her soul. I guess it's why she's still... Harmony. I mean, no demon on earth could stand up to a Cordette in full-on snark mode."

They both laughed; Spike mostly because he knew vampire-Harmony pretty well, and Xander because it was still just too bizarre; Harmony as take-over-the-world evil vampire.

"When did you...look at me," Spike asked, and Xander bit his lip for a moment.

"The first night you stayed in the basement with me."
Spike looked at him, finishing his cigarette - thinking. "That why you...? Never mind." He crushed the cigarette out, frowning.

_That's why I let you share the bed with me._ Xander thought. He took a deep breath. _Now or never._ "You've still got your human soul too, Spike." Xander said it softly, but the vampire's reaction was instantaneous and violent. Spike leapt to his feet and hurled his beer bottle across the room - snatched Xander's and did the same, then swooped down to get right into Xander's face. The mortal flinched back as Spike's demon came to the fore and snarled at him.

"_Soul_ - you're saying there's a human _here_, Harris? _Demon_, here, no bloody hag-ridden poufter."

"Spike," Xander whispered, trying not to look him in the eye; the hyena wanted him to bare his throat, show subservience, but Xander wouldn't go that far - wasn't _that_ stupid. The soldier fervently backed him up on this. "Spike, please? Let me tell you." The vampire spun away, growling, and Xander just sat still, watching him pace, watching his fists clench until blood seeped out from under his nails. Finally Spike stopped and stood by the window. He pushed the curtain aside and stared blindly out. His back was quivering with tension, and Xander
wanted to get up and smooth it - touch and rub and pet until the vampire was calm again. Xander clenched his own hands down tight, knowing he'd likely get smacked across the room if he touched the vampire right now. And while he could maybe deal with that Ok, no, I'd be pissed as hell there was no way he was going to trigger that damn chip. So he waited.

After what seemed ages - probably really only about five minutes - Spike let the curtain fall closed with a sigh and came back to the couch, rubbing his palms on his thighs. He flopped down and stared at Xander, and finally nodded. "Right. Tell me - what it is you see, exactly."

"Ok. I'm going to really - look, ok?" Spike looked puzzled, but nodded again, and Xander whispered the word. *Taisbean.* Spike twitched a little, but sat still. And Xander looked, and told him.

"I see the demon. He...it...whatever - *glows.* This dark, dark gold, like fire. And there are all these - sparks. Gold and red and black, flying around, going *through* him - through you. And then there's - you, or maybe William, I don't know. Longer hair, darker. Not so - hard. That part glows, too, paler - more like sunlight. And a lot of the time they're - together. Merged, like...kind of like you when you go all *grrrr* only... Well, it's hard to
describe. But the sparks around *him* are white and silver, and they go into the demon, and the demon's go into *him*. They're just kind of - there, like ghosts, hovering just...inside you. I can see the bad stuff, Spike. I can see how you got your name. I can see...the right hand of the Scourge of Europe there, you know?

*Old and blackened blood sheathing blunt claws...gore-stained fangs that leer. And more then that - not only vision but feeling. Malevolence. Remorseless hate. The urge to destroy and absolutely nothing to stand in its way. Nothing but the human part.* "But...I can see how much you loved Drusilla, too. I can see it... I can see why you made that deal with Buffy, to keep Angelus from waking Acathla.

*The human part - it had to be William - strong enough to hold the demon - subsume it into himself and keep it still, keep it...under control. Obvious, when the human part wrapped itself around the demon and the demon closed its eyes in bliss and surrender, the blood and fury simply fading away. A feeling of connection, some sort of connection, and the demon wanted it badly enough to give in. The human had wanted it badly, too. Enough to give in to Drusilla*. Because that was there, too - the feeling that Drusilla, of everyone Spike had ever known, had seen *him*. And wanted exactly what she had seen.
"It's all there. It's..." Xander wanted to say beautiful but he wasn't sure if Spike wanted to hear that. So instead, he ended with: "It's amazing. And - lucky you - not a trace of poufter anywhere."

Spike was staring at him, his eyes so wide they looked cartoonish, looks like a manga character and then he snorted. Snorted again and was laughing, and then was laughing so hard he actually cried. As Spike lay helplessly on the couch, Xander started laughing, too, and poked Spike in the ribs with his foot. The sparks were whirling faster - fast enough to make Xander dizzy, and the demon looked - puzzled. That made Xander laugh harder. He poked the vampire again and Spike batted at his foot. Poked a third time and suddenly Spike grabbed his foot and yanked; pulled Xander halfway across the couch and snatched him upwards by his shirt front. Xander ended inches from the vampire, chest to chest, Spike's hands tight on his biceps, one leg over Spike's thigh, the other squashed underneath.

"That why you kissed me, then? 'Cause you saw this - my - soul?"

"That - that's part of it," Xander gasped out. The souls, this close, were more a golden aura then anything else, the sparks dazzling and dancing as if Xander had cracked
his head on something. *Oh man, don't mess this up, come on, calm down, just tell him...* Oh, he smells so good, he - love his eyes, love how his eyebrows are so dark, love how his eyelashes are so long... *That scar is really deep, must have hurt to get that...want to kiss him again...*

"Well? What was the other part?"

"I - thought about you. All the time. Ever since that first time that... When Angel tried to trick you into biting me. And after. I just - couldn't get you out of my mind. Couldn't get you out of my mind..." Xander whispered, and he leaned forward, the tiny bit he needed to, and kissed Spike again. A light, careful kiss, hardly daring to press, not daring to move at all. Xander felt Spike's hands clench tighter on his arms, and then he felt Spike start to kiss him back. To move closer and press harder and for a moment they were actually *kissing*; cool and wet and Spike's tongue just touching his. And then Spike pulled away - let go and backed away completely, until nothing was touching at all. Xander couldn't move. His lips were tingling - fuck, his whole *body* was tingling - and he wanted to *pounce* and get back into that taste, that scent...feel that lean and whipcorded body against his. He bit his lip, hard, watching Spike, and Spike scrubbed his hands back through his hair and sighed.
"I need to - I gotta think about this. I can't...I..." Spike shot to his feet and started pacing again, and Xander stood slowly and went into the kitchen. He got the broom and dustpan from the cabinet and went back to the living room. Spike had lit a cigarette as he paced and trailed smoke like a slim blond dragon. Xander had to smile. He went over to the wall where Spike had thrown the beer bottles - and thank god he hadn't hit the TV - and started to sweep. He was mindful of his bare feet, but when a piece got lodged under the edge of his bookshelf, he bent and carelessly tried to wrench it out. The glass sliced right into his finger, of course, and he straightened with a curse, wincing.

"What did -? You're bleeding." Spike was right there, grabbing Xander's hand, looking at the cut and the blood that welled and ran down into Xander's palm. His eyes were dark and the tip of his tongue came out to touch his lip.

"It's ok - not a big cut, didn't hurt much..." Xander watched Spike - watched the shivers that gripped him as he scented the blood. Watched Spike's eyes go gold and baleful as the demon longed for it - looked, and saw the demon's color darken further, saw the sparks take on a reddish tinge. And the human part looked to be in pain. Not from the bloodlust but from the demon, whose
insubstantial claws were scrabbling at the black spot in their skull - a spot like a cancer. The chip. Xander stared at it, that ugly spot of deadness in the glowing creature he...

Loved. You love him. "Spike, you - you can -" Xander didn't know what to say - how to say it. Instead he simply lifted his hand, offering, and Spike stared at him, demon-eyed. Then he bent his head and licked, like a great cat - licked every drop and streak and trailing line, and lapped at the small pool that had gathered in Xander's palm. And then he pulled Xander's finger into his mouth and groaned, sucking the blood, eyes shut, and Xander felt it like fire all over his body, racing to that place. He felt himself harden, felt arousal like a wave of heat and cold wash through. Oh god, oh...if this is what it feels like to be taken, what does taking feel like, what is he - ooooh...fuck... Xander swayed, and Spike pulled away slowly, letting his tongue trail over Xander's finger, the lambent gaze on Xander's face now, watching him. Xander stared back, marveling. The demon glowed like a bed of coals - the human part almost white, emerging for a moment and then sinking away, merging with the demon. The sparks were still reddish, swirling in a languorous dance. I think it felt - even more incredible - to be on his end. Fuck he looks...beautiful...sexy...want...
"Xander?" Spike was still staring at him, and Xander blinked and looked down at his finger. The cut was closed over, a raw-looking slash of red, but one that looked a couple days old, rather then minutes. "Xander..." Spike whispered, and the hand still holding Xander's was trembling. Xander realized that he was trembling.

"Wh - what?"

"Why'd you let me do that?" Spike whispered, and his voice was raw with want and need and...something.

"Because I could - see you. I could see you."

Spike closed his eyes, and his grip on Xander's hand became crushingly tight. Xander didn't flinch, didn't think about it, begging for the chip to not notice, not notice. Spike shook his head, the demon coming out, and he shot one last look at Xander and turned and ran. Xander just watched him - watched him go out the back door and across the grass, towards the bluff. The gibbous moon was high - small and cold and white - and its stark light showed the vampire running flat out, faster almost then Xander could track him. Spike ran to the edge of the bluff and was gone - dropping straight down the twenty feet between land and sea.
Xander breathed a long sigh of relief. He wasn't going far, not without his boots - his duster. But he was safe there, on the beach. No Initiative, no humans. Xander heard a grumbling, shrieking roar, and knew it was Spike, pouring his frustrations into the night sky, into the wash of diamante stars and endless cold black. Xander whispered *ceil*. No need for seeing now.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Hours later. The sky was faintly pinking and Xander was lying in bed, stiff from nerves, exhausted. He finally heard the door creak open and then click shut. He closed his eyes and listened to Spike coming into the bedroom, the soft swish of clothing being removed and tossed aside. Then Spike slid into the bed, and Xander could feel his shivering across the mattress. He hesitated for a long moment, and then scooted over, reaching for the vampire. His fingers found chilled, damp flesh and muscles that shuddered from cold.

"Damnit Spike - did you get wet? You'll freeze to death! What were you thinking? Wer**e** you thinking?" Xander got out of bed and quickly went around to the other side, not even contemplating the impossibility of the undead
catching a cold. "Move over right now. Get onto my side, where I was lying. Come on, Spike!" Dimly, he could see Spike's pale head, his bleached hair matted and spiked from salt water. Spike looked at him and then obediently slid over, settling into Xander's warm spot with a sigh. Xander got back into the bed and curled himself around the frigid body, rubbing Spike's arms and getting as close as he could. All the while he murmured in Spike's ear, low and soft.

"It's alright, Spike, it's ok, just let me get you warm, alright? Just let me hold you and warm you up, ok, it's alright, alright, I'll take care of you, keep you warm..." Xander rubbed and stroked, kneading tight muscles, smiling to himself as he touched the smooth skin; ran hands and fingers over a body that was satin over steel. After a little while Spike gave a great sigh, and his shivering, which had grown less and less, just stopped. Xander felt him finally relax, and he sighed and relaxed too, closing his eyes. He bit his lip, considering, and finally dropped a kiss on the back of Spike's neck, just below the salt-sticky hair. Spike shifted a little, and then he petted Xander's arm where it lay curled against the vampire's chest.
"Wish I could see you, " he whispered, and Xander squeezed once, briefly, and burrowed a little closer. In a few minutes they were both deeply asleep.

4 Keepsakes

Thank god it's Saturday Xander thought, burrowing a little closer into the bed - into Spike. He didn't think he could get up if he wanted to, even though it was afternoon already. Spike smelled like salt and sand and spice, and Xander lay and breathed it in, resisting the urge to kiss the soft-skinned bit of neck that was just under his lips. Resisting, as well, the urge to stroke every inch of the cool, silken body that lay against him. It wouldn't be - fair.

Don't want him to wake up and tell you to piss off, more like

Oh, go polish something, for fuck's sake It was a little true. Despite everything that had happened over the past two days and nights - and that kiss in the basement - Xander still had no real idea of what Spike thought of him. And he wasn't in any real hurry to find out, if he could just continue to do this for a while. This...was really, really good. Better even then the four weeks Spike had stayed in his basement. They'd talked, and watched movies, and generally gotten along, but Xander's stress
over moving and his feelings about being a Scooby had distracted him. He'd found that even while they were having a nice evening heckling 'Ah'ndon', the little nagging voice in the back of his mind had kept him from really enjoying himself. He was going to enjoy this - naked vampire, in his arms - to the hilt.

Eventually, being human caught up with him, and Xander groaned and slipped out of bed. After he finished in the bathroom he pulled on an old pair of sweats and a flannel shirt and made his way into the kitchen. He made coffee on autopilot and stood there waiting for the pot to fill enough to get a cup full. The whole time, in the back of his mind, ran a litany - Spike's name. Xander wondered if this was normal or if he'd lost his mind as well as his heart. He took his coffee and the boom box outside and sat on the back porch, drinking and listening to chatter and music. It was just perfect outside - cool and sunny, and the ever-present breeze from the ocean smelling tangy and fresh. He heard the gull's shrill cries - watched them circle and dive over the edge of the bluff, endless and endlessly compelling with their sharp white wings and lazy, elegant swoops and spirals. *Spike, Spike, Spike* running through his head. He daydreamed a little about flying, mind wandering from gulls to jets to gliders to gulls again until he realized his cup was empty and that
the sun was starting to sink a little. He figured it must be nearly four o'clock, and wondered if Spike was up yet. He also noticed that he was rubbing his fingers over and over the cut from last night, and that every time he touched it, it gave him a little shiver of sense-memory.

What am I gonna say to him, when he DOES get up? I think protestations of undying love are not gonna go over all that well, and am I really ready to go there? Maybe...maybe I am. It FEELS like I am, but feelings are so...well, they're feelings, they're SUPPOSED to be so...but... I don't want to get in over my head. I don't think I could stand being laughed at, right now.

He came back. He didn't try to kill me. He accepted what I told him. It could all be ok Xander stood up and stretched hard, then turned and went back into the house. As he shut the door he heard the shower running and smiled to himself.

He had settled down with a second cup of coffee and his mail by the time Spike came out of the shower. The vampire was dressed only in Xander's robe, and Xander caught his breath as Spike came into the kitchen. The robe - a heavy cotton jersey in dark blue - was too big, and one shoulder slipped down and a little off as Spike flung himself into a chair, looking groggy. He hitched at it ineffectually and then looked around at the table. His
hair, free of the gel, was tufted in loose waves all over his head, and he looked so young

"You looking for something?" Xander asked, checking over his phone bill.

"Smokes," Spike rasped. His voice was rough and hoarse - obviously it hadn't recovered from the howling he'd done last night. Xander shivered. Oh, SO not fair. His voice is already like sex on toast, now it's like...CHOCOLATE sex on toast. Gahhh. Act normal, for fuck's sake Don't notice that his skin looks like mother of pearl next to that robe, that that place right above his collarbone is where I'd like to nibble, just a little...

"You left 'em in the living room. On the coffee table." Xander glanced up from the bill and straight into Spike's gaze. The half-shut eyes were full of speculation. Xander tried not to let anything show on his own face - tried to be casual - but his heart was going like a trip-hammer and he knew that a blush was coming on.

He's gonna think all you think about is sex! Rein it in, Harris! Xander looked back to his mail, rifling through the papers, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Spike stand up and shuffle into the living room. He came back with a cigarette already in his mouth. He set the ashtray on the table and went to the 'fridge, pulling out two bags
of blood and fumbling his coffee cup, assembling breakfast and managing to get ashes and blood on the counter. Spike leaned against the edge of the worktop until the microwave dinged and then shuffled back to the kitchen table.

Xander forced his gaze back to his mail, but his heart wasn't in it.

"I'm starving. I've got frozen waffles - want some? They've got partially reconstituted one-hundred percent naturally unnatural blueberries in them." Xander smiled brightly at the vampire and Spike squinted through cigarette smoke at him, cup halfway to his mouth.

"What?"

"Waffles. Want some?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why bloody not." Spike shut his eyes and drank and Xander got up and started making the waffles. He put them in a pan and shoveled it under the oven broiler - the only way to make six at a time. Then he got the butter, syrup, plates and forks out. Spike just drank, little sips as if the blood were something much stronger, and after a minute Xander stopped bustling and frowned at him.

"You ok?"
"What?"

"I said, are you ok? You seem kind of...I dunno. Are you pissed off at me?" Oh damn, didn't mean to say THAT, just slipped out, DAMNIT, now he'll think...what'll he think? That I'm a freakin' girly dork, that's what he'll think.

Spike stared at him, then flicked ash off his cigarette and regarded it closely, as if the filter were suddenly very interesting.

"No. 'M not mad at you, pet. I - just a bit tired still, you know." He made a vague gesture with his cigarette, towards the bluff and the sea, and Xander nodded. More voice the hyena grumbled, and Xander mentally shushed it.

"Yeah... I can see how that could - wear you out." He opened the oven and turned the waffles over, singeing himself a little on the edge of the oven door. He sucked on the burn as Spike got up and fixed his second cup full of blood.

"What d'ya wanna do today?" Xander poked through a drawer, looking for a potholder, but came up empty. He grabbed the towel off the dish rack and folded it, and took the waffles out of the oven.
"Spike?"

"Huh?"

"There anything you want to do today?" The vampire watched him assemble waffles, three to a plate, butter between each one, butter on top. Xander put the plates on the table and got a glass from the cabinet - poured himself some milk.

"I - can we go by my place? I need some stuff." Spike made a gesture with his hand, indicating himself, and Xander realized that Spike didn't have any clothes here.

"Oh. Right. I kinda forgot. Sure, we can do that. I need to get some groceries and stuff anyway, so we can go by the store and your place both, no problem." Xander poured syrup over his waffles and started to eat. He watched in a sort of horrified fascination as Spike poured syrup and then blood over his own and wolfed them down. He glanced up once at Xander and grinned, his bad mood seemingly gone. Spike's tongue snaked out to lick a drop of blood-tinged syrup off his fork. Xander stopped feeling horrified and started feeling...

Snap out of it, Harris

Sir, yes sir! Soon as this image of Spike and syrup and tongue gets out of my head, sir!
There was BLOOD, Harris!

Adds to the flavor, sir! Xander mentally shook himself and drank his milk down, then took his plate and glass over to the sink and ran some water over them.

"Right. I need a shower, Spike. Be out in a few."

"Sure, pet. Take your time." Spike was still grinning, and Xander wondered if the robe had been open quite that far a few minutes ago. He decided to think about it in the shower and bolted for the other room. Damn vampires and their uncanny senses! Wonder if I have any Old Spice in here or something? That could drown out a dead cat

Spike watched Xander make his escape into the shower and laughed to himself. He'd thought the boy's heart might explode, it'd been beating so hard. And he'd smelled so...

Smelled gooood. Warm and salt and rich, like...blood...oh... His blood, last night. Tasted so good. Could taste him - every bit of him, his fear and his want and his...

Love. You think he loves us

Spike ate the last forkful of waffle and looked at the sticky swirl of blood and syrup on his plate. He drew his
fork through it idly, thinking about it. Maybe love. But. He's. Human, for one. And. A white hat. He can't - he'd never be able to really...

He can see us. He knows us. Better than anyone else in our life - better than Dru maybe. He sees us and that's why he - offered his blood. And he wasn't afraid. Not in the 'I'm gonna die' way. He wasn't. And he... Spike thought about that, too. It was almost frightening, to imagine that someone loved him. Someone who wasn't Dru. She'd been his only - his girl - for so long. How could he let someone else in? He had to know...he had to see. He had a box - keepsakes. Dru's things. He needed to look through them, to know how he felt about her once and for all. She'd sent him off, alone and angry and desperate to prove he was what she wanted - needed. He'd ended up with the damn soldiers, with this bloody thing in his head that might as well be a shock collar and a lead, and just be a good doggie for the Slayer... Spike snarled, his demon surfacing at the thought of her.

Never. Die first. Take the Slayer with me. Get it out, get it out, getitout - Spike shot to his feet, growling, and almost hurled his cup across the room. With an effort he set it on the table, and then leaned there, head down, struggling with the demon. Trying to cope with the all-consuming rage the demon was pouring through him. It
was still light outside - nowhere to run this time - and he couldn't tear Xander's house apart. Wouldn't. Finally, the demon calmed, and he reverted to his human face just as Xander came out of the bedroom.

"Spike? You ok?" The soft voice was like warm velvet stroking over him, full of concern and care, and Spike shivered under its insubstantial caress.

"I...I'm fine. Tired." He slowly sat down, pulling the mug back to him, but the blood was cold now and he grimaced in distaste.

"Here, I'll..." Xander took the mug out of his hands and took it to the microwave. Spike watched him, studying him. He could remember, through a filter of rage (at Angelus) and worry (for Dru) and whiskey (because of Dru) the few times he'd met Xander before. When Angelus had used the boy as bait, he'd only thought good choice because he'd smelled so delicious. Terror and anger and sweat and sweet and...something. A dark, rich undertone that Spike could smell right now, savory and warm. Angelus had always had a knack for finding really tasty...boys. Spike firmly put older, bloodier memories away behind a mental door and locked it.

_Gave him to us. Ours...oh, the blood..._ The demon _wanted_, and Spike mentally soothed it, quieting it. But
the want remained, and Spike felt it like an ache through his bones. *What am I, some stray cat? Take me in, feed me, I'm yours?*

The second time - well, Xander'd been a soldier then, and the fear had had a darker undercurrent of... Something like bloodlust. He hadn't paid much attention then, but he'd sensed it again, the night they'd worked the spell and Dru had got her power back. The boy had been around there somewhere that night, fighting the Order of Taraka - he'd smelled Xander's blood like dark smoke in the air, but all his attention had been on Dru and Angel and the two Slayers. Then the pain of his back being shattered... That memory, too, went under lock and key.

*Going to run out of room for all the stuff you're locking away. Ever going to face any of it? Ever going to -*

*No. I'm not. At least...not right now. Kind of trying to get my head right, figure the boy out! He says you're my soul...William's soul. Not - inherited madness. So. Don't need to think about...all that, just now. Got enough to think about.*

*'All that' has teeth. Better be careful how you lock those doors* Spike shook his head a little, silencing the voice, and Xander gave him a quizzical look as he handed Spike the re-heated blood. Spike took it with a nod of thanks
and drank, reaching for his cigarettes. He frowned in irritation when he realized the pack was empty.

"Oh bloody buggering hell," he snarled, and Xander laughed.

"It'll be dark in half an hour - we'll get you some more then. Listen - " He sat down opposite Spike, looking serious, and Spike felt his stomach clench tight. What was he going to say? 'Thanks but no thanks, don't need a crazed killer in my home'? He shouldn't have taken the blood last night, no matter that the scent of it and the boy had practically driven him over the edge. He shouldn't have gone off raging - probably scared him, shrieking and carrying on like that. But all that - that business with the soul, and what he'd tasted, thought he'd tasted, in the boy's blood... We tasted love. Some kind of love. Running doesn't change it. Spike gulped the rest of his blood, suddenly desperate for some comfort, some warmth. He realized Xander was still talking and he forced his attention back to the boy.

"What?"

"Spike! Geez. Ok, to review - I need supplies, so I have to go to the grocery, so you need to write down any stuff you need here on my list." Xander pushed a pad of paper and pen over to Spike, and Spike stared down at it Really,
Xander had horrible handwriting. Spike squinted at the list, trying to read it.

"What the hell does this say - 'title point'? What in bloody hell is that?"

"Toilet paper, Spike, and you're supposed to be adding to the list, not critiquing my penmanship."

"You don't have penmanship, you have...chicken scratches." Spike looked at the lidless and rather grubby ball point pen in his hand with disdain.

"This isn't even a proper biro, the ends all - fuzzy - or somethin' - " Xander snatched the pen out of Spike's hand and wiped it on his jean-clad thigh.

"It's just a little lint or something, for god's sake. It's been in the junk drawer." Spike snatched the pen back and glared down at the paper. What did he want? The Slayer served cold. Those soldiers crucified... The boy...naked...under me... Spike blinked and tried to think about groceries. Wondered if he dared add lube to the list and decided against it. He had a feeling he wasn't going to get anywhere with Xander by being flippant or crude. Although, maybe later...

Ah. So you DO want to...get somewhere? With him?
"Sod. Off." Finally, he wrote 'smokes' and 'Weetabix' and 'shirt' on the list, and pushed it back to Xander.

"S'all I can think of," he mumbled, and Xander glanced down at the paper - did a small double-take and stared.

"Now what?" Spike snarled. His head was starting to hurt.

"Uh. Oh, nothing. You just - you have really nice handwriting. Like a - birthday card or something." Xander glanced up at him, smiling, and Spike shrugged. It was just handwriting - the same style everyone his age had written in. You learned it or you got caned.

"Comes with the territory, mate. How we learned to do it."

"Yeah. It's just...really nice." Xander ran his fingers over the word 'shirt', and then tore the sheet off the pad and folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Uh - I'm gonna go see if I can find some clothes for you to wear. Those jeans you had on are pretty damp, still. I've got some stuff from last year, doesn't fit anymore, it'll probably be ok." Xander stood up and started to go back to the bedroom and Spike was right behind him.
"Oi! If you think I'm gonna wear that same kit like last time you're out of your bloody mind." Xander sniggered, opening drawers.

"Don't worry, I'm sure I can find something more appropriate for the evil undead than parrots and palm leaves."

"Too bloody right."

In the end it was last year's jeans and another wife-beater. The jeans were a little big and rode low on Spike's narrow hips, and Xander had to force himself to look away from the enticing line of dark-blond hair that tracked from the vampire's navel to...under the waistband. Spike grumbled about the jeans being faded blue, the shirt being white. Xander offered an over shirt - faded chambray workshirts in blue or green, or flannel shirts. He was suprised when Spike took a flannel shirt; dark red and green and black. The vampire's fingers stroked the soft, worn fabric and Xander wondered if he were cold or if he just liked the softness of it. Xander had already put on jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt when he'd gotten out of the shower, so they both only needed to put on their respective boots. Spike's shoulder seemed completely healed - he wasn't favoring it anymore, and
he looked much better. Xander made a mental note to check the prices of the kind of beer Spike liked - if he could afford it, he'd get him a six-pack. He sighed, looking down at his checkbook. While Spike had finished dressing he'd written out checks for the phone, the electric, and the insurance on his truck - Uncle Rory's car had never recovered from Oxnard - and he didn't have too much left, after buying blood the night before.

So much for payday. Keeping vampires is expensive. Keeping...hrmmm. No, don't go there. He mentally stopped any train of thought that led to Spike naked or in the bed or...

How about anywhere? Doing anything? He looks as sexy in those old jeans of mine as he did in the robe and naked in the bed. He can't NOT look good, and dammit, I can smell him...want to taste him. Xander rubbed his finger over the healing cut and shivered, then stuffed his checkbook into the junk drawer and picked up his bills. Gotta remember to get stamps.

"Hey, b - Xander." Spike stood in the doorway to the living room, unconsciously clenching and unclenching his fists. "I - got some dosh at my place. I took it off some wingeing little fledge I dusted. I can - I can pay you back for the blood." Spike seemed nervous, saying that, and
Xander wondered why, but he felt himself smiling hugely at him.

"Hey! That's great. You don't have to pay me back, you can just kind of ch- contribute, you know? Guess we'll go to your place first, so we don't come up short at the store. Ok?"

"Yeah. Ok." Spike ducked his head, looking like he might be going to say something else, and then he just turned, rustle of worn leather, and went outside. Xander grabbed his keys and wallet and followed, trying not to grin like a loon.

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They approached Spike's crypt as silently and stealthily as possible - Spike vamping out and scenting the air, stopping to turn his head and listen every few feet. Xander just concentrated on being as noiseless as he could be, and watched where his feet were going. They crouched in the shadow of the Robinson memorial for a few minutes, watching Spike's crypt, but finally deciding they just had to go for it.
Spike stood at the door for a minute, listening, scented...trying to feel, maybe, if anyone was in there. He pushed the doors open cautiously and they both went inside, Xander's finger ready on the switch of his flashlight.

Almost as soon as they were through the door Spike started cursing. Xander felt icy fear wash over him for a moment, and then he sorted out what Spike was saying and turned on his light. The crypt was destroyed. The things Spike had salvaged - TV, chair, a low dresser and assorted candleholders, cups, ashtrays - were smashed and scattered all over. What little clothes he'd had were shredded and - wet? - and even the old 'fridge in the corner was knocked over, the door-hinge sprung.

"Bloody bastards, fuckin' soldiers..." Spike kicked at a broken CD box. He was staring around furiously when he suddenly noticed that the cover to the sewer access was askew.

"Oh no, no no, damnit, they did not find that..." He wrenched the cover aside and leapt down into the darkness beneath.

"Wait!" Xander tried stop him but the vampire was gone. He hurried down the ladder, trying not to slip on the rungs. Beneath the crypt was not, as Xander had rather
imagined, a dark and dank tunnel but what looked like a natural cave. He flicked his flashlight beam around, nervous. Spike was nowhere in sight and he was afraid. What if the Initiative had left a trap or a...watcher down here? Spike could be caught - could be *dusted*... "Spike!"

"M'over here, mate!" Spike called, and Xander gasped in a breath and followed the voice - the noises Spike was making as he apparently dug something up. Xander found him in a far corner. A tangle of rotting boards, rocks and dirt lay there, looking as if a support of some kind had collapsed years ago. Spike was shifting the mess, digging under it, and after a few minutes he uncovered a trunk. It wasn't huge; it was small enough for one person to carry, but still bulky. The wood was dark with age, and the iron bands that encircled it were rusted and pitted. Spike dragged it clear of the pile and gently lifted the lid. Xander tried not to stare, and saw only what looked like folded cloth before Spike shut it again.

"Bloody bastards didn't find it," he murmured, and Xander watched him slump there for a minute, his hands caressing the trunk softly, as if it were alive. The he straightened and lifted it easily, balancing it on his shoulder.
"C'mon, mate. Got the dosh over here - unless they found that." Xander followed Spike as they crossed the cave floor to a niche in the wall. More rubble was piled here, and Spike thrust his hand through a gap between some boards and pulled out a crumpled paper sack. He shoved it at Xander's chest and strode away, heading for the ladder. Xander clutched the sack to him and followed, stumbling a little over more rubble and broken furniture. He climbed up the ladder and found Spike waiting impatiently by the door. Spike took a long, lingering look around the crypt, and his face finally relaxed out of the demon's vaguely feline planes into his own.

"I'm gonna make them hurt for this." He looked straight at Xander when he said it, and Xander looked straight back. He knew he should feel fear - should be worrying about Spike somehow getting his revenge. But he didn't - he wasn't. All he felt was rage, for Spike, at seeing his things destroyed, his home desecrated. He could smell what was on the clothes - knew what the soldiers had done. He'd take a little revenge himself, if he could, for this and other things. Riley at least was in his grasp. He returned Spike's hard stare and nodded once, acknowledging what had been done, and what would be
done. Spike grinned suddenly, and the overwhelming tension of the last few minutes seemed to drain away.

"Got what I came for, any road, and they didn't bloody touch it, so that's all right. Guess we'd better get outta here though, eh mate?"

"Yeah. I'm not feeling too good about being here. Let's go and get our supplies and get home." They made their way quickly back to Xander's truck, the very silence of the cemetery making them both a little jumpy. Spike settled the trunk carefully into the middle of the seat and climbed in, but when Xander tried to shift into reverse, he bumped into it with the stick.

"Uh - gonna have to move that or hold it on your lap or something, Spike, I can't back up here."

"Bloody hell. Hang on..." Spike lifted the trunk, shifting it, and then had it half in his lap and half on the seat, scooting himself over towards the middle. "That do you, mate?"

"Uh...yeah. That's g-great." Xander shifted into reverse, his hand rubbing along Spike's thigh as he did. *Oh yeah, this'll do me fine. Fuck. Breathe*

As they drove Spike started wiggling around, trying to get something out of his pocket without upsetting the trunk.
It seemed to be balanced on his legs precariously, as if one end were heavier than the other, and he needed both hands to keep it braced.

"Need any help?" Xander asked, and Spike shot him a frustrated look.

"Yeah. Can't seem to get my smokes. Just reach in here..." Spike held his arm up, gripping the trunk, and Xander slid his hand into the duster pocket. They'd stopped for smokes first thing at a gas station, as soon as they'd left the house. Xander felt around for a minute, his fingers identifying the Zippo, a slim, closed knife, some change, a - handkerchief? Maybe a bandanna. Spike's leg... Damnit, he did that on purpose. Are they even in here? Calm down Finally he found the pack and pulled it out, then the lighter, and lay them both on the seat.

"There you go." Xander congratulated himself on how even his voice sounded.

"Can't exactly get one out and light it, pet. Takes two hands to work the Zippo, you know." There was glee in Spike's voice, and Xander was pretty sure he could have gotten that damn pack of cigarettes out of his pocket all by himself. Fine. I can do this. Red light coming up, no problem. Try not to choke when you light the
cigarette...in your mouth...and then put it in his... Xander held the steering wheel in a death-grip and down-shifted with unnecessary force. They came to a stop and Xander fumbled a cigarette out of the pack and held it awkwardly in his mouth. It took two tries with the Zippo but he finally got it lit, then applied the flame to the tip of the cigarette. Merest breath in, to make sure it was lit, then he shut the Zippo and took the cigarette out of his mouth - held it out to Spike. The vampire leaned forward and took the cigarette delicately between his lips, and Xander felt his knuckle just touch the cool chin. Then Spike was sitting back, squinting through the smoke, grinning at him and puffing out a cloud of smoke.

"Cheers, mate."

"Yeah. Right. Cheers," Xander mumbled. The light was green, and he put the truck in gear with a jerk and drove on to the store. The faint taste of cigarette smoke lingered on his lips like a kiss.

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Shopping had been... Well, if any other member of the gang had been there, it would have been a nightmare,
but Xander had actually had fun, in a heart-pounding kind of way. The mingled expressions of horror and disgust on Spike's face as they'd pulled into the discount chain's parking lot had been hilarious, and Spike almost hadn't come in. In the end, though, he'd grudgingly admitted that he didn't want Xander picking out the clothes he needed, so he'd settled the trunk tenderly on the truck seat and followed, asking Xander at least four times if he was sure he'd locked both doors.

Inside they'd gotten a cart, dodged the greeter, and gone straight to men's wear.

"This place is a zoo," Spike hissed, glaring at an octogenarian who'd grazed him with her electric Shop'n'Ride cart.

"Yeah, it is. But it's cheap. Oh look, these shirts are on sale." Xander picked up a four-pack of t-shirts: two grey, one maroon, one black. "This look like your size?" Spike peered at the shirts.

"There's only one black one."

"Oh, come on. Live a little."

"Fuck that." Spike turned the package over, reading the sizing chart. "I need - M - I think."
"You think? Let me see." Xander took the package back and studied the chart. "Yeah, you're right - what the hell are you doing?" Spike looked up at him, shreds of plastic in his fangs.

"I'm gonna make an all-black package. Set of four, right?" He proceeded to shred more packages, pulling out black t-shirts and stuffing them into the least-shredded bag. Xander looked around in panic, sure a store employee would see them and make them buy all the shirts. Spike kicked the opened packages under the display and held up the lumpy all-black one for Xander's inspection.

"See? Just what I wanted." He walked around the end of the display and suddenly the black t-shirts came flying over the rack, bonking Xander in the head.


"These are all black. And look - five. S'better."

"What about these?" Xander waved the made-by-Spike four-pack of black shirts. Spike rolled his eyes.

"Those are open. I don't want an open package." He tossed the sealed pack into the cart and wandered away.
Xander waited until he was around a corner before laughing. Then he followed, fast.

Spike was standing in front of a wall of jeans, eyeing them with apparent loathing.

"Don't they have any soddin' black?"

"What is it with you and black?"

"It's a thing."

"Yeah, an annoying thing. Nothing wrong with color." Spike plucked at the pale jeans he was wearing.

"These show the dirt. And the blood. Black's better. And you've got no business makin' fashion statements, mate." This time Xander rolled his eyes.

"Fine. Black is over here." The selection was smaller, but after about five minutes they found a couple of pair that would probably work.

"Go try 'em on," Xander said, pushing the jeans into Spike's arms and looking around for the changing room.

"What for?"

Xander glared at the vampire, but he seemed genuinely puzzled.
"Because...because if you don't..." Inspiration struck. "If you don't, and they don't fit, we'll have to come back here and exchange them." Spike looked at Xander - looked at the jeans - looked over at an obese man who was struggling to maneuver his cart between too-narrow aisles and knocking day-glo skater-style shorts to the floor in the process.

"Right. Try 'em on." Spike crouched down and started unlacing his boot and Xander hauled him upright and propelled him down an aisle.

"Not. Here. There's changing rooms...right over there. Come on." They entered the changing area, which was empty of people and employees, and Xander whipped open a curtain and gestured to Spike. "There you go."

"It takes forever to do these boots up right, you know," Spike grumbled, but he sat on the little bench and unlaced, yanking his boots off and tossing them to the side. Xander noticed he wasn't wearing socks and mentally added them to his list. Spike stood up and undid the waist of the borrowed jeans and started pushing them down.

_Oops, no underwear either. Guess past a certain...age... you really don't have any modesty._ Xander spun around, checking for anyone, feeling an embarrassing rush of
heat to his groin. *Damnit, it is totally unfair that he can do that to me. AND that he KNOWS he does that to me. Probably reeling from the fuckin' pheromone hit. Ok, breaths, deep breaths.* Xander heard rustling, and then Spike tapped him on the shoulder. He twitched away and turned to face the vampire, a rather forced smile on his face.

"Right, so, they fit?" Xander looked down at the jeans - the black, painted on, utterly sexy jeans. *Well fuck, here we go again.*

"Yeah, they fit just fine."

"Great. Let's go."

"Xan-derrr" Spike purred, and Xander's heart thumped painfully. He looked up at Spike's face. Straight into eyes half-lidded, lips curved in a small, knowing smile. Spike cocked his head a little to the side, his gaze raking Xander from head to toe and Xander shuddered. He could practically *feel* Spike's gaze on him - the smoldering weight of that regard, so focused and intent.

"Wh-what?"

"Shouldn't I try the other pair on?"
"Huh? Other p- oh. Oh, no. No. They're exactly the same. No need of that. Why don't you just slip out of those and I'll - I'll go get you some socks, ok? Right." Xander turned and got four steps when something smacked into him from behind. He turned and fumbled the black jeans that were trying to strangle him.

"Just put those with the t-shirts, right, pet?" Spike said, standing there with Xander's blue jeans dangling from one hand. Xander looked - stopped looking - turned, nodded and ran No, we're walking briskly back towards the cart. He could hear delighted laughter coming from the changing rooms. He tossed the jeans into the cart, looked around and found a pack of socks serve him right if I bought him orange socks or - hehe - argyle then pushed the cart back towards the changing rooms. Spike emerged a moment later and tossed the other pair of jeans on top of the first and then looked quizzically at the mortal.

"What's next, pet?"

"Food. Beer. Sundries. Let's go." They managed to get the rest of their supplies without anything too awful happening. Spike vamped out and made a cart-full of clamoring children scream bloody murder, and he insisted on sniffing every single different scent of
shampoo before letting Xander put one in the cart. 'Freesia Fantasy'. At that point, Xander didn't care if it was 'Rotten Apple' scented, he just wanted out. He was pretty sure he'd seen Spike slipping things into his pockets and was starting to get paranoid.

"Ok. We got what we need. Let's get out of here." Xander pushed their cart up to a check-out station, resigned to a long wait. Why was it always so crowded in here? It had to be dinner time or something - why weren't all these people at home, eating? Spike had pulled out a cigarette and was lighting it.

"Spike. You can't smoke in here."

"I'm gonna eviscerate somebody if I don't get a fuckin' smoke, mate," Spike growled, taking a huge pull on the cigarette.

"Look - there's the doors where we came in. Just go out there and smoke, I'll be out in ten minutes, ok?" Spike craned to look over at the doors; eyed the cashier, who seemed to be a trainee, and the two loaded carts in front of Xander.

"Cheers, mate. That I will." He started to push past Xander and Xander grabbed his arm.
"Wait - give me some of that money, ok? I don't want to be short."

"Oh, right. Here." Spike reached into the inner pocket where he'd stashed the bag of money and pulled a crumpled handful out. He shoved it into Xander's hand and slipped away, dodging people and carts. He got stuck behind an over-loaded cart being pushed by an older couple in sweat-suits. Just as they reached the door, he dodged around them and was gone. The door alarm went off, and the sweat-suit couple stopped in confusion, looking around helplessly as a manager and a boy with 'Cart Crew' across his t-shirt hurried up to them. Xander closed his eyes briefly in sheer panic. But he knew that Spike had done it just right - gotten out and left the huge cart-full to be the main suspect. Xander just hoped he'd go sit in the truck or something and not hang around near the doors. He started unfolding and smoothing out the money Spike had shoved into his hand, and his mouth went a little dry as he realized that the ten or more bills were all fifties. *Please don't let them be counterfeit. Please*

Closer to twenty minutes later and a quick stop at the stamp-vending machine Xander was finally done and walked outside, almost a dozen bags swinging from his hands. He walked quickly across the parking lot and
found Spike sitting on the lowered tailgate of his truck, smoking, swinging his legs and drinking from a stolen bottle of whiskey. He hopped down when he saw Xander.

"That took for fuckin' ever. What the bloody hell were you doin' in there?"

"Just waiting my turn." Xander loaded the bags into the truck bed, up near the back window, and slammed the tailgate shut. "Come on, let's go." He opened his door, got in, and leaned over to open Spike's. The vampire lifted his trunk up in his arms and settled carefully with it, shutting his door awkwardly. Xander started the truck, shifted into reverse, tried not to think about Spike's thigh, backed up, shifted into first gear, thought about Spike's thigh, and drove away.

At home, they unloaded and put things away. Or, rather, Xander unloaded and put things away. Spike carried the trunk in to the living room and then sat moodily staring at it, drinking the whiskey and petting the trunks' rusting, splintered sides. When Xander had decided to move in to this house, he and Manny had agreed that the kitchen needed a pass-through in the living room wall, to open the space up a bit. Now Xander watched Spike through it while he put milk and frozen dinners and bread and other groceries away, and stacked Spike's new clothes on
the table. He put the imported beer *Can't believe they had that* on the counter beside the microwave and shoved the store bags into an empty drawer. Then he just stood there, for a long while, watching Spike who seemed to be lost in time - in memories - in whatever was in that trunk.

*Drusilla's things. Keepsakes of her. This is where he looks at their life together and decides it really IS what he wants - decides to go back to being Spike-and-Dru and fuck the rest of the world. And... god...if he does that I don't know if...I don't know if I'll be able to stand it.*

Manny wants me to go work for his other son, up in Seattle, and maybe I will, if Spike decides... If he's still in love with her. I think I will because I won't be able to stand being here alone. Please, Spike. Please, please...

The soldier was silent, for once, but the hyena was making a low and mournful sound, somewhere in the back of Xander's brain. The hyena had decided on *pack*, and pack did not leave. *FUCK when did this get so...how did I get in so deep? So fast?* Xander took a long, long breath, trying to calm himself, and jerked in startlement when Spike stood abruptly and came into the kitchen. The vampire started unloading the pockets of his duster, piling his stolen goods on the table. Zippo fluid, flints, a
bag of lemon drops, a thermal coffee mug, a couple of candles, a high-end ballpoint pen, a tube of hair gel, and -

"How'd you get those?" Xander asked, staring at the carton of cigarettes.

"Nicked 'em outta somebody's cart in the parking lot. Git should'a been payin' better attention to what he'd bought." Spike took off his duster and then the borrowed flannel and the wife-beater. Xander just stared at him.

"Gonna wear one'a my new shirts." Spike explained, grinning at him. He stood there, shirtless, and squeezed a little hair-gel into his hand, and then rubbed both hands together and smoothed them back through his hair. After a couple of passes he fished a comb out of his duster and combed his hair through once, then looked up at Xander.

"Look all right then?"

"Looks - fine. Much better then what Angel does with hair-gel."

"Oi! Tosser." Spike picked up the t-shirts and ripped open the package and then pulled one on. He fished cigarettes and lighter from his pocket and lit up, then sighed and looked at the pile of things on the table.
"I'm gonna...go look through the trunk. Would you...would it be alright if..."

"You want some privacy?" Xander asked softly, and Spike looked up at him, his eyes wide and already anxious.

"Yeah. I mean, your house an' all, but ..."

"It's ok. I understand. I'm just gonna do...stuff, you know? Start some laundry, get a little dinner... You hungry?"

"Maybe in a while. Thanks...Xander."

"Sure, Spike. We're...we're friends, right?" The vampire looked at him, and something sparked in the depths of his lapis gaze. Then he smiled softly.

"Yeah. We're mates." He took the ashtray off the table and went back into the living room, and Xander went into the bathroom and spent far too long staring at himself in the mirror, willing himself not to care. As if that ever worked.
Spike sat on the couch in Xander's living room and set his ashtray and smokes on the coffee table. After a moment's thought he lifted the trunk up there, too. Then he unlaced his boots and took them off, shoving them under the table. He tucked his feet up, cross legged, and finally, finally, reached out to the trunk and opened it. The hinges were stiff and they protested loudly, and Spike winced a little. He sat looking at the folds of red cloth that obscured the contents. A smell came to him, over the must and damp of the rotting trunk. Dru's scent, compounded of Florida Water and church incense and herself - musk, sweet, and licorice. All faint, so faint but there and he breathed it in - leaned forward and pulled the red cloth out, burying his face in it.

It was a hooded red-velvet cloak, lined in white satin. Heart's Ease blooms had been embroidered along the edges and silver flowers fashioned the clasp. Dru had loved that cloak - said it made her feel like Little Red Riding Hood, only she got to eat the wolf up, this time around. She'd gotten it off an opera singer in Danzig, and had worn it for years, until they went East to China. Spike hugged the soft folds to him, seeing the little tears along the hem, the places where time had
unpicked the embroidery. The white lining was cream-colored now, stained along the bottom edge with travel and damp and he breathed deeply of her lingering scent. He petted the cloak then folded it over into his lap and leaned forward to the trunk again. There were books - Balzac, Dumas, Austen, even a Hemmingway and Aldous Huxley - and several cloth-bound journals, green and blue and faded red. Dru had read Freud's 'Interpretation of Dreams' and had started keeping dream journals. There were at least ten of them, and Spike picked one up and leafed through it, skimming the yellowed pages filled with Dru's stiff, schoolgirl hand. He read a phrase here and there, but it was mostly nonsense. His own name caught his eye, and he read: "My Spike burns so brightly in the night I can hardly bear to look at him. But the knight must throw down his armor if he is to win the hand of fair prince..." Spike shook his head and put the books down on the coffee table, making a stack of them. Under the leather bound novels were three or four penny dreadfuls. They were so cheaply made that the binding disintegrated as Spike picked them up, and he was left with an untidy stack of crumbling paper.

Underneath were more things, loose in the trunk. The stake that the Chinese Slayer had used; it was carved and
polished, a beautiful thing. Dru had carried it for years. Some jewelry; rings and a necklace, things Dru had abandoned over the years as too familiar. The same reason Spike had kept them. He couldn't bear to see the delicate ring of garnet and gold filigree that Dru had worn for a decade tossed aside. Or the necklace of pearls and emerald. Worth a lot, those. But he'd never sell. No one else would ever wear these things.

He came to a thick brown-paper envelope and picked it up, hands shaking ever so slightly. He knew what was in there - he dreaded it. He held the package for a long time, turning it over and over in his hands. Finally, sighing, he lifted the flap and slid the contents out into his lap.

Pictures. Of Dru, of the Family...his whole life, almost, in sepia and faded kodachrome. The first one; Dru alone, taken not long after Angelus had turned her. She still had the lost look of a child whose family has left her, and Miss Edith was new in her tight grip. The next was the Family - Darla looking faintly supercilious, Angelus sternly patriarchal, Spike himself smirking against the direct orders of the photographer and Dru smiling her best smile, looking up through her lashes; one hand holding her doll and the other twined with Spike's. Then Dru in gorgeous Mandarin robes, with a paper parasol and
jeweled sticks holding her hair up, taken right before he'd killed his first Slayer. Himself and Dru, at a nightclub in Berlin, the two of them forehead to forehead, eyes shut. Spike closed his own eyes for a moment and then went on.

*Only a few more now...nearly to the end.* Spike leaning against a car - a Rolls-Royce skiff - with Dru looking out from the driver's seat, both of them grinning madly. That was - London, 1931, and they'd lived at the hotel that was in the background for nearly two years, playing at being the eccentric artists. The next was right after the Blitz, their first night in Casablanca. Dru at a café table, a dark-eyed boy in native garb holding a tray of drinks and looking nervous. Spike had taken that one, using Dru's special camera and nervous about blurring the image. Then the both of them in New York, one of the few times Dru had consented to wear modern dress. She was in something vaguely Hollywood - a fitted sheath of a dress, long gloves, high heels. The emerald and pearl necklace. Spike, in a tuxedo and gloves, held her arm. That had been... some sort of coming-out party. Debs in white cotillion dresses and matrons in pearls and tulle. Tulle was slippery when it got bloody.
The last picture was one Dru had taken herself, which was the only reason Spike had kept it. It was himself, punked out in an alley behind CBGB's. The neon from a nearby sign had made a strange sort of bloody halo behind him, and the reflected light from headlights and street lamps had spangled and glared in puddles, making it seem like he walked on crushed diamonds. He had no shadow in this picture, somehow, and the exposure had made him white as salt, while at the same time shadowing his eyes. He was faintly blurred, faintly transparent. It was a strange picture - one only Dru could have taken. Things just seemed to work that way, for her; anyone else would have gotten an uninteresting shot of a man walking past a doorway. Dru captured a demon, a fallen angel - a soul. Spike stared at the picture, remembering how much Dru had liked it. Photography fascinated her, and she had taken rolls and rolls of film, and cut the bits she liked best out of the pictures and pasted them up on the walls of whatever place they were living at the time. She'd made a half dozen of those kind of huge, unsettling murals, juxtaposing pictures of trees and torn paper and corpses, hundreds of pairs of hands, eyes, bloody mouths, cityscapes. Some woman in Prague had wanted to cut the wall down, put it in a gallery. Maybe she had. They'd fled Prague not long after.
Spike was startled out of his reverie by Xander, who had very quietly walked in and set a mug of blood down on the table. Spike looked up at him - at warm, dark eyes and a solemn expression. Dark hair, dusky skin from days in the sun. Like, and so unlike his Dru. He smiled faintly at the boy and looked back at the trunk.

"I like that picture of you. It's...just right."

"Yeah? My Dru took it. She had a knack for gettin' just the right...look, sometimes." Spike looked back at the picture - up at Xander again who was stepping away, leaving him to his memories. He held the picture out. "Here. Why don't you have it?" Xander looked at him and then at the picture, obviously unsure if he should accept. "Really. I'd like you to."

Xander smiled, and took it. "Thanks. I do like it a lot. But..." He touched the photograph with one careful finger, then looked up at Spike. "I thought - you can't take pictures of vampires."

"Oh, well, not with a camera with a mirror in it. Dru met some queer little professor type in Berlin, he'd taken her picture and she thought he was a sorcerer. She turned him. As it happened, he just used this kind of camera - pin-hole camera - there's no mirror. Just a box with a little hole an' you put the film inside and uncover the
hole..." Spike smiled up at Xander - looked down at the pictures he was holding. "He made her one, really pretty, all cherry-wood and brass. She loved it. It got smashed in Prague." Xander looked at him for a moment and then he went back into the kitchen, silent as a human could be. Spike listened to his slow and steady heartbeat, and let it calm him. That professor - Spike could never remember his name - had burned himself up three months into his undead life. Sometimes curiosity was a bitch.

There wasn't much left in the trunk - a few odds and ends. A comb Dru had used to wear in her hair, programmes from three or four plays when they were in Munich. A compact Dru had taken, the powder inside still faintly perfumed. She'd taken it for the enameled bat on the lid, thinking it a great joke. And one of her dolls - the nose worn down, dress in tatters. The half-bare head was grubby and the eyes cracked. Spike petted the sad thing then began to lay it all back, piece by piece. He hesitated for a long time over the photos then he finally put them aside and lay the cloak on top of the rest, folding it carefully. He shut the lid and picked up the mug and slowly drank.

_Surrounded by her scent - it's almost like she's here. And I miss her, I miss her... I ache for her. But...I don't know if I_
love her, anymore. All these bloody things - all these memories - and I just don't know if it's love or loss... If it's habit or... passion. Oh Dru, Dru... I'd have bloody killed myself for you, once upon a time. Been anything - done anything. And now. **Why did you turn me away?** Will I ever, ever not feel your absence like a fucking knife in my gut?

Spike stared at the trunk, and weighed the packet of pictures in his hand, and finally he stood up and went into the kitchen. Xander was sitting at the table, a can of soda in front of him, studying the picture of Spike. In the back of the house the washing machine chugged quietly, and for a moment something almost like panic swept over him; panic and a feeling of unreality at this domestic - human - situation. Xander looked up when Spike came in and smiled, and Spike felt a rush of warmth come over him. A sense of... belonging that pushed the panic aside. He put the pictures and the mug down on the table, and stood there for a moment. Then he made up his mind.

"Would you help me with something?"

"Sure. If I can." No hesitation. No questions.

Spike felt relief sweep over him, and calm. "I want... I want to burn the trunk." Xander's eyes flicked towards
the living room, then back to Spike, serious and a little anxious.

"Are you sure? You really want to burn her things?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. It's...just too bloody heavy to lug around anymore."

Xander gazed at him in silence for a moment, then nodded and stood up. "Ok, Spike, sure. We can go down to the beach. There's always driftwood down there. And they cut down a dead pine next door about a week ago. It's still there and something like that'll burn like a firecracker. We'll just grab some of the branches."

Spike nodded absently and went to retrieve the trunk. They walked outside and Xander quickly gathered an armful of cut limbs, the dried needles brown and scratchy, the resin still fragrant. They walked across the grass to the bluff and climbed down. A couple of times Xander steadied himself on Spike's outstretched hand, and then they were on the sand. The water surged and foamed about twenty yards distant, glowing with phosphor. The shivery rushing sound of it was loud here, confined by rocks and land, and Spike and Xander worked in silence, dragging driftwood up and constructing a pyre. They built it far down the beach, near the tide line. Xander pointed out that anything that
didn't burn would be dragged away by the outgoing tide, and Spike liked that idea. Finally they were done, and Spike set the flame of his Zippo to the bunched pine branches.

Xander was right. They burned very, very well.

*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*

The last of the trunk was cinder and char. Black butterflies of ash swirled and danced upward on the breeze and Spike rose from his crouch and nodded to Xander. They walked slowly back to the house and the light in the kitchen seemed unreal and too bright to Xander. He considered for a moment, then got out his stash of candles. He'd gotten a whole box cheap at a yard sale, and now he set a couple on the kitchen table and lit them, turning out the overhead light. He carried one into the bedroom as well, and the bathroom, then returned to the kitchen. Spike was leaning against the counter drinking a beer, and Xander got one, too. He felt - confined - in the house. He wanted to be back under the stars. Watching the trunk burn on the beach had made his heart surge wildly in him. Hope, that Spike was letting the past go - letting Dru go. Hope that Spike could
be his, maybe. Somehow. He picked up the boom box and made a little gesture with his hands.

"I'm going to sit outside. I just - don't feel like being indoors right now. Want to join me?"

Spike looked up from studying the label on his beer and nodded. He followed Xander out, a cigarette in his fingers, leaving his empty bottle behind.

They went out onto the back porch and sat on the top step. The moon hung low and coppery off the shoulder of the bluff, and the surf boomed and hissed, glimmering like fairy-dust out on the horizon. The salt tang of it made the night air seem cooler, and Xander shivered a little. He set the boom box down and switched it on, scanning the stations until he found the 'oldie's' one that could be counted on to play quiet, soothing stuff. There was a moment of static-y silence, and then low horns, slow and sultry, began to wind out into the darkness.

Xander didn't know the tune - hardly knew the music. It made him think of black-and-white movies, men in tuxes and women in floaty, feathered dresses. But it obviously meant something to Spike whose hand paused in mid-air, his Zippo held open but unlit, his face gone blank with an unfamiliar look of surprise. Xander barely heard the muttered 'Oh'.
And then the snick and flare of the Zippo, and a long breath in and out, smoke pluming upwards. "Bloody hell. Glenn Miller. Haven't heard this...in ages." He took another long drag off his cigarette, bare toes curling around the edge of the step, elbows on knees and his head sunk down a little, listening. "Dru loved this - all this sentimental crap. Listened to it for hours - Tommy Dorsey and Louis Armstrong and that other...Les Brown. We was - we was listening to Miller when the bombs came, that first time..."

Spike's voice trailed off and Xander looked over at him, at the curve of his spine and the clenched fingers of his right hand digging into his bicep, the other holding the cigarette out to the side, away from Xander.

"Bombs?"

"Huh? Oh - yeah. Bombs. The Blitz?" And in the face of Xander's puzzled look: "That war you Yanks came in on 'bout fifty years ago, you know?" The words were sarcastic but the tone wasn't - not even remotely, and Xander nodded quickly, watching as Spike pulled on the cigarette again, the flare of the ember glittering in his eyes, hooding them.

"Yeah, ok, World War Two, I know that war, but - you didn't fight in it, did you? I mean - what bombs?"
"The Blitz! Christ, what do they teach in school these days? September, 1940. Me an' Dru were in London when the damn Jerries started rainin' down bombs on us. It was the middle of the afternoon and we were stuck, see, in this house we'd - moved into. I thought Dru'd just go barkin', you know, I thought she'd get - but she didn't." Spike sat up straighter and puffed for a moment on the cigarette, eyes looking off towards the moon but seeing - seeing bombs, Xander guessed, and his Dru.

"She cranked up the Vicki - the Victrola, you know - and put on some Glenn Miller and we - we danced. And the bombs fell for two hours. When we went out it was like a hell dimension. Fire everywhere - people screamin'... Just perfect for two blood-thirsty demons, eh?" Spike smirked over at him, and Xander nodded, but Spike's voice had been...

"They started up again 'bout four hours later - went on all night. Incendiary bombs, yeah? Fire just - everywhere." His voice trailed off again and Xander didn't stop him when Spike reached over and took his beer out of his fingers. He drained the last of it, and slipped the cigarette butt into the neck. Xander heard the faint hiss as it was doused in the dregs of the beer. The bottle clinked faintly as Spike set it aside.
"We thought - we'd stay, you know - people runnin' and screamin', chaos in the streets. Never knew from one morning to the next if they'd have a house or a job or a neighbor. You know what it's like, things goin' all to hell, everybody gets - friendly. We got invited into more houses that night... We stayed for a week, but those bombs - the fires burned all the time and it just got too dangerous. Dru was lovin' it, but then, she'd go up to a burning house, stare at the flames - wanna dance. I couldn't risk it - couldn't risk her. All of The Smoke like one great charnel house an' me an' Dru dancin' to I'll Never Smile Again..." Spike laughed, but it was mirthless and rather strangled. Xander watched as he felt absentmindedly for another smoke, patting at the nonexistent pockets of the duster he'd left in the house.

"I miss her. I miss her - so bloody much." Spike's voice broke over the last, and he turned his head away sharply, hunching down over his knees, both hands gripping so tight on his forearms that Xander expected to see blood well up. His shoulders hitched a little, and Xander knew, at that moment, that if Spike would turn and look at him, there would be tears. Tears streaking down from eyes wide and wounded as a child's.

Another song started on the radio, and this one was a little familiar. Xander had heard it somewhere - his
grandma's house, maybe, or over at Willow's - he couldn't remember. The woman's voice poured out, rich as cream, and Xander lifted his hand and stretched it out towards the trembling shoulder of the man - the demon? - beside him. To the person, who was remembering love and loss, and crying for all the things that he couldn't have, any more.

"See the pyramids along the Nile... watch the sunrise from a tropic isle..."

"Spike?" Xander whispered, and finally, finally, let his fingers come to rest lightly on those shoulder blades, that rose like little fledgling wings from the taut stretch of black t-shirt. "Spike - c'mere." Xander stood up, stepping down onto the grass, holding his hand out. Spike looked up at him and Xander's heart clenched tight and then resumed its rhythm with a hurtful thud as he saw there were, indeed, silvery tracks down the sharply sculpted cheeks, and eyes made black with pain. Xander let his hand trail down shoulder and arm to Spike's hand, and he tugged at it, pulling Spike's hand away from his forearm, pulling him up onto his feet.

"Just remember darlin' all the while... You belong to me..."
"Come and dance with me," Xander whispered, his heart beating so hard, so fast, that he felt dizzy. Spike's wounded stare went a little wider, and for a moment he resisted, and it was like tugging at a statue, no give at all. Please Spike, please, let me hold you, let me... Spike's free hand came up and wiped at his face, impatiently obliterating the evidence of his pain. And then he rose and came forward into Xander's arms, enfolding him. Cool, hard arms going around Xander's waist, chest to chest, and his head sinking down onto Xander's shoulder. Xander put his own arms around Spike's shoulders, letting his hands slide slowly up and down the slender, tense back, feeling the shuddery breath Spike took as they began to move, swaying ever so slowly to the music.

"See the market place in Old Algiers... Send me photographs and souvenirs... Just remember when a dream appears... You belong to me..."

"I loved her for so long. I gave her - gave her my heart. Gave her everythin'...why..." Spike's grip tightened, and Xander felt dampness on his shoulder, felt the cool drafts of unneeded, hitching breaths and let his chin and cheek settle onto the sleek blonde head. He rubbed a little, humming with the music under his
breath. He could say - nothing. What could he say, to a hundred-years love that had flared so brightly and then burnt itself out in the crucible of the Hellmouth? What could soothe - what could comfort a demon - a demon who cried just like a real boy Xander thought inanely - tears bitter with loneliness and heartbreak and desolation.

"I'll be so alone without you... Maybe you'll be lonesome too, and blue...
Fly the ocean in a silver plane... See the jungle when it's wet with rain...
Just remember 'til you're home again... You belong to me..."

Xander listened to the words, shuffling his feat in the damp, cool grass, aware for the first time of the strange picture they must make. But he didn't care. He remembered that first kiss, weeks ago, that had loosed the first little piece of armor he wore over his heart - started the shattering process that had cut him until he bled, inside... And now. His heart raw and aching with need. The last couple of days - everything that had happened - had made it that much more urgent.

I love...oh god. Love him All he wanted was to whisper those secret words aloud. To tell Spike what was there,
under that pale cheek - the emotions fluttering and leaping at the bones of Xander's chest as wildly as caged birds. He shut his eyes and pulled Spike a little closer; turned his head just enough, and kissed the stiff, blonde hair. Then just let his mouth rest there.

He felt Spike shudder all over - felt him shift a little, and pull back, and Xander was staring down into eyes full of confusion and hurt; full of the reflected light of the moon and of a desperate wondering. He let his head go forward, so slowly, letting their foreheads touch lightly. Spike's face blurred in his vision and he shut his eyes and tipped his head, just a little, and let his cheek roll over onto Spike's - let their noses bump a little and then... lips, so lightly.

The wings in his chest beat and beat, and surely it was deafening to Spike, who could hear a heartbeat across a room. Xander pressed his lips a little more into Spike's, wanting...but going slow, so slow. So that there would be no - pressure. If Spike said no - if he pulled away again... Xander didn't want to think about that, couldn't think about that. He opened his mouth, just a little, just enough, and felt a flash like lightning from mouth to groin as Spike's tongue touched his lips. The cool, wet tip of it traced along Xander's lower lip, tickling a little, then flicked to his upper lip, just brushing along the
outside. Then more, as Spike pushed a little past, his tongue fluttering along Xander's teeth, dipping in a little further. Xander sighed into the kiss, shivering, and suddenly he couldn't wait, couldn't not do it, and he opened his mouth wider and let his own tongue come forward to taste; tobacco and beer and blood and...something. That something that he'd dreamed about, thought about, for weeks. That strange, rich spice that was just Spike. Xander went deeper, his breath coming hard through his nose and suddenly Spike was holding him, so tight he couldn't move; crushing them together, deepening their kiss until their teeth clicked together - until Xander felt his lips bruising. But he didn't care, he didn't care. He kissed Spike back as hard as he could, trying to imprint himself onto the other, trying to say with breathy little moans and slick, dancing tongue what his head - what his heart - couldn't. Spike broke away finally, pulling back sharply and looking into Xander's eyes - searching the mortal's face, his own closed and wary, lips a little swollen.

"Do you - what do you -"

"Come inside with me," Xander whispered. He put one hand up, to cradle the cool, sharp planes of Spike's face, letting his thumb rub along Spike's lower lip. "Please..." he said, and Spike kissed him again, fleetingly,
hard. Took his hand and led him away up the steps and through the kitchen to the bedroom, where the heavy curtains blocked the setting moon and the lone candle flame, guttering in dusky-red wax, sent strange shadows dancing up the walls. Faintly, the sounds of the radio - a sultry blues - came through the screen door, and Spike enfolded him again. Lips cool and devouring, his hands tugging at Xander's t-shirt, chilled fingers ghosting up Xander's back to his shoulders, curling over them and pulling them together. Xander did the same, letting his fingers glide up ribcage and pectoral, around to spine and shoulder blades, mapping the bones and muscle. His hands learning Spike's body as his tongue learned Spike's mouth.

Spike pushed at the hem of Xander's shirt, and Xander swayed back a little, letting him pull it up and off, his own hands suddenly clumsy as they fumbled at Spike's shirt. Finally it was off, and Spike ducked his head down to trail slow kisses from Xander's shoulder to collar bone to throat, leaving chill little wet marks behind, his tongue rasping and tasting like a cats. Xander caught Spike's belt-loops and pulled him close, gasping a little as their groins met and each felt the other's hardness for the first time. Spike nipped at the point of Xander's jaw, nibbled along his jaw line and then was back at Xander's
mouth. Xander sucked Spike's lower lip into his mouth - licking it, tasting it - and his fingers moved away somewhere below, feeling as if they were not even attached to his hands as he undid the buckle of Spike's belt and then began to undo the jeans. They were trembling, those strange, independent fingers - trembling with need and utter terror. Xander got the zipper undone, and then lifted his hands to Spike's hips, letting those clever fingers - *like mice, like little mice* Xander thought - caress the arch of hipbone, and dip under the waistband of the jeans.

Spike's mouth left Xander's again and trailed downward, chin and throat and sternum, nibbling little kisses with the occasional edge of tooth, the soft lap of tongue. Xander gasped softly as Spike found his nipple, and his hands pushed suddenly on Spike's jeans, easing them down over the narrow hips, freeing the trapped length of Spike's erection so that Xander felt it push wetly at his wrist. He pushed at Spike, urging him back, and Spike did a little staggering hop, getting the jeans off his feet. Xander guided him to the bed and pushed him down onto it. Spike fell in an elegant sprawl, left leg straight out, right leg bent, elbows braced behind him and his chin tucked down to his chest. He regarded Xander through his lashes, his chest heaving in
unnecessary little pants. Xander stood for a moment just looking, taking in the lean, long lines of the body laid out before him - a body cleanly muscled, angled and arched as a greyhound. The candle lit golden sparks in Spike's eyes, and Xander put his own hands to his jeans, undoing them and pushing them off along with his underwear, kicking them away. The wet sensation on his wrist persisted and he unconsciously lifted it to his mouth and licked. The taste tingled through him like the first kiss - the spice-salt taste of Spike, trailed there by the tip of his cock. Spike's nostrils flared, scenting, and Xander knew what he was smelling - felt the heavy pulse of want in his cock, and the cool leak of fluid at the tip. He knelt down on the edge of the bed, between Spike's legs, and crawled slowly up. When they were face to face, Xander dipped down to kiss, giving Spike the taste of himself on Xander's tongue. Then he moved down slowly, tasting each bit of flesh as he came to it; nibbling and licking, sucking hardened nipples and stroking his hands down Spike's ribs and up along his shoulders. He pushed Spike flat and trailed his hands down the cool arms until their hands were entwined, and then he nuzzled into the silky skin of Spike's belly, licking out to a hipbone, sucking hard on the hollow just under it. The thin flesh reddened and then bruised under his lips and teeth.
Spike was panting aloud now, soft *ohs* and sighs coming from him as Xander buried his face into the crease of hip and thigh and breathed deeply of Spike's scent, subtle and delicious, that had teased him from a distance for months - spice, leather, smoke. Spike's hands clenched in his, and Xander pulled both hands to his mouth, kissing Spike's knuckles and slipping his tongue between the fingers, then letting them go so he could slide his hands under Spike's thighs and grasp his cool flanks.

Spike arched up under him, gasping, when Xander's mouth engulfed the cool flesh of his cock. Xander took the head into his mouth, sucking the drops of fluid there, rolling them over his tongue, breathing deeply as the scent intensified and Spike shivered under him. Xander pulled as much as he could into his mouth, sucking, licking, letting his teeth graze lightly, lightly up the shaft, then releasing him to go lower and lick and mouth the silky weight of the scrotum, holding it in his mouth as Spike's hips undulated, and his thighs fell open further. Xander moved up again, back to Spike's cock, licking up the underside, taking it in his mouth once again, his fingers stroking over Spike's belly and feeling the muscles tense and release, satin over sculpted steel.

Spike moaned aloud. He tangled his hands in Xander's hair, stroking his fingers through and through the dark
strands. As Xander pulled away, bringing his mouth to the very tip of Spike's cock, the vampire tugged a little, insistent, and Xander willingly went with him, slithering up the cool body to sink into more kisses, Spike's hands at the back of his head, at the nape of his neck. Spike arched up, into Xander, and their cocks slid together, bumping and rubbing; not enough friction to get either off but a delicious, shivery sensation that served to ratchet their arousal upward a few more notches. Xander writhed over Spike, his hand clutching a firm buttock, the other on Spike's back, pressing him closer. He slipped one leg over Spike's hip and pressed down, and Spike arched up hard, shuddering.

"Spike - would you - I want -" Xander struggled to speak; breathless, near mindless, the feel of cool satin skin and flickering tongue stealing his thoughts away. He wanted - so badly - to feel Spike on him - within him. He wanted to feel - consumed, taken, wanted - and Spike...was it. Was all. Was the one who could anchor him, with his body and his need and his desire. Anchor his soul to him, that felt as if it were slipping out of him sometimes, adrift on seas of darkness.

"What, pet, what do you want?" The blue eyes were dark and wide - so serious, so wary.
Xander closed his own eyes for moment and gathered his fraying thoughts. "I want - I want you to be inside me. I want to feel you there - want you to feel me..."

Spike kissed him, soft little presses of his lips, his hands sliding down to cup Xander's buttocks and pull him close. "I want to - I will -" Spike breathed, and twisted, turning them both so that Xander lay on his back. He brought both legs up, pressing his thighs against Spike's ribs, his hands running up Spike's arms to pull him down for another, deeper kiss.

"Need somethin', don't wanna - oh - don't wanna hurt you."

"Yeah...drawer..." Xander watched Spike lean and stretch to the bedside table, yank open the drawer and feel inside, then settle back on him with the tube in his hand.

"You ever -"

"Yeah. This summer - please..." Xander arched against Spike and groaned softly when Spike knelt up away from him. Spike put one hand flat on Xander's chest, his eyes glimmering like a cat's.

"Then it has to be slow, you know that." Spike's other hand flicked open the top of the tube, and he squeezed a
large dollop of clear lube onto Xander's cock. His fingers dabbled in it then slipped lower, to rub along Xander's perineum and then slide further down. Xander sighed and shifted, knowing that going too fast meant it would hurt, but wanting Spike to hurry oh, please hurry.

Spike began to rub lazy circles across Xander's chest, pinching his nipples, scratching lightly down Xander's ribs. He echoed the circles with his other hand, rubbing the tight muscle there, pushing a fingertip slightly in and then retreating. It seemed to go on for hours, those teasing touches, but finally Spike's fingers were pushing deeply in, two and then three, leisurely fucking Xander into a frenzy. Xander dug his heels into Spike's back, urging him forward, his hands knotted in the sheet.

"Please, please... need y-you..." he rasped, and Spike scooped up a last bit of lube and began to spread it over his own cock, his hips already moving in shallow thrusts.

"Tell me, tell me what you need..." Spike whispered, and then the head of his cock was pushing - was in, and Xander shuddered all over. Spike curled down over him, barely moving, letting himself go forward the barest inch. His mouth covered Xander's in a fierce kiss and then he was whispering in Xander's ear, his tongue
tickling the whorls and curves of it, his teeth worrying at Xander's earlobe.

"Tell me."

"Oh, I... oh... I need - to f-feel it, to see you... Ssspike, do you see me?"

Spike edged forward another inch, his hands iron on Xander's hips. He swayed fractionally upright, meeting Xander's desperate stare. "Course I see you..." his silken voice was puzzled, and Xander moaned and tried to thrust up on him, thwarted by the slim, strong hands.

"Tell me - what you see. Tell me - make me real, Spike - m-make me real..."

A long pause, and then: "I'll make you real." Spike's eyes were golden now - demon's eyes, and his voice had roughened to a throaty growl. He slid in a little deeper and when Xander gasped and urged him forward with heels and thighs, he finally pushed all the way in, one long glide that sent fire through Xander's groin and up his spine. Spike began a slow and rhythmic thrusting, and he kissed and nibbled at Xander's mouth and throat as he spoke.

"I see you. Demonslayer...builder... knight in patchwork armor... oohhh..." Spike began to thrust faster, his kisses
becoming harder and his teeth biting now, little stings all over. Xander pulled him closer, his hands curling around Spike's back and his nails scoring into the damask skin. Spike shifted, angling a little differently, and Xander gasped, writhing, the vampire just hitting that spot, inside, that felt...oh, felt good.

"You are... lover...brother...strong right arm...you are... s-sunlight... hearth fire... oh gods..." Spike crushed them together, Xander's legs tight around his ribs, Xander's hands pulling his head down to kiss him and kiss him between breathy moans and soft cries. Spike thrust hard and harder, unmindful that he was bruising the mortal beneath him, his senses overloading as Xander's heart raced and his blood rose, the scent and sound of it intoxicating. Xander felt the change; felt the canines in Spike's mouth like a great cat, felt the sudden rigidity of the demonic face against his cheek and forehead. Xander arched and thrust back as hard as he could, welcoming the frenzied pace, the bruising hands. Marking him, making him real, making him...other then he was, before. Spike arched away suddenly, thrusting ferociously, his mouth open in a soundless roar, and Xander snaked his hand down and grasped his own cock and stroked himself once, twice...and then he was coming, something like fire and
something like ice sizzling over him. As his body tightened convulsively around Spike the vampire reached orgasm also, pressing so hard into Xander that Xander almost screamed. He could feel the cool jets in his body as Spike emptied himself, and his own hotter seed across his hand and stomach.

Spike stayed upright for a moment, locked into the arch, his belly heaving. Xander pushed one hand back through his hair, lifting it off his sweaty forehead, and then Spike was coming back to him, human again, laying over him and wrapping his arms around Xander, and Xander let his legs fall limply aside, his fingers stroking down Spike's back in languid strokes. They just rested a moment, Xander catching his breath, Spike stopping his altogether.

Xander felt Spike kiss his throat, the top of his shoulder, and he rubbed his cheek against Spike's hair. "Hey, no fair," Xander said, and Spike lifted his head and looked at him.

"What's no fair?"

"Your hair's still perfect," Xander said, and Spike snorted, grinning.

"That's 'cause I'm evil. Us evil types always look good, no matter what."
"Oh yeah, part of the whole package - bloodlust, psychotic tendencies, perfect hair. I guess it's the whole broody poufter thing that screws Angel over, huh?"

Spike laughed outright, and darted in for a quick kiss. "Guess so." Xander stretched up for another kiss, and for a while they were silent, kissing each other slowly, content to just lie there. After a few moments Spike slipped free of Xander's body and they both shivered at that loss of connection. Spike shifted, sliding off Xander a little so that he was only draped over half of him, and he leaned his chin on Xander's chest, looking at him curiously.

"So - Xander. Tell me. What was that all about then, eh? Why did you...why d'you think you're not...real?"

Xander smiled at him, even though he heart was starting to thump uncomfortably fast. Something else he'd never told anyone. "Long story," he warned, jokingly, and Spike nodded at him. "Ookay. Umm. This summer right after graduation - I decided a little road trip was in order. Remember me telling you? Get out of Sunnyhell, see the sights, have some fun before I locked myself into lower-middle-class drudgery. I was gonna drive to every state. I got as far as Oxnard, and my car - kinda blew up. In the most unspectacular way possible, I might
add." Spike raised his eyebrows at him, the smirk just curling his lips, and Xander poked him in the ribs.

"Don't say it. I know. It's me all over. It was a crazy trip. I almost bailed right then - I had enough money for a bus ticket back, and I thought really seriously about just coming back here. 'Cause I'd realized something. I'd realized I was alone."

This time a snort of amusement from the vampire, and Xander rolled, pinning Spike beneath him and doing a little hip-wiggle thing that wiped the amusement away. "Now hush and let me tell you. It just hadn't hit me until I was sitting in this greasy spoon, having the cheapest meal I could and wondering what to do next. I turned to make some comment to Willow and realized she wasn't there. And then I realized Buffy wasn't there. And if I said anything people would think I was nuts. But - I hadn't actually been alone up until then. You know? It was..."

"Right," Spike said, and some of the earlier darkness had come back into his eyes. "Right, I know."

"Yeah. It really freaked me out. I went over and stared at bus schedules for half an hour. And then I just stopped. I decided I wanted to be alone. I wanted to try it. I was probably safer in Oxnard then here, anyway, and
I just - wanted to see what I could do on my own. So I hunted around and got a job at this... this strip club -"

"Strip club? Oh my, do tell -"

"As a dishwasher, Spike, clean up those dirty thoughts." Xander wriggled again, doing a pelvic roll he actually had learned at the 'Fabulous Ladies Night Club' and giggled a little when Spike's eyes went wide and then narrowed in speculation.

"My dirty thoughts -"

"Shhhh. Listen." Xander grinned at him. "I washed dishes. I rented this - well, they called it a trailer but really it was just this little RV whose wheels had rotted off. I went for walks and I met people and I helped my landlord fix some stuff around his house and the club... I really - liked it. Even got promoted to bartender. Nobody knew...well, nobody knew anything, you know? About me - where I was from, what I'd done. It was great. I was just - myself. And the best part..." Xander stopped and lay his head down on Spike's chest, his fingers absently caressing a pale nipple, smiling when he felt Spike's ribs hitch a little with a surprised breath.
"The best part was, I was liked. They liked *me*. The real me. I never felt so..."

"Happy?" Spike asked softly, and Xander lifted his head and looked up at him, smiling gently.

"Yeah. Happy."

"So. I'm guessin' part of this happiness was your - experience with this sort of thing." Spike put both hands on Xander's buttocks and squeezed, and Xander responded by flicking his tongue out over the same nipple.

"Surprise. I started hanging out with one of the dancers. *At first*, because he had a TV and a bunch of movies on DVD. We had movie nights and it was a lot of fun. Then I started hanging out with him before work, and then we had a few - well, dates - and one night I just didn't go home." Xander kissed Spike's sternum, one nipple and the other, thinking about his dancer - Thomas Ironbear. Tall and lean with long black hair, half Lakota and half Chinese. The most exotic person he'd ever met. Almost the sexiest.

"Mmmmmmm..." Xander rolled his hips again, looking up into Spike's face and seeing a fleeting expression he couldn't quite place. "So, I had a job, a boyfriend, and
something like a life. A really great three months, give or take. Then one night..." Xander frowned, and abruptly rolled off Spike. He took the vampire's cool hand in both of his and held it to his chest, staring hard at the shadow-daubed ceiling. "I helped close the club, and Thomas and I were walking home, and we were being a little...touchy-feely in the street. And out of nowhere this truck roars up, and four guys jump out, and next thing you know we're fighting for our lives..." Spike's hand gripped his tight, and Xander glanced over at him, seeing the glare of golden eyes, lips curling back in a snarl.

*What is he...?*

*Pack*

Xander tried a small smile and Spike blinked, his eyes going back to blue. "Well, we lived, obviously. I got bashed around a bit, but you know, being from here really came in handy. Thomas wasn't quite as lucky - he got some ribs broken, broke his wrist. A cop came by and those guys drove off... It really fucked with Thomas. He'd been up and down the coast, in a lot of big cities. Never had a problem like that - I mean, people had said some things but he'd never been attacked. It scared him. And of course, he couldn't work. His mom lived up in Eugene, and when they released him from the
hospital he went up there. He asked me to go with him but...I just couldn't. I -"

"You missed life on the Hellmouth so much, I know," Spike said, and his voice was joking, but Xander propped himself up on his elbow, curling his arm around Spike's so that they were forearm to forearm, Spike's hand pressed to his mouth. He kissed Spike's knuckles, the back of his hand.


"Soooo..." Spike pulled Xander back over onto him, settling Xander between his legs, their hips fitting together nicely. Spike was mostly hard and Xander was half-way there, and Spike started a gentle rocking, his hands stroking down Xander's back and over his buttocks, up and back, again and again.

"How does this all make you...unreal?" he murmured, nuzzling into Xander's neck, breathing his scent in, tasting his skin.

"It...oh...ummmm..." Xander did the same, mouthing the juncture of neck and shoulder; nibbling little kisses that made Spike shiver. *Ooh...knew that would be a good spot. He likes that...*
"I was myself up there. Finally. I wasn't - pretending anything or hiding anything...mmmm... And when I - when I came back it all...started all over again. Be - tag-along guy, be - goofy... I couldn't. I just could not. Not after all that. Not after - after Jack, and what he gave me."

Spike rolled them again, pushing himself up and straddling Xander's hips. He pressed their cocks together, rubbing and stroking, and reached for the lube with his other hand. Xander watched him, hands on Spike's hips. "Right, your gift," Spike murmured. He squeezed out more lube onto Xander's cock, and guided Xander's hand to it. "Want you in me, now," he whispered, and Xander nodded, his breathing speeding up as he watched Spike's face.

He slipped his hand between them, trailing lube, preparing Spike's body for his own. "I'm not real to them. I see everything - all so different now and...I just can't connect, and I can't ignore the bullshit anymore. They don't much like it. But..." Spike made a breathy whimpering noise as Xander slipped a second finger in and his body clenched down hard.

"Oh...now..." he rasped, and Xander withdrew, pulling his knees up so Spike had something to brace against. He
took his own cock in his hand and held it steady as Spike lifted himself and then hovered there, just resting himself on the tip of Xander's cock. "They don't like it, pet. I've noticed."

"And I don't care, I just don't care, anymore...Sssspike, please..." Spike grinned at him, then all at once pushed himself down, engulfing Xander in cool, tight flesh, and Xander arched up to meet him, groaning aloud at the incredible feel of it; the fleshy glove slipping down over him. Spike leaned back against Xander's legs, his arms behind him, hands curled around Xander's ankles. He began to move, up and down, slowly, and Xander moved opposite, trying to go faster, harder. But Spike effortlessly controlled them both, and Xander lay panting with need, hands on Spike's hips.

"You're real - you are, I see you, I feel you... Oh... I feel you..." Spike started to go faster, rougher, and Xander pushed himself up, propping on elbows and then hands, stretching up to Spike to kiss him, letting his legs go flat on the bed. The vampire put an arm around him, holding him close, pulling them into a position only his greater strength made possible. Spike rested his forehead on Xander's and shifted a little and began to work himself in earnest on Xander's cock, bending down to kiss him and then tearing away to gasp needlessly, deeply, his eyes
wide and dark and looking straight into Xander's. Xander reached between them and took Spike's still-slippery cock in his hand and stroked the vampire as fast and as hard, gasping himself now, groaning down in his throat, lost in the feel of it, the clinging glide of Spike's body, his lips on Xander's throat. They strained and shivered together, mindless, and Xander felt his body tingling, singing, as his orgasm rushed through him. He heard himself making some sort of sound - a keening sort of cry, and Spike's eyes were suddenly locked onto his, and Spike was himself stiffening into ecstasy, his eyes wide and golden, unblinking, seeing him. A moment after Xander came, Spike did too, and they both shuddered to a stop, leaning against each other, Spike's breathing slowing and then stopping altogether, Xander gasping into Spike's chest. He flopped back onto the bed, both of them twitching a little at the change of angle, and Spike put his hands on Xander's chest and rolled his hips once, grinning.

"You wish," Xander said, careful to keep his sticky hands off the sheets. "I dunno about you, but I want a shower. And a drink. And damnit, your hair -"

"You can mess it up in the shower." Spike swooped down and kissed him, then lifted and swung off in one move. He headed towards the kitchen, and Xander
heard the rustle of leather as he searched his duster for cigarettes. He came back to the bedroom as Xander sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Xander stood up and wobbled a little, legs weak.

"Whoa." He leaned on the dresser for a minute while Spike found the borrowed jeans and dug his Zippo out.

"Another perk to bein' evil. I can shag you 'til you're dizzy."

"One more in the plus column. Maybe I should reconsider my attitude about being turned." Spike laughed, flicking his lighter open, drawing the smoke in deeply as Xander headed for the shower.

He did mess Spike's hair up in the shower. He shampooed until every trace of gel was gone and then ran his fingers through it again and again, making it stick out wildly, pulling some of it down over Spike's forehead and laughing when Spike growled at him.

Afterward they sprawled naked on the kitchen chairs. Xander brought the boom box in from the porch and the radio softly played swing and jazz, big band and blues. Spike talked about some of the music - about listening to this or that song with Dru, what they'd been doing. His voice took on a fond tone, remembering, and
Xander hoped he was feeling a little less of the crushing grief and just being happy, talking about his girl. Two beers down, one soda, about six cigarettes, and Xander stood and stretched hard, reaching towards the ceiling and arching his back until it crackled. He relaxed out of the stretch to find Spike's gaze on him, hot and wanting. Spike reached out and pulled Xander close and Xander sat in his lap, straddling his hips, groin to groin. He fluffed Spike's hair, which had dried in loose, tumbled waves.

"You look like somebody out of a manga. Some rock star-slash-warrior-slash-tortured lover. It's cute."

"The evil undead are never cute. Devastatingly sexy...smolderingly good-looking...even cool... but never...ever...cute." Spike punctuated his speech with little kisses over Xander's chest and shoulders, and Xander closed his eyes for a moment, shivering.

"Right. Never cute. C'mon, let's go back to bed." He stood up and held out his hand, smiling, and Spike took it and went with him, into the dim cave of the bedroom; scent of sex and smoke and the faintly rose-scented candle. The radio played on, My Blue Heaven, and westward, far out over the sea, lightning flickered silently.
Spike woke with a start, dreaming; confused for a moment by the heat and weight pressing all along his right side. Then Xander moved a little, murmuring, and Spike relaxed. In Xander's bed, in his arms. Warm, and sated and for the moment, at peace. A very faint light came through from the kitchen, and Spike slid easily out from under Xander and ghosted out of the bedroom. False dawn made the sky palely green and yellow, but the whole of the western horizon was a dark, slatey blue - a storm moving in. Thunder growled, distant as yet, and a silent streak of pinkish lightning lit the underbelly of the clouds. Spike smelled the rain coming - ozone and wet earth, clean and rich. He pushed open the screen door and leaned in the doorway, smoking; watching the clouds advance.

He wondered if Xander would notice he was gone - wondered if the boy would get up. He really wondered, with an inner smirk that tried to belie the knot in his belly, if Xander would be at all pleased to see him, naked in his kitchen, the bruises and suck-marks of sex dappling his body.
The first month or so that Spike had been around, Xander had all but ignored him - when he wasn't saying something obnoxious, or cutting. But that had changed. Something had happened, and Xander had started to... Well, had started to see him. To notice him in ways other than as an annoyance or an enemy. When Giles had pushed him off onto Xander, insisting that he couldn't keep Spike with him anymore, Xander had ducked his head and frowned a little, but he hadn't protested. And when Spike had gotten there, that first night, and Xander had run down the 'rules of the house', they hadn't been remotely like Gile's rules. Nothing about leaving bloody mugs sitting around or a long list of things he mustn't touch. They'd been about staying quiet so Xander's parents wouldn't know he was there, and not running out all the hot water, and turning off the sink in the kitchenette gently, because it was about to break and really, they didn't want water spraying all over everything. The kind of rules you told - anybody. Just a mate, over to stay, so watch out for the broken step and don't wake up the folks. And then the last thing - the thing that had shocked Spike to his core. Xander had asked - asked - about his food. About blood. Asked him how much he actually needed. Spike had grinned at him, thinking to fluster him with his answer.
"Well, you have about 12 pints in you, boy, so I'd need one of you every couple days or so. Vampire's are like big cats - don't have to eat every day, if we get enough at one...feeding." Xander just looks at him - not in horror, or even squeamishly, but in speculation, and Spike looks away suddenly, knowing what Xander is seeing. He's thin, now - almost gaunt - and the bruises and cuts from fighting - and from the Slayer taking a swing at him almost daily - just aren't healing all that quickly. Animal blood just didn't work as well, and the constant hunger that twists in his gut makes him almost crazy. Makes him snappish and anxious. Then Xander really shocks him.

"It should be human blood, shouldn't it? I mean - you can't really live off pigs and cows, can you?"

"Not really." Spike answers without thinking, and Xander just nods and gathers up keys and wallet, preparing to go out.

"Come on then. I gotta get supplies, and I think you should help carry them." Spike just stands there, his mind a whirl of confusion.

What is he - what's he playing at? Doesn't he mean to - "You're not going to tie me up?" he blurts, and curses himself. Stupid, stupid, don't give him any ideas...
But Xander just looks at him, serious and steady, a small frown drawing his brows together, the keys jingling nervously in his hand. "No, I'm not. You - you're not a child, and you're not an animal, no matter what Giles and Buffy say. I know I can't - I can't **trust** you, not really. But you don't want to die anymore then I do, so I'm going to believe that your instinct for self-preservation will override any really **stupid** impulses you might have. **We are not** -" and here, Xander steps forward and pokes a hard finger into Spike's chest. "I repeat **not** telling Giles or Buffy about this. I don't need to hear it from them, and what they don't know won't hurt them. You behave, and we'll - get along. I have to live here, too, and to be honest I can't live here with someone tied up in a chair all day. It...kinda freaks me out. So - can we do this?"

Spike stares at the mortal boy really almost a man - stares into earnest and wary eyes in a frowning face, and smells the nerves and the fear coming off him. He snarls a little at the poke - he can't **not** - but he nods, because this is hell and away better then being chained in a bathtub

Oh, gonna **hurt** the Watcher for that.

**They walk out into the night, and the fear comes in, subtle and shrill.**
Don't own this anymore...not mine now...oh gods, can't do this ...can't do this.  But he has to do it - has to be the Big Bad no matter what, because if he slips, even once, he's dead.  So he stalks along with this human - this white hat who seems a little...tarnished, maybe.  And ends up at the hospital, down in the basement where the morgue and the storage rooms are.  Xander walks confidently, threading his way through a maze of tan-and-pea-soup-green painted cinderblock.  He knocks at a door with biohazard symbols stuck all over it and a sign that said 'Incinerator'.  A young man - long hair in a lank ponytail and hospital scrubs looking a bit grubby at the edges - opens the door in a puff of pot-scented air and grins when he sees Xander.

"Hey man, thought you weren't coming."

"Just got a late start.  D'you have my stuff?"

"Sure man, yeah.  C'mon in here, quick."  The boy shoots nervous looks up and down the hallway and ushers them into the dim room.  The incinerator looms in one corner and various broken-down chairs and gurneys litter the edges of the room.  A medium-sized cooler sits on one gurney and Xander crosses to it and opens it.  Spike's eyes widen at the stack of bags inside - human blood, marked and dated, sitting on ice.  A lot of it - over a dozen bags.
"You're sure this is still okay- hasn't gone off?"

"Nah - we get rid of fuckin' gallons of the stuff, man - can only keep it for like a week or something... This was all sent down here today, so - it'll be okay if you keep it cold."

"Great." Xander shuts the cooler, hoisting it off the gurney and handing it to Spike. Then he reaches into his pocket for his wallet. "Now - what'd we say - two bucks a bag, right?"

"No man - four bucks. C'mon, I could get fired over this."

"Right, four." Xander sighs and pokes through his wallet. It actually has quite a bit of money in it.

Must have been payday or somethin', Spike thinks, looking at it.

Xander pulls out a hundred dollar bill, sighing again, and hands it over. "Here Randy. Four bucks extra. I'll be back next week, same day, okay?"

"Yeah, same day, that's cool. Here. For the four bucks extra." Randy fishes in the pocket of his scrubs and pulls out a joint, handing it to Xander with a flourish.
Xander eyes it suspiciously and takes it and tucks it away. "Great, thanks. See ya 'round, Randy. And listen. If I ever can't get here, then Spike'll be here for it, okay? This is Spike."

Randy nods at Spike, eyeing him curiously for a moment. "Yeah, man, okay. See ya." Randy grins down at his money and gives it a little kiss, waving it at Xander and Spike as they walk out.

"I know it's not enough, but I could only afford two people's worth, so you'll have to make up the rest with Porky Pig or whatever, okay?" Xander says, and Spike stops walking, staring at him.

What in bloody hell is going on? Why is the boy being nice? What does he want? What's the catch... Spike can't even get the questions out, and Xander turns around and walks back to him, impatience showing on his face.

"What the bloody hell are you playin' at, mate? What are you - what is this?" Spike snaps, wincing at the crackle of incandescent pain that flares through his head. Fuckin' chip.

"I'm - look, I'm just..." Xander licks his lips, nervous, and then seems to resolve something in himself because he stands up straighter and pushes Spike back, stepping away from the wall. "I'm not playing at anything. I told you. You're not an animal. You may not be a - person - like me or the gang but I don't get to starve you or...or hit you just because you're different and because you can't fight back. You're helping us - you helped Giles. You're telling us what you can about those soldiers. As far as I'm concerned, that makes you part of the gang, whether you want to be or not and whether you'll kill us all when you can or not. I won't - I can't see the world in black and white anymore, and I won't. This is - hospitality. You're staying with me and I'll do what I can to make it... Well, to make it bearable. And you'll refrain from tearing up my place or being a total fucking bastard all the fucking time, ok?"

Xander has gotten in pretty close at the last, and Spike lets his human face return. The heady scent of hot blood and fear and anger linger around Xander, mixing with his own, unique scent; sweetish and salty and warm.
Spike looks down at the cooler in his hand, swinging it a little, then back up at Xander. "You're right. I'd kill you all if I could. But - I can't. So for now... pax. All right?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Fuckin' hell, you Americans. What did you do in school all day? Pax. It means peace. Right?"

Xander eyes him, as if not sure that peace with a vampire is all right no matter how much easier it makes life, but finally he nods. "Okay. P-pax. And then we've got to figure out a way for you to make some money, 'cause I'm not gonna be broke all the time." Xander turns and walks away and Spike follows behind, smirking a little, patting down pockets for a cigarette. Bloody pax, indeed. Maybe the boy is telling the truth, though. Spike has a cooler full of human blood to help convince him.

"Not like I can go work at the local five and dime, boy. My options are somewhat bloody limited, just now."

"Yeah, whatever. I gotta get a better fuckin' job." Xander continues to grumble to himself as they retrace their path to the exit. They finally make it out of the seemingly endless corridors of the hospital and Spike walks along almost jauntily, looking forward to a meal of
human blood. And of finding out just what the hell is up with his human.

Spike flicked the ember off his cigarette and tossed the butt into the kitchen trash. The storm clouds were overhead now, and rain began to fall, pattering lightly at first but rapidly getting heavier and harder. How'd I get here so fast? From 'I'll kill you but pax for now' to...this? He kissed me, and he took care of me when those bloody soldiers... Told me his secrets, he did. Is that enough, though? Last night I...I let Dru go. And he...sees me. Knows me. Still wants me. Makes me feel... Spike moved out of the doorway, pulling the screen door shut and shivering a little as random raindrops spattered him. He pushed the main door closed and heard the toilet flushing in the back of the house. A moment later Xander stumbled into the kitchen, yawning. The radio was playing Louis Armstrong now.

"Isitrainin'?" Xander mumbled, pulling open the refrigerator door and peering inside. He grabbed a jug of grape juice and took a long swig, eyes shut.

"Yeah - rainin'. Lightning and thunder, even."

"Di'nt hear any." Xander stood staring at Spike, the grape juice forgotten for a moment, and then he shook himself
a little and put it away, yawning again. "What're you doin' up?" he said, and came close to Spike, one hand reaching out to touch the mark he'd made on Spike's hip, fingertips just ghosting over it. Spike shuddered.

"Wanted a smoke. Guess I should -"

"Come back to bed, Spike." Xander looked at him, dark eyes wide and solemn - a little frightened maybe. Not of him, Spike realized; not of what had happened. But of...what Spike might say. What he might do.

"I see friends shakin' hands, sayin' "How do you do?"... They're really sayin' "I love you"... And I think to myself... What a wonderful world..."

Louis sang, and Spike smiled and took Xander's hand, and they went away back into the bedroom.

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Patsy Cline - You Belong To Me
Louis Armstrong - What a Wonderful World
6 Sides

Lowell house was a shambles, and Xander stood looking at the mess while Buffy and Riley dressed. The whole ordeal - with the freaky ghosts of repressed children, marathon sexcapades and semi-sentient people-hating vines was just really more then he wanted to deal with right now. Although seeing Giles doing an 'Unplugged' session at the Espresso Pump had been rather entertaining. He kicked at a shattered railing and went downstairs. Spike was in the lounge, surreptitiously going through various drawers and cabinets, pocketing a few things.

"Feeling like a little petty larceny will round the evening out nicely?" Xander whispered.

"Never let an opportunity to get something for free pass you by, mate. Done well for myself with that kind of thinking over the years. Look - want a...commando-thing?" Spike held up a tazer and pressed the button and dropped it when it went off, snapping out bluish sparks. Xander snorted, holding out his hands in a 'keep it away' gesture. "Bloody hell - that's what done for me
before. And it hurt." Spike grinned and picked the taser back up, shoving it into a pocket.

Xander leaned on the back of the couch, arms crossed. "You know, I just want to go home. This place creeps me out. And Buffy...after what happened - the professor dead and Riley being *drugged* - she's still with him. Still running around with those damn soldiers. I don't understand what she's thinking."

"She's not, pet." Spike leaned next to him and lit a cigarette. "She's using what's between her legs instead of between her ears. Not much difference, I'll grant you, but..."

"Gah!" Xander pushed Spike away a little, grimacing. "Well, ok - point made. Just a little too..."

"Visceral?" Spike asked, eyebrow cocked, and Xander grinned.

"Way to impress with the two-dollar words, evil undead." Xander laughed, and Spike looked pompous.

"Tell me the joke so I can laugh at Spike too," Buffy said, coming into the room. Spike's pompous look reverted to snarl, and Xander straightened off the couch, stepping between them.
"No joke, Buffy. So - everything back to Hellmouth normal? Time for us workin' guys to turn in and get our beauty rest."

"No amount of beauty rest will do not-so-evil over there any good. And speaking of, where are you resting lately, Spike? I've looked for you at your crypt and hey, no smart-assed corpse."

"That's not your bloody business, Slayer," Spike snapped. He glanced over at Xander and started to walk out, but Buffy moved lightning fast and grabbed him by the throat.

"It is my business, Spike. Remember? You tell me everything I want to know, and I don't dust you."

"Buffy -" Xander stepped up close to her and put a restraining hand on her arm. Spike was tight as a bow-string, all vamped out and Xander just wanted everyone to calm down. He could feel his own anger rising in him, but he really didn't want to have a showdown here and now. Get it off what's ours, the hyena growled, and Xander couldn't help but agree. "Let him be, Buffy. He's staying with me."

Buffy goggled at him in surprise and let go of the vampire. Spike snarled at her, eyes glowing gold, and
Xander pushed him back a step. *Please don't lose it, Spike, please don't...let me get us out of here*  "Come on you guys - we just defeated the Ghost of Sexual Repression and I'm thinking I need a little down-time after that."

"*Xander! You've got* to be kidding. *He's living with you? He'll kill you in your sleep! He'll - steal all your towels!*

Xander sighed, rubbing his forehead. He could feel a headache starting. "*Buffy. Think. Victim of mad Professor here - I'm not going to be killed in my sleep. It wasn't safe at the crypt, and if you've been around there, you saw what the Initiative did. They're not getting their hands on him again, so yeah, he's staying with me.*"

"*Xander, you can't* be serious." Buffy crossed her arms, doing her best 'I am Slayer, I know best' look, and Xander almost snarled himself.

"*Serious about what, Buffy?*" Willow asked, walking into the room with Riley and Giles trailing behind. Further back, in the foyer, he could see Tara and Anya looking like the last thing they wanted to do was get involved in any more fighting. He could feel the tension rolling off Spike in waves and he sincerely hoped the vampire could keep it under control for just a few more minutes.
"He's letting Spike live with him!"

"He is? You are? But...why?" Willow's eyes were huge, and Xander couldn't help but think she looked like a little red-haired rabbit.

_Hop away and nibble somewhere else, little rabbit_  "Like I told Buffy - it's not safe. The Initiative is going crazy - if Professor Walsh thought it would be okay to _murder_ Buffy, who knows what's on their 'to do' list for vampires? Spike can't fight the bastards off, so he's staying with me until this whole Initiative thing resolves itself."

"But - that could be weeks - months! Xander, you can't have a _vampire_ living at your house for months!"

"Relax, Will. He's been at my house since the night they shot him with that tracer. It's fine - _I'm_ fine - let's not all have a cow, ok?"

"Giles, you talk to him! He won't listen to his friends so maybe he'll listen to you." Buffy stomped over to Riley, leaning into him, and didn't notice the look of hurt that crossed Giles' face at her comment. Xander noticed though, and felt a little sorry for the man. He liked Giles well enough - when he wasn't acting the sainted Watcher. He could see Giles' days as a sorcerer - as
Ripper. He knew that tweed and library books weren't all there was to Giles, and it made him angry when Giles preached duty and honor and white-hattedness. He hadn't always been on that side, and Xander wished he would stop being so...pontifical, sometimes. Xander also realized, though, that he was biased and resolved to try very hard not to snap at whatever the man was going to say. Behind him, Spike was angrily lighting another cigarette - his safest outlet for frustration - and Xander just wanted to grab him and go - kiss him until he needed to breathe.

"Buffy may have a point, Xander. While Spike may not be able to - physically - hurt you, there are still things he could do to...make things difficult."

"Standin' right here people, for fuck's sake."

"Giles - I appreciate that you're concerned, but this is the Hellmouth - everything's difficult. I've got vampires and demons on the one hand, and whacked-out wanna-be secret commandos on the other. At this point, if Spike could come up with something that trumped all that, I'd be excited by the novelty. It was your idea in the first place that he come stay with me, so I don't see what the big deal is. I have a headache and a five-thirty wake-up call, so I'd like to get home and get to bed. Okay?"
Giles seemed to want to say more, but he sighed and looked down for a moment instead, glasses off, thumb rubbing over his forehead as if he, too, was suffering a headache. Then the glasses were pushed back on and he looked up at Xander, some expression Xander couldn't interpret flickering across his face and gone.

"All right. I'll trust you to know what you're doing. But rest assured that I will be keeping an eye out." He looked over at Spike and his expression hardened. "If anything untoward should happen to Xander, Spike, you won't live to regret it."

"Hey, Giles, that's my line! But you said it real convincing-like." Buffy came back over and leaned in close to Spike. "That goes double for me, Spike."

Spike stared down at her with loathing and puffed a lung-full of smoke into her scowling, upturned face. "Try to find another way to tell me the same old story, Slayer. I'm gettin' tired of this edition." He looked over at Giles and snorted softly. "And you'd better leave the threats to the Slayer, mate - you've lost your edge."

Buffy drew back her fist and Xander - just couldn't. Instead of letting her hit Spike - letting her do her threat of the week - Xander stepped up and put up his arm. He wasn't really strong enough to stop her, but
he startled her enough that she failed to follow through and ended rather awkwardly, her fist somewhere near Xander's shoulder, her expression one of astonishment. Xander kept his voice low and calm, knowing that if he didn't keep a lid on it he was going to explode.

"Enough Buffy. Okay? Just enough. He helped us tonight. He was part of the team, saved some lives. You don't get to hit him just 'cause he pissed you off." The silence was absolute in the room. Riley shifted uncomfortably, glancing from Xander to Buffy. Giles stared at Xander as well, and Willow looked to be near tears.

"Are you under some sort of spell, Xander?"

"Spell? You think I'm under a spell because I won't let you hit someone who can't hit back? For god's sake, Buffy! You're the Slayer, not the Torturer. White hat, remember? I'm so sick of...this. I'm so sick of all of this." Xander backed away from her, shaking his head, and started to walk out. The gang simply stared at him. As he walked past Riley, Xander stopped and glared at him. "If the Initiative pays a visit to my house, I'm gonna know who to blame. And you really don't want me to be pissed off at you right now, Riley. I'm just not
feelin' the love, you know? Keep your damn jarheaded friends away from me and mine."

He stalked out, fuming. He could hear Spike behind him, could practically feel the laughter that he was sure the vampire was repressing furiously. They went past Tara and Anya, who both looked as if they'd rather be anywhere else, and went out the door. Once outside Xander took a hard, hard breath and tried to let the anger go. He kicked viciously at a trashcan and was happy to see it bounce away across the street.

"Easy, mate. Don't wanna break anythin'." Spike fell into step beside him, matching Xander's angry stride. Xander glanced over at him, wondering what would come next. Far from amused, the vampire looked serious and thoughtful.

"Bit of a cock up, in'nit? You takin' on the Slayer for me. Could get yourself hurt, you know. She wouldn't have hurt me much."

"Don't care, Spike. I really don't care. It's enough that she wants to - that she doesn't see anything wrong with it, and that neither do the others. They just don't..."
"They don't see, love. I know. Not like you do. But you're gonna bring a whole world a' trouble down on your head. Best to let it go."

"I won't!" Xander rounded fiercely on Spike, seizing his arms in a hard grip, getting in close. "It's enough, Spike. It's just...enough! I've been trying to keep on their 'good side', I've been trying to shrug it all off, but I can't. What she does to you - what they all do - is wrong. And it's not just because..." Xander faltered, and Spike took advantage of Xander's momentary confusion to slip his hands under Xander's shirt, sliding them up to his shoulder blades and back down.

"Because I can make you sigh my name like a prayer to heaven, love?" Spike's voice was so low, so soft. It made Xander shiver. Spike rested his forehead lightly against Xander's, rumbling with pleasure deep in his chest. Xander sighed and slid his own hands around Spike, pulling him closer until their groins brushed gently together.

"Right. It's not just because of that. Every time they do something like that - every hypocritical, petty thing - puts its mark on them. They're staining themselves - making themselves less. And for what? So they can lord it over
one vampire who can't hurt them. It's - degrading, to both of you. And I won't put up with it any more."

"My knight in patchwork armor," Spike sighed, and they moved together, kissing slow and deep and gentle; oblivious, for the moment, to everything.

Up the street, the gang was leaving Lowell House and going home and only Tara - habitually in the rear, habitually watching - saw the two figures in the chiaroscuro of streetlight and leaf-shadow.

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Didn't need cared for - bloody soldiers!

Yes...but...keeping me warm isn't because of the soldiers. Buying me the beer I like, lettin' me get away with 'accidentally' shreaddin' the worst of his shirts, washin' my hair in the shower...none of that has anythin' to do with the soldiers. He does it because he...loves. Me. I think.

Hasn't said so The demon was smug, seeming to think it had won this particular round. But Spike knew it hadn't, because he hadn't said that word, either. At least not out loud.

They walked inside, Spike immediately shedding duster and boots by the couch, Xander doing his usual routine of locking and chaining the door then checking to see that the kitchen door was chained. Xander walked through to check the bathroom door, too.

Three doors is bloody overkill, but it's handy for those exploding-demon nights... In the weeks since he'd burned Dru's things...they had established something of a routine. Dim white light from the streetlights sheened everything in gossamer-grey. Spike lit the candles on the kitchen table and Xander padded barefoot into the kitchen and got a big glass of milk. Spike watched him drink it down and noticed that Xander's hands were
shaking. Spike sidled up behind him and slipped his arms around Xander's waist, his fingers burrowing up under sweater and t-shirt then down into jeans, feeling the flex and bunch of muscle as Xander rinsed out the glass. Spike stroked the warm skin just under Xander's navel, pressing himself up tight to his back. Xander shivered, hands braced on the counter, head bent. Spike started kissing the exposed curve of his neck, going slowly from Xander's spine to the soft skin just behind his ear and then back and around to the other side. Xander sighed and shifted, pushing back, and Spike ground his pelvis into him, letting him feel the hard length of his erection.

"Sspike..." Xander whispered, and Spike bit lightly along the top of Xander's shoulder; two, three, four little bites, and Xander pushed back harder, gasping softly.

"Come wash my hair," Spike murmured, and Xander twisted in Spike's grip, turning to face him. His eyes were dark, the pupils dilated, and his face was flushed. Xander tugged Spike's shirt up out of his jeans and pushed the material up, exposing Spike's chest and leaning in to run a flickering tongue over his nipples. Spike pulled him closer, groin to groin, and Xander ran kisses up his throat and jaw to his mouth, making Spike shiver. They kissed slowly, lingeringly; Spike's hands slipping down the back
of Xander's jeans and Xander's hands caressing Spike's back, shoulders and ribs.

"Come on," Spike said, and led Xander into the bathroom. As Xander skimmed out of jeans, sweater and shirt, Spike lit the candles that had become a permanent fixture in every room of the house. Xander seemed to prefer the softer, dancing light to the harsher electrics, and Spike had no objections to them. Spike drew the line at vanilla scented, though. Xander started the shower, turning the heat up.

For me, see, for me he does that, don't need to do that  Spike stripped down quickly and they both crowded into the narrow, glassed stall. The space was tight and they'd learned through trial and error - and dozens of showers - the best way to bathe without bruising each other or knocking the flimsy 'shampoo caddy' to bits. (Spike had accidentally taken it out with an overenthusiastic elbow their second shower together.) They'd also learned that shower gel was better than a bar of soap, since it was impossible for either one of them to bend over if bar soap got dropped. Although the first time that had happened, it had taken a fun few minutes figuring out what, exactly, to do.
Now Spike pumped out a generous palm full of soap and began to rub it over Xander, a rusty grumbling sound of pleasure coming from deep in his chest. Spike loved this - the smooth skin of Xander's body was like silk, the heat of him like a furnace - like the half-forgotten sun he sometimes dreamed of. As he soaped, he let his forehead rest on Xander's, letting his lips brush Xander's, just lightly touching. He let his tongue trace the full lower lip - slip inside the merest fraction to taste and then out again, back to feather touches of lips on lips. Xander shivered under those touches, eyes closed, his arms loosely around Spike's waist, his hips moving in languid, gentle thrusts. Spike ran soap-slippery hands down Xander's back and over his buttocks - slipped his fingers between muscled cheeks and caressed the sensitive flesh there. Xander moaned a little and Spike kissed him again, deeper this time, loving the heat of Xander's tongue as it slipped into his mouth, caressing teeth and sliding over the roof of his mouth. Spike shuffled them in a slow circle, getting Xander under the spray and sluicing soap off him. Xander leaned his head back a little, getting his head wet, and then turned in Spike's arms so the vampire could rub shampoo into his hair. Spike maneuvered himself so that his erection was between Xander's legs, sliding it back and forth along the underside of his balls and letting the tip just trace the
perineum, then pushing forward again. He slid his foam-covered hands down Xander's belly and fondled his balls, then slid his hands the length of Xander's cock. Then, more briskly, he rubbed at the soap, getting it off, and nudged Xander around again, to rinse his hair.

"We're really just way too good at this," Xander said, getting a handful of soap in his turn. "It's like we have some sort of obsessive bathing fetish."

"Hmmmmmm." Spike had his eyes closed, concentrating on the delicious slip and glide of Xander's hands on his body. Xander slipped one hand down Spike's buttocks and between, probing gently, and the other slid across Spike's stomach to lazily pump once and then twice, squeezing his erection. Another slow turn, and then Xander was washing Spike's hair and the rumbling started again as Xander's strong, calloused fingers gently teased out the gel. Scrubbing Spike's scalp with his fingertips, running his hands through the length of it over and over. Spike braced his hands on the wall to either side of him and leaned back, getting every inch of contact that he could. It felt... *Feels good, feels like love, feels like...*
Xander laughed softly. "You're like petting a big cat - a snow leopard or a...Siberian tiger. They have blue eyes. I wonder if I could make a tiger purr."


Xander kissed his neck. "Right. Growling real soft. Silly me. Come on, rinse time, or you won't have any hair left." Spike turned again and opened his eyes to watch Xander as he reached around, rinsing the shampoo out. His dark hair was plastered sleekly back, curling along his neck - getting long, something Spike was liking more and more. Xander's eyelashes were beaded with water and a little shampoo clung to his cheek, sliding down. His eyes were intent - serious - and he was holding his lower lip between his teeth as he concentrated.

"Let me do that," Spike said, and Xander looked at him

"Do what?"

"This..." Spike leaned in and took Xander's lip between his teeth, nibbling, sucking gently, and Xander's hands faltered in his hair, gripping instead of combing.
"Ohhh..." Xander sighed into his mouth, then tugged gently at Spike's hair, pulling him back. "Come on, we're gonna be prunes. Let's get this to the bedroom."

Spike darted in for one more kiss. "M'l all soap-free?" Xander nodded. Spike opened the door and stepped out. "Got some foam on your face, pet." Xander ducked his face under the spray and then turned the water off and they both dried quickly, neither bothering to comb their hair. Xander grabbed his toothbrush and started a quick brushing and Spike dug his lighter out of his jeans and headed into the bedroom to light a candle and spread the bed up a little. He'd dreamed, while Xander was at work, and had left the bed in a tangled mess.

_Nightmare. Not a dream. Soldiers and needles and..._ Spike shook his head hard, dismissing that. Not what he wanted to think about, right now. He heard Xander rinsing his brush, finishing up, and a thought came to him. He remembered what Xander had said about novelty to the Watcher and decided they should have a little novelty tonight. He got the lube from the nightstand drawer and tossed it onto the bed.

_Don't scare him. Nothing too...novel._ Spike saw Xander's robe draped over the footboard and snatched it
up, pulling the belt free. It was long enough. He balled it up in his fist and dropped the robe as Xander came into the bedroom and walked over to him; full-body contact, hands everywhere, that hip-roll he'd learned in Oxnard, lips and teeth at Spike's throat.

"Mmmm. Taste good," Xander murmured, licking across Spike's collarbone. Spike turned him and walked him backwards into the bed, easing him down and then using one arm to lift Xander and scoot him up higher, until they were both lying full-length, diagonal on the bed. Spike knelt over Xander's hips, pressing their cocks together. With one hand he held Xanders jaw and kissed him, sucking on his tongue, tasting every part of his mouth, trying to get the toothpaste taste out so he could just taste the boy. Xander arched under him, hands hard on Spike's hips, and Spike pulled back a little.

"Trust me, love?" he whispered, and Xander opened his eyes, looking into Spike's, panting a little.

"I trust you, Spike," Xander whispered.

_Bet he wouldn't if the soldiers hadn't -_

_Shut. Up. He would. He can see me, remember? See you, too. You wouldn't hurt him._
**Wanna taste him** The demon was almost petulant, but Spike knew what he wanted - the blood - Xander's blood. Spike wanted it too, desperately. But he wouldn't risk this, wouldn't risk...any of this. Xander pinched him, both hands on his buttocks, and he blinked.

"What was that for?"

"You were off somewhere. Want you here," Xander almost pouted, and Spike laughed.

"Just thinking about what you said tonight, pet. How you'd welcome some novelty."

"Oh. What?" Xander looked puzzled, obviously not remembering *what* he'd said, at least not while naked under a rampant vampire, and Spike took advantage of his momentary distraction to grasp Xander's wrists and bring his arms up, over his head. Holding both easily in one hand, he quickly looped the robe belt around Xander's wrists and knotted it, then looped the other end around the corner post of the headboard, pulling the slack up until Xander's arms were stretched above his head, tight but not painful. He knotted the other end and then leaned up, settling himself on Xander's thighs, their cocks brushing together. Xander pulled instinctively against the restraint for a moment, then looked up at Spike, his eyes dark with the sudden intensification of
arousal. Spike could hear Xander's heart speeding up - his body sending out a wave of scent that was heady with pheromones and need. Spike scented the air, running the tip of his tongue over his lips. His boy was so delicious - so perfect.

"I'm gonna taste every inch of you, Xanderrr," Spike purred, wriggling a little, making Xander gasp. "Gonna taste you and touch you and put my tongue and my fingers and my cock in you but I'm not gonna fuck you until you beg for me to. Ohhh...you'll have to beg so pretty - have to earn it..." Spike leaned forward, grinding a little, and Xander writhed under him, his eyes wide and his hands already clawing uselessly at the air. He was so very, very hot, so keyed up. Spike was going to make this good.

He did exactly what he'd said - he began to lick and kiss Xander all over, starting with his mouth and moving down, across, around; tasting the salt and sweet and my boy my own. He bit lightly at Xander's nipples, then harder when he heard the need in Xander's voice, the trembling groan. He used his nails and his fingers and touched every inch, everything but the hard length of Xander's cock. He lapped, delicately as a cat, at the drops of pre-come that slid down onto Xander's stomach and he blew gently across the damp tip of his cock,
watching with glittering eyes as Xander writhed and arched, throat working, moaning. Xander's hands were knotted in the belt, his legs spread wide and wanton. Spike moved to one side and turned Xander onto his belly, pushing his thighs so that Xander ended on his knees and elbows, legs spread wide, his cock and balls hanging heavy and exposed between his legs. Spike started licking again, neck and shoulders, spine and ribs, and Xander was panting harshly now, whispering a soft litany of pleas and curses that Spike totally ignored. As his tongue slipped down between Xander's buttocks, Spike felt him tense, and when he pushed the tip of his tongue inside Xander shuddered all over.

"Spike, please, please, oohhhhh, I can't...want you, Spike, please...oh fuck..." Xander thrust back, fighting for more contact, and Spike pushed his tongue in deep as he could, leisurely fucking, then pulling away to mouth and suck Xander's balls. His fingers felt over the bed until they found the lube and he opened it and squeezed a dollop out onto the small of Xander's back. Then he dipped back again with his tongue, his fingers trailing lube up Xander's cock. Xander bucked, trembling, and his breathing was harsh in his throat.

"Like that, love?" Spike murmured, gathering more lube onto his fingers.
"Love that, love that, god... *fuck*... *want* you..."

"You're supposed to be begging, love," Spike whispered. He slipped his finger in, long glide, and Xander threw his head back, a low, wavering groan escaping him, his hips thrusting helplessly back at Spike. He was so ready, so close, and Spike forced himself to go slow, to make it even better. He twisted his hand, his finger probing, finding the place, and Xander's knees spread a little further apart as he tried for more and deeper, almost sobbing, his ribs heaving as he panted for breath. Another finger, gently stroking, turning, and Xander *was* begging, babbling, his voice breathy and cracked and beautiful.

"Spike, Spike, please, need you... anything... do anything... please... make me... *in me*, Spike please, please, *please*..." He rocked back with each gasping word, and Spike kneeled up, slicking himself, and pressed his cock against Xander, just breaching the muscle. Xander arched hard against him, his fingers digging into the mattress, his whole body shuddering. Spike didn't think Xander could last any longer. He pushed harder and was in, driving down into the luscious, clinging heat, full length in one long glide. He reached up and yanked on the belt, pulling out the simple knot and freeing it from the bedpost. He
grabbed Xander's shoulders and pulled him upright, then used his strength to simply lift him, arms around his chest and waist, moving them both close enough to the headboard so that Xander could touch it. Xander gripped the headboard with white-knuckled hands, legs wide, thrusting frantically back into Spike as the vampire started to fuck in earnest, driving in hard and deep, angling his hips so that Xander actually yelled, a wordless exclamation of pure pleasure.

"You are so fucking sexy, so hot around me, so tight, Xanderrrr, love, so perfect..." Spike felt the demon emerge and he couldn't help raking his fangs over Xander's throat and shoulders, his hips moving on pure instinct now as the demon drove him - drove them both. Xander pushed into the prickle of razor-sharp fangs, gasping, crying out brokenly.

"T-touch me, Spike, touch me...need...you...pl - please..." Spike reached down and grasped Xander's cock, a solid bar of heat, slick with strands of pre-come, pumping in rhythm with his own hips. It took only moments and Xander was arching back as wave after wave of pleasure crashed through him. He cried out, wordless and hoarse. Spike could only follow him, his orgasm like ice and fire, the clenching muscles of Xander's body pulling him deeper. The demon roared its
delight, and after long minutes they finally began to come down; bodies slumping forward, Xander against the headboard, Spike draped over him, bellies heaving. Xander let his head rest on Spike's shoulder and the demon's visage shifted away, Spike coming back to himself. After a few minutes Spike felt the tremble in Xander's legs and started to move away.

"No, don't. Stay in me, Spike, stay here. I want you close to me."

"Anything, love," Spike whispered, his arms curling around the mortal, licking at the sweat on Xander's shoulder.

_Fuck he tastes good. Like everything good to eat, like blood and sweet and life ..._


"Close as I can get, pet."

"Untie me, I want to touch you, Spike..." Spike quickly loosened the knot and let the belt fall away. Xander slid his hands around behind them, holding Spike's hips, pulling him closer, rubbing his hands up and down Spike's thighs, over his buttocks.
"That was...mmmm...you are so good at this...make me want you so much..."

"S'easy, pet...you're so delicious..." Spike continued to nibble and lick, reveling in the taste, in Xander's hands gliding lazily over his flesh. He reached down and picked up the robe belt and draped it over the headboard.

"Was it alright, this? Didn't hurt you?"

"No - didn't hurt. It was - it was fucking amazing. I've never..." Xander laughed suddenly, and Spike felt it in his cock, a pleasurable ripple through Xander's body that began to rouse him again.

"I'm so clueless when it comes to this stuff," Xander turned his head a little, catching Spike's mouth, kissing him greedily, deeply.

"You're doin' fine, pet. No complaints." Spike slid his hand over Xander's cock, to his balls. He weighed them in his hand, caressed them, squeezing gently. Xander gasped a little, and clenched around Spike, his cock twitching a little against Spike's wrist.

"Ohhh. I mean... I had only - a couple of times - before Oxnard, and that was with girls..."
"But you had ... him...for a full summer." Spike moved just a little, back and in, and felt Xander begin to harden again in earnest.

"I was...totally inexperienced and pretty freaked out. Thomas is lucky he actually got to...uh ... fuck at all. And then...all that other stuff happened, so the last week we weren't actually doing anything, anyway. Practically a virgin." Xander was smiling and Spike kissed him.

"Ooh, that means I get to teach you -" Spike empathized his words with movement, thrusting a little harder now, "all kinds of fun things."

"Aaah...Spike, god...." Xander bowed his head, pushing back, his fingernails digging into the tight muscles of Spike's buttocks. Spike went faster, rolling his hips, knowing he was rubbing and rubbing just the right place in Xander, keeping his hand moving slow and loose, knowing the two different rhythms would drive Xander crazy. Xander thrust back and forth between the two sensations, panting again, and shivered when he felt the fangs - shivered and clenched tight around Spike.

"Spike, do you...do you want to bite me?" he whispered, and Spike froze, lips pressed to Xander's throat, just at
the juncture of neck and shoulder. Xander felt the demon withdraw and moaned.

"Xander, won't hurt you, pet, promise..."

"No, Spike - I know you won't. I - if you - it'll be good, won't it? If you do that? Like the other night... Can you do it? If I... Spike, if I want you to, can you?" Xander's voice was trembling, and Spike scented him, finding only lust and need, anticipation and...

Love, call it love, want him, so much... he can't really... "Xander, why do you - why would you... offer me..."

"I trust you. I told you. Like before. I can see you, Spike - I know... please move, please..."

Spike thrust slowly, pushing deep, stroking Xander harder now, the mortal fully aroused. He could bite - easily. But would the pain end this? He could probably ride it out... Would Xander wanting it make the difference? Was he willing to even try?

Do anything, anything for him. What if I can't...

WANT it, want him  The demon was whining for it, deep in Spike's chest, and Spike himself was willing to try, wanting to try... He remembered how it had been,
before - that brief taste of blood when Xander had cut his finger. It had been... **Sweet...hot...sunlight and cool water...want it...**

"I don't want you to be hurt, Spike, I don't. But if you can...I want you to." Xander turned his head again, kissing him, and then Spike was moving fast, fucking hard and stroking Xander as fast; bringing them to the edge, nerving himself. As he felt Xander stiffen under him, arching into the pleasure, he let the demon out, and put his mouth on Xander's body and bit. The fangs slid in easily, gently, and the sudden fiery rush of blood shocked Spike, so unaccustomed had it become.

**Ohhh...gods...fuck...so good, so perfect...mine, mine...** He groaned in ecstasy, sucking hard, and felt Xander shuddering under him, rigid in his grasp, coming so hard he seemed to not breathe at all. Spike swallowed and swallowed, the blood like sparks and ice and *life, his life, sunlight and...* With a wrench he tore his mouth away. He slammed a last time into Xander's body and came also, trembling, crushing Xander to him. This time they collapsed, Spike controlling the fall so they landed on their sides, heads towards the foot of the bed, knees bent up against the pillows. Xander was gasping, his eyes closed, and Spike licked the wound on his throat - licked the last traces of blood away and
watched as it stopped flowing. He tasted...something else there, too.

*Oh gods. I feel...* He buried his face in Xander's sweat-soaked hair, breathing him in. "Smell so good, Xander, taste so good..."

"Spike." Xander moved a little, weakly, as if he wanted to turn over, and Spike hugged him closer.

"Lie still, pet, get your breath."

"Spike - you hurt? Did it hurt?" Xander was trying to see him, and Spike lifted his head, letting Xander turn a little. He grinned down at the boy, into eyes wide and anxious and so dark, so full of emotion - emotion he'd tasted, like sparks of fire. Emotion he could hardly believe was for - *because* - of him.

"Not hurt a bit, pet. Not a bit. It was..."

"Fucking incredible. Felt like - like I was on fire, like every nerve in my body was being touched, like...fuck, I can't describe it..." Xander waved a limp hand and Spike laughed.

"Yeah, pet, fucking brilliant for me, too. You taste...so good. Better than anything I've ever tasted... like
sunlight, like..." Spike kissed him, making a 'yum' sound, and Xander laughed.

"Score one for the junk-food diet." Xander snuggled back into Spike, getting comfortable, and they both sighed a little as Spike slipped free of his body. Spike kissed the bite again, delighting in the shiver it produced in Xander. They lay there for a moment, just resting, Spike kissing his way across Xander's shoulder and back, Xander holding Spike's hand in both of his, playing with the long fingers, picking at the nail polish a little.

"Xander. I wanted..." Spike stopped, not sure if he wanted to say what he was thinking aloud.

Xander turned a little, lying on his back more so he could see Spike's face. "What, Spike? What did you want? I think, at this point, I'd give you anything at all."

Spike grinned at him, leaned in for a quick kiss. "No, I wanted to say... for what you did...with the Slayer an' all, standin' up for me..."

"Spike - no. I did...the only thing I could do. I won't let them hurt you, I won't let them belittle you just because they're afraid and you're a convenient target. You - you deserve better then that." Spike looked into the dark, serious eyes of the boy next to him with longing, wishing
he could say - what his heart said - what he finally, irrevocably, had admitted to himself. The demon scoffed, and he himself even tried to bury it, but he couldn't. The longing and fear must have shown, somehow - something was making Xander look scared - almost tearful. Spike buried his face in Xander's neck, hugging him.

_I won't say that - won't do that to him. He doesn't...I'm wrong. It would only ruin everything. He'd never..._

"Spike... I'm scared. Listen. Don't say anything, listen...oh fuck..." Xander took a hard breath, crushing Spike to him, trembling.

"What - ?"

"No, don't, just listen... Spike, let me... I want to... I _love you. I _love you..." The choked voice whispered away to silence and Xander kissed the side of Spike's neck, his cheek. Then he spoke again; whispering, urgent, the almost painful grip of his fingers in Spike's back warning the vampire not to interrupt.

"You don't have to - say anything. Don't worry about it. I just - I can't _not_, I have for...so long. I tried not to; I know you and D-drusilla... I can't compare...hundred years... But I had to, had to tell you. I don't - don't
expect anything... I'm just here, just here, whatever you want..." This time he pushed at Spike, making the vampire meet his gaze. Spike stared down at him, too stunned to think, to speak. Xander's eyes were glistening bright with unshed tears that he blinked away, rubbing a quick hand over his eyes, laughing shakily at his body's betrayal. Spike leaned in close and kissed him gently, gently, so slowly. As he pulled away, Xander whispered, "Do you believe me?"

Spike hugged him hard. "I believe you, pet, I do. But...how can you?" Spike's voice was so low he was surprised Xander could hear him.

"I...dunno." Xander laughed softly. "I just - I have for a long time. I didn't even know it, at first. I thought about you, all the time. About the time you made that deal with Buffy - I saw you that day, putting Drusilla in your car...you loved her so much, it was so...obvious. It was confusing - Giles always said vampires couldn't love - didn't love. But it was so clear that you did, and I couldn't stop thinking about that. And then when you came back...that love spell..." Xander kissed him softly. "Is it - alright to talk about this?" Spike could only nod, and Xander kissed him again. "You came back to get that spell and you were...devastated. I could see the hurt in your eyes...and I thought - Giles is wrong. And
then so much happened, that last year in school - so much crap. I was hating everything and everyone here when I left for my big trip. Then Oxnard, and I...found myself...but I still only thought about you. Dreamed about you...love you..."

Spike shivered all over, and the demon hissed in feline satisfaction, inappropriately smug.

*Knew he loved us*

*Did not! He...loves us...oh fuck...want to. I will* Spike took a deep, unnecessary breath, and tightened his grip on Xander, blue eyes locking onto brown, fearful but determined. *Please don't let this be wrong*

"Love you," he whispered, and Xander went utterly still, eyes widening impossibly. And then he was kissing Spike fiercely, rolling him until he was underneath, kissing and kissing until the human was gasping for breath, shaking, smiling so hard his face might crack. "Never let you go. Never." Spike gasped, and Xander laughed aloud, pure joy.

"Loveyouloveyouloveyou... Fuck. I've wanted to say that to you - tell you that..."

"Yeah? How long - tell me again."
"Weeks. For weeks - for years. For forever."

"Don't believe that, pet."

"It's true!" Xander smacked Spike lightly on the chest, grinning at him. "DREAMED about you... wished it was you in Oxnard..." Xander ducked his head, then looked back up at Spike. "And don't think that didn't really fuck with my head, either, when I woke up next to my boyfriend with a raging hard-on because I'd had this sexy dream starring this sexy blonde vampire..."

"You're windin' me up, mate. You never."

"I did. It made things...very surreal. But don't worry. I was in really deep denial." Xander laughed again, and kissed him, then began to lever himself up, groaning. "Fuck, I'm sore, I'm totally wiped out, I need another shower...and all I want to do is lie here and kiss you..." He paused in the act of moving away from Spike to kiss him; lips, collarbone, chest.

"Come back then, love..."

"No, no, got to be Responsible Guy. Got to earn the big bucks so I can...keep my vampire." Xander grinned down at him.

"I've got money, Xander - you know you can have it."
"I know - I mean, I saw, and don't think I'm not going to hit you up from time to time, but... I have people counting on me. And it's - a good thing. You know? I can't let Manny down."

Spike saw the happiness in Xander's face, the pride. Saw, too that Xander wanted him badly to understand - to accept.

Probably never had anybody give a fuck about him before - never had a job worth a toss or anybody who noticed if he was there or not. And now, he's so unhappy with his mates... means everythin' to him...

"I'm a selfish bastard, pet, and I'd tie you to the bed if I thought I could and keep you happy. It's alright." Xander stroked Spike's hand where it lay on his thigh, and stood up, shaky.

"Damn, gotta start takin' vitamins. Come on, I'll wash your hair again." He made his way into the bathroom and Spike lay on the bed for another moment, grinning madly to himself in the low, glowing light of the candle.

Gotta tell him it's over with Dru. Gotta tell him...gotta explain. But later. Tomorrow. He loves me. Spike bounced up off the bed and into the bathroom. Xander opened the shower door and gathered him in.
Xander dragged himself, groaning, to work the next two days. He wanted nothing more than to stay home with Spike, but he knew he couldn't. On Wednesday he was actually secretly grateful that there'd been some sort of screw-up By them and not us, thank god that made work almost impossible. The required supplies were wrong - and not enough - and damaged for fuck's sake, and Manny was looking daggers at the delivery guys who could only shrug and shuffle around, unable to fix the problem themselves but bearing the brunt of it. Eventually - around eleven - Manny just threw his hands into the air and sent everyone home. Xander stayed an extra hour, helping Manny get the right stuff organized for the next day, checking the site, getting the delivery guys packed up and out of there. He felt Manny's frustration but relished the idea of being home with Spike instead. Two more days until the weekend, so this would be a nice break. He drove home, humming along with Aerosmith on the radio. Once there he moved as quietly as he could, leaving his boots and tool belt by the door, walking barefoot to the bedroom. Spike was curled into Xander's side of the bed, buried in covers, and Xander started to smile before he realized something wasn't quite...right. Instead of the
normal near-motionless figure Xander had gotten used to, Spike was twitching and writhing in his sleep, small sounds of unhappiness coming out of him. Xander moved to the bed, crouching down next to him and reaching out hesitantly to stroke the tangled blond hair.

"Spike?" he whispered, and the vampire twisted away, giving voice to a moaning, keening cry that made the hair stand up on Xander's neck. He smoothed the vampire's hair again, then moved his hand to Spike's shoulder, shaking him gently.

"Spike - wake up," he said, a little louder. And then - a blur, pain - and Xander found himself rolling hard into the dresser, thud of his back and shoulder into the wood, sharp ache in his jaw. Dazed, he looked up at Spike who was... *Where the hell is he?* Ok, what the fuck - *I touched his shoulder, he jerked away - HIT me, then...* A sound caught his attention, and he scrambled up onto the bed and over, and saw Spike. Tight against the wall, hands around his head, moaning in agony now. *Oh fuck, oh DAMNIT, that damn thing...* *He hit me, having a nightmare - fucking thing...* *Sorry, Spike, sorry, sorry, should have ...* Xander stopped himself from reaching out again, watching Spike. The vampire was silent now, but still huddled - half asleep maybe. He didn't seem to
realize where he was.

"Spike? Hey, Spike. Wake up, ok? You're safe...safe at home..." Xander couldn't help himself - he reached out again, touching the bowed head, and Spike moved fast, away, scrabbling into the corner and getting trapped between the wall and the bed, panic wrenching a sound from him, inarticulate, terrified. Spike's head rapped the wall sharply and he froze, eyes open finally, staring around him wildly. "W-won't," he whispered, and then seemed to see Xander, and he frowned.

"Xan ..."

"Spike, wake up now - you're safe here - home, ok? It's just you and me here, Spike - you hear me? You awake?" Xander didn't move, and Spike scrubbed his hands over his face, pushing them back through his disordered hair, head down for a minute, shaking.

"Come on, Spike, come back up here, let me warm you up," Xander said, and Spike looked at him - really looked this time, and finally, finally he moved, unfolding from his huddle and moving shakily up onto the bed. Xander pulled the quilt free and wrapped it around them both, trapping the heat in with them, pulling Spike half into his
lap and just holding him, stroking his back and murmuring softly to him.

"It's alright love, no one but us, won't let anything hurt you, it's alright, I've got you, just you and me love, safe, you're safe..." Spike's arms were almost painfully tight around Xanders' ribs, his face in Xanders' neck and soft pants of breath still coming from him. Xander felt the trembling body gradually still, and he kissed the messy hair, Spike's forehead; stroked his shoulders and back and hugged him tight. Suddenly Spike jerked away, blue eyes frantic and wide.

"I hit you - Xander, fuck, I - "

"It's all right. Didn't hurt much. I startled you, it's ok..." Xander soothed, but Spike was trying to get away from him, pushing him back.

"It's not all right! Bloody hell, I could have - "

"You didn't. You won't. It's OK. Spike - look at me!" Xander managed to grab Spike's hands in one of his, put his other to the vampire's cheek, stilling him, making the blue eyes meet his own. Spike's mouth trembled, then firmed, and he ducted his head.
"I could hurt you. Xander, I can't - "

"It was just a nightmare, Spike. You didn't do anything on purpose. You have those a lot?" Xander gently chaffed the chilled hands between his own, and Spike sighed and leaned his shoulder into Xander's chest, resting his head on the boy's shoulder.

"Sometimes. They're just...just the soldiers, you know?"

"The Initiative? I thought..." Xander stopped and bit his lip, and Spike looked up at him.

"Thought what, pet?"

"I...just thought...they did that, put that thing in you, and you escaped... I... I'm just being stupid."

"Xander - " Spike sat up, looking straight into the mortal's eyes, frowning. "You're not stupid. Tell me." Xander looked away, then sighed.

"It's not like that - thing - isn't enough to give you nightmares, but I guess I just thought...that's all they did. You know? And...it's not, is it?" Now Spike looked
away, not willing to admit to exactly what had happened, not willing to admit how much the soldiers - the scientists - had scared him. Still scared him. Xander could see it in his eyes, in the rigid set of his shoulders. Oh god, WHAT did they do to him, something awful, nothing scares him, but here he is having nightmares, damnit, DAMNIT...

"Fuck. I should have known. Bastards. I'm gonna do something to Riley, I'm gonna..."

"No, Xander." Spike took Xander's face gently in his hands, leaned in and kissed him, lingeringly.

"Anything done to those fuckin' bastards is done by me, right? You don't get your hands dirty with them, not ever. Not you." They kissed again, and Xander hugged him close.

Fuck that, Harris. We'll settle 'em, you'll see The hyena growled in agreement, and Xander had to fight the urge to laugh aloud. He wondered if everyone had multiple personalities urging them to homicide.

"What're you doin' home, anyway? It's not that bloody late, is it?"
"Screw up at the site - delivery all wrong and we couldn't do any work, so Manny sent us home. Which is good, because I get to get back in bed with this sexy blonde..." Xander pushed Spike flat, kissing him, neck and chest and shoulders, and Spike pulled at his clothes, trying to strip him.

"Get 'em off, pet, gonna fuck you..." Xander flung the quilt away and stripped, letting Spike take control, letting him vent his stress with kisses and bites, long licks and strong, mobile hands. Despite his initial frenzy, Spike entered Xander in a slow, controlled glide, and then simply lay over him, rocking slowly, kissing him again and again. They lay in near silence, the only sounds panting breaths, small sighs, low moans of pleasure.

*Ohhh, want this forever, want him forever...no more nightmares, I'll fix that, I will...*

"Sspike, love you..." Xander whispered, and the vampire gasped, surging against him, hands burrowed under his shoulders and holding him like the most precious of things.

"Love you, pet, love you..." Xander felt himself trembling
on the edge of orgasm, nearly there, and he turned his head, exposing his throat, silently urging Spike to take him. Spike made a low sound, desperate need, and he leaned down and let the demon out. The fangs slid effortlessly home in Xander's neck and Xander shuddered, writhing. As Spike took the first sip of his blood Xander arched into silent, trembling orgasm, gasping, pulling Spike as close as he could. Spike drank, small mouthfuls, two and then three and then he pulled away, gliding his tongue over the marks, and Xander whimpered. A hazy thought swam through his brain, and he nuzzled in close to Spike - kissed and then bit gently on the vampire's neck - bit harder when he felt Spike shiver, and then hard as he could, tasting Spike's skin and... blood, that's blood, oh Spike was coming, thrusting into him, calling his name in a broken voice. Gradually, they were still again, and Xander felt as if he'd run a marathon. His whole body tingled, and he was pleasantly limp. He licked his lips, tasting metal and salt and...something rich, delicious.

"Spike!"

"Hrmmm? Xan, what?" Spike mumbled, drowsy and unmoving.
"I bit you!"

"Know that, love. Was good." Xander pushed at him, making him lean up, and Spike looked down at him, eyes half-shut. "What, pet?"

"I mean, there's blood - I drew blood."

"Yeah? You - ok with it? I mean, wasn't too bad, was it?" Xander ran his tongue over his lips, then he grinned.

"Nope. It was - great. Tingly. Tasted...good. Huh. Never thought I'd say that. I didn't hurt you, did I?" Xander eyed the bite - messier then what Spike had done to him, slightly swollen. It looked sore.

"No worries, pet. Had lots worse in the throes of passion. It was just right." Spike dipped his head down and licked over his own mark on Xander's shoulder, and Xander shivered. It was like lightning and fire going through him, sharp and hot, shivery. It made arousal stir in him, and a fierce want. He tightened his arms around Spike and they both lay there, unwilling to move. Spike gradually fell asleep again, it being the middle of his
night, and Xander shifted him a little and managed to get
the quilt up over the both of them. Then he, too, drifted -
dozing on and off, waking again and again to kiss or
caress the silken, milky skin. Love, this is love, love him.
..how can he love me? Don't care how... just want him,
need him...don't care... I'll take what he'll give me, for
however long...don't care...

Xander drifted for a couple of hours, but eventually he
had to get up and decided to take a shower. Afterwards,
he dressed in faded jeans and an old, holey sweater. He
looked at Spike, lying loosely curled in the bed, and
reached out and smoothed the pale hair with one
hand. Then he carefully took the blue jay feather from
its place in the edge of the mirror over the dresser. It
was tucked in just above the picture of Spike that Drusilla
had taken, and Xander touched the photo, smiling
softly. Then he slipped out of the bedroom and through
the kitchen, and went outside. The sun was hovering a
hand-span above the sea, the light thick and still, a
bloody amber. Xander hesitated, then walked down the
steps and stood in the grass. He looked at the feather,
and then shut his eyes, taking a deep breath. He
pictured Jack in his mind; mop of black hair, coat of
velvet or leaves or denim - wicked smile, eyes like
coals. Jack. I need you. You said you'd come whenever I
called - I'm calling. Calling in the debt. Jack Green ... The feather seemed to tremble in his fingers and he opened his eyes. A sudden wind - cool, salt-tanged - gusted up from the west and straight into Xander's face. The feather spun free of his fingers and flew up, corkscrewing higher and higher until it seemed to wink out of sight in the darkening sky. The wind ebbed - faded away altogether - and Xander shivered. Jack was coming.

He went back inside to find Spike just coming out of the bedroom, naked, looking slightly apprehensive.

"Hey, Spike."

"Xander...been outside?" Spike came over to him and kissed him, hands on Xander's hips.

"Yeah - it's nice out. You hungry?" Spike nodded - kissed him again.

"Gonna take a shower, pet."

"Ok. I'm gonna make some...spaghetti or something. Won't take long."

"Hmmmm." Spike smiled, burrowing into Xander's neck
for a moment, taking a deep breath.

"You smell nice." He broke away and headed for the bathroom, and Xander watched him walk out, making the appropriate wolf-whistle. Spike laughed.

By the time Spike was done showering, Xander had sauce heated on the stove and the pasta boiling. A mug-full of blood sat in the microwave, ready to be heated. He lit the big candle they had on the kitchen table and leaned against the counter, watching the pasta. He felt it again - that strange little tingle. Jack. Wonder when he'll get here. Xander stirred the pasta and got a glass of milk. Tonight - movies, or maybe there was a match on the TV that Spike wanted to watch. Or maybe...they would talk. Or not. Xander didn't want to tell Spike what he was planning.

What're the odds this'll work, Harris? You have to tell him.

Don't want to. I want to talk to Jack first

Not nice, Harris.

Xander turned the radio on, to drown out the soldier,
and listened to piano and horns and the rich voice he was slowly coming to recognize - Louis Armstrong.

"Give me your lips for just a moment... And my imagination will make that moment live ...

Give me what you alone can give... A kiss to build a dream on..."

Xander was starting to like this music. It was all Manny ever played, these soft songs and tunes from the 'war years' as he called them, and they lent a certain calm to the site that could sometimes be utter chaos. Xander stirred the pasta again and decided it was done. He hunted out the lid to the pot and carefully dumped the water, only spilling a little pasta down the drain.

"There has to be a better way," Xander muttered. He was sure there was, he just couldn't remember what his mom had done. Hanging out in the kitchen when she had done her sporadic cooking had not been a good idea.

"Better way for what, pet?" Spikes voice, sand and honey, and Xander flashed him a quick smile.
"Oh, this whole draining thing. I'm sure there's a better way but, you know, I don't come from a long line of chefs or anything."

"'Course there's a better way, love. " Spike said, and shot Xander a truly lascivious look, flashing his fangs. Xander made an exaggerated 'ha ha' laugh, and Spike shrugged, grinning, passing through to the living room for his cigarettes. He'd only pulled on his jeans, and there were still drops of water glittering on his back. Xander watched him walk past Ah, fuck. How m'l I supposed to concentrate on food when I've got THAT sitting across from me?"

"Can't help you, pet. Never done much cooking, me."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Xander called after him. He put the pasta pot back on the stove, turned the burners off and got out plates. He heard Spike's Zippo flick open, and watched through the pass through as he lit the half-dozen candles they kept in the living room. Then Spike lit his cigarette and came back, trailing smoke, to start his blood heating while Xander got a plateful of food and sat down. Then stood back up to grab bread and butter and his milk. After a minute
Spike joined him, and they ate and drank in companionable silence, listening to Les Brown and Duke Ellington, Buddy Holly and June Christy. Spike drank his human blood - he tended to space six or so pints out during the course of the day - but then heated up a cupful of the stuff from the butchers to pour over his spaghetti. Xander just watched in amusement as he sucked up noodles, making a mess.

"Jeez, you're not so much 'Creature of the Night' as 'Pig of the Night'. Have a paper towel." Spike snatched the towel and wiped at his mouth, then reached over and took Xander's bread-and-butter.

"Hey!"

"That's what you get for makin' derogatory comments about my oral skills." Spike looked up at him from under long lashes, eyebrow cocked, and Xander choked a little on his mouthful. He knew exactly what 'oral skills' Spike was alluding to.

"Speaking of 'oral skills'..."

"Yeah, love ?" Spike murmured, and Xander felt his cock stirring. *How does he do that, drop his voice down so
low, make it so...damn...hot.

"Uhhh..." Spike smirked at him, and Xander sat bolt upright as he felt a lean, wriggling foot insinuate itself into his crotch and stroke his growing erection.

"You were sayin' somethin', Xanderrr,?" Spike purred, and Xander closed his eyes, taking a long breath.

"Mmmm..." Spike's other foot was suddenly there, rubbing and kneading in concert with the first, and Xander let his fork clatter to the plate and just slumped back in his chair. No point in trying to talk...

Xander was just beginning to wonder - in a hazy, half-coherent way - about how to get his jeans off without losing contact with Spike when the feet pulled away. Xander opened his eyes to see Spike sitting straight up, looking towards the door.

"Wha - "

"Somebody's here." Xander's heart skipped in his chest, and he sat up as well, his mouth going dry and his erection subsiding unhappily.
"Do you know - who it is?" Spike cocked his head to the side, listening, then relaxed fractionally.

"Watcher and Red and the blonde. Red's...cryin'." Xander looked at him and Spike nodded, pushing back his chair. "Damn," Xander muttered, getting up as well, and Spike caught his arm, pulling him close for a quick kiss.

"I'll finish with you later," he murmured, and Xander snagged him back for one more kiss, deep and hard, before turning to the front door. Just as he reached it, someone knocked, and Xander could hear Giles' voice, saying something. He undid the chain and opened the door, and Giles, Willow and Tara looked in at him; Willow pale and teary, Tara just pale, and Giles thin-lipped in anger or fear.

"Willow - you ok?" Xander stepped back, ushering them in, and saw Spike in the doorway of the living room. Thank god he grabbed a shirt cigarette in his mouth, fingers dipping into his jeans for his lighter. Willow and Tara sat on the couch, huddled together, and Giles stood near the bookshelves, arms folded, looking around at the candle-lit room with an expression of bafflement. Xander perched on the couch arm.
"Xander! What happened to your face!" Willow's eyes were huge and she reached towards his jaw.

"Huh?" Spike - nightmare - remember? Must have bruised "Oh - I kinda forgot. New kid on the site, he got a little clumsy with a board. No big deal. Now tell me Willow - what's the matter? What's happened?"

"It's Oz - " Willow started, voice shaky, just as Giles said, "Don't light that in here, Spike." Xander looked over at Spike, who lit his cigarette and snapped his Zippo shut, glaring at Giles.

"Giles," Xander said, turning to the older man calm, stay calm "this is my house. He can smoke in here if he likes." Giles stared at him, eyes narrowing slightly behind his glasses, and then he looked away.

"Very well."

"Go on Willow, what about Oz. Is he back?"

"He - he came back yesterday. We were up all night talking, Xander, just - talking, and...and he's been in Tibet, he met these monks and they showed him -"
showed him how to control the wolf. It was wonderful, Xander! We were outside under the full moon and he wasn't going all grrr and everything.

B-but then, today at school he - " Willow stopped, gulping, and Xander felt ice in his belly.

"He what, Wills? Tell me." Xander slid off the couch and crouched at the girls' feet. It was Tara who spoke, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I-i-it was me. He s-ssaw me and thought - I w-was W-willow, he said hhe could s-smell her, and then he - ch-changed. He told me to r-rrun, and I did but he ch-chased me." She swallowed, looking at Willow, who gripped her hand and nodded, rubbing at tear-streaked cheeks.

"I r-ran into this cl-cl-classroom and then these - sss-soldiers came - "

"Bloody hell, " from Spike, who started pacing.

"Soldiers? The Initiative? They grabbed Oz?"

"Th-they shot him w-with a d-dart gun - I t-t-tried to t-tell
"It's ok, Tara, it's not your fault they didn't listen." Willow took Tara's hand and squeezed it gently, then looked at Xander, her eyes wide and red-rimmed, terrified and angry.

"They just dragged him away, Xander! And he isn't dangerous any more, he can control it, he showed me! Riley told Buffy - one of the soldiers got killed last night by some big demon or something and they think it was Oz but it wasn't! We were together all night, he was telling me about his trip - "

"Ok, Willow, it's ok. I believe you if you say he didn't do it...where's Riley?"

"We don't know!" Willow wailed, and Tara clutched her hand. "We've been driving around trying to find any of them - any of the soldiers. Do you think he'll make them let Oz go? I mean, once they see it's Oz?" Willow's eyes were full of hope, but Xander shook his head

"We can't count on Riley for anything, Willow - he's one of them. What about Buffy?"
"She is also trying to find Riley. She was going to go on campus and see if any of the soldiers were about. But they all seem to have - vanished, tonight." Giles spoke up from behind him, and Xander stood up, turning to look at him. "We may have to force our way into the Initiative headquarters."

"Damnit. How long - I mean, how long has she been trying? Shouldn't she have - " The phone rang thank god and Xander walked fast to it, snatching it up.

"Buffy?"

"I can't find anybody, Xander. We're going to have to go in there - "

"Ok. Listen - head back to Giles' house. We'll meet you there, figure something out. What about Riley?" Buffy hesitated, and Xander felt the ice in his belly getting bigger, making him feel slightly sick.

"I can't get him, Xander. He's not - answering. Just - get to Giles' house fast, ok?"

"Ok. See you there."
"See you. Xander...thanks."

"Sure, Buff. No problem." Xander hung up, turning to face Willow. Willow and Tara had stood up, clutching anxiously at each other, and Giles was rubbing his forehead.

"What'd she say? Can she find anybody?"

"She can't, Willow. We're gonna meet her at Giles' house, figure out - how to get in there." Xander stepped up closer to her - put his hand out and gently touched her cheek. "It's gonna be ok, Willow. We'll figure this out. We'll get Oz out." Willow smiled shakily at him, gripping Tara's hand, and Xander turned to Giles.

"Will you take the girls back to your house? I'll follow in a minute - "

"We'll follow, Harris." Xander snapped his head around to stare at Spike, who was leaning nonchalantly on the doorway, cigarette in his hand. But Xander could see the tension around his eyes - could see the slight shake of his hand that he tried to disguise by rolling the cigarette, lifting it to his mouth.
"What? No, no we, Spike. No way."

"Xander -"

"He's not going, Giles -"

"Harris." Spike said, and his voice was cold and level and dead calm. Xander narrowed his eyes at him. Spike made a jerk of his head, indicating the kitchen, and pushed away from the doorjamb, walking to the kitchen door. Xander followed, fists clenched. *No, no, NO, Spike, not gonna let you get near there, not gonna risk you, I'm NOT...*

"Spike -" he hissed, the minute he was close, and Spike shot a quick glance over Xander's shoulder at the girls and Giles.

"Xander, love, I know a way in. A - back door, like. How I got out last time." Spike kept his voice low and even, but his pupils were dilated so far his eyes seemed black.

"NO, Spike. You can't - I won't risk you getting caught again. Who fuckin' knows what they'll do this time -"*

"I'm going with you, Xander. You're not going in there
with just the Slayer - she never watches out for you. I know how to get in, I'll help you. You just - keep 'em off me, ok? I trust you, Xander." Surreptitiously, he put his hand on Xander's chest, rubbing a small circle there.

"Spike...fuck..." Xander wanted to hit something. In frustration, he grabbed up the dirty dishes, jamming them into the sink and then leaning there, gripping the sink-edge in a death grip.

"Xander - we need to hurry." Giles from the living room, his hand on Willow's shoulder, his face set and angry.

"Damnit. Ok. OK. But Spike - " Xander spun around to face him, anger and helplessness and fear plain on his face. He dropped his voice down low again. "You don't take any chances - keep close to me and just - damnit."

"I got it, mate. You too. C'mon now, you're makin' the Watcher nervous." Spike stared back at him, his facade perfectly calm and emotionless, and Xander shook his head.

"Yeah. Ok. Will you - get the candles in the other room, please?"
"No problem, pet." He went away into the living room, and Xander stood there a minute, trying to collect himself. *What about Jack?*

"Damnit," he whispered, thinking frantically. He undid the chain on the kitchen door and made sure the deadbolt was unlocked. Then he grabbed a clean plate and fork and put them on the table with one of Spike's beers. The bread was already on the table and Xander stared at it for a moment. The candle was in a glass jar... *should be safe... Salt!* "Right," he muttered, grabbing the salt off the stove and putting it with the bread. Should do it. *Please be here when we get back. Jack - you're welcome here, please wait for us...*

"Ready mate?" Spike called, and Xander hurried through to him, catching the vampire's puzzled look.

"Tell you later," he whispered, grabbing his keys out of Spike's hand. He hastily stuffed his feet into the work boots he'd left by the door, not bothering to do up the laces. Spike already had his own boots and the duster on, cigarette clenched in his teeth. Giles and the girls were on the porch, and they walked quickly to the vehicles.
"Uh, Xander? What's with all the candles in there?" Willow was looking at him strangely as Giles unlocked his car. Tara seemed to be smiling behind her hair.

"What? Oh - uh, saves on the electric, you know? 'Sides, I like it better."

"Oh. Sure. Electric." Willow nodded as Tara tugged her into Giles' car. Giles backed out and drove away, tires squealing slightly, and Spike and Xander got into Xander's truck. As Xander pushed the key into the ignition, Spike grabbed him and pulled him into a hard, passionate kiss, stealing his breath and squeezing his ribs painfully tight.

"Love you, love you," Spike gasped, and Xander kissed him back.

"Love you. Damnit, I hate this. Don't get hurt, Spike, don't let them near you, run if you have to, just..."

"It'll be ok, love. Promise." Xander looked into the wide eyes, the sharply planed face so close to his own. Beautiful, he's so beautiful...can't lose him...
"Ok, Spike. Ok." They drove in silence, Spike's hand resting on his on the gear-shift.

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Fuck. *Hate this place.* *Stinks. Rotten blood and death and disinfectant and fear...* Spike clenched his teeth, forcing himself to stride - to strut - behind the Slayer and Xander. No way was he going to show any fear - any weakness. He was a Master in his own right, and military hardware or no, he would not cringe or cower. Ever. *Even in this bloody soldier get-up.* *"Evil olive", my arse.*

Up ahead, Buffy kicked her way into a room and a moment later emerged with an older, paunchy soldier - obviously an officer.

"Riley's in the brig. We'll get him first." Buffy looked determined, and Spike didn't miss Xander rolling his eyes. Spike could clearly see the sweat on Xander's face, the lines of tension around his mouth. *Stay calm, pet. We'll be in and out in no time. Get Red's wolf and gone. Calm, yeah. Need a bloody smoke* Spike felt his pockets for cigarettes and then cursed when he realized
he'd left them in his duster. Xander glanced over at him and he shrugged, scowling. The officer - Colonel somebody - directed Buffy down a side corridor and they waited there while she ghosted around the corner, intent on getting her soldier-boy. Stupid bitch. Should get the wolf and go. Captain Cardboard can get his own arse out of this - these are his mates. If she left him here maybe they'd execute him. Save us all some trouble The Colonel shifted nervously and Xander poked him with his rifle, looking ready to blow.

"So what'd this Riley do, eh? Why'd you lock him up?" Spike asked, trying to distract Xander, make him ease up.

"He betrayed his command," the Colonel said stiffly, eyeing Spike with poorly concealed distaste.

"What's that mean?" Xander asked, looking down the corridor where Buffy had gone. The Colonel looked Xander up and down, frowning.

"He tried to help an HST escape. That's a court-martialing offence. Why are you helping these hostiles, son?" The Colonel sounded as if he were making an effort to be paternal towards Xander, and the demon reacted instantly. Spike snarled, vamping out and
lunging at the Colonel, who jerked away into the wall. Spike got up close to him, snapping his fangs in his face.

"You mean a hostile like this?" Xander got close to the Colonel on his other side, looking from Spike to the soldier. "I'm helping because the 'hostile', as you call him, is my friend. And because I happen to be fucking this one." The Colonels' eyes bugged, and Spike hissed at him, dropping back into his human face and planting a quick kiss on Xander's mouth.

"Ta, love," he whispered, and then spun around as Buffy and Riley came around the corner.

"Let's go," Buffy said. "He's being held down here." They quick-marched, silent, Buffy keeping her crossbow trained on the Colonel, her other hand knotted in his shirt.

Oh, my boy, you're gonna get a niiice reward for that bit of bravado back there. Trailing behind, Spike managed to reach out and let his fingers rest lightly on Xander's wrist for a moment. Xander shot him a quick grin, and then they were in that place - that corridor. Glass-fronted cages, with demons and vampires pacing or huddled or
snarling from within. Spike shivered, and the demon roared, fighting to emerge, to rend and destroy. Back off, back off, can't do anything, just back off, get the wolf and out...bloody hell, smells the same, looks the same...fuck Spike could feel his fingers denting the stock of the rifle he held. Xander shot a look of concern at him and then they stopped, because there was the wolfling, huddled and naked, and more soldiers surrounding them, holding their weapons in a confused mess of level and not, obviously unsure of what to do.

Buffy yanked the Colonel closer, holding her crossbow up to his head. Spike watched as Oz looked up, recognizing Buffy and then Riley, his eyes flicking over to Xander and then coming to a stop on Spike, widening in surprise. Spike nodded fractionally at him, glancing around again and again at the soldiers.

*Come on, people, come on, the longer we fuck around the more bloody time they've got to figure out how to fuckin' stop us.* What'll I do if they attack? If I shoot when Xander does, will this bloody chip know if I hit anyone? Bloody fucking HELL - what is she babbling about, William Burroughs? Christ, Slayer, just shut up

One of the soldiers walked cautiously forward and used
his key-card to open the cell door. Oz stood slowly, the bruises, cuts and burns on his body clearly evident, and Spike heard Xander whisper "fucking bastards". Oz walked out, shying away from the soldier, and Riley and Buffy both looked shocked - and embarrassed. Spike saw how Buffy was looking everywhere but at Oz and finally realized that it was because Oz was naked.

_Not the time for bloody scruples you miserable..._ Spike took three quick steps up to the soldier who'd opened the door and grabbed his shirt.

"Get him his clothes, you bastard," he hissed. Oz had sunk down onto his haunches again, shivering, and Spike crouched down in front of him, watching the soldier go to a locker at the end of the hall, fumbling with the latch.

"You all right, wolfling?" Spike asked, and Oz rubbed a trembling hand over his face.

"All right enough to get out of here," Oz whispered. His voice was a ruined husk, and he winced, swallowing hard.

"Soon be free, mate. Here." Spike pulled his flask out of his back pocket and unscrewed the top, then handed it
to Oz. Oz sniffed, eyebrows going up, then he took a long drink, grimacing as the alcohol stung his throat. Spike could see blood on the corners of his lips.

"F-fuck." Oz coughed a little, and rubbed his hand over his lips. Spike took the flask back and stood up as the soldier approached with a wad of clothes. Oz struggled into jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, ill-fitting clothes that were obviously not his. He didn't bother with the socks or sneakers. He nodded to Spike and they both went over to Xander. Xander put his hand on Oz's shoulder, gently, and looked inquiringly at him. Oz nodded, and Xander stepped back, assured Oz was all right enough for now. Buffy started backing up, taking the Colonel with her. They backtracked to a bank of elevators, and Spike felt relief wash over him as they crowded in. The elevator doors closed on the soldiers furious faces, and they rode up in silence.

The doors opened again in Lowell House, and Spike snarled. *Should burn this place to the fucking ground* Oz stepped out quickly, limping, and Xander and Spike followed. Riley seemed to want to say something to the Colonel, and since the Slayer was staying with him, Spike was happy to go ahead and leave them to it.
They got out of Lowell house fast, making their way across the campus towards where Xander had parked his truck. Oz staggered, breathing hard, and Spike could smell blood and exhaustion and fear rolling off him - and rage. The wolf-smell was strong, and Oz kept snapping his teeth, growling a little, obviously fighting for control. Spike touched Xanders' arm, gesturing towards a patch of deep shadow. Xander frowned but followed when Spike took Oz's arm and pulled him into the darkness.

"Come down here," Spike whispered, crouching down, and they did. Oz was shaking hard, hands clenched in the loose folds of the sweatshirt, his eyes utterly black. Xander looked nervous, and Spike could smell fear from him, and worry.

"Wolfling - listen mate. You've got to calm down. You can't be wolfin' out on me and the boy here. You're out now - safe, alright?" Spike reached to touch his shoulder and Oz shivered, gasping. Xander moved close in on his other side, and slid an arm around Oz, pulling him close.

"Oz, it's ok. Spike's right. Willow said - you learned something from some monks? Try it - use it. We've got to get out of here, ok?" Spike watched as Oz tried to
slow his breathing, his eyes wide and still scared, the wolf-scent pouring off him. He reached blindly and clutched at Spike's sweater and suddenly his face was against Spike's chest and he was crying - gasping, choking sobs that shook his slight frame. Spike looked up at Xander, meeting the mortal's helpless gaze, then he just folded Oz into his arms, pulling him and Xander both close, holding the shaking, coughing boy to him while Xander crooned something into Oz's ear, rubbing his back, rocking him a little. The three of them huddled there, long minutes, until finally Oz came out of it. The dreadful gasps eased off and faded away, and he finally sat back, rubbing at his face; still shaking but the tremors less, now. His eyes were human again, and he reached out and gently cupped Xander's face in one hand, Spike's in the other. His hand was cold, sticky with tears, smelling of disinfectant and blood.

"Th-thanks. I'm ok now, guys." His voice was so strained and cracked the Spike winced to hear it, and Xander shushed him immediately.

"Don't talk, Oz. It's ok. Come on, let's get you to Giles' house, ok? Willow's going out of her mind worrying about you - " Xander stopped as Oz clutched at him, shaking his head.
"What, wolfling?"

"Can't. Not there. Please?" Spike looked up at Xander, baffled, but Xander looked as if he understood.

"You don't want to go to Giles' house?" Oz nodded, his lip trembling, and Xander rubbed his shoulder.

"Ok. It's ok. You can - you can come to my house. You'll be safe there - Riley doesn't know where I live, and you'll be safe. OK?" Oz sighed in relief, nodding.

"Right then, let's get a bloody move on. Gotta get away from these bloody soldiers." They walked faster now, Oz still limping but doing better. They got to Xander's truck and piled in, Oz in the middle, huddled and miserable. As they drove slowly off campus, Oz suddenly straightened, pointing.

"What is it, Oz?" Xander asked, slowing even more. Oz pointed again, and Spike saw a zebra-striped van, parked in the back of a student lot.

"Oh, hey - your van. Want to get it?" Oz nodded, and Xander drove over to it. Spike thought furiously, wanting
to avoid Giles' house as much as Oz did.

"Xan - listen. Why don't me an' the wolfling take his van and get home. You go over to the Watchers an' explain everything. They'll wanna know what happened, anyway, and if I try an' tell 'em anything all I'll get is arguments and threats." Xander sighed, looking at his hands, then up at Spike.

"Yeah - you're right. Fuck. Ok. Just - be careful. Don't attract any attention, ok? 'Cause I'm bettin' you don't have a drivers license or an i.d. of any kind." Xander tried to look stern, but Spike could see the little smile that played around his mouth.

"Right, mate. Come on, wolfling, you got an extra key for that?" They climbed out of the truck and Spike slid his rifle under the seat. Oz felt under a wheel well for a moment, finally pulling out a spare key in a little magnetic box. He opened the back door and climbed stiffly in, then handed the key to Spike. Spike shut the door and walked over to the truck, leaning in Xander's window. He grabbed a handful of Xander's sweater and pulled him close, kissing him hard; the stress and fright of the evening needed some sort of outlet, and this was as close as he was going to get for now to what he really
wanted. Xander kissed him back just as desperately, and then pulled reluctantly away.

"Ok - gotta go. Want to get home as fast as I can. You were great in there, Spike. Did great."

"Huh. You too - 'specially tellin' that bloody Colonel we were fuckin'. Thought he'd drop right there." Xander laughed, and pulled him in for another kiss, shorter this time.

"I'm not ashamed of it - any of it. I'd tell Buffy and the gang tomorrow if I thought I could without getting you killed, but..."

"I know love, I know." Spike petted Xander's hair, seeing the worry and sadness cross his face.  *Know you'd claim me from the roof-top, love. You'd be crazy to do it, but you would..."

"Why do you think Riley tried to help?" Spike shrugged.

"Dunno. Maybe he was just tryin' to get some points in with the Slayer. Don't trust him, no matter what he did."

"Me neither." Xander reached and touched Spike's
cheek. "You were brave." Spike grinned, flash of fangs.

"You told the Colonel we were shaggin'. Who's brave now?" He leaned in and kissed Xander hard, then reluctantly pulled back. "We'll go straight home - mind you do the same. Hurry."

"I'll hurry." Spike stepped back and Xander drove away, looking back once or twice. Spike glanced around, then hurriedly got into Oz's van. It was thick with the wolf-smell, and also with fainter undertones of incense and marijuana, dust and stale bedding and someone - another man. *Friend of the wolf's, maybe, been in here recently. Not Red, though.* Spike started the van and began to drive, and after a moment Oz shuffled up behind him, kneeling in the tangle of bedding and clothes, one hand gripping the back of the driver's seat for support.

"Ok then, mate?" Spike asked, and Oz made an inarticulate sound, throat working. He coughed and tried again.

"Ffflask?" he whispered, and Spike dug it out of his pocket, handing it back to him.
"There you are, pet. Go slow." Oz nodded and tipped the flask back, taking a small mouthful and wincing as he drank, his throat obviously raw. He drank a couple more times then offered it to Spike. The vampire took the flask - weighed it in his hand and then drained it, keeping one eye on the road. He shoved it back into his pocket and Oz leaned on the seat, eyes half-shut. Spike drove with uncharacteristic care, not wanting the lackadaisical attentions of the Sunnydale police to notice him tonight. They were both silent, and Spike was tense until he pulled up in front of the house and parked. Oz didn't move, half-dazed by the motion of the van, almost asleep.

"Come on wolfling - got some clothes in here? Grab your kit and we'll get you a shower, right? Wash the bloody stink of the place off of you. Get you somethin' to eat." Oz blinked at him, then crawled away into the depths of the van, emerging from the back with a paper bag stuffed with a few things. He wobbled, out on his feet, and Spike shut the van door and guided him up to the house. Xander kept a spare key under a rock on the front porch, and Spike stooped and got it out, and quickly opened the door. He helped Oz in, shutting the door - and froze. Someone's been in here. What the bloody hell is it? Not human...fuck... He pushed Oz against the
door.

"Stay here a minute," he whispered, and moved silently toward the kitchen. The plate Xander had left had been used - fragments of pasta and smears of sauce were drying on it. The beer was empty, and there was a piece of paper pinned under the bottle. Spike peered at it. There were two words written there, in a slanting, careful script. "Tomorrow - Jack" What the fuck? That Jack from Oxnard? What's he doin' here? And what the fuck is he? Xan-love, what are you doing? Spike knew the house was empty except for Oz and himself, but the lingering presence left by this 'Jack' made him uneasy. He crossed to the kitchen door and turned the deadbolt - set the chain. Fuck it. Gotta get the wolfling sorted He went back out to the living room to find Oz crouched against the door, nearly asleep, his bag crumpled in his arms. Spike crouched down beside him, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Come on mate - let's get you clean, get you something - 'nother drink, maybe. Come on. It's safe." Oz peered at him, his eyes flashing green in the dim light of the kitchen candle. He pushed himself slowly to his feet and let Spike lead him back to the bathroom. Spike grabbed the matchbook that was in the cabinet drawer and lit the
bathroom candles  This is better then the regular lights, anyway...never turned those damn lights off in that place...burned your eyes out after a while... He got the shower turned on, making sure it was warm. Oz stood, dazed and swaying, and Spike shook him a little.

"Wolfling - wake up. Can you get undressed? Come on, pet, that's it..." He helped Oz shed the borrowed clothes, then guided him into the shower. The bruises and cuts looked just as bad in the softer candle glow, and Spike felt an unexpected rage well up in him.

He's not my friend - he's Red's dog...why do I care? Maybe 'cause he's hurt...worse then I ever was. Even the damn Scoobies treated him like he was human. They never made him an animal - a thing. I KNOW I'm not human - they made sure HE did, too. Fucking bastards. Oz woke up in the shower a little, getting the soap and washing carefully around the cuts. Spike bundled up the clothes and shoved them into the trash, then heard the phone ringing in the other room.

"Gotta get the phone. You'll be ok, mate?" Oz nodded at him through the steam, and Spike trotted to the living room and grabbed up the phone.
"Xander?"

"Yeah. You alright? Oz?"

"As bloody well as can be expected. Wolfling's in the shower. You on your way?"

"Yeah - I'm outta here. See you soon."

"Be careful, love. Oi, Xander! Make sure and get my kit - want my coat back!" Xander laughed.

"Don't worry 'bout it, Spike - got it covered. Bye."

"Right," Spike said, and hung up. He looked down in distaste at the army-issue sweater he was still wearing and hastily skinned out of it. He went into the bedroom and got undressed, kicking the army clothes away from him, shoving his boots under the bed. He decided to wear a pair of Xander's sweat-pants and one of his old flannel shirts. He needed the comfort - wanted to be surrounded by Xander's scent, by his presence. At this point, he didn't care what Oz would think. He got dressed and went into the kitchen, heating up a first and second mug full of blood, feeling better for it. The
residual shakes and nerves of the night were wearing off, and he finally started to relax. The shower was still going, so he went back to check on Oz.

The boy was huddled down in the bottom of the shower, the water running over him, plastering his hair down. Spike could smell fear still, and utter misery. He reached in and turned the shower off, and pulled Oz to his feet.

"Come on, pet - you'll be all right." He wrapped a towel around the boy, who was shivering, and rubbed briskly, getting him dry, careful over the cuts and scrapes, wincing at the deep bruises.

"You want me to put somethin' on these?" he asked, and Oz shook his head, clutching at the towel.

"No - I'll change, later. Heal faster."

"Change - go all wolfy? All right. Come on and get dressed now." Spike pulled clothes from the bag - soft flannel pyjama pants and an oversize thermal shirt, thick socks. Good clothes to sleep in, heal in. Sleep was what he needed the most, Spike figured, and the whiskey he'd drunk was the best thing he could have had. Oz dressed
slowly, then shuffled out of the bathroom, heading unsteadily for the living room.

"Want to eat?" Oz shook his head and sank down onto the couch. He curled on his side, shaking a little, and Spike pulled the blanket off the back of the couch and spread it over him. Oz burrowed under it, pulling it close, his eyes already closing. Spike took a minute to light a couple of candles, then he settled down onto the couch as well, putting his feet up on the coffee table. Oz reached out with one hand, groping along the couch, finally finding Spike's hand and closing his fingers around it. Spike slumped down on the couch, gently squeezing back, waiting for Xander to get there.

8 Trust

When Xander arrived home, he walked in the door and stopped dead, staring in surprise at the scene – Spike slumped on the couch, half asleep, with Oz curled next to him, their hands entwined on Spike's thigh. Xander shut
the door quietly and Spike's eyes were suddenly open, watching him. He gently loosened Oz's grip on his hand and eased off the couch, and they both walked quietly to the kitchen. Xander had a plastic bag of Oz's shredded clothes, wallet, and keys that, amazingly, Tara had recovered from the college. He put it on the kitchen counter.

"Everything go alright at the Watcher's, pet?" Spike asked, and Xander nodded, staring at the table.

"Yeah - well, sorta. Willow was pretty upset that Oz didn't want to see her, but I told her he was in bad shape and just didn't want her to worry. Told her he was just gonna sleep, anyway, and it would be better if everybody was a bit more calm when he finally saw them." Xander walked up to the table and looked down at the note, touching it with his fingers. "Buffy backed me up, said he needed to rest and not answer a bunch of questions... That secret project the mad Professor was working on has killed some people. I think she finally gets it that the Initiative is bad news."

"Took long enough," Spike muttered, and put his arm around Xander's waist. He leaned there, his chin on Xander's shoulder as Xander picked up the note and
looked at it. *He was here. Back tomorrow... thank god... Jack, I hope this works*

"What is he, Xander?" Spike asked, and Xander turned to face him, putting his own arms around Spike's waist, groin to groin but leaning back a little. Spike's eyes were narrowed, speculating, and Xander raised his eyebrows in question.

"What do you mean?"

"He's not human, pet. I could...feel him, when I got here. It - he..." Spike cocked his head a little, thinking, eyes never leaving Xander's face.

"What, Spike?"

"It was - uncomfortable. Whatever he is, he's strong. What are you doing messin' about with somethin' like that, love?"

"He owes me, remember? I'm calling in the debt." Xander leaned closer and kissed Spike lightly, lips and cheeks, edge of his jaw, side of his throat. He nibbled on the tiny marks that hadn't quite faded from his earlier bite, and Spike shivered, shutting his
eyes. Xander let his hands wander up the front of the flannel shirt, undoing one button, then the next, exposing the smooth planes of Spike's chest.

"Think you can distract me with sex?" Spike murmured, and Xander laughed softly, breathily, ghosting more kisses over Spike's collarbones, the other side of his neck.

"Oh yeah. Is it working?"

"Workin' a treat, love," Spike whispered, pressing his erection tight into Xander, and Xander laughed again. Spike slid his arms up Xander's back and gently took his head in his hands, kissing him slowly, with utmost concentration. Xander sighed into the kiss, reveling in it, loving the taste and scent and feel of the vampire, content to just stand there all night, kissing him, feeling him, holding him Safe, he's safe, he's here, mine, oh...please don't leave me, love, please don't...

"Xanderrr," Spike whispered, breaking away, nuzzling into his hair, "Want you..." He grazed Xander's jaw, his throat, with blunt teeth and Xander shuddered, the sensation going straight to his groin, a tingle like electricity all over.
"Have me...whatever you want...yours..." Xander mumbled, and Spike did a slow, sensual slide down Xander's body, his hands working at the belt, the button and zip of the Army pants, opening them and pulling them down. His cool cheek rubbed over Xander's hip, his lips nibbling, tongue darting out to flicker over heated skin. Xander gasped softly, swaying, looking down at Spike. He stumbled a little as Spike pushed him back a step, into a kitchen chair. He sank down and Spike slid his hands around Xander's waist, rubbing up his back and then down again, to settle on his hips.

His mouth glided over Xander's belly and then finally, ohhh... it was on Xander's cock, cool and wet, sliding down, licking, sucking, and Xander couldn't stop his hands from going out to Spike's hair. He curled his fingers in it, only holding, caressing. The vampire took the head of Xander's cock into his mouth, sucking gently, and Xander tried hard not to thrust up into him, afraid of hurting him. Spike went lower, further, and Xander could only writhe under him, lost in the pressure and the slick glide, in the fingers that stroked his hips and thighs and then slid down, to caress his balls. Spike pulled away and bent to lick there too, mouthing them, and Xander moaned softly.
Then the cool mouth was back on his cock and taking him in, flicker of tongue and hard suction, fingers sliding between his legs to stroke and tease his perineum, slipping lower and just breaching the muscle with slippery fingertips. Xander gasped, transferring his grip to the chair-seat, clutching it tightly as Spike went faster, harder, with both fingers and mouth until Xander was arching up into him, trembling in orgasm and feeling Spike swallow and swallow again.

Xander slumped back in the chair, eyes shut, panting, and he felt Spike's lips kissing his belly and then chest, pushing the shirt up. Then Spike's mouth was on his and Xander kissed him hungrily, tasting himself. Suddenly Spike was gone, and Xander opened his eyes, looking dazedly around. A noise from the bedroom and the vampire was back.

"Stand up, pet," Spike whispered, and Xander struggled upright, the vampire helping, then turning him, putting his hands back on the chair seat. Spike pushed Xander's pants lower, past his knees.

"Still want you..." Spike whispered in his ear, and he felt the vampire's fingers again, slick with lube, opening him, and Xander spread his legs as far as they would go in the
confines of the camo pants.

"Want you to come with me, this time," Spike murmured, and Xander pushed back against the twisting, petting fingers, groaning aloud as they found their mark and rubbed there. He couldn't help but push back, thrusting as hard as he could, and he gasped when Spike abruptly withdrew. A moment later the cool, blunt head of his cock was pushing there, insisting, and Xander arched into the body behind him, half hard, panting.

Spike moved into him so slowly; he held Xander's hips in a tight grip and moved inch by inch.

"Please move, Spike, please - want you in me..."

"Hmmm..." Spike leaned over his back, one hand coming around to lazily stroke Xander's cock, fondle his balls. The other rubbed over his chest, pinching his nipples, scratching sharp nails down his ribs. Xander pushed back, hard, and Spike was in him. They both froze for a long moment, and then Spike was thrusting into him, building speed, changing the angle until Xander made a wordless sound of pure pleasure. Spike put both hands under Xander's shoulders and pulled him upright, holding him there.
"Shush, love, have to be quiet - don't want to wake the wolfling..." He kissed and nibbled Xander's neck, and Xander shivered as the vampire found his mark and trailed blunt teeth over it.

"Do it, Spike - want to feel that. Feels like...like I'm in you, when you do that...feels so good..."

Spike let one hand trail down Xander's body to his cock and began to stroke him in time with the thrusts into his body. Xander felt him change and he tipped his head to the side, begging silently, his hands going behind to grasp at Spike's hips, urging him on. Spike thrust harder, making his own moaning cries now, and Xander used his muscles to tighten down on Spike's cock, pushing back, wanting as much as Spike could give him.

Spike's left arm lifted suddenly, disappearing, and then he was bringing it around again in front and Xander saw that he'd torn his own wrist. The blood trailed there, gleaming scarlet, and Xander hesitated for only a moment, and then reached to press the wound to his mouth.

The blood was... *Oh...so good...like sparks, like...* Xander
almost giggled, licking the heady stuff. *Like Pop Rocks.* *Ooohh...* Spike hissed in pleasure and suddenly his fangs were sinking into Xander's flesh, sending out a wave of electric frission, blossoming from where the fangs were sheathed in him and racing over his body, ending where Spike's cock was sheathed.

Xander arched, rigid and trembling, a knot of fire tightening in his cock and balls and ass, sending him into orgasm. Spike's wrist was drawn away, his hand curling around Xander's hip, the other stroking him fiercely, the rhythm of Spike's hips going ragged now as his body stuttered into orgasm as well. With a low moan Spike pulled away from Xander's neck, licking the blood there and gasping, his arms tight around Xander. Xander leaned his head back on Spike's shoulder and just breathed, his heart pounding fit to burst. *Oh that feels so good...like we're the same person...same orgasm...never wanted anyone this much...never want anyone else...*

"Love you," he whispered, and Spike's arms tightened around him, and he felt cool lips on his jaw and then cheek, soft kisses at his temple.

"Love you too. Xander...you sure..."
"Sure of what, Spike?" Spike tried to move and Xander crossed his arms over Spike's arms, holding him there.

"Sure that...I'm what you want, pet?"

"Mmmm. I am. Never been so sure. Thought about you for so long - and this is better then I ever thought it would be. So much better... I was so sure you'd never..." Xander stopped, and Spike kissed his temple again, hugging harder for a brief moment.

"Sure I'd never what, love?"

"Never feel anything for me. Why should you? You had Drusilla...and I'm human - can't compare to a vampire..." Spike finally let go, turning Xander in his arms. Xander looked into eyes that were wide and deepest sea-blue in a face so solemn and intense that he felt a clench of fear in his gut.

*I can be second to her. I can. Don't care...*

*Don't want that - want ALL of him...* The soldier, fierce and anxious, no intention of being second. The hyena was only a wordless hum of pleasure, too lost in the
presence of the vampire to notice or care about the sudden tension.

"You can't compare, love. That's one of the reasons I want you so much. You're so different... Never spent this much time with a human, not since I was turned." Spike pushed his fingers back through Xander's hair, tugging gently, then leaned in and rested, forehead to forehead, his hands burrowing under Xander's shirt, rubbing his back in slow circles. "I don't want a vampire - I want you. Dru... she's gone. She told me what for, and pushed me away... I loved her so bloody much, once upon a time...but I just don't anymore. She cut my heart - slashed it to bloody pieces. And I...it was just habit there at the end, love. Just habit. Hundred years I gave her, more, and she took it all...and I just want..." Spike stopped and put his face down into Xander's neck, and breathed a moment there, deeply. His hands were shaking on Xander's back, and Xander pulled him close, stroking the vampire's back under the flannel shirt he'd never taken off.

"Just want you. You make me real too, love - make me know I'm still here. Make me feel..." Spike lifted his head, looking into Xander's eyes, and Xander saw the truth there. He leaned in to kiss Spike, slow and easy and
thorough, *cloves and cream, whiskey and spice and...blood. So...good...*

"Love you...just...love you. Never really thought I'd say that and mean it so...damn...much," Xander whispered. Spike smiled at him, nuzzling his cheek, his fingers coming back up to comb through Xander's hair.

"Glad you do, pet. Love you too..." Spike kissed him again, little fleeting kisses over cheek and forehead, nose and chin - caught Xander's lower lip between his teeth and nibbled for a minute, then pulled away, grinning.

"Come wash my hair?" Xander laughed aloud, quickly shushing himself.

"You do have an obsessive bathing fetish. But..." Xander looked down at themselves, pants around ankles and smears of lube and - other things - on their bodies and clothes.

"But we do need a wash." He bent his knees a little and snagged the sweatpants Spike was wearing, pulling them up, and Spike did the same for him, leaving the camo pants gaping open, belt jingling. As they walked to the bathroom, Xander had to ask.
"Why are you wearing my clothes, Spike?"

"Wanted something comfy. They smell like you." Spike grinned at Xander's look of surprise, then laughed as a huge smile spread over Xander's face.

"You got a crush on me, Spike!" Xander teased, and Spike growled.

"The evil undead do not get crushes, pet. We're much too dignified for that."

"Oh right. Forgot. Dignity." Xander reached over and yanked the sweatpants down, giggling. Spike made a point of very carefully shutting the bathroom door before pouncing.

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After they showered, Xander went about cleaning up the kitchen while Spike watched him. The vampire smoked one cigarette after another until Xander finally opened the kitchen door and made shooing motions with his hand.
"What?" Spike asked, and Xander made a face at him.

"You're going to choke me with those things. Until the marathon chain-smoking session is over, go outside. Why are you smoking so much, anyway?" Spike looked at the cigarette he was holding and frowned, then crushed it out in the overflowing ashtray.

"Sorry, mate. Didn't think about it. Just - this Jack..."

"That's what you're worried about?" Damnit. Didn't want to talk about this. Wanted to talk to Jack first... Ok, calm... Xander took the ashtray and dumped it, then tossed it back to Spike, who sat on the kitchen table, bare feet in a chair, his black jeans half undone. Spike weighed the ashtray in his hands, then looked up at Xander, scowling.

"Do you know what he is, really? He wasn't even in the soddin' house and I felt... He's so strong, love. Can you trust him? What do you want him for?" Xander sighed, pulling the plug on the kitchen sink, watching the dirty water drain out, wringing out the dishcloth. He wiped his hands on a towel and turned around, leaning on the sink, arms crossed.
"He owes me -"

"You said that, pet. What are you going to get him to pay?" Spike put the ashtray aside and sat there looking at Xander as if waiting for him to sprout an extra head. His eyes were narrowed and he was very, very still. *Like a cat about to pounce. Well fuck. Here we go* Xander uncrossed his arms and walked over to Spike, nudging one leg aside and getting between the vampire's thighs. He rested his hands on Spike's hips and sighed, looking up finally to meet the violet-blue gaze.

"I don't want to tell you..." Spike started to speak and Xander put a hand up, stilling him. "But I will, because...I didn't realize you would worry so much. I'm going to... I'm going to ask him if he can do - something - about the chip." Spike's eyes went wide, and Xander felt Spike's muscles go rigid under his fingers. Spike didn't move - didn't say anything, and Xander couldn't stop the babble that welled up out of him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Spike, I didn't want to tell you, I don't know if he can do anything at all, he might just tell me to forget it, but you're right, he's powerful, I felt it, and it just seemed like... He's the only - it's the only
solution I can come up with. The Initiative seems to be imploding, who knows if they'll even be around in a few months, and they're the only other people who know..."

"Xander...love...hush." Spike lay one cool finger on Xander's lips, shushing him, and Xander looked down at where his hands were clenching on Spike's hips. He eased up, rubbing gently.

"What..." Spike stopped, looking away, then back at Xander. "What if he can. I'll be free of this bloody chip - free to kill. And I will, love. You know I will. Startin' with those soldier bastards and any doctor I can get my hands on... Every one of them..." Spike's eyes were lambent brass now, glowing in the candle-light, and Xander rubbed his hands on Spike's thighs.

"I know, Spike. I trust you."

"Do you really? Do you really, pet?" Spike let the demon emerge, baring his fangs, hissing through them, his hands on Xander's biceps, clenching hard.

"This is me, Xander - whatever you see when you look at me with that mojo - this is me...and I earned my name, love, and I enjoyed earning it. And nothing stops me, and
nobody owns me, and I'll snap the Slayer's neck for her, love. On the day I get lucky, she gets dead, love - do you really understand, love, who I am, what I am, what I'll do?" Spike's voice had sunk to a sibilant growl, all the more unnerving for being so quiet.

Xander could feel his heart pounding - could feel fear and anger and desperation all roiling in his gut - knew that Spike could feel it, sense it; the demon's nostrils flared, and a groaning, snarling noise rumbled out of his chest. Xander felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck - felt his breath shortening to pants.

*Harris, you've fucked yourself, TOLD you -*

*SHUT. UP. You're not helping. Gotta calm down - gotta calm him down...what...*

*Pack* the hyena muttered, whining, *Pack* Xander's eyes widened. He knew what the hyena wanted him to do - for the second time, the hyena was urging something Xander knew was dangerous. But the hyena knew that maybe, this was all he could do. To calm Spike down. To show him...he trusted him. *God I hope this works...* Xander closed his eyes and tipped his head back and to the side, exposing his throat, the edges of Spike's
earlier bite showing above the collar of his t-shirt. And waited there, shivering, for what Spike would do.

He felt the vampire's hands dig hard into his arms - heard the snarl ratchet up into a full-fledged growl; louder, deeper, infinitely more terrifying.

Spike jerked Xander close, crushing the mortal to his chest, his mouth going down hard on Xander's throat, on his mark, one hand shredding the t-shirt away from it in a single jerk. The fangs bit, savage and hard, and Xander felt the blood flow out in a shivery rush. Xander gasped, writhing helplessly.

Even this - this brutal taking, sent heat through him, want, desire. His hands scrabbled at Spike's back, trying to pull him closer, and abruptly Spike wrenched himself away, pushing Xander back, launching himself off the table and around the room in an inarticulate fury. He roared, and Xander heard a yelp and a thud from the living room. *Oz, fuck... don't come in here...*

"Spike!" Xander yelled, and Spike rounded on him, snarling, then stopped and backed away. He came up hard against the wall by the bedroom door and slid down into a crouch, head in hands. Xander watched him for a
moment, then he walked slowly over to him, crouching down as well, clenching his hands together in an effort not to reach out and touch the vampire. He just hovered there, and finally Spike looked up, human again, the expression on his face utterly furious.

"That was the stupidest bloody thing I've ever seen you do." he grated out, and Xander ducked his head, unable to keep a smile off his face.

"Maybe it was. But it proved my point, Spike. Didn't it." Spike glared at him, and Xander finally reached out, slow, and touched the sharp curve of cheekbone; brushed his fingers back through Spike's shower-damp hair.

"You're a vampire. I know that. You kill. I know that. But..." Xander smiled softly at him, caressing Spike's cheek, and Spike leaned into it, so feline that Xander almost laughed. "You're a vampire and I trust you. A vampire whose soul glows like the sun. Who loves me. Who went back into the place that gives him nightmares to help rescue -"

"Me. And I'm kinda wondering why." Xander and Spike both whipped around, startled, to stare at Oz, who
leaned in the doorway of the living room. The werewolf was pale and a little shaky on his feet, but his green gaze was steady and calm. Spike laughed, slightly hysterical, and put his head down in his hands again, scrubbing his fingers through his hair.

"Hey, Oz. Sorry about - " Xander made a vague gesture, himself and Spike, and Oz shrugged, pushing away from the door jamb and shuffling over to where the other two were. He eased himself down, cross-legged, looking first at Xander and then at Spike.

"I remember you, from - school. Parent-teacher night. Saw you in the halls... Spike. Vampire."

"S'right, mate. You care?" Oz shook his head, glancing over at Xander.

"I knew back at - that place. But you were with Buffy, and...you smelled like Xander, all over. Figured you were...friendly, somehow. And Xander smells like you. So I guess that's why the rescue? You two together?" Xander choked, trying not to laugh, and then he had to. He sprawled down onto his butt, snorting, and Spike slid down until he, too, was sitting, kicking Xander's foot.
"You great tit," Spike said, and smirked. Xander sat up straight, shooting a mock-furious look at Spike.

"Don't call me weird English slang things - I don't know how to respond. So, Oz...you don't care? I mean, about Spike and me...the grrr thing - all that?" Oz shrugged, rubbing his hands up his arms as if he were cold.

"S'cool with me, man. I mean, the yelling and the growling was a bit...but you guys seem ok. That looks a little sore." Oz was peering at the bite, and Xander reached up to it, ruefully fingering his torn t-shirt.

"It'll heal. He wasn't actually trying to hurt me." Xander just looked at Oz for another minute, grinning.  

_Thanks, Oz - for being...just calm._  

"So - how're you feeling? Do you - are you hungry?"

"Kinda. My stomach's kinda... Mostly I'm thirsty. I'd really like some water." His voice seemed to have mended itself, but the bruises were still stark on his face.  

Xander scrambled to his feet, pulling Spike up with him.
"Why don't you help our guest to a chair, vampire-mine." Spike lifted an eyebrow, cocking his head to one side as if considering whether or not to comply. Then he swooped in and got a quick kiss in on Xander's lips before turning to Oz and holding out a hand.

"C'mon, mate. Up you go." Xander grinned and went over to the 'fridge for water, filling a glass and putting it on the table for Oz. Spike helped Oz to a chair; the brief nap seemed to have stiffened the werewolf up and he moved gingerly, wincing. He drank in silence, watching as Xander settled in a chair and Spike leaned behind him, the long, pale fingers going out almost unconsciously to stroke Xander's hair.

"So - what do you... You're welcome to stay here as long as you like, no problem, but...what are you gonna do about...Willow?"

Oz looked down at his glass, stroking his finger along the sweating side. He sighed, then looked back up at Xander.

"I think...Willow and me...that's over. That girl - Tara? She was - all over Willow. Like - well, a lot like you two."
"Yeah?" Huh. *I thought they were getting close, but - didn't realize... That must hurt..."

"Thought those two were up to somethin'," Spike murmured, and Xander tipped his head back to look at him.

"You did? Why?"

"Same as wolfman, here," Spike said, and tapped his nose. Xander grimaced and looked back at Oz.

"You know, stuff like that just makes me want to bathe about five times a day." Xander yawned suddenly, hugely, and looked around at the clock on the microwave. 1:16. *Damn. How do I do this to myself?* "Sorry, guys, but I gotta go to sleep. I gotta be up early for work. You two...stay up, if you wanna. Watch TV or whatever, I don't mind. Ok?"

"Sure," Oz said, and lifted his glass to his mouth, gulping down half the water. Spike followed Xander into the bedroom, catching him around the waist and kissing him hard, a desperate kiss of passion and claiming and maybe fright, as well. Spike reluctantly pulled away, resting his forehead on Xander's.
"Don't do that again, love. You could have died."

"But I didn't. I trust you, Spike. I see you. Don't ever forget that." Xander kissed him gently, and Spike sighed.

"You're crazy, to be like that."

"Crazy in love. And - the chip didn't go off. So I'd say that doubly proves my point. You didn't have any intention of hurting me at all." Xander said, and smiled. Spike shook his head, but he was smiling, too.

"Want me to stay?" Spike asked, and Xander kissed him again, flicker of tongue over Spike's lips.

"Go and sit with Oz for a little, would you? He might be... he might need it." Spike looked at him, and nodded finally, and shut the door softly behind him as he went out. Xander brushed his teeth quickly and then got into bed, stretching hard and trying to let all the tension out that had accumulated through the day.

_I won that round. I think. I still trust him. I hope - I just hope he can... Fuck. I wonder if I lived anywhere but_
Sunnyhell if my love life would be normal  Xander burrowed into his pillow, which held the faint scent of Spike, and was asleep.

When he woke, it was to the unaccustomed sensation of warmth all along his back, and he slapped at the alarm and turned in the bed, wary of what he might find. He couldn't help but grin at what he did see. Spike, on his belly, with one arm flopped over the silken back of a large, red-brown wolf. As Xander stared, the wolf Oz. Damn, that's Oz. Forgot how beautiful.  Wow  raised his head and gazed at Xander with wide black eyes.

"Hey. Work." Xander said softly, and reached out to smooth the thick mane of hair along Oz's shoulders. Oz made a 'humf' sound down in his chest and lay his head back onto the quilt. Xander slid out of bed and got ready to go. Before he left, he tiptoed back into the bedroom and pressed a kiss to Spike's forehead. A vampire and his wolf. Hah. Wish I had a camera. Least they'll both be safe  He was in his truck and down the street before he remembered that Jack would be there that day. He glanced back at his house, lit by the rising sun, and mentally shrugged. One way or another, by tonight
they'd both know what Jack could do. And then - things would change. *And please, for the better*

9 Jack

When Xander walked into the kitchen *I hope wolves like Chinese. Maybe I should have tried that Ethiopian place...or maybe I should learn to cook* Spike was already awake, dressed and sitting at the table, cigarette in hand and mug of blood in front of him. He looked extremely unhappy.

"Hey, what's up?" Xander asked, stroking his hand across Spike's shoulders as he came into the kitchen.

"Bloody witch and the Watcher came by - nattered at the wolf until he bolted."

"What?" Xander knew he'd seen Oz's van outside. "Where'd he go?"
"Out," Spike gestured towards the door - the bluff - and Xander cautiously parted the blinds to look out. Oz was nowhere to be seen.

"I don't -"

"You wouldn't, pet. He went all wolfy. Red seems ta bring it out in him."

"Oh." Xander slumped down in a chair, watching Spike, who stabbed the cigarette out with unnecessary force then toyed with the mug of blood in front of him.

"What's the matter, Spike?"

"Hmmm? Oh - just... Those two. Really fucked with the wolfling. Went on and on about comin' here an' how I can't be trusted and how you been actin' weird and what did the soldiers an' the doctors do..." Spike stopped abruptly and lit another cigarette but didn't smoke it - held it in his fingers and watched the smoke. Xander figured that the last question - what the soldiers and doctors had done - was what was bothering Spike the most. The vampire certainly didn't care one bit about being 'trustworthy', and any opportunity to separate Xander from the Slayer and her gang would only make Spike happy, not all... Is he...mad? More like - brooding. Huh. Angel Jr. Better not say THAT out loud Xander
smirked at the thought, then sobered. He got up and got the bag of Chinese food from the counter and grabbed some plates out of the cabinet.

"Well, they'll know better next time. Nobody got - hurt, did they?"

"Nah, more's the pity." Spike lifted his head, nostrils flaring. "Wolfling's back." A moment later, there was a scratching at the door, and Spike retreated to the bedroom while Xander opened the kitchen door. Honeyed light flooded in and Oz with it, russet fur glowing in the light. The wolf sniffed at Xander's work-stained jeans then trotted into the bedroom, claws clicking on the hardwood floor. Xander shut the door, and a moment later giggled when he heard Spike's voice.

"Oi! Get off! That's bloody cold!" Spike came back into the kitchen, wiping his cheek with his hand and shooting a disgusted look back towards the bedroom.

"Damn mongrel," he muttered, but his bad mood seemed to have lifted and he dug into the bag of Chinese with gusto. Xander went over to the sink to wash his hands, and then got a soda out of the 'fridge. When he turned back to the table, Oz was there, back in human form; flannel pants and thermal shirt, barefoot, his
henna-washed hair sticking up in spikes and a grin on his face.

"Oz. You look better. Soda?"

"Sure." Oz sat down, watching Spike open boxes in his search for dumplings. Xander pushed his unopened soda across the table and got another one for himself and a beer for Spike.

"So - feeling better, I guess. Did you have a good run?" Xander gestured out towards the bluff and the sea, and Oz opened his soda, lapping at the drops that spilled over the edge.

"Yeah. It was nice. Guess I'll have to apologize to Giles and Willow later - " Spike snorted, pouring soy sauce and then blood over his plateful of rice, dumplings, sweet and sour chicken, and egg rolls.

"Don't owe them fuck-all, mate. They should'a known better. Tell 'em keep their poxy questions and leave you be." He stuffed a dumpling in his mouth and chewed, eyes golden, and Oz shot Xander a look.

"Well, that's an option too." Oz said as he and Xander filled their own plates. For a while there were only the sounds of eating and drinking. The sun crept below the horizon and the kitchen got darker, and Xander lit two
new candles for the table and opened the door, letting the cool ocean breeze blow into the house. Spike, finishing first, shoved back from the table a little bit and lit a cigarette, smoking slowly, eyes on the distant, heaving sea.

"S'nice, bein' by the sea like this. Me an' Dru had a house in Casablanca, near the Medina. Used to sit up on the roof, right before sunrise and watch the sea... Dru loved to go down to the beach, lay in the sand when it was still warm from the day..." He drank his beer, lost in thought, and Oz leaned his chin on his hand, watching him.

"Sounds nice. When were you in Morocco?"

"Hmmm? Oh - right after the Blitz started. We stayed there 'bout a year. Then came over here for a while. It got...thin, down there, during the war." His eyes were dark, and Xander wondered if these memories were painful because of Dru, or because of something else. Oz just seemed enraptured, ready to listen all night.

"New York was better - we had fun there. Hell's Kitchen, Greenwich Village, Chinatown..." Spike glanced up at Oz - at Xander, and smiled. "Even got a bloody gang named after us..."
"Oh right! The Capeman murders!" Oz said, and Xander shot him a look.

"What?"

"Gangs and stuff - the Vampires and the...Nordics."

"How do you know this stuff?" Xander asked, getting up and gathering plates. Oz shrugged, stuffing empty cartons into the bag they'd arrived in.

"I did a lot of reading, locked up in the cage at the library. Sometimes - you guys were kinda late, getting there."

Xander paused, thinking about it. "Yeah. I guess we were. Kinda sucked for you, huh?" Oz shrugged again, getting up and pushing the bag into the trash can.

"No big deal." He yawned, stretching - froze in mid-stretch and backed away from the door. At the same moment Spike was on his feet and growling, the demon's eyes flaring yellow fire in the candle-glow. Oz seemed to waver, eyes going black, his teeth lengthening, and then human again, looking back and forth between the door and Spike.

"What is it - " Oz whispered, moving closer to Spike, shivering.
"It's - him...that..." Spike snarled, back tight against the wall, and Xander felt almost sick, his heart was pounding so hard.

**Jack? Is it Jack? What the hell is he? Why are they so freaked out?**

*This could have been a major miscalculation, Harris* the soldier grumbled. Xander wiped his hands on his jeans and walked slowly towards the door. The hyena didn't seem to notice whatever it was that had set the others off. Xander could *feel* the power, but it didn't seem to threaten or frighten. Just...be there, like a subtle smoke. He stood in the doorway, looking out over the porch, into the dense shadow of the eucalyptus that stood near the stairs. Beyond was grass dotted with low bushes, and the bluff; a sharp edge of darkness against a sky silvered with moonlight. Something - moved. And then Jack was there, at the foot of the stairs, grinning up at Xander. Xander jerked back, startled. The bloodied and torn denim jacket was gone, replaced by a leather bomber jacket so cracked and worn it looked like it had survived a kamikaze flight. The jeans and undershirt were the same, the sneakers still patched with duct tape.

"Xander," Jack said, voice low, and his eyes sparked red through the tangled hair.
"Jack." Xander whispered. He backed away as Jack climbed the steps, and from behind Xander rose a sing-song wail, a hideous sound. It was Spike, and Xander crossed to him, unsure if he should touch him, or even speak to him at this point. The hyena reacted to that, a shiver deep down. Hunting... Circle the pack...pack... Oz was crouched down, panting, his eyes black and his clawed hands digging into the floor, splintering it. Spike was head down, ready to spring - although Xander couldn't tell if he'd attack or run.

"Spike? It's ok, Spike. Calm down. You're kinda freakin' me out. Spike?" Jack stood in the doorway, his leather knapsack over his shoulder.

"Fuck. Spike? Oz? Can you guys..." Xander put his hand out and tentatively took hold of Spike's shoulder. The vampire was shaking, his body tight as a bow-string, and Xander gently rubbed his shoulder, creeping his hand slowly to the back of Spike's neck and rubbing, trying to get Spike to relax a little. The vampire hissed, snapping at him, but his hand shot out and grabbed Xander's arm, trying to get Xander behind him. In a minute Xander knew the vampire's grip was going to hurt both of them, and he tried to pull away. Spike yanked, and then was on his knees, clutching his head, still growling but panting in agony now, shuddering from nerves and pain and fright.
Oz abruptly reverted to his fully human state and shot a lop-sided grin at Xander.

"We're both a little wigged, man. Let's get him up." Xander nodded and put a hand under Spike's arm, as did Oz, and they both hauled the vampire up. Spike staggered a step and slumped into a chair, and Xander hastily stepped between him and Jack, who was still in the doorway, watching them. Jack walked to the table and slung his knapsack on it, and lowered himself into a chair.

"So. Xander. You called, I came. I see you have...companions."

"Uh. Yeah." Xander pulled a third chair over close to Spike and sat in it, letting his thigh press up against Spike's under the table, keeping his hand on Spike's shoulder. Oz settled into the last chair, looking frankly curious, still shivering just a little.

"This is Spike - "

"William the Bloody," Jack said, and Spike's head came up, game-face again, fangs bared.

"I knew of you in Europe, oh...around 1895. So - you're here. And with Xander."
"What are you," Spike said, and his voice was flat calm. Utterly devoid of expression and deadly quiet. It made Xander flinch, but Jack laughed, and made a motion with his hand, and suddenly he was in the tatty velvet jacket, feathers in his hair, and his eyes glowed. Oz gasped, eyes going wide, and Spike sat upright, glaring at the man.

"What did you - " Xander wondered wildly for a moment if Jack had given them all that power of seeing.

"I just let them see me as you do - took away the glamour. Now do you know, vampire?"

"I know. Leave Xander be. Cancel your debt." Jack laughed again, and settled himself back in the chair. Xander gaped at Spike. What the hell? What the FUCK is going on... Xander almost spoke but then waited, wanting to know what Jack would say.

"Why would I do that? I owe him - he only has to ask. No strings."

"There's always strings with your kind." Spike dug his fingers into the table, his fingernails leaving gouges. Xander winced. Maybe I should have seen Jack alone, first. Fuck

"No strings this time." Jack cocked his head a little, then stretched his arm out across the table, palm up.
"Try it - test me. You know you can." Jack stared at Spike, utterly serious now, and Spike stared back. Jack reached with his other hand and put his fingernail to his wrist, and slit the skin with an easy flick. The blood welled up immediately, darkly glittering, and Spike and Oz both scented it, nostrils flaring. Xander even thought he detected something - a dark, earthy scent, old and powerful.

"No strings. Just a debt paid." Jack leaned forward, bringing his arm even closer, and Spike reached out and gathered the welling of blood onto his finger and touched it to his tongue. Spike shut his eyes, shivering all over, and licked all the blood away in a single, sensuous move. His hand dropped to Xander's thigh under the table and gripped it tightly. And he laughed.

"Fuck, mate. Wouldn't have to eat for a month, if I got one of you." Spike was grinning now, suddenly relaxed, and Xander couldn't keep quiet anymore.

"Ookay, I would really like to know what's going on here. And why I wasn't nearly as - wigged out as you guys were. Care to explain? Jack? Spike?" He looked from one to the other, and Jack smiled again, seriousness gone. He licked the blood on his wrist and the cut vanished, healed.
"You have another of those beers, Xander? The last one was pretty good."

"Sure..." Xander stood up and got two - hesitated, and grabbed two cold ones out of the 'fridge. He put the imported beers down for Spike and Jack and the others for himself and Oz. Oz smiled faintly.

"Ok. Somebody talk." Xander opened his beer and drank, waiting, pressing his thigh and calf against Spike's, itching to do more but not wanting to distract anyone from explaining what was going on.

"You tell, Grandfather. Not my place." Spike smirked, drinking his beer, and Jack raised an eyebrow.

"Grandfather?"

"Suits you, mate." Spike leaned back, casual, but his thigh trembled against Xanders' under the table.

"Huh." Jack drank as well, then set the bottle down and looked at Oz, then Xander.

"You children have heard fairy stories, I'm sure. Leprechauns and will-o-the-wisps and all manner of...otherworldly things."
"Hellmouth. Pretty much got 'otherworldly' comin' out of our ears here." Xander said, watching Jack watch him.

"That's so. Salt?" Xander rose silently, got the salt, set it down, then sat back down, eyes still fixed on Jack. Jack poured salt out into his palm - funneled it into his beer and licked the rest away.

"Well, they are real too, those things. The little folk. The fair folk. Bogarts and the Banshee and all manner of...creature. The Seelie Court. And the UnSeelie, as well."

"And the tithe to hell, eh Sidhe?" Spike's eyes were narrow, watching Jack, and Jack smirked at him.

"You'd know about hell, wouldn't you, vampire? But yes, the tithe to hell, for some, sometimes. It's all...negotiable." He waved his hand in a vague gesture, and drank another mouthful of beer.

"Well, the Seelie Court is home to the queen and king - sometimes they're called Titania and Oberon. They're the Fair Folk." He grinned at Spike, his eyes going narrow. "I'm not."

Xander felt a chill go through him at that, but Oz had a strange look on his face.
"Elves, you mean? Fairy?" Jack grimaced.

"Those words are...let's use the vampire's, shall we? Sidhe. Yes."

"Shee," Oz echoed. Xander was staring.

"Elves?"

"Yeah, those folk. Only this one won't be fixin' your shoe or cleanin' your house, pet. Or gettin' up to lighthearted romps in the woods with maidens and boys. This kind - "

"Let's leave that where it lies, shall we?" Jack interrupted. "As for your - companions' reactions... Well, we're quite a bit older then demons and werewolves. They tend to react badly to their elders." Spike snorted, and Jack grinned at him. "Humans, on the other hand... There are, shall we say... complications, in our dealings. We're no threat to you unless you let us be. Now, vampire." Jack switched his gaze from Xander back to Spike. "You tasted - you know I'm not lying, or trying to trick Xander. And I have no claim over you or the wolf. So let's be...friends?" Jack looked at Spike from under lowered lashes and Xander felt a tremor go through the vampire, and Spike hissed, eyes flashing gold.
"Let's be gettin' on with it, mate." Spike drained the last of his beer, setting the bottle down deliberately, carefully, and Jack copied him.

"Let's, then." Jack looked at Xander, solemn now, his eyes glowing even without the seeing.

"I owe you a debt, you called me to you to pay it. Name your price." Xander felt Jack's power slide over him - surround him - like an invisible smoke. It made the hairs rise on the back of neck. He gasped in a sharp breath, and Oz did the same. Spike just growled, low, and Xander could feel it tremor through his body.

"Can you - can you see what's inside Spike? That...thing." Jack cocked his head, looking at Spike, the power coming off him in almost tangible waves now. He recoiled, his face flashing for an instant into something else - not the homeless man, or the man in the velvet coat. Something...far darker.


"You can see it? It's...a computer chip. This military group - they captured him. Opened up his head and stuck that thing in there. It hurts him if he tries to hurt any human -
if he...tries to feed." Xander watched Jack - watched a look of revulsion cross his face, and then speculation.

"Military?"

"Yeah. The government. They had Oz, too - tortured him." Jack ran an appraising eye over Oz, who looked back, his gaze mild, his fingers laced tightly together on the table-top.

"But the wolf is free of...things. Little spiders, pumping venom."

"Yeah. Just a spot of the old Spanish Inquisition for the wolfling," Spike muttered.

"I can see it. I'm thinking you want me to do...something...with that."

"Yeah. I do. I want...want Spike to be able to defend himself. To feed. I want that thing out of him." Jack looked at him, then back at Spike, tapping his fingers on the table-top.

"I can...break it. Getting it out would - well, it's not possible. But it's just - elements. I can manipulate those. And this is a good night for it."
"Why is that?" Oz asked, and Jack shot an amused look at him.

"It's Ostara - the Equinox. Night and day, the same length. A good night for things to be put back into balance." He looked at Spike again, and the grin came back, wide and rather feral, the eyes sparking red behind his mane of hair. "It's gonna hurt like fuck," he said. Spike laughed.

"I'd be disappointed if it didn't, mate." He stood up, bouncing just a little on the balls of his bare feet. "Where d'ya want me?"

"Wait - hurt?" Xander stood also, looming over Jack. "Why do you have to hurt him?"

"Some things hurt, Xander. He'll be alright. Vampires, they're tough. And he'll be himself again. Which is what you want. Right?" Jack looked up at him, all innocent except for the hell-shot red of his eyes, and Xander felt a surge of fear go through him. Oh damn, Spike's right, he has power and to spare and what if he - what if he fucks him up, what if he...fuck, FUCK

"Jack..."
"It's alright, love. I tasted his truth. He won't trick you. But don't ever count on that again. Let's get this done, Sidhe."

"Outside would be best, I think." Jack rose and went, and Spike followed. Xander stood in the kitchen, staring after them until Oz stood also and came and put his hand on Xander's shoulder.

"It'll be ok, Xander. But man, you owe me a story."
Xander stared down at Oz and a hysterical giggle escaped him. He clapped his hand over his mouth but another bubbled out before he could calm himself.

"Fuck, Oz, I...I just want Spike to be - to not be afraid anymore. *Fuck* I hope this works." They both just looked at each other for a minute, and then they went outside as well.

Jack was sitting on the ground about ten yards away from the house. Spike was lying on the ground in front of him, on his back. His hands were clenched into fists, and he was staring upwards, face rigid. His eyes kept flickering to gold, and Xander wanted to sit with him; hold his hand, touch his shoulder, kiss him. But he didn't think Jack would let him do that, so he went down the stairs and across the grass, Oz beside him, and settled cross-legged a few feet away.
"All right then?" Jack asked. Xander nodded, and Jack closed his eyes. His hands rose from his lap and settled lightly on Spike's head, where the chip was. He began to make a soft sound in his throat - like humming - but it was deep and strange, wild-sounding. It made Xander shiver, and beside him Oz fidgeted, growling.

Green sparks and lines began to fade up out of the grass all around Jack. They hovered over him, swirling and dancing, tracing the lines of his body until he was encased in a shifting, transparent shroud. His fingers seemed to sink ever so slightly into Spike's skull, and Spike went rigid, his eyes and mouth opening wide. He gasped in a breath, and started to scream, but the light swirled around his face, covering it, going into his mouth, and all Xander heard was a thready whine that seemed to go on and on.

Jack was frowning, still humming, his wrists making tiny movements, and his fingers sunk further away.

Xander ground his teeth together, a helpless, sick feeling twisting his gut; he was gasping for breath, his fingers twisting in the grass. That sound - the sound Spike was making - seemed to shiver through him like nails on a blackboard. It hurt, somehow, down in his bones. He felt
Oz's hand touch his knee, gripping, and he realized he was crying.

Spike's fingers had dug into the dirt, knuckle deep, and he was arched like a bow, his body straining off the grass. Suddenly the light around Jack flickered to yellow - white - and was gone, leaving Xander and Oz blinking, half blind. Spike's body sagged in sudden release and his head lolled, eyes shut. He was unconscious.

Jack was bowed over, gasping, and Xander struggled up, crawling on his knees to Spike and pulling at him. He sat back, cradling Spike's head on his thighs, stroking his fingers through the stiff hair. Laying his palm on Spike's cheek he realized it was wet with tears.

"Is it - what did you do? Is he going to wake up?" Xander wiped at his own face, brushing off moisture. Jack pushed himself upright, and he was haggard, drawn. Whatever he did to himself to look like a homeless man - the glamour - was working erratically. The real Jack kept showing in flashes and fits, making Xander dizzy.

"I broke it. It was only silica and metal. A spider with golden legs and a crystalline body, sending out pain along its web. Crouching there..." Jack coughed, wiping his mouth, and looked down at Spike. "I made it draw its legs in - made them knot. Changed it. It's nothing but a bead
of gold and glass now. It would make a pretty charm." Jack smirked, then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell back onto the grass. Xander just stared at him, then down at Spike. The vampire was motionless. He looked to be made of salt in the cool slant of the moonlight, his brows like slashes of ink, his hair glowing. He was unearthly and utterly beautiful and Xander leaned down and kissed him, breathing his scent of leather and smoke, blood and spice. He heard Oz moving closer, and looked up to see him settling near by, eyes wide and amazed.

"Xander. That was..."

"Yeah. Do you think...do you think Spike needs blood?" Xander pulled Spike up a little higher on his thighs, wrapping his arms around him, Spike's head on his chest.

"I dunno. Let's wait a minute and see." Oz glanced over at Jack, who was still shivering in and out of focus. The green light was back, much subdued, and it crawled over Jack like thin worms, weaving a veil that seemed to anchor him to the ground. Xander turned away from Jack to Spike, stroking his hand over and over the vampire's hair.

"Spike, wake up now. Jack did it, he fixed it. Come on Spike, open your eyes and look at me, love. Spike...wake up...please, Spike..." Xander could hear the tremble in his
voice, and he tried to calm himself, taking deep breaths. He hugged Spike to him as tightly as he could. He felt Oz's hand on his back, rubbing lightly. *Spike, please, please. You've got to wake up, love...* The cool body in his arms jerked suddenly, and Xander lifted his head, looking down. Spike twisted weakly in his grip, squinting his eyes tight, and a low moan came out of him.

"*Spike! Hey, you ok? Spike - love - talk to me...*"

"Bloody hell," Spike said. His voice was a thread, broken and rasping, and he winced and tried to swallow. "Need a drink, mate," he mumbled, and Oz scrambled up and went into the house. He came out a few seconds later with a beer - his or Xander's, it was half-empty. He knelt down and put it in Spike's hand. Xander propped him upright and Spike took a long drink, rubbing his throat.

"Ah...fuck. That was fuckin' horrible." Xander wondered if he meant the experience or the beer. His voice wasn't much better, but he seemed able to talk a little easier. "Ohh, my head..." Spike opened his eyes finally, and Xander felt a moment of panic when they tracked on nothing at all, dazed. Then his gaze sharpened, and Spike looked up at him.

"Did it work, pet?"
"I - I dunno. Jack seemed to think it did. I guess - you'll have to test it." Xander helped Spike to sit up all the way and the vampire groaned and held his head. Oz went back into the house, and Xander heard him rummaging around. Spike just huddled there, rubbing his temples, and Xander held him, kissing his shoulder, his hair, rubbing small circles at the small of his back. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the light web fade from around Jack, and he too, struggled to sit up, looking unhappy and rubbing his forehead. Oz came back outside with a mug and handed it down to Xander.

"Figured he might need a little - help him knock the pain back." Xander sniffed - found blood. Spike was already blindly groping for the mug, so he held it for him, easing it up to his mouth. Spike drained it rapidly and then sat for a minute, waiting. Xander laid the mug aside in the grass and kissed Spike's temple.

"Better now? Can you get up, do you think?" Spike straightened abruptly, and Xander saw his mouth curling in a smile.

"Oh yeah. Better. Thanks, mate." Spike nodded to Oz, who nodded back. "So, did it work, Sidhe?" Spike asked, climbing slowly to his feet, leaning on Xander. Jack was still sitting, hunched, and he squinted up at the three of
them and then held out a hand. Spike leaned and hauled him upright with a jerk, and Jack yelped.

"Fuck it, vampire, have a care! I reckon it worked. This miserable place - makes it harder to do things. You should test it. " Jack stumbled past them and into the house, and after a moment the other three followed, Spike leaning on Xander and Oz snatching up the bloody mug from the grass.

"Sit down and have a little more blood first, Spike."

"Aye, blood, and put this in." Jack was slumped in a chair, rooting through his knapsack. He pulled a bulbous brown clay bottle out. It was stoppered and tied much like the little pot of salve had been, and Jack picked at the coarse twine, undoing it with shaking fingers. Xander guided Spike back to his own chair, then sank down gratefully as Oz fixed another packet of blood. Jack finally got the twine off and uncorked the bottle, and a scent wafted out - sharp and alcoholic but overlayed with a warm smell of honey and almonds and something like clean, green grass. It was heady and delicious, and Xander's mouth watered for it. Spike's head came up, nostrils flared, and Jack smirked at him.

"Ever had any, vampire?" he rasped, and Spike shook his head. "In for a treat, then." Oz put the mug of blood on
the table and Jack poured a generous dollop of the stuff into it. It was dark gold, and seemed to glow in the candle light.

"Some all round - get more cups, eh?" Jack said, and Xander pointed to the right cabinet for Oz, who got three glasses down and settled finally into his chair.

"What is it?" Oz whispered, and Jack laughed.

"It's the nectar of the gods, wolf. It's...blood of virgins and honey from the rock, it's manna and moonlight and all manner of things: *Currants and gooseberries, Bright-fire-like barberries, Figs to fill your mouth, Citrons from the South*"

Jack grinned at them, pouring a measure into each glass - more for himself, Xander noticed, but didn't really care. Jack set the bottle back on the table and picked up his glass - raised it a few inches, his expression going solemn for a moment.

"Slainte," he said, and they echoed him, "Slawncha." And drank. The drink was cool on Xander's tongue - and then hot, sparkling with little prickles of mint and cinnamon and cloves. The path it traced to his belly was fiery, and a rush of prickling, delicious heat washed through him. He
gasped, his eyes tearing, and Spike threw back his head and howled, laughing. Oz closed his eyes and laughed too, and Xander had to join him. Jack just grinned at them, re-corking the bottle and re-wrapping the twine, his eyes sparking red again, his bomber jacket back.

"Oh, that was good, mate. No wonder you lot don't share." Spike drained the last of his blood and wiped his hand across his mouth. He looked at Xander, eyes sparkling.

"Gotta know, pet. Gotta test this." Xander looked back at him and nodded, holding out his hand. Please let this work. Fuck. And if it does...he might go. For good

Or kill us all, Harris

No. Pack. We'll survive Xander waited, and Spike grasped his hand. The vampire squeezed, tentatively at first, and then harder, and suddenly pain shot through Xander's fingers as they were ground fiercely together.

"Fuck! Ease up!" Xander jerked his hand away, then froze, staring at Spike. Who stared back - who began to laugh, slightly hysterically. He leapt to his feet, knocking his chair back into the wall and roared. The demon lowered his face to them, eyes ablaze.
"I'm free. I'm back. William the Bloody is alive and well." He laughed again, and the lucent golden eyes flashed at them, eerie, otherworldly. Jack rose also, shoving the bottle back into his knapsack and hoisting the knapsack onto his shoulder.

"Then I am done here. This place - drags at me. I'm for the bonny road, me." He turned and began to walk out the door. Spike took a step after him.

"I'll remember this, mate." Jack turned around and looked at him as the demon sank away. Spike's blue eyes were serious, calm and intent, and Jack nodded once.

"You may have to...Spike." He grinned, suddenly jaunty, and strode out the door and away, vanishing like a ghost into the shadow of the eucalyptus. Spike pounced on Xander, pulling him to his feet and kissing him devouringly, deeply. His hands worked up under Xander's shirt and caressed his back and Xander melted into him, tasting the blood and lingering flavor of Jack's drink, breathing deeply of the heady scent that was just Spike. Oh, love you, love you, please don't let this end...don't leave me, Spike, don't... Xander finally pulled away and Spike smiled at him - a smile full of love and desire, joy and excitement.

"Love you, pet. Love you so much."
"Love you too, Spike. I'm - I'm glad it worked." Spike's eyes darkened a little, and Xander leaned down and kissed him gently. "I am glad it worked. I love you...nothing's changed that... nothing will." Spike hugged him fiercely and then he was gone, into the bedroom, and Xander knew what he was doing. He slowly sat back down, glancing ruefully at Oz who had sat silent all this while. There was a strange mix of fear and compassion on Oz's face, and he made a little gesture with his hands, shrugging.

Spike came back out of the bedroom, Docs on his feet and practically ran into the living room to grab his duster. He snatched his cigarettes and lighter from the table and lit up, then stood staring down at Xander, his face serious, his eyes alight.

"I have to, pet. I have to know...for sure. And...I just...I bloody well have to." 

"I know you do, Spike. I really understand. Just...fuck... Don't make it so I have to identify any bodies tomorrow, ok? I don't think I could stand that." Spike bent and kissed him, hard, his free hand tangling in Xander's hair.

"Promise, love," he whispered. He straightened and looked at Oz. "Keep an eye on him, right mate?" Oz nodded, and with a last look at Xander, Spike was gone.
Xander looked down at his hands, noticing he was clenching them so tightly that his fingernails were starting to cut into his palms. Oz got up and got two more beers out of the 'fridge and settled back into his chair.

"You really need to tell me the whole story, Xander. I think we've got all night, don't you?" Xander looked up at Oz and smiled into his calm, green gaze. He nodded and took a small sip of the beer, and began.

"It started probably three years ago - you weren't a Scooby yet. When Spike was at the school that time, the parent-teacher thing? Well, Angel had this really great idea..."

**10 Payback**

Spike stepped out onto the front porch of the house and simply stood there for a moment, breathing in the night air and trying to contain the screaming, frenzied demon that was scrabbling and howling inside him for control. The demon wanted to run through the streets; smash windows, destroy walls, set fire to the city. Drink until he was as warm as a living man and pull the heart from every human it met. Spike wanted something else. He began to walk - then run - heading straight into Sunnydale proper, searching. As he neared the UCS
campus, he found what he was looking for. A college student stood on the sidewalk, fumbling drunkenly with a helmet. Parked beside him in the street was a motorcycle - one of the low-slung racing types that seemed to be all the rage for some rich boys. It was painted an unappealing mustard-yellow but Spike knew its top speed was somewhere above 150, and that's what he wanted - needed. Speed. He bounded up the sidewalk and snatched the helmet from the boy, hurling it away with enough force to crack it in two as it struck a light pole. The boy gaped - drew in a breath to scream as the demon emerged and lunged.

Then Spike was drinking, drinking; the hot jet of arterial blood near-scalding on the back of his throat. The boy flailed at him, writhing, and Spike clamped down tighter, his fingers sinking into the boy's arms so deeply that bones cracked. The blood surged through him, laced with alcohol - sharp and heady with fear. The familiar, wanton heat of it - the tingling wave that rushed over him - was intoxicating, dizzying. A feeling at once both remembered and shockingly new. Spike groaned deep in his throat, arousal pounding through him. This was heat - freedom - life; delicious and heady. He pulled hard, forcing the last mouthfuls to come to him, listening as the ta-tum of the heart stuttered - faded altogether. He
wrenched his fangs from the boy's throat and roared to the night sky, sending echoes rolling up and down the street. He snapped the boy's neck with an easy twist of his hands and then frisked the body for keys and wallet. He found he was grinning maniacally - couldn't, in fact, stop himself.

*He did it, he did it, Xander-love, you did it...brought me back, gave me back...everything. Everything. Love you, pet. Love you for it*

Spike straddled the bike, glancing swiftly at unfamiliar controls, learning them. He put the key in the ignition and started the bike. The surging growl made him laugh out loud and he gunned it away from the curb, heading out. Heading towards Highway 101. Towards a place to feed and regain his full strength without interruption; to hone skills that had gotten a tad rusty, of late. To deal out a little payback. He grinned savagely, hurling himself forward into the night. The air was a solid wall to lean into, the roar of the bike lost behind him as he pushed it to its top speed. The highway stretched before him, silver-grey, broad and beckoning, and he remembered what Jack had said.
"I'm for the bonny road, me." He laughed again. The bonny road was not for him. No, for him it was something else.

"And see ye not yon braid, braid road, That lies across the lily leven?

That is the Path of Wickedness, Though some call it the Road to Heaven..."

The bike surged under him, as vital as a lover, and he crouched over it and flew forward into the night.

*`*`*`*`*`*

Xander finished telling Oz his story.

Oz looked up from his fingers, and smiled up at Xander. "That's pretty cool," he said. And that was all. A few minutes later, Oz changed and curled himself into the corner of the couch, nose to tail, sighing heavily into sleep. Xander just laughed, not really expecting a scene from Oz, but surprised nonetheless at the utter calm.

Maybe that's all to the good, though. Couldn't really take a scene right now. Xander took a shower and cleaned up
a little and waited. He lay down in bed and stared at the ceiling and when his alarm woke him two hours later he was alone and the sun was coming up, and Spike wasn't there. Xander felt the first twist of fear in his belly, and he fought it. Work was a daze, and the ritual of paycheck and weekend plans passed him by, an inconsequential murmur that couldn't break through the tumbling, frantic thoughts in his head. Even Manny asked if he was alright and Xander barely managed to be coherent enough to satisfy the old demon. But inside he was babbling, and the fear was getting worse.

*What if he ran into Buffy, out on patrol, and couldn't resist? What if she... What if he got captured by the Initiative again? They're even hotter to capture and kill now that Professor Walsh is dead... What if he just left? Went to find Dru -*

*Doesn't want her. Wants us. Wants pack*

*But we're not...I'm not...what if I'm not enough?*

*Don't panic, Harris. It's only one night. One day. And don't you think we'd know if he were dead, or...? Remember feeling his pain?*

He got home and went through his routine of shower and dinner, barely aware of Oz. The werewolf said
almost nothing, watching him with dark and speculative eyes. When the sun was gone and Xander was sitting silent in the blackness of the kitchen, Oz lit candles and then slipped away, wolf again. Xander knew Oz was looking for Spike, but he couldn't rouse himself to even say thank you. He went to bed, and the shivery fear came back again and again, waking him with formless, forgotten dreams.

No work the next day and he found himself pacing his house, too restless to sit, or talk to Oz. Too scared to think. Oz made a dinner Xander could barely force past his teeth, and when Oz went out again, tail tucked, Xander thought it was with a certain relief.

This time Xander forced himself to get up, do a few things; laundry, cleaning. He sanded smooth the gouges Spike's nails had made in the table, running his fingers over and over them. He thought about changing the sheets - sweat and sex and wolf hairs - but couldn't bear to lose the scent of Spike that the cotton still held. In the end he simply curled up in the middle of the bed, pulling the covers around him, burrowing into Spike's pillow and biting his lip until it bled in an effort not to cry. Won't do that. Won't. That would be...saying he's really gone, and he isn't, so I won't, I won't
Sunday, it turned out, they had to go to Giles' house. Oz wanted to talk to Willow - he'd put it off too long, he said, and owed her an explanation. So they went and Xander sat on Giles' couch and listened to Giles brief them on the 'situation'. Faith had come and gone, trying some sort of body-switch with Buffy that Tara had helped to foil. Professor Walsh's experiment now had a name - Adam - and it was lurking, killing people, recruiting possibly. Or maybe just hiding. Buffy had gone to LA to warn Angel about Faith. And Riley had finally moved into an apartment, still reeling from the discoveries surrounding Maggie's death. Still recovering from being drugged.

Wow. Missed a lot. Now will Buffy finally get the hell out of bed with these damn soldiers? Look what they've done - some kind of Frankentronic creature roaming around...drugging their own men... Please tell me we're not on 'their' side anymore... He listened to Oz explain in his soft voice why he had left with Xander and Spike - why he was staying at Xander's house. Listened to Anya ask him if he wanted a soda, listened to Willow babble out hurt and guilt and love and sorrow like an upended cup, pouring over them all. He heard Willow finally admit that she and Tara were together. Giles started a bit, but Oz only smiled and Xander wondered if he'd ever
be able to tell Willow about Spike. If Giles would smile at them and murmur 'very nice' for Xander and Spike.

*Not in this lifetime, Harris. Wishful thinking*

Maybe. *But he's smart...he...if I told him about Jack, he'd...*

*Think you were possessed again. Or under some thrall. Give it up, Harris.*

*Shut up. Miss him...miss him...* He jumped a little when Tara sat down next to him, putting her hand lightly on his wrist.

"A-are you okay, X-xander?" she asked, and he mustered up a wane smile for her.

"Sure Tara. Guess you saved the day, doing that aura-thing with Faith, huh? Good for you." Tara blushed, looking pleased and flustered, and Xander smiled at her for real this time, feeling the stirrings of affection for this shy, powerful girl. He'd *looked* at her, the day after the Gentlemen had been destroyed, and had seen a soul that was radiant, powerful, and utterly without guile. Her power came from the earth and he could see how gentle - and how fierce - she could be. A true 'earth mother'. 
"You're...m-missing someone, Xander. I can s-see that in your aura. Spike isn't h-here, is he?"

Xander stared at her, incredulous, then looked quickly down at his hands, which were clenched tightly on his knees.

Get a grip, Harris. Calm down or she'll know everything!

She wouldn't...say anything...

You can't know that! This is need-to-know, soldier!

I think she already knows

Pack. No harm, the hyena insisted, and Xander looked back up at her; saw the sweetest smile on her face, that faded under his frightened stare.

"Tara - I don't...I'm not...Spike..." He trailed off helplessly, flinching a little from the silent tirade of protest and invective the soldier was hurling at him.

"I-it's okay, Xander. I w-won't tell anybody. I...s-saw you two th-that night, outside of L-llowel House." Xander groaned, shutting his eyes.

Fuck! We should have been more careful, should have...
"Your a-auras were really...you l-looked right t-together, Xander. I th-think it's okay, y-you two."

Xander just stared at her, and then he reached out and grasped her hand, startling her. "Tara - thank you. I - Spike is..." He shook his head and smiled. "Just, thanks. I'm...glad you know. And please don't say anything. I think - it's not a good time for earth-shattering announcements, you know?"

"I n-know. I won't say an-anything. I'm happy for you - both of you. You make each other h-happy."

"Yeah. We do." Xander gave a last, light squeeze to her hand and then let her go, and she got up and unobtrusively made her way back to Willow, who had finally stopped babbling at Oz and was hugging him. Oz's eyes were black over her shoulder, and he broke away gently but firmly, retreating. Giles watched him with concern, idly stroking the cover of a book.

"I really need to go now, Willow. I'll be around. I can help with this - Adam thing, probably. Anything to get the Initiative out of Sunnydale. We'll talk, just not... I'll be around, ok, Willow?" Oz was uncomfortable, but Willow didn't seem to notice and she nodded, wiping her eyes, smiling gratefully at Tara as the blonde took her hand.
"Okay Oz. I'm - glad you're back. Really I am. And we're - we're all glad you've decided to help us. Right, Giles? Always good to have one more on the team."

"Yes - yes it is." Giles stepped up to Oz and offered his hand, and Oz shook it solemnly. "When we get more information about this 'Adam', we'll call you and Xander. All right?"

"Sure, Giles. Sounds good." Xander stood up and went over to Oz, cocking an eyebrow, and Oz nodded.

"We're gonna go on home, then. I guess - call me when Buffy gets back, tell me if anything...new is happening," Xander said. They said their goodbyes, and Xander and Oz left. Halfway back home, driving on autopilot, Xander jumped a little when Oz spoke.

"So...Tara knows. About you and Spike."

"Y-yeah. How'd you..."

"I could hear her."

"Oh." Xander laughed shakily. "Gotta get used to all these people with super-powers around me." Oz smiled - touched Xander's shoulder fleetingly with his hand. Xander glanced over at his calm profile - at the hair he'd re-hennaed the day before to a deep, rich
auburn that glowed in the gilding light of the setting sun. "How do you feel about - everything? Spike. That whole thing with...Jack."

"You mean, how do I feel now that William the Bloody is back?" Oz's voice was level but the look he shot Xander was full of some emotion and Xander flinched a little.

"Yeah. I mean - I guess you're ok with the concept of me and Spike. But...do you think...I should have left that whole chip thing alone?"

Oz sighed, bringing one foot up onto the seat of the truck and putting his chin on his knee, fingers absently toying with an ankle-bracelet of leather and glass beads. "You're right - you and Spike as a couple, two guys - that doesn't bother me. Me and Devon go back a long way and - we've always been...close." Oz studied his nails for a moment - chipped blue polish instead of black - and Xander felt a little clutch of longing that almost cancelled out the shock of what Oz had just said.

"You and...Devon? Really? But he's always got those...groupies."

Oz laughed. "Yeah. He's not...well, let's just say that Devon thinks monogamy is okay if you practice it serially." Xander laughed, too, but then Oz's smile faded
and he knew that he might not like what came next. "As for Jack - that whole scene. I mean - wow. Gotta say he gave you something really cool. I'd like to see what you see, sometime. That'd be..." Oz shook his head, and pulled his other leg up, wrapping his arms around his shins. "And...what he did for Spike...I can't say I'm surprised that you asked. You love him. You want to - take care of him. And he was hurting. I understand that. I dunno what Spike'll do. I hope he's like you say. I hope he'll come back and not...kill us all. But that isn't anything we can really know, is it? 'Cause, people are complex, and he's got a person and a demon to deal with..." Oz rubbed his chin on his knees, thinking. "I don't blame you for wanting to help him. The Initiative was all about power. And what they did to him was...vindictive. Like taking a tiger and pulling out all its teeth and claws and then letting it loose. I want them to go down as badly as Spike does." Oz shifted a little, looking over at Xander, and Xander just drove, amazed at the words that had poured out of him.

"I don't think I've ever heard you talk that much at one time." Xander said finally, and Oz just grinned at him.

"I want it to work, Xander. Just like you do. But it's kind of a wait and see thing, you know? If he's - okay with us,
then that's cool. If he's not...you know I won't let him hurt Willow - any of them."

"Yeah. I know. But when I look at him - really look - what I see - what I feel is so strong. He's nothing like the vamps we dust out on patrol, Oz. He's so different. I just...I trust him."

"Trust is nice." There was a long silence, and Oz looked out the window for a minute - looked back. "He'll be back, Xander."

"Yeah. Thanks, Oz." Oz just shrugged, smiling a little, and reached to turn on the radio. "Are you - okay, Oz? I mean, everything that happened...how are you?" Oz fiddled with the radio, finally getting some kind of acoustic NPR-type thing, and settled back in the seat.

"I guess I'm okay Xander. I really want to put the Initiative in the ground. I learned some meditation, in Tibet? It helps keeps the wolf...at bay. It keeps the Initiative at bay, too." Oz's eyes were clear and steady and calm and the lack of emotion more than anything clued Xander in.

Somebody else with nightmares. Fucking bastards "You'll - tell me if you need...anything. Right?"
"Yeah. I will." Oz grinned at him, and they drove the rest of the way home in companionable silence.

Monday morning, waking up alone, Xander felt the depression coming back. Oz slept in a loose curl of brown and russet fur on the couch. He'd said that the lumps didn't bother the wolf so much. Xander was glad he was there, if only because it gave him something to focus on.

Gotta be quiet, don't wake him. Wonder if he'd like to try some kind of chicken for dinner or if we should just fall back on pizza? Remember to get more laundry soap, we're almost out... Xander managed to make it through the day and felt something like relief, going home. He was looking forward to seeing Oz - just talking a little, maybe, or listening to Oz play his guitar. Something to distract him. He'd trusted Spike not to kill his friends - and he hadn't. But Spike being gone - made him second-guess everything he'd done. All his reasons seemed faulty, now. Putting his trust in a vampire just seemed stupid. Even one with a soul. Look at Angel, for god's sake. But then he'd think about Spike in bed with him -
Spike standing in the glowing corona of his souls, love and need and desire and tenderness flowing out from him. Spike aching with loss over Drusilla and Spike looking him in the eye and telling Xander he was loved. And the trust was there again, just like that. And that only made that void of not-Spike worse, and deeper, and darker.

He parked his truck and got out, stretching, hauling his tool belt and laundry soap out of the seat. At the door he paused and got a sheaf of mail out of the box attached to the front wall and carried it inside. He dumped soap and tool belt on the kitchen floor, tossed the mail down and got a cold soda before he slumped gratefully into a chair. They'd all had to pitch in and do some heavy lifting today, cleaning up part of the site so that the buyers could see it. Putting in finishing touches. Xander was sore and tired, but proud of how well his crew had worked - and that Manny had put it all in his hands, no questions asked. Oz came out of the back of the house, a pile of shirts in his hands. "Hey, Xander," he said, and Xander waved at him, gulping soda.

"Oz. I'm just gonna get pizza, okay? I'm so worn out I can't even think about experimental cooking."
"Fine with me." Oz lay the shirts on the table and started folding them and Xander picked up the mail, shuffling through it.

Bill. Bill. Junk. Previous occupant. Any occupant. Oh good, bras and panties are on sale... He flipped past yet another gaudily-colored circular and then froze. He went back to the piece of mail, heart pounding. It was a postcard, slightly crumpled around the edges. On it in one corner was a scallop shell, with a bright red strawberry superimposed over it. And the words 'Oxnard - California's Strawberry Coast'. Underneath was a view of the Channel Islands Harbor at sunset - Xander recognized it. He and Thomas had strolled there once hand in hand, watching the gulls. Mouth suddenly dry, Xander turned the postcard over. On the other side were four or five lines in the beautiful 'birthday card' script that was Spike's. Xander blinked, his eyes refusing to focus. Then finally, he read the words there.

"As a perfume doth remain
In the folds where it hath lain,
So the thought of you, remaining
Deeply folded in my brain,
Will not leave me; all things leave me;
You remain."
His heart did a peculiar little extra thump, and he took a deep, deep breath. *Oh god, oh...god... He's alive, he's...in fucking Oxnard, what the fuck? But he's alive...*

"You all right, Xander?" Xander blinked, focusing, and looked up at Oz, who was staring at him, frowning just a little. "Xander?"

"Yeah. Uh. I'm - I'm fine, Oz. It's..." He couldn't think of what to say, so he shoved the postcard at Oz. He noticed that his hand was shaking. Oz took the postcard and looked at the front and 'humfed', so much like the wolf that Xander felt a hysterical little giggle rising up into his throat. He choked it back and took a hasty swig of soda.

Oz turned the postcard over and glanced at Xander for permission, then read it. A slow smile drew up the corners of his mouth, and he handed the card back. "That's nice. I guess that's from Spike?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. From Spike.‖ Xander realized he was grinning like an idiot, but he didn't care.

"Why Oxnard?‖ Oz asked, folding his last shirt.

"I dunno. I was down there, last summer... Oh." Xander sat bolt upright, a sudden thought coming to him. *Oh no. He wouldn't. I mean...would he? I told him the story and he...oh fuck" "I think maybe... I dunno.‖
Oz gave him a searching look, as if he thought Xander knew more, but then he nodded and wandered away with his shirts, putting them in the open duffle that had become a permanent fixture in the living room. He'd refused to let Xander clean out a drawer for him - Xander's dresser was pretty small and he really didn't have a place to put any stuff he moved. Oz just told him it was fine and that in Tibet he'd only had two shirts and one pair of pants so this was really like the Ritz, and he didn't mind.

Xander sat at the table and read his postcard over and over, forgetting how tired he was and how hungry. He barely noticed Oz ordering pizza - turning on the radio.

*God, Spike's down in Oxnard, he's...*

*Hunting* the hyena grumbled, and Xander knew it was so. Spike was hunting. He finally noticed the music playing, and he realized that it was almost dark and the food was there and he was starved. The song played on and the chorus made Xander shiver.

"And I find it kind of funny... I find it kind of sad...

The dreams in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had... "
He got up, and got another soda for himself and one for Oz, and was glad when the song ended.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The next day he got two postcards. *Maybe he mailed one on Sunday. Spike...come back, love...*

The second was something that seemed vaguely familiar. He was pretty sure he'd read it in school, but so much had taken precedence over studying - saving the world from certain doom and all that - that it was only a fleeting thought.

"*Wild Nights! Wild Nights! were I with thee*
*Wild Nights would be our luxury.*
*Futile the winds to a heart in port, Gone with the compass*
*Gone with the chart--Rowing in Eden.*
*Ah the Sea! Might I but moor-- Tonight in thee."

The third was as unfamiliar as the first, but it ached with the same loneliness that Xander felt.
"Western wind, when wilt thou blow, 
The small rain down can rain? 
Christ, if my love were in my arms 
And I in my bed again! "

The same, the same for me... Please, whatever you're doing up there - what I know you're doing - don't, don't, just leave it and come home... A couple of times during the long days that Spike was gone, Xander thought he was going crazy. He'd wake up in the night certain he'd heard Spike's voice - felt him, right there in the bed with him. But always it was just a dream...or wishful thinking. Once, at work, he'd suddenly started upright from the two-by-sixes he was nailing, fear washing over him - certain Spike had cried out his name. But he blinked at the sun pouring down over him, and the hive-like bustle of the site, and knew it wasn't Spike. At least, it wasn't Spike there...it was as if...

As if he's in my head - like I'm hearing him. Really must be crazy. Unless it's some kind of freaky vampire thing. I think I need to check out some of Giles' books. Won't that be fun

Wednesday's postcard was Iggy Pop from that movie, and it made Xander grin all night. Thursday was something amazing and unfamiliar again, and Xander
wondered how Spike could possibly remember so much stuff when he couldn't, apparently, remember to rinse blood out of his own mug or wipe his boots off. *The Selective Memory of the Evil Undead: Theories and a Case Study* Xander thought, and snickered over his carry-out curried chicken.

"*The incredible beauty of joy*

*Stars with fire the joining of lips, O let our loves too*

*Be joined, there is not a maiden*

*Burns and thirsts for love*

*More than my blood for you, by the shore of seals while the wings*

*Weave like a web in the air*

*Divinely superfluous beauty."

Oz thought he recognized that one. Something about the style - the subject - made him think he knew it and Xander was startled out of a daze while not-really-watching a 'Law and Order' re-run by Oz smacking his hand on his knee and saying:

"Robinson Jeffers!" with this huge smile on his face.

"What?"
"The postcard today. It's Robinson Jeffers. He lived up in Carmel. Cool. I wonder how Spike knows his stuff? Doesn't seem like...evil undead poetry to me."

"And you'd be the expert on evil undead poetry?" Xander grinned at him and they had a very...different sort of discussion. All about the kind of poetry vampires should like, as opposed to what Spike, apparently, did like. Xander didn't actually know a lot of poetry but Oz did. Because, Oz said, it helped him to write songs when he got into the cadences and word pictures of poetry. He even quoted a little for Xander and it made Xander feel a little stupid, and a little excited at the same time. Xander wanted to know poetry, too - to know who Robinson Jeffers or Oscar Wilde or Ezra Pound were. He decided to go to the library the next day.

Friday's postcard somehow brought tears to Xander's eyes. He didn't know why, particularly, and he wiped his eyes roughly while Oz poured a glass of milk and they settled to a rather haphazard dinner of cereal and toast.

_Gotta go to the store tonight. Spike in the changing room...maybe we'll go to a different store..._

_"But if you ever come to a road where danger
Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share._
Be good to the lad who loves you true,  
And the soul that was born to die for you,  
And whistle and I'll be there..."

They ended up going to the same store and Xander felt the depression settle on him again, as he remembered that night and the nights that followed. It hadn't been that long - only four months, almost five, since Spike had stumbled through Giles' door, starving and desperate. And a lot of the time after that he'd spent fighting with Spike, or ignoring him, or being ignored.

How can I feel this way in such a short time? Seems...too fast. It's crazy. But...miss him, miss him...

Wanted him for two years. Loved him for two years. It isn't too fast. It was too slow

Xander was amazed that the soldier would say such a thing, but the soldier was straightforward, if a bit schizo. He lay in bed that night reading a library book - a collection of Jeffer's poetry - and while the words about granite and pines, the sea and hawks, stonecutters and seals ran and blurred together on the page, he remembered... A night in the Basement of Doom, his parents upstairs screaming like the damned, hurling invective and bottles and god knew what else. And Xander had cringed down on his couch, horrified and
ashamed and flinching, waiting. Waiting to hear that
drawling, caressing voice stroke across him with razors
and acid, telling him what he knew already: worthless,
useless and wasn't he going to be just like them - already
just like them - spoilt blood and not a chance in hell to
escape it. But Spike had stood up and stamped into his
boots and pulled on his duster, talking about getting a
beer and playing a game of pool. Then he'd stood in the
doorway and looked at Xander as if he were a complete
idiot.

"You comin' or what, mate?" he'd snapped, lighting a
cigarette and blowing the smoke toward Xander -
eyebrow cocked, lips smirking. Xander had scrambled to
put on his sneakers and they'd played pool and drunk
beer and basically acted like friends. And Spike hadn't
said a word, not one word, about his parents.

Xander looked up at the mirror over his dresser, where
six garish postcards and one photograph were
stuck. Maybe he felt the same. Maybe he
felt...something for me, too, that long ago. Only took a
couple weeks after that for me to kiss him. Mmmm...that
kiss ... Spike, Spike, come home Xander fell asleep on the
book, dreaming about storms and seals and white,
arrow-winged gulls.
Child's *Ballads* - *Thomas the Rhymer*

Arthur Symons - *As A Perfume*

Tears for Fears - *Mad World*

Emily Dickinson - *Wild Nights*

Anonymous, 16th Century - *Lover in Winter Plaineth for the Spring*

Robinson Jeffers - *Divinely Superfluous Beauty*

A. E. Housman - *More Poems*

11 Promise

Spike flew, the motorcycle like solid thunder between his thighs, the sea-salt air slicing around him, cold and
heavy. He'd stolen a CD player and headphones and was blasting Buzzcocks straight into his skull. He roared the words along with Shelley, swooping the bike from lane to lane. It was almost three a.m., and the traffic was light. Spike grinned. Home. He was going home. Xander was there, waiting for him Please be there love. Had to do this. Had to get out, get back into my game...collect a debt. Please be there and he was eager to arrive. He gunned the bike faster still, demon's eyes behind wrap-around shades easily seeing the route.

"I used to only want but now I need
To get by with what I got but now I need
I need
I used to only want but now I need
I need sex ... I need love
I need drink ... I need drugs
I need food ... I need cash
I need you to love me back"

He'd finished up in Oxnard late Thursday night. Then he'd driven south, down to LA, in search of replacements for his trademark railroad spikes. Going out of his range seemed the smart thing to do. He didn't want anyone linking him to anything. At least, not yet. He'd driven into
LA in the pale lemon light of almost-dawn and holed up in a cheap motel, putting his last postcard in the mailbox on the corner.

Hope he liked those. Kinda...poufy. But I had to let him know I was still alive somehow. Then he'd slept, and dreamed of Xander - called his name so loud he'd woken himself. It was only mid-afternoon, but sleep had been elusive and he'd ended up watching TV until the sun went down. He'd stared at the phone and thought about calling Xander - had been thinking about it every hour, every day. But he'd had work to do - something that had to be done, even if the need was only in his mind. A spot of revenge on four men who'd touched mine Xander and hurt him. He didn't want to talk to Xander about it on the phone. Time enough for talk later. If Xander would listen.

That night in L.A. he'd gone out, leaving his duster behind, finding an easy meal in a dark corner of a club. oh, the blood, makes me whole, makes me...

He'd taken the bright white shirt the food had been wearing. Then he'd gone into one of those rich-folk home improvement places. And why in hell is this place open at ten o'clock at night? Surprisingly, there had been spikes there - about half the size of real railroad spikes, but solid
and deadly all the same. Spike had looked them over, but then decided on something...newer.

Eight inch long galvanized steel, as big around as his index finger. And twisted. Spiral nails, the box said. Love at first sight. Spike got two dozen and walked jauntily outside, ignoring the alarm as he exited the store, and knocking aside with a casual backhand the security guard who came running. He made his way back to the bike, shedding the stolen shirt not much of a disguise but better than a long leather coat in this weather getting his duster and hitting the road. Pushed the bike up to top speed and just gone, leaving the lights of LA behind, leaving Oxnard behind, feeling the subtle, warping aura of the Hellmouth stretch out and pull him in. Going home, going home. Can't wait to feel my boy around me, on me, beneath me...heat and sweat and sawdust smell, sweet and musk

He undulated on the saddle of the bike, the vibration sending delicious tingles through his groin and belly - making his hard-on even harder.

"I need ... I need ... I need ... I need
The things I used to crave for now I need
Have made me just a slave for what I need
I need
Yes I am just a slave for what I need"

When the Welcome to Sunnydale sign came into view, Spike considered running the bike into it but decided that arriving home with cuts and broken bones would probably not make for a very fun homecoming. He ditched the bike near the ruins of the old high school and walked the rest of the way. He was back. He was once again the Big Bad, and the vamps and demons of Sunnydale would soon know it. And so would the soldiers. Whether they knew it was him or not, he was going to make his presence felt.

As he got closer to home, he walked slower and slower, thinking. He wanted - more than anything - to find the Slayer and her Watcher, and slowly repay them both for the humiliations he had endured at their hands. But... Xander will hate that. He's not happy with them, but they're still his mates... Bloody hell. Not gonna endure any shite from the Slayer. Hope Xander can talk to her, 'cause I might just have to... Fuck. He stopped altogether, looking down the street to the cul-de-sac and home, home He pulled a cigarette out and lit it, then resumed his walk, even slower then before.

He was going to get the soldiers - the doctors - anyone
he could find that had been a part of the Initiative. And he wasn't going to show them any mercy whatsoever. Xander knew that. But... The Judge had been right, when he'd said he and Dru had 'stunk of humanity'. They had - he had, and still did - always would.

It was that soul Xander could see - William the Poet still looking out of William the Bloody's eyes from time to time. Spike had never seen a reason to give up his passions - his obsessions. Had seen no reason not to love and live exactly as his mind, his will and soul, apparently dictated. Somehow, knowing the soul was there - that the human part was real not just something Dru passed on - madness from her blood to mine. Always thought that's what it was, that so-familiar voice... it gave him...permission. To love Xander like he did, hopelessly and completely. It gave him permission to - make exceptions. To act as other vampires would not - very possibly could not.

He'd always done that - always been an aberration that Darla, Angelus - the Master - could barely abide. Dru had the Sight - she was allowed her strangeness, because her talent was real, and useful. And because Angelus' cruelly deft hand had made her so. But his strangeness...had only pissed the Family off. And he'd wrapped it around
himself like armor and used it like a sword and a wedge and a *bludgeon*, even. Anything to maintain *himself*. The demon had given him the means - speed and strength, immortality and amorality - to do anything, be anything. And he'd warped the demon to his will and fought its rage and its mindlessness to a standstill.

*He used it* - and never again would he be that beaten, heartsick, stumbling fool of a boy. It was true, what he'd told Xander - nothing and no one owned him, not even the demon. And for Xander he would do... *Anything. Everything. I'll give him this because I CAN. Me. Spike. Who backs away from nothing, and bows down to no one. Ever again. My lovely boy saw to that* It wasn't some blood-borne madness that made him like this. It was *himself*. And that had a very deep and satisfying feel to it. He was...better...then he ever thought he could be - and beneath no one, at all.

No, he wouldn't kill them, and Xander would believe it was love and the soul and that Spike was really a good guy, down deep. Spike would know he wasn't good at all, but that he could make exceptions to every rule, and be what he chose to be. And right now and forever, he chose to be the vampire that Xander loved.
He finished his smoke and tossed the butt away, then went silently up the steps to the door, hoping to find it open and not chained and locked as was Xander's usual habit. The knob turned easily under his hand, and he slipped inside. The wolf was there, sprawled on the couch, and Oz lifted his muzzle, eyes glittering, and made a tiny sound, a sort of interrogatory whine that made Spike grin.

"Wolfling. Better close your ears, mate," Spike whispered. He took his Docs off and left them by the door, shed his duster to the couch-back and ghosted through the house to the bedroom, undoing his belt. He stood in the doorway for a moment, only watching, drinking in the sight of my own, my boy Xander was curled in the center of the bed, a pillow bunched to his chest, a book laying face-down on the other pillow, fat candle half-burned on the night table. In the golden light he glowed; sable hair as sleek as a mink, with glints of red and gold in it. His dark eyes were shuttered behind thick lashes, his lush, mobile mouth open very slightly. His skin looked like the softest tanned suede, and Spike itched to touch it, re-learn it; taste and smell and have every inch of it. He took his clothing off silently, dropping them where he stood, and moved to the side of the bed. He could smell Xander; the honeyed warmth of him, salt
and sweet, clean wood and a little clean sweat, the citrus soap from the shower. Spike shivered all over; scenting him, achingly hard, his thighs trembling with want and his breath coming in little pants. He slipped into the bed - into the laval heat from Xander's body, the scent of love mine safety home home

Xander was dreaming. In his dream, he was running with Willow, heading for the Bronze. Inside was a confusion of bodies - screaming, darting figures in the dim light. And then Jesse was there, and then they were face to face, and then the jolt of the stake, going in, and not Jesse's face now - Spike's face - dissolving, flying apart, ribboning down in scarves of ash and dust. In his dream, Spike screamed as he died, and Xander screamed as well, a choking cry - NO! And woke shivering all over, panting, his heart pounding fit to burst. And cool, cool arms, holding him tight, cool hands stroking over his chest, lips against his ear and a voice, purring out words of comfort, words of love. SPIKE? Can't be...still dreaming...am I? Fuck, don't want this to be a dream... Xander opened his eyes - took a long, long breath, and it was there; the scent of him - leather and smoke, the cool spices of his hair, his sex, his unliving, demonic flesh. Flesh that Xander wanted to taste, to touch...to crawl inside. He pushed back against the chilled hardness of chest and
belly and cock and thighs, and a sound escaped him, a low moan of want. He fought to turn, to see, and the arms loosened, helping him, and Spike was there, just there; fathomless eyes and ink-slash of eyebrows, the face of a cathedral angel and the wickedly smiling mouth of Lucifer himself. *Home, he's home, he's here...*

"Ssss..." Xander tried to say Spike's name and couldn't - found his teeth were chattering so hard he could barely make a sound at all.

"Xander, love...you all right?" Spike's voice was honey, was a growl of pure arousal, and Xander shuddered, clenching his jaw, trying to get control. Spike's hair was tousled and waved over his head, and one lock fell forward, curling beside the scar, beside ridiculously girlish lashes.

"S-ss- Spike!"

"Yes love..." That smile - that smile of pure want, and oh *fuck*... Xander moved, faster then he thought possible. He took Spike's face in his hands and kissed him. Kissed him as hard and long and as deeply as he could; shaking, seeking out every inch of the cool, wet flesh - bruising the lips beneath his and sucking greedily on the flickering tongue. Arousal coursing through him in waves, hot and cold. He finally had to pull away, gasping, and Spike's lips
were swollen and gleaming, his eyes nearly black. Xander ran his fingers back through Spike's hair, down his neck to shoulders and back. Spike moved then, rolling Xander beneath him and kissing him back, just as hard, as desperate. His cock was hard and slick with pre-come, rubbing over Xander's own erection, and Xander thrust up against him, fighting to get his legs free, to wrap them around Spike's hips and cling with his arms, nails digging into the satin flesh. They were both moaning now, panting, and Xander wanted...

"Spike - need you love - need you now...in me... Spike...want you to fuck me...have me... Spike, Spike, love..." His own voice was gasping and hoarse with desire, his words coming out between kisses and bites and licks from the mouth of the vampire.

"Yesss," Spike hissed, grinding into him, biting along his jaw, his throat. Xander arched upwards hard and cried out when Spike's teeth grazed the near-invisible mark he'd made a week ago. He was trembling on the edge - had never felt so needy, so wanton. He spread his legs as far as they would go, urging Spike to do something, do anything.

"Wait love, hav'ta get...somethin'..." Spike lunged for the side table, fumbling in the drawer, and Xander licked his
tongue over Spike's nipples, rough rasps like cat, tasting the silken flesh, biting so that Spike gasped aloud. Then Spike was moving, kneeling up, and Xander reached down to stroke the jutting hardness of the vampire's cock, bringing a slicked finger up to his mouth and sucking off the savory fluid that was smeared there. Spike hovered over him, his eyes gone gleaming gold.

"Hurry Spike - just do it, I want you, want you in me..."

"Won't hurt you, love, wait, wait..." Spike smeared lube on his fingers and wormed them into tight, grasping flesh. Xander felt the fire building impossibly fast in his balls - his belly. He grasped Spike's biceps, urging him forward, arching upwards, unable to keep himself still. Spike was panting now, eyes fixed on Xander.

"Oh fuck, Xander...so hot..." Spike moaned. When Spike thrust a third finger into him - twisting, rubbing, the orgasm that rolled over Xander was like a wave of lightning. A rush of tingling sparks surged the length of Xander's body, and he cried out, hands tightening convulsively on Spike's arms, hard enough to bruise. Spike leaned down and fastened his mouth on Xander's cock, sucking the last of the creamy fluid from him, licking it from where it had spattered on belly and chest.
Xander lay panting, writhing, still impaled on the caressing fingers, and he groaned when Spike withdrew.

"Xander...so sweet, so fuckin' perfect..." Spike pressed forward, twisting his hips and sinking into Xander, one long glide, his head thrown back and his mouth open in a soundless cry. Xander shuddered, already growing hard again, and he pulled Spike down to him, his thighs against Spike's ribs, his calves on the trembling shoulders. He wanted Spike as deep, as close as he could possibly get him, and Spike began to thrust into him hard, rubbing over and over that one place, making Xander gasp aloud. *Oh fuck, want...want more...oh good, so good...closer love, deeper love, more...*

Xander wasn't aware he was chanting aloud, his voice a whispered rasp. Spike dipped down and pushed at Xander's thighs with his arms, pounding into him, and Xander bit at the vampire's mouth, his lips - threw his head back suddenly, stretching his throat out, pulling Spike closer and the demon snarled. Spike bent to the arched column of flesh, snuffling over it, tasting. Without warning he sank his fangs deep into the muscle at the top of Xander's shoulder - a harder, more savage bite then he'd ever given. Xander screamed aloud, his body dissolving into a frenzy of desperate thrusts and Spike's
did the same, pounding flesh and bone hard enough to bruise. Xander sank his nails into Spike's back, clawing him closer... *need need oh fuck I neeeed!*

He snaked his head around, pure instinct, and sank his own, blunter teeth into Spike's neck, as hard as he could, tearing flesh and feeling the sudden tingle on his lips and tongue as the vampire's blood ran into his mouth.

It was like an electric current had suddenly opened between them - mouth to cock to mouth - incandescent and pure. Spike arched hard into him, whipping his own head away from Xander's body, roaring into the spangled darkness. Xander could feel Spike's orgasm, the shuddering spasms of it pumping cool semen into him and his own body did the same, pouring out his ecstasy between them.

Spike collapsed onto him, panting, and Xander wrapped trembling legs around his waist, arms around his neck, pulling him close and closer, unwilling to let even a millimeter of air come between them. He kissed Spike, all over his face, darting little kisses between gasps for air, little licks of his tongue to gather the taste of the vampire to him, his hands ceaselessly roving over and over the arched back, the perfect curve of buttock.
"Spike, you're home, you're here, you bastard, don't you ever do that to me again, Spike...Spike..." Xander whispered to him, and his whole body felt...new. Felt as if he'd just wakened from a long and restful sleep and the tingly, drowsy feeling was peace and satiation, and comfort. Spike was licking the bite now, cleaning away all traces of blood, sending little sparks of pleasure along Xander's spine, down into his belly.

"Xanderrrr," he purred, licking, kissing, and Xander ran his hands up over Spike's shoulders and throat to his head - pushed his fingers back through Spike's hair and then jerked the vampire's head up, glaring into startled lapis eyes.

"Don't you fuckin' dare ever do that - I thought you were dead for three days! Or back in the damn Initiative!" Xander gave the vampire's head a little shake, feeling tears welling. He blinked them back, pulled Spike down to kiss him again, biting Spike's lower lip so that the vampire hissed in startlement. Xander licked at the welling of scarlet blood there, feeling it sizzle through his mouth like champagne.

"You don't ever, ever just leave, Spike. Ever. I can't do that. I can't stand that." Spike's eyes were golden in the
candle-light, glimmering, and he ducked his head down into Xander's neck and nuzzled there for a moment.

"You - didn't you get the postcards, love?" he asked finally, and Xander felt a reluctant chuckle bubble up from inside.

"Yeah, I got 'em. They were...I loved them." Spike smiled, and Xander swept his hands down Spike's back to his buttocks and squeezed hard, pinching.

"Oi!"

"Doesn't make up for it. Doesn't make up for it *one bit.* " Xander managed to flex his hips a little, pushing up against Spike, and he sighed a breathy *ohhh* when he felt the vampire move, still hard inside him.

"I'll make up for it," Spike murmured, kissing him - neck and shoulders, cheeks and chin and nose, delicate licks at his mouth, his long fingers tucking into the hair behind Xander's ears, curving around his skull and holding him close. "I'll make up for it all night, love, all day tomorrow...not gonna let you out of bed...not gonna let you be empty for one minute, love...my love...mine..."

"Yours, all yours..." Xander sighed into the smoke and spice of his mouth, the cool damask of his skin. He was becoming hard again himself, something he hadn't
thought possible after the intensity of the orgasms he'd just had. Spike continued to kiss, sweet and slow, his body barely moving. Xander undulated beneath him, using internal muscles to massage the hard length inside him. He couldn't stop his hands from going over and over Spike's body, tracing out ribs and shoulder blades, bicep, triceps, the hollow of his collarbones and the ridge of spine. His thighs ached and trembled, locked around Spike's waist, but he wouldn't let go. Spike licked again and again at the marks on Xander's neck, and Xander couldn't help gasping each time he did it.

"Ohhh...fuck...why does it - why does it feel like that? Why is that so fuckin' sexy?"

"Just is, love. How it is, when a vampire bites a human. Why d'ya think people pay vampires to bite 'em?"

"What? People do that?" Spike moved his hips a little faster, hissing, and Xander closed his eyes, reveling in the sensations; the pull and thrust and weight of Spike in him and over him, his scent and the texture of his skin.

"You feel - me, in you. When I do this." Tongue on the bite, rasping, and Xander shuddered. And he could feel - could feel something else, something besides the physical. Could feel pleasure. Want. Fierce joy. Predatory desire that would have and never let go. Tenderness.
Xander looked up, into Spikes' gaze, and saw those same things there, in his eyes. Saw Spikes' love laid out for him, raw and so hungry...

"That's you? Spike, I can feel...what you feel, for me..."

"Yeah? That's brilliant, pet. It works, then. This is how I feel for you, this..." And Spike dropped his head again to the mark, his hips thrusting faster now, his hands pulling Xander closer. When he came it was with a sound like a sob, and Xander arched into him and came as well, reveling in those pulses of raw emotion that seemed to flow straight from Spikes' heart into him. They lay gasping, and Xander finally had to let his legs fall, almost painfully stretching them out on either side of Spikes' hips, letting his feet tangle with the vampire's.

"Do you feel - what's it like, when I do this?" Xander asked, and mouthed his own bite-mark on Spikes' shoulder. Spike hugged him tight, then lifted his head to look at Xander again, smiling.

"Feels like - like you just put your hand in me and petted me...feels like you took my cock in your mouth...like you kissed me. Feels good, love..."

"Can you...can you feel this?" Xander thought at Spike - thought of the past week and how empty he'd felt - how
alone. How he felt now - alive again, *complete*. How much he loved Spike - how beautiful he was. Spike closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were wide and shocked.

"Didn't think you could - love me so much. You love me that much, Xander?" Spike's voice had dropped to a rough whisper, and his gaze was fearful and amazed all at once - and desperate. Wanting so much. Xander felt that fear, fluttering along the edges of his mind. Spike's fear, that somehow this was all...temporary. Superficial. Xander traced Spike's cool lips with his fingers - gently kissed him - no pressure, just a sighing touch.

"Love you that much. That much..." He kissed him again, a little harder, and Spike responded eagerly, sinking his tongue into Xander's mouth, teasing it along tooth-edges and the sensitive roof, fluttering his tongue over and around Xander's like a cool, pink moth. Xander groaned, and pushed a little with his heels, but he couldn't get his legs to come up again.

"Want more, Spike, but I think I'm gonna need to - get my second wind, here." Spike ducked to nibble Xander's lower lip and smirked up at him.
"Poor human. All shagged out already?" Xander pinched a taut buttock and Spike bucked into him a little, laughing.

"Just have to put up with it, Spike. M'all...tingly and...heavy. Mmmm..." Xander pulled him close, to kiss and caress. Slowly, so slowly, they both drifted into sleep.

The candle hissed and sputtered, and in the kitchen Oz turned on the radio, searching for something soft. He settled to a snack of cold store-bought chicken and a woman's voice and smooth guitar, spiraling out into the warm, sea-scented air.

"...But night is the cathedral where we recognized the sign...

We strangers know each other now, as part of a whole design...

Oh hold me like a baby, that will not fall asleep...

Curl me up inside you and let me hear you through the heat..."
Buzzcocks - *I Need*

Suzanne Vega - *Gypsy*


12 Truth

Late Sunday afternoon; Spike asleep in bed, Xander half-heartedly sweeping the living room, Oz perusing the help wanted pages of the paper. *Like fuckin' Leave it to Beaver here or something.* *What is wrong with you people!* The soldier hated the domesticity of everyday life and seemed happiest when plotting death and destruction. Xander had learned to tune him out but sometimes, like now, he just made Xander laugh. Oz looked up from the paper, giving him a curious look through the pass through.

"What's so funny, Xander?"

"Oh - it's just..." Xander dragged the broom to the doorway and stood there, poking it into the corner made by the wall and kitchen cabinet. He felt pleasantly
languorous and achy from...last night. Two last nights. "You remember that Halloween, that spell that Giles' old buddy did that made us all turn into what our costumes were? I dressed up like a soldier..."

"Yeah."

"Well - the soldier's still around. He - never really left. I can still remember a lot of that military stuff and - he - talks to me."

"Yeah? Like - out loud?" Oz looked nothing more then curious, but Xander felt the blood rush to his face. He's gonna think I'm insane. Well. More insane then usual

"Well - in my head. Anyway, he's all - upset - 'cause I haven't been doing the whole 'Scooby' thing so much lately. He likes the search and destroy stuff. Actually, the hyena..." Xander trailed off at Oz's look of astonishment, and he bit his lip.

Damn. Didn't mean to let that out.

Pack. Won't care

Oh, shut up. How big is this pack, anyway? You keep
adding people.


MOTHER witch? You mean Willow.

Light witch  A fleeting image of Tara, blonde hair backlit by the sun, came to Xander's mind.  NOT Willow?

Red witch scares us

"Xander? You all right?"

"Huh?" Xander blinked - realized that he'd totally zoned out and that Oz was staring at him.

"Oh, sorry, I..."

"You said hyena. Wanna - fill me in?" Xander sighed, and leaned the broom against the wall. He pushed at his hair, which was growing long. No quite long enough to put in a ponytail, long enough to get in his eyes. Spike loved it. He went over to the 'fridge and got out a jug of cranberry juice and poured a glass, then sat opposite Oz, taking a long drink.
"Ookay. When Buffy first moved here, we did this field trip to the zoo...and there were these hyenas. And the zookeeper was kinda crazy and he was trying to do this spell to get possessed by the hyena spirit or something, only - me and that guy Tor? His gang, they were in the hyena exhibit, picking on Lance - remember him? Anyway, we all got - caught - in the spell instead. So for a while we were - pack." Xander took another drink, eyeing Oz over the rim of the glass. Oz didn't seem too freaked.

*How the fuck can you tell? He'd make a good spy*

*Shut. Up.* Xander continued.

"Anyway, so, I had a hyena spirit in me and did some crazy stuff, and then that zookeeper - he took it back, sort of. It - never really left. It's still in here, too. Still wants a pack." Oz sat back in his chair, head cocked to one side, a little line of a frown between his eyebrows.

"So, does it have a pack, love?" They both jumped at Spike's voice and turned to see the vampire nude, lounging in the doorway to the bedroom. *Not fair. How come he can fuck all night and get up looking like...like THAT! Sex and attitude and...sex...* The diffused golden
light coming through the blinds made Spike's skin the palest champagne gold, threaded with tiny silver lines of scars. Xander shifted a little in his chair. Spike was looking with definite interest at him, and after a moment Oz looked over at Xander, too.

"Yeah - is there a pack?" Oz's voice was low - slightly hesitant - and Xander wondered suddenly what the wolf thought of them; their odd little home.

"Yeah - there is. It says "Us" Meaning me and the soldier and it, and "Vampire, Wolf"...and... Tara."

"Not Red?" Spike pushed away from the jamb and sidled over to Xander, leaning on the back of his chair and combing his fingers through Xander's hair. Xander closed his eyes in a long blink, loving the feel of the strong, cool fingers tugging and petting. He's nude. In the kitchen. Touching me. In front of OZ. I shouldn't be getting turned on.

"Mmmm... No. Not Willow. She scares it. Kinda scares me, too." Xander sat up a little straighter suddenly, looking at Oz. "Oz man, that doesn't - it doesn't bug you, does it? I mean...you're ok with being part of my psychotic little pack?" Oz was picking at his fingernails,
and he glanced up at Xander and Spike with a quick, smiling look.

"Yeah. It's kinda cool. The wolf likes it. He needs a pack, too... I really need to re-do these." Oz picked a flake of polish off his nail and Xander laughed. He captured one of Spike's hands and pulled it around to inspect.

"Hmmm. Definitely time for a manicure party, Spike. These are atrocious." Spike snorted.

"S'what happens when you're doing heavy labor with your bare hands, love." Xander twisted around in his chair, looking up at Spike, puzzled.

"What heavy labor? You're the laziest person I know."

"Oi! M'not lazy. I just prefer other people to do the heavy lifting. I had to do some...work, while I was away." Xander just looked at him, confused, and then suddenly it clicked and he looked away - looked down. He felt something fear? anger? pulse over him; something Spike was feeling and just as hastily shut down. The feelings - the link, Spike had said - were strong and getting stronger very fast. Xander was getting more and more flashes of whatever Spike was
feeling. He wondered how strong it would get...he wondered if Spike was feeling him. It was - amazing, and unsettling. But good.

"Spike. Would you...would you put on some jeans and sit down and tell me...what you were doing up in Oxnard?" Xander studied the vampire's face, seeing the tiny flinch at the emotionless tone of his voice.

"Don't need to get dressed for that, pet. I was - gettin' back to full strength. Brushing up on my skills. They'd got a tad rusty of late, what with all the - excitement." Spike stalked over to the counter and got a cigarette, lighting it with a snap. He leaned there, smoking furiously, looking at Xander through half-closed eyes.

"But what - what exactly were you doing?" Xander asked, and he realized his voice had gotten very small. Some other emotion surged over him - panic. He stared hard at Spike and realized that the vampire was shaking. That Spike was terrified.

What's wrong? Oh...he thinks...

Well, you're all in a panic over it yourself, Harris. Why
I'm NOT. Ok, I am. But... Spike...love you  love you  Spike felt that - Xander could tell. Spike shut his eyes for a long moment, and then he was striding into the living room and grabbing his duster. Cigarette clenched in his teeth, he rummaged in a pocket and pulled out a stained handkerchief. Blood, that's blood. The hyena tried to scent it and Xander crushed it back. Spike put the knotted handkerchief on the table in front of Xander and draped his duster over a chair. Stood there smoking, watching him. Only Spike could look so intimidating totally nude. And this - like a cat bringing in a dead bird... No, don't go there. Oz had pulled both feet up into his chair and rested his chin on his knees. He too was watching Xander, looking a little like he thought he should leave the room. Xander slowly undid the knots and spread the spattered cotton out. Inside were four things. He touched each of them, naming the name. Knowing.

"Tony." A gold class ring with a large blue stone. There was a football emblem on one side, a cougar on the other. Linebacker. Hurt his shoulder, had to quit  "Mike." A money clip, tarnished brass with a tigers-eye stone set into it. Got it from his dad - a graduation
"Jason." A picture - his 1971 Mustang, all tricked out with racing stripe and mag wheels and scoop. *He did all the work himself.* "Chris." A bracelet, woven leather strips and silver beads. *Got it from his girlfriend* Xander stirred the things with his finger, not looking at Spike or Oz. Remembered Mike helping him with the wiring in the trailer. Remembered Tony having a beer and laughing as Xander and Chris played pool. Remembered Jason telling him his car was totally dead - KIA. Remembered as well, fists and boots, a swinging bat, cruel voices that shouted hateful, hurtful things. He knew what it meant. Knew...they were dead.

"You..."

"Yeah. They hurt you." Spike looked as belligerent and stubborn as a child, knowing he'd pissed somebody off - not admitting he'd been wrong. Xander knew Spike wasn't sorry - knew he would do it again in a minute. Xander looked back down at the pitiful remains of four people he had known.

*Protect the pack.*

*You knew he'd do this. Do something like this, as soon as you told him about being attacked. It's gonna be like*
he can't lie. Can't ever lie. And we can't lie to him. However this works - we can't ever lie, and we'll always know...always know the truth. And the biggest truth is: he's a vampire. And that's not going to change. And if I can't deal...I lose. Lose him

Xander stood up slowly and reached for Spike's cigarette. He lay it gently in the ashtray on the table and then took Spike's face in his hands. He stood looking across the scant inches that separated them, and he loved him, loved this man-not-man. But...

"You can't do this, Spike. You can't." Low whisper, his
eyes never leaving the oceanic blue of the vampire's, and there was a…flinch, in the link.

"It's what I am, love. No one touches what's mine." Spike's voice just as low - vibrating with pain.

"I wasn't yours, then."

"Doesn't matter." Xander let his thumbs just gently caress the blades of Spike's cheekbones - the hollows beneath. His fingers sunk into the soft waves of platinum hair and his heart beating so hard, so painfully hard. Dimly, he was aware of Oz moving - slipping into the living room.

"You don't...care that they're dead." Not really a question and Spike didn't try to answer it, just put his hands lightly on Xander's hips. Xander leaned in and kissed him, softly. "You don't care, but I do, love, I do. You can't...you can't put that on me, Spike. You can't put any more deaths on me. Please love? You can't." Finally, finally, Xander opened to the link - let everything he was feeling spill out, and it was sorrow fear anger horror but it was also love love you always my love mine ALWAYS
Sent as clearly and as fiercely as this new voice would allow, and Spike's eyes widened, and then he leaned up and kissed Xander, slow and sweet and deep. Holding nothing back. His heart on his lips and his hands just gently, gently stroking back through Xander's hair, holding him close.

They were both oblivious to the phone ringing, and Oz answering it. As Oz talked, Xander pulled Spike close, loving the press of the hard, cool body against him; kissing with more urgency now, letting his hands slide down Spike's back to his buttocks and pull him closer still. Spike was rapidly becoming erect, and he slid one lean thigh up Xander's leg, curling it around, his heel digging into Xander's thigh.

The kiss became passionate, breathless, and Xander had to break away, gasping a little. Spike's lips on his throat, and Spike in his head love you love you promise. Oz stood in the doorway to the living room, frowning again.

"Guys. Giles wants us at his place in an hour. Something's happened, apparently."

"Bloody Watcher. C'mon pet, come wash my hair..." Spike nipped lightly at Xander's throat and
Xander shuddered and hugged him tight.

"What's happened? Did he say?" *You're practically dry-humping your...vampire in front of your ...werewolf housemate. Fuck, this is insanity. How come I don't care?*

"Initiative. Adam. Death and chaos. The usual."

"Right. Right. Ok. An hour. We'll just... Spike! We'll just be..." Spike was walking towards the bedroom, having wound his arms around Xander's waist and hoisted him effortlessly. Oz smirked and turned back to the living room.

"I'll just see what's on TV, then," the werewolf said, and rolled his eyes. Spike kicked the bathroom door shut behind them.

*

Xander stood at the top of the stairs going down to Giles' courtyard and sighed. He really didn't want to go down there. All this business with the Initiative was getting out of hand, and he had a feeling it was only going to get
worse. He felt a soft touch in the small of his back, up under his sweater, and he turned his head to smile at Spike. The vampire smirked back, putting a cigarette in his mouth and lighting it. Something that would automatically piss off Giles.

"C'mon pet, once more unto the breach," Spike whispered, and leaned in for a quick kiss. Then he sauntered down the steps and pushed open Giles' door, the Big Bad from head to toe. Xander grinned over at Oz and followed. Inside, Giles was already snapping at Spike to put out his cigarette, and Buffy was glaring daggers - or maybe stakes - at him. Xander and Oz slipped in; Oz went immediately to the breakfast bar, perching on a stool, and Xander settled at Giles' table next to Tara. Anya sat at his other side, smiling at him, and he smiled back a little warily. Willow was doing something on her laptop, frowning.

Spike sucked another half-inch of cigarette to ash and flicked the butt into Gile's kitchen sink, then settled himself on the stairs. Giles had only two lamps lit, and in the dimness of the stairwell Spike's eyes glittered like a cats, and he became a crouching, slightly threatening figure. Xander could barely keep his eyes off him and stiffened in his seat when a sudden wash of want need
swept over him. He glared over at Spike, whose teeth flashed at him, something between a smile and a snarl. Arousal was a twisting little flame down low in his belly, and Xander hunched down in his chair and tried to pay attention to Buffy.

"Well, I found out where Adam is hiding - some caves in Breaker's Woods. Forrest was there, too - one of Riley's team? Doing some recon. And Adam - killed him. I barely made it out of there myself. The electric zappy-gun Forrest had charged Adam up just like the Energizer Bunny." Buffy touched gingerly at a bad bruise on her forehead and looked over at Giles, who was frowning.

"So it seems that this Adam is not averse to killing members of the Initiative. Have you informed Riley of what happened?" Buffy sighed and sat down on the back of the couch. "Yeah, I told him. He was...pretty upset. That and Angel -"

"Angel's in town?" Giles straightened, taking off his glasses, and Xander felt a bolt of pure rage go through him. He glanced hastily over at Spike who was game-face, snarling silently. Xander sent his own feelings out - calm, and quiet, and love love and relaxed marginally when he saw Spike shift back to his human face,
scowling. Buffy looked chagrined, as if she hadn't meant to mention Angel at all.

"Yeah, he - we had some unfinished business from when I went to L.A. He's going back tonight." Giles looked at her for a moment, then he turned to Willow.

"Have you found anything, Willow?" Willow looked up from the scant pages of data on the Initiative that she'd managed to hack into.

"Not really, Giles. All this stuff is so - military. I mean, it's all in that kind of coded military double-talk, you know? It's hard to figure out what they're really saying. Kinda like when you get real excited about a prophecy and start referencing three hundred-year-old books." Willow smiled nervously at him, and Giles pursed his lips, massaging his forehead. Over in his shadows, Spike snorted.

"Yes, well - carry on then. Did this Adam say - anything to you, Buffy? Give any indication of what he's doing out there or what his plans may be?"

"Nah. He was way too interested in trying to kill me. Not one for the polite chit-chat."
"Until we have a better understanding of what he is doing, and a means of killing him, I suggest you avoid his lair altogether. I'd like to talk to Riley about this again, as well. In the meantime, do your best to avoid any Initiative patrols. I'm afraid that they are not going to be very happy with what they perceive as our continuing 'interference'."

Giles leaned up against the breakfast bar and Xander wondered when they could leave - too bad for Forrest, but when you played with fire, you tended to get burned. The Initiative should never have started this particular blaze. That thought was too close to what the soldier was thinking - only he was thinking in terms of friendly fire and acceptable loss and Xander wondered when he'd stopped caring about what happened to the Initiative soldiers. He just wanted them gone. And he really didn't like the thought of Angel lurking around Sunnydale. Who knew what he would find out - or do?

"Slayer, did you say the caves up in Breaker's Woods?" Spike leaned forward into the light, his face serious and sober, and Xander immediately began to panic. It didn't help that he was getting a thready undercurrent of something from Spike that felt
suspiciously like laughter.

"Yeah. Why, are you thinking of taking Adam on yourself? He'd go through you quicker then he did Forrest. In fact - go right ahead! Be my guest." Buffy gave Spike a big smile and perkily tilted her head as she chirped at him, and Xander ground his teeth. Spike pulled out a cigarette and his Zippo with an air of long-suffering and lit the cigarette.

"Noo, I wasn't planning on taking him on - but I wonder if he'd like to take me on. Make me a part of his - team, so to speak."

"Why on Earth would he want to do that?" Giles asked, stepping over to Spike and snatching the cigarette from him. Spike sighed, looking frustrated. Giles carried the cigarette to the sink and ran water over it.

"Evil undead, me. And I've got some of Mad Maggie's hardware in my head. Probably thinks I'm one of the bloody family. I can tell him all about the Slayer. All kinds of - secret Slayer stuff. And he can tell me about what he's doin'. Give us a leg-up on him. The whole spy thing, like Bond." Spike straightened, looking pleased with himself, and Buffy rolled her eyes.
"Riiiiight. And you think he'll just cough up the 4-1-1 on his evil plot to you?"

"Well, he's bloody well not gonna tell you lot anythin'. And it beats runnin' around one step behind, doesn't it? It might be your bloke Riley he goes after next."

"And why would you be willing to do this, Spike?" Giles was cleaning his glasses, and he peered nearsightedly at Spike, who snorted softly.

"'Cause you're payin' me, that's why. Blood and smokes and the odd spare quid. And it might be I can get him to part with somethin' about this bloody chip. Might be I can get it out, or find out how to turn it off. Which is something you lot were supposed to be doing -"

"But that's bad..." Willow started, but Oz interrupted.

"No - it's good. It's the perfect con."

"Hmmmm." Giles looked thoughtful, pacing the small space between the stairs and his desk. Xander sat very, very still. He could feel so many things from Spike it was
hard to separate them, but primarily he could feel amusement and arrogance - and when they managed brief eye-contact, a rush of lust. Xander bit his lip hard, trying not to groan aloud, and Spike smirked a little.

"I think Spike might have something here. Why don't you go ahead with your plan then, Spike, and we'll expect a report back in - two days?"

"Giles!"

"Oi! Two days!" Buffy glared at Spike and turned to Giles, frustration on her face.

"You're not really going to let him do this Giles, are you? He'll probably just lie to us about anything Adam tells him and end up getting us all killed!"

"Two days is bloody short notice, Watcher - might take longer for me to get in there, you know?"

"No, two days. You have two days to show us some progress. You won't get paid until then. And I seriously doubt Adam has any information about the chip, Willow. And Buffy, if Adam doesn't like Spike coming around he will, as you said, kill him. So really, we'll
benefit no matter what, don't you think?" The hyena growled at that, pure rage, and Xander clamped down hard, trying not to react.

Giles had a little smile on his face, looking at Spike, and Spike vamped out, snarling. He hissed at Buffy, who had automatically taken up a defensive stance between him and her Watcher. Everyone was tense - waiting - and Xander couldn't help it, he had to stand up, legs shaking. There was nothing but hate pouring out of Spike now, and Xander battered at it with all the calm calm calm he could muster. He tried to think of something - anything - to say. The utter silence of the room was finally broken by Spike, who straightened out of the predatory crouch he had gone into.

"Bloody bastards. Supposed to be the good guys here." Spike slipped back into his human face, although his eyes continued to glow a baleful yellow, and he pushed past Buffy, heading for the door.

"Spike! Where are you going?" Buffy looked exasperated.

"Got two bloody days, Slayer. Best get started, hadn't I?" He pulled out another cigarette, lighting it as he
slammed out the door. There was a moment of silence, then everyone started talking at once. Xander wanted desperately to run out after Spike - soothe him, kiss him...scream baffled questions at him. But he knew he couldn't. After a moment, he felt a faint trickle of love and he relaxed. Spike was going to wait. Slowly, he sat back down.

He hoped the rest of the meeting wouldn't take too long. Beside him, Anya shifted a little closer. The ex-demon looked pretty tonight, and Xander wished she would stop trying to get him to go out with her. He liked Anya - her blunt ways were fun, and sometimes she said things that were amazingly perceptive. And Xander didn't mind that other people found her matter-of-factness embarrassing. At least Anya told the truth - or the truth as she saw it, which was as good. He was having fun helping her 'fit in' more by explaining, in the most sarcastic way possible, the reasons behind most social graces. As she leaned over, obviously intent on starting with the flirty games once again, Xander decided it was enough. He wanted to 'come clean', as it were, to the gang anyway, and this was as good a time as any. He waited for a break in the conversation and cleared his throat.

"Guys - hey guys? I've got something I've been wanting
to tell you all and...I think now is a good time, since everyone is here..." Six pairs of eyes turned on him expectantly, and he felt himself wilt a bit. The tiny nod from Oz, the love from Spike put a little starch back into his spine, and he cleared his throat again.

"Ok...remember when I took my trip this summer? Well, I ended up in Oxnard..."

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Oz and Xander swept through Giles' door and shut it behind them. They both paused for a moment, staring at each other, then burst out laughing.

"Oh my god, I can't believe I did it - I told them!" Xander ran a shaking hand back through his hair, wired on adrenaline and sheer terror. He'd gotten through his story about Oxnard - Thomas - almost everything. And he'd only had to answer about a hundred hysterical questions. Anya had questioned him more closely then the others and had finally left, looking slightly sniffly. Tara had smiled her real smile at him, full of warmth and understanding, and Willow had finally broken out of babble-mode long enough to give him a
hug and tell him she supported him no matter what. And then shot a rather speculative and... considering look at Oz. Giles had polished his glasses, cleared his throat, and offered tea, and then spent twenty minutes in the kitchen not making it. But he'd shaken Xander's hand as they'd left, and told him that it had taken a lot of courage to come out to them, and that he was proud of him.

Xander had felt - warm, at that. *Guess the G-man isn't so bad, after all*  Buffy had been - well, Buffy. She'd screeched a little, wise-cracked a little, then hugged him, and she, too, had shot a narrow look at Oz, who had sat smiling like a skinny, red-haired Buddha.

Xander had deliberately left out Jack - he didn't think he wanted to go there just yet - and had reluctantly but resolutely left out all mention of Spike. Or anyone, for that matter. *Better to let them think I'm gay but single, for now. Don't really want to go through the 'are you possessed, are you insane, he's so dead' thing right now*  

They climbed the steps out of Giles' courtyard and headed across the parking lot to Xander's truck. Oz turned to say something to Xander and suddenly his eyes went black and his mouth stretched in a silent
snarled. Then Xander felt himself being lifted up and swung around, held tight by strong arms in a familiar leather coat. Smoke and spice and leather smell, cool lips on the back of his neck.

"Spike! Jesus!" Xander squirmed around in his embrace, facing him and covering Spike's mouth in a hard kiss. Whiskey, smoke, blood. mmmm Xander tucked his face into Spike's neck for a moment, just breathing.

"What took so long, pet? I've been to Willy's and back."

"Mmmm...mmmmm? Willy's? I thought -"

"Had a change of heart, he did." Spike smirked at him, and Xander pulled away a little and smiled.

"Oh. Really? It took so long because I told them I was - well, I told them I was gay. Mostly gay. You know."

"'Mostly' gay? Can you do it like that, pet?"

"Well, you know - I have been with girls, and it wasn't like it was - horrible or anything. Well, ok, it was kinda horrible, some of it. But still - girls." Spike growled deep in his chest, and Xander laughed, kissing him lightly
before turning and starting to walk to his truck again. Oz was already there, leaning against the passenger door and looking up at the sky. It was a clear night and the stars were thick as dewdrops in the grass. Xander squeezed Spike's hand, fishing for his keys.

"Anyway, that's what took so long. I told them, and they asked me tons of questions, and now they know."

"Just what do they know, love?" Spike pulled Xander close, kneading Xander's back through his sweater, and Xander slipped his arms inside the duster, under the t-shirt and along the cool back.

"Just that. I left out Jack, for now. And you. I didn't want to -"

"Hush, pet." Spike kissed him, nibbling at his lip, and love you love you mine pulsed over Xander - through him. He sent it back, hard as he could, and Spike's arms tightened around him.

"You don't worry your head about it, pet. Can't be tellin' them all your secrets right out. This one'll keep, all right?" Xander looked at him; brushed his fingers back through Spike's hair and then cupped the nape of the
vampire's neck in his hand, gripping lightly.

"I...I know I can't tell them - not right now. But - I want to, Spike. I'm not ashamed of you."

"Know you aren't, love. Don't fret." Spike kissed him again, gentle and soft, and then backed away, inclining his head a little toward the truck and Oz waiting patiently. Xander smiled at him and unlocked the door and Spike slithered across the seat and opened the other door for Oz.

"Hey - why did you volunteer to go hang out with Adam? What's the deal?" Xander asked, starting his truck and shifting into reverse.

"He can tell me 'bout the Initiative, pet. Tell me all their dirty little secrets - tell me who's who. That'll make findin' the bastards that much easier." Spike's eyes gleamed in the streetlights, and Xander nodded silently.

Of course. And why doesn't this bother me more? Killing, again...

HURT what's ours. Kill it The hyena had no compunctions, and Xander reluctantly had to agree with
"Ok... You know - you almost got staked in there. I thought - low profile?"

"They pissed me off. Wankers. Hopin' the Frankendoof'll kill me. I'm tryin' to play nice." Xander snorted, and Spike shot him a fangy grin, his eyes dancing.

As Xander drove, Spike put his arm across the back of the seat and ran the tips of his fingers through and through Xander's hair. Xander shivered, relishing the feel of him so close; the little touches and looks that spoke volumes to him about what Spike was thinking and feeling. The bond, link, whatever it was they had - was amazing, but the casual physicality that Spike indulged in made as much or more of an impression on Xander. He loved to touch - to be touched - and he'd finally found someone who loved it as much as he did. They drove home, Santana on the radio; Oz playing air-guitar along with the complicated chords and laughing at himself. Spike dug more liberated lemon drops out of a pocket and they all crunched some noisily, Spike complaining about how the candy stuck in his fangs. His hand had fallen into a lovely little stroking rhythm on the back of Xander's neck, and Xander wanted to lean his head into it and surrender. He
drove extra-careful, just to combat the turn-into-goo feelings.

At the house, getting out of the truck, laughing about something, and suddenly Spike's demon was there, snarling, and Oz's eyes had gone dark, his lips curling back to bare sudden fangs. Spike all but lifted Xander off his feet and rushed him onto the porch, growling. Rage was coming off him, hate, a killing instinct so strong that the hyena howled.

"Spike -"

"Go inside, Xander." Spike leapt from porch to the walk, motioning to Oz who darted up the steps and stood beside Xander, human again but tense. Something moved in the shadows of the sycamores that lined the street-side of the property. Something - someone - stepped from the blackness. Angel. Oh fuck. Just what we need

Xander unlocked the door but didn't go in. He watched as Angel came out into the small space of open lawn, pale skin glowing in the street-light. Spike circled him, head down and demon to the fore. He was snarling continuously, his eyes glowing, and Xander caught his
breath, watching him. Spike moved like a stalking cat - like a snake. He was terrifying and beautiful - dreadful and intoxicating all at once. A Master in his own right - the Lucifer that Xander lay down with every night. Xander felt a hot and twisting pull in his belly - in his groin. *Fuck. THAT turns me on? That turns me on. Of course it does. Look at him - in his element - what he IS. Beautiful. Mine*

Angel was watching Spike warily, but his demon wasn't evident - he seemed, in fact, to be fairly relaxed. Almost - smug. The hyena growled, and Xander felt his hands clenching into fists. *Don't be so sure of yourself, deadboy. You'll be lucky if Spike doesn't take your head off*

Angel took a couple of steps towards the house and Spike was there between the house and the older vampire, barely three feet from Angel, suddenly and ominously silent. Angel smirked a little.

"*William*

Spike stood in a strange, nearly silent place. All of his attention - all of his senses - were bent on the vampire before him. Angel. Memories flooded through him - emotions and actions and words - cascading in a glowing
torrent. Too fast to sort, too ephemeral to re-live. Only the hurt was real, like a long-bladed knife going through and through him. And the hate. The pain - the rage - was so strong he was held immobile, nearly deaf. His vision narrowed to a black-edged tunnel and all he could see were the pale planes and angles of Angel's face - his thatch of dark hair, his dark coat. The superior and slightly amused expression on his face. Faintly, like a moth battering at glass, he could feel calm love mine from Xander. But they didn't penetrate.

*Left us...betrayed us...abandoned us - me...* He took in a deep breath, filling his nose and mouth with the essence of the older vampire. Angel's scent - leather and musk, mint and green tea and dust. And underlying it all, the faint, sickly smell of a vampire who was not feeding well. Animal blood, rank and rotten.

Spike felt his lips curl back from his fangs in something that might have been a smile, and his hand slipped into his pocket - caressed the cool, twisted length of steel there. *Surprise the bastard. Let's see how this goes*

Then he launched himself forward, forearm striking Angel squarely across the chest, driving him back. Angel hit the trunk of a sycamore with an odd, breathless
grunting sound, and in one liquid movement Spike pulled the nail from his coat and drove it through Angel's shoulder, pinning him to the tree. Angel's scream was ragged and inhuman. Sound and thought and sensation suddenly washed through Spike again, freeing him. Spike silenced Angel with a fierce backhanded blow.

"First mistake, Angel. Wanna make a second?" He rattled the nails in his pocket - drew another one out and held it to Angel's other shoulder. Angel swiped weakly at him, gasping, his demon to the fore.

"What are you doing, Wi - Spike!"

"Me, mate? Doin'? Teachin' you my name, I guess. Worked, too. What other lessons might you need to learn, eh?"

"Spike?" Xander called from the porch, and Spike pushed the demon's face inward, turning his head over his shoulder to look at the two on the porch.

"Everythin's all right, mate. Just...seein' if the pouf's a quick study."

"What does he want, Spike?" Xander's voice was level -
calm - and Spike felt that calm coming through him, steadying him.

"Dunno. Let's ask." He looked back at Angel, grinning, and dropped the second nail back into his pocket. He reached up to the one in Angel's shoulder and grasped it. He held it for a moment, gaze locked with Angel's, then he wrenched it free of tree and body in one ferocious jerk. Angel gasped harshly and sagged to his knees, and Spike stepped back from him, indolently licking the dark blood from the nail. Angel pushed himself to his feet, holding his wounded shoulder.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Spike? Why are you here - what are you doing with Xander and Oz?"

"Doing? I live here. What's you're soddin' excuse?" Spike spun the nail through his fingers, not watching it, letting it flash in the streetlight.

"You don't have any reason to attack me, Spike. After what happened the last time we met - I should be the one attacking you. You're damn lucky I'm not." Angel stared at him, his lip curling in dislike. "You always were an ungrateful child." The nail stopped moving, and Spike gripped it tightly, his grin fading. The rage - the hurt -
burned bright again, and he deliberately kept his face human - his voice low.

"You're not my Sire, Angel. You're just another bloody vampire poaching on my territory, as far as I'm concerned. And if you don't leave, I will kill you." Angel barked a short, humorless laugh, stepping up close to Spike.

"You can deny it until the hells freeze, Spike, but you know -"

"Yeah, I do know - Dru turned me. You bloody well know it, too. Wasn't her fault she didn't know what to do next. You taught me some things - you acted the Sire - but you're not. Any claim you had ended when that hag-ridden soul of yours lodged in your throat like a bone. It chokes you, Angel - chokes you until you're mad with it - it drove Angelus mad. I had to make bloody pax with the Slayer to end Angelus' grand world-destroyin' schemes. You're no more my Sire then Liam was. And Dru's let me go, Angel. She's talkin' to snakes in the jungle. I am Master here. Go back to LA."

"A Master who can't defend himself - can't feed himself? You're pathetic, Spike. You're no Master - if
anyone's Master in Sunnydale it's Buffy, and don't you forget it."

Spike snarled, snapping his fangs inches from Angel's face. Knew. Oh bloody gods, he KNEW

Something - some tiny thing in Spike that had, until then, been a tendril of hope withered utterly with those scathing, scornful, merciless words. He fought for control - found it in the steady, sun-warm flow of love love love that came from Xander.

"You knew. You knew what the bloody soldiers did! And you did nothing. That's why you're not my Sire, Angel. Because my Sire would have torn the soldier-boys limb from limb for me - would have torn down the Initiative brick by bloody brick and sowed its grounds with salt! You. You do fuck all except brood and ponce around L.A., bloody wanker. Hair shirt and ashes on your face. Come running when your bitch calls and tuck tail when she sends you home." Something surged through Spike - an emotion he'd never felt for Angel before. Pity. You ignorant bog-trotting bastard. You just lost me, and you don't even know it. Lost me...and you don't care
"That chip is the only thing keeping you alive, Spike, and you know it." Angel pushed Spike back a step, and Spike threw his head back and laughed.  

*Don't need him, have my boy...it's gone...he's gone ... free of him ...tastes like ashes, like bitterest aloe...*

"Oh, Angel - you really are stupid. I'm taken care of here - human blood an' all - dosh, a fine place to lay me bones down... I'm in, here, Angel - like you never were."

"You're fooling yourself, Spike. You're a parasite here. And the minute you're out of line you'll be dust. And I'll be the one doing it." Spike laughed again, harder this time, genuinely amused.

"Weren't you listenin' mate? I'm not livin' on pigs and cows here - I'm living on human blood, like a good vampire's supposed to. You want to challenge me, scavenger?" All amusement left Spike's face, and he growled. "I'll tear your bloody head off, mate." Spike looked for a long moment at Angel - at the blood still seeping from his shoulder, at the look of anger and disgust that twisted Angel's face. Spike sneered, and turned his back, and sauntered up to the house. He dropped the bloody nail back into his pocket.
"You're not invited, peaches. Go home."

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In the house, finally in the house, magic making its impervious barrier and Spike cat-eyed in the gloom. The shocking glow of baleful yellow as Oz lit a candle and Xander went to Spike to hug him, ask him... Spike stiff-armed him away.

"Spike?"

"Don't, Xander. I..." Spike was utterly still, his hands curled into claws that absently sank into the denim on his thighs. Xander heard the threads pop as he tore through them. What was coming through the link made Xander shiver - a roil of anger and pain, of hunt and hate and sorrow - overwhelming, chaotic.

"Hey -" Spike's head swayed a little, left then right. Scenting. Oz made a strange little grumbling sound in his chest, and out of the corner of his eye Xander saw Oz's eyes darken. Spike hissed. It was a snake sound: low, cold, and hideous. Xander felt himself
freeze. *mouse, just like a mouse, don't let it see me, don't...*

"W-what -"

"Xan-derrrr..." His name devolved into a full-throated growl, and Spike's head was down, eyes glittering, so feral and so predatory that Xander involuntarily took a step back. Spike mirrored him - moved one step closer - then another. His hand came up and hovered over Xander's cheek, trembling. Oz shifted nervously, a grumble of warning or displeasure starting in his chest and Spike's head whipped around to orient on him, full demon in seconds, mouth gaping in a rising roar of sound. Oz froze - Xander did. Spike shook his head, shaking the demon off even though the eyes remained.

"Gotta...you smell like..." Spike let his hand drop, and seemed to come back to himself a little.

"Need to get out, love. I'll - I'll come back. Tonight." The demon-eyes were fierce and dry - the silent wave of emotion that poured over Xander ached with need, with fear, with *love love mine please* Xander nodded, not daring to speak, sending everything he had of *calm love you trust you* Spike moved past and was gone, faster
then thought, out the kitchen door and into the blackness beyond. Xander sagged, suddenly light-headed, and Oz swore softly.

"What was that, Xander? Is he -?"

"I think...I think what he just did...he rejected Angel...Angel's claim. I think he just needs to go beat the crap out of something. He's - he's all right."

_You don't seem too sure about that, Harris. He wouldn't hurt US_

_Nothing to stop him hurting someone ELSE, though... Fuck, fuck, that was... What the hell WAS that?!_

_Vampire_ the hyena grumbled, as if that answered all the questions. _Ours_ And really, it did. It answered them all just fine.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Of course, fifteen minutes later, there were more questions, as Angel stood on the porch, looking in
through the screen door that Xander refused to open. Back, like the proverbial bad penny.

"What's he doing here, Xander? I don't understand. I know your feelings about...our kind."

Xander sighed.

"Look. You know about the Initiative - what it did to him. They're still trying to recapture him. They trashed his crypt - they grabbed Oz and tortured him. There's no way they're getting their claws into Spike again. They crippled him, Angel. What they did... At least here he has some protection, if they come. Oz and me can at least stop them long enough for him to get away, if they ever try it."

"He's a killer, Xander - a cold-blooded murderer. You know if that chip were gone, you and Oz would be the first ones to go. Why do you even care?"

"You've done your share of murdering, Angel." Angel flinched, and the hyena yipped in satisfaction. "You think you deserve agony every time you try to feed yourself? What about - if some kid decides he wants your coat - your wallet? Comes at you with a knife. Even
I could pick up a board or a brick or something and fight him off - Spike can't even do that! It's torture, Angel." Xander stared hard at the vampire, wondering if Angel could smell the lie. He sincerely hoped not - hoped the vampire mistook any scent that was...off...for stress from the evening's events, or Xander's own dislike of him. Xander wished he wasn't sweating under Angel's scrutiny.

"Nobody deserves that, Angel. It's - revolting. At least before, he had a fighting chance, just like everything else on the planet. Now he doesn't have that. So yeah, he's staying here with me, and I get him human blood because we need him - he's the strongest of all of us except maybe for Buffy, and sometimes he can kill the demons better because he knows more about them. Do you know - he told me he got blacklisted from Willy's? Because he was helping Buffy? Just leave him alone, Angel. He's doing fine here."

"He's playing with you, Xander, can't you see that?" Angel looked genuinely distressed, but Xander really didn't care. He didn't know the full history between the two vampires - wasn't sure he wanted to know. But the feelings that had battered at him, as Spike had confronted Angel - the rage and the hurt, the
grinding, hopeless hurt had told him everything he'd needed to know. Angel had done something to Spike - hurt him badly enough to make Spike want to kill him. Therefore, he was no friend of Xander's. If he ever had been. Even the soldier, whose slavish duty to any and all 'authority' figures was sometimes annoying as hell, didn't want anything to do with Angel. *Is this what it felt like for Spike, up in Oxnard? I don't want to...KILL... Angel, do I?*

*It hurt what's ours* The hyena had no such doubts.

"Xander -"

"Look, Angel, I'm tired and I have to get up before dawn to go to work. I just want to go to bed." Xander ran his hand back through his hair and stepped up close to the screen door, trying like hell to be calm and to make Angel just go. "Spike and I and Oz ... we're friends. And he's going to stay here as long as he needs to. And if he ever gets that thing out of his head - we'll deal with it then. For now, this is how it is, and I don't need you coming up here and fucking with him. You've done more to hurt the people I love then he ever has - Spike never killed one of us, and you did. So just go home." Xander turned away from the door, and suddenly Angel
slammed his fists into the jamb, growling. Xander spun around, startled, and saw Angel glowering at him, game-faced.

"Xander - why do you smell like him? What the fuck are you doing? Are you crazy?" Angel's fingernails were gouging the wood of the jamb, and Xander glared at him.

"Quit fucking up my house, deadboy. So I smell like him, so what? Living together here."

"No, no - it's more then that. A lot more. You can't do that, Xander. Don't you understand -?"

"I do understand, Angel. You're out of your territory and out of your league here. Go. Home." Xander shut his front door in Angel's face and slipped the chain on, then went back to the kitchen to slump in a chair opposite Oz. Who knew what Angel had sensed - who knew what he would do? At this point, Xander didn't even care. He was worried about Spike, and tired, and just sick of all the bullshit. *If they knew what I could see - could FEEL... Fuck - even if I told them I get the feeling they wouldn't want to be convinced. Hellmouth Living - see only what you want to see.*
Oz had lit some candles; made himself a big sandwich and a glass of milk and was studiously not noticing that Xander's hands were shaking and that he was close to tears. Xander got up and grabbed a soda and sat back down, then abruptly put his head on the table and thumped it onto the wood a couple of times, groaning.

"Fuck. This is all so - fucked. Oz..." Xander lifted his head, looking up into the calm gaze of the werewolf. "I'm sorry if I kinda - spoke for you, out there. I just wanted him to leave." Oz swallowed his bite of sandwich and rubbed a hand over his hair, making it stick out more wildly then before.

"It's ok, Xander. We're friends. Honestly, I don't know Spike well enough to say, you know, a hundred percent, but he came with you to get me. He didn't have to, and he was in a lot of danger from them..." Oz shuddered slightly and poked at a crust. "Anyway, I don't have anything against him, and I - it's weird, but I trust him. The way you two... I mean, I can't help but see you, you know." Oz looked up at Xander from behind his lashes and Xander was suddenly and rather forcefully reminded that Oz and Devon were - intimate. Oh fuck. Maybe Spike and I embarrass him or...ah...maybe we DON'T embarrass him. Never thought of
"Oh fuck, Oz, I'm sorry, I didn't - we didn't mean to -"

"No, Xander, it's ok. I'm not - it doesn't bother me. I mean, not like that. You guys are - really in love. Makes me a little...sad, I guess. I was kind of hoping to come back to something like that, myself." Oz smiled wanly, and Xander bit his lip - busied himself opening his soda, wishing there was something he could say. But Oz spoke first.

"That stuff - from before, the ring and - " Oz made a gesture with his hand and Xander nodded.

"Yeah?"

"That stuff was from those guys - up in Oxnard. The ones that jumped you?" Xander turned the soda can in his hands, glancing up to meet Oz's gaze and then away again.

"Yeah. It was." Oz rubbed the grooves in the table, the grooves Spike's nails had left and that Xander had smoothed over.
"Did you...did you want him to do that?" Oz's voice was so quiet, but there was something in it - something - and Xander's gaze snapped back to Oz's face.

"NO. I didn't - I didn't ask him to do that and I didn't want him to. Oz - I don't...I don't know what to do about that." Oz ran his finger down the side of his glass, again and again, concentrating on it.

"Do you really think there's anything you can do about it, Xander?" Those eyes - so calm, and so utterly opaque. Showing nothing. But his voice...

"I - dunno. I don't want him - running around killing people who look sideways at me. I know - I know he's going to go after the Initiative. I'm having a hard time caring about that. But...I think... Fuck, Oz. I dunno. I trust him - I can see him and I can feel him - inside me. He...promised. I think he promised. I don't know what he promised. What - what do you think about that? What he did?" Oz lifted his glass and drank, emptying it, then he touched absently at a mark on his arm; burn-mark, scarred there despite his werewolf constitution.

"Protect the pack, Xander. That's - baseline. You
know? Hardwired." His jade-pale gaze flickered over the room - came to rest on Xander. "I know why he did it." Xander held that steady regard as long as he could - nodded finally, and took a long drink of his soda.

"So we're cool, Oz?"

"Yeah."

"Ok. Thanks. I really - I really appreciate you at least trying to - understand."

"Hey, you get bit by your nephew, turn into B-grade Lon Chaney, and have to go to Tibet to get a cure, you start to see things a little...differently." Oz grinned at him suddenly and Xander grinned back, feeling better. Oz's sandwich looked good, so he got up and made one for himself.

They both puttered around, getting ready for Monday. Oz had a couple of job interviews to go to - he was starting to feel uncomfortable not chipping in - and Xander had to be on site early to deal with the usual Monday-morning craziness. Also, Manny wanted to go over some schedules with him as the demon was planning a week away and Xander would be in
charge. *Forgot all about that. I'm kinda promoted - temporarily - and I'm not even excited right now. Fucking Hellmouth. Fucking Initiative. Can't wait for all this crap to be OVER.* They showered and settled into sleep, the kitchen door unlocked for Spike. Xander hated being alone in the bed, and he dozed on and off, waiting.

His alarm woke him, and he automatically slapped it off, and then slumped on the bed as he realized he was still alone. *But - the shower's running. Spike?* Xander sent a questing thread of *love missed you where* and received a blast of *want want want* so strong he gasped. He scrambled out of the bed and into the bathroom and Spike was there, standing under the shower, looking... *He looks strange. Something happened tonight. What happened?* Xander glanced around. Spike's clothes were in a heap by the washing machine. They were - damp. His duster was hung up on the rack by the outside door, dripping a little puddle of rusty water, and his boots were wet, as well. There was a smear of blood on the door jamb.

"Spike! Are you hurt?" Xander wrenched open the shower door and frantically ran his gaze over and over the lean body under the spray. *Nothing. Nothing. He's alright...* Spike was leaning against the wall, drops of
water caught in his eyelashes, beading along his collarbones, pectorals. He was looking at Xander with the oddest expression.

"Spike - what's going on? Are you ok?"

"Xander..." Spike opened his arms and Xander stepped into them, pulling the shower door shut, pulling the water-warmed body close to his. Spike clung to him, shuddering, and Xander started to kiss him; neck and shoulders, cheekbones and jaw. He dug his fingers into the quivering back and kneaded the muscles there, trying to soothe him.
"Love, it's all right, please tell me...tell me what I can do...Spike..." Spike lifted his head and Xander looked into his eyes; bruise-blue, wide and fear anger sorrow sorrow so strong.

"What, love, what - please tell me."

"He's not my Sire." Spike whispered. He looked down - back up. "He never really was, but... I rejected him. I left him. And he left...mm-me. Let me go...didn't even try... Gone for good, now."

"He wasn't doing anything for you, Spike. It'll be all right
love, promise." Spike only stared at him, his expression lost and so sad, and Xander pulled him closer and kissed him. Tried, with his kiss, to show all his love and all his desire and all his trust. *mine forever love you.* Spike let him, standing so still, and then after a moment he began to kiss back, his passion mounting and the kiss becoming something more - something fiercer and more possessive. And *yours yours* washing through and through Xander like static electricity; tingling along his nerves, sparking fire in his groin. He moaned into the kiss and Spike was turning, putting his hands on the wall, opening his legs, and Xander leaned against him, covering the vampire's body with his own, hands to hands and Xander's lips on Spike's neck, gentle kisses.

"Xander..." *need want*

"What do you need, Spike? Tell me."

"C-claim me - make me yours, Xander, please - have to be..."

"Always mine, love..." Xander whispered, but his hands were moving - getting a palmful of liquid soap, slicking himself and then gently beginning to make Spike ready. Spike pushed back against him, his head down
between his arms, his arms shaking.

"No, love - just do it - take me. Need to feel it, love, please...please..."

"But I'll hurt you -"

"Need it - won't hurt - please... " and please please need you so strong, so desperate.

_Do this. Do this for him, his way. Make it right, Harris_ The hyena whined agreement, wanting as badly as Spike did, and Xander closed his eyes for a brief moment, and leaned in and kissed the side of Spike's neck. Then he took a deep breath, and forced his way into Spike's tense, unprepared body. Spike cried out, flinching, but pushing back, welcoming the pain that Xander could feel - it hummed under the _need need need_ that Spike was sending and made Xander bite his lip hard, hating what he was doing. Knowing Spike wanted it - could take it. _But I don't have to like it. Fucking Angel._ Xander began to thrust, as hard as he could, gasping as Spike thrust back. Xander felt the viselike grip of the vampire's body ease just slightly and realized with sudden shock that Spike was...
"Spike - fuck - you're bleeding -"

"S'all right...Xander...yours?" There was the tiniest questioning note in that word, and Xander swiftly put his arms around Spike's body, hugging him as tight as he could, stroking into the shivering body, sending out *mine mine love you* making it count, making Spike feel every particle of love Xander had for him - every bit of desire and need.

As he pounded into Spike, he let one hand slide lower, to grasp and stroke Spike's erection, wanting them to end this together. Spike was moaning now, gasping harshly, bending further so that Xander could get closer - harder.

And what he was pushing through the link... Xander shuddered under it - the unbelievable feelings of love, desire, utter surrender, the need, so strong, to give and belong and be a part of. Mirroring Xander's own feelings - everything the hyena wanted, everything Xander wanted - to belong, to have some connection outside his own head. Xander understood these feelings - understood them suddenly in a much clearer way then he ever had, and his own desire suddenly doubled. This was right - this was pack, and belonging, and this was *vampire ours sealed in blood.*
Xander pulled Spike upright, threading the fingers of his free hand through the pale hair and wrenching Spike's head to the side. He ran his tongue up the tense length of Spike's neck - thrust a little faster, knowing he was hitting the deep place, feeling it reverberate through Spike's body physically and through the link. Then he bit as hard as he could, savage - tearing the pale skin, going for blood.

Spike let out a sound like a howl, like a scream, his hands scrabbling on the wall, his body arching into a fierce and immediate orgasm. The blood was shockingly crimson on his shoulder, and Xander lapped at it - sucked on the wound and bit again, not quite as hard, his own orgasm leaving him breathless. *MINE* and "Mine, you're mine, always mine, Spike, claim you, want you..." Spike sagged against the wall, gasping, and Xander wrapped both arms around him and just held him, rubbing his hands over and over the quivering muscles, murmuring into his ear, kissing gently now at the livid mark he'd made.

"Love you, Spike," Xander whispered, and Spike leaned his head back on Xander's shoulder, turning his face to kiss him.

"Love you...Xander, love you." His smile was small and
fragile, and Xander's heart ached for him. He pulled gently away, hating the shudder that ran through the vampire as he came free of Spike's body.  *Oh, blood, on me, on him...fuck...love you sorry sorry*

"Don't be sorry, love," Spike murmured, and Xander got soap and began to wash him, sluicing the stained foam away and getting more, going so slowly and so gently, biting his lip until it bled.

"I'm am sorry, Spike - can't change that." Xander turned Spike around to face him, getting more soap, roughly cleaning the blood off his own body, hating it.

"I love you, Spike - I don't want to hurt you."

"Didn't hurt," Spike said, eyes closed, and Xander took Spike's shoulders in his hands and shook him just a little.

"It did, love. I could feel it, remember?" Spike's eyes opened wide at that, and Xander smiled at him. "I could feel it. But I could feel - why, Spike. I could feel that too. I know why. I'm still sorry. Never want to hurt you." Spike's eyes were darkly blue, still so wide, so hurt, and Xander had a sudden thought, and he tipped his head.
"Spike - take a little. Drink, love. Claim me, too." *please love you yours always* The blue flashed to gold, and Xander watched the rearrangement of flesh and bone with fascination. Then Spike was pressing his mouth to Xander's throat, and the fangs slipped in, gentle, so smooth, a ripple of fiery delight coursing over Xander's body. Spike drank the merest swallow - licked the wound gently and leaned back onto the wall, human again.

"You are...amazing, love." Xander touched the mark he'd made on Spike's throat. It was already less sore-looking. Not so livid. *Heals fast now - back to full strength, like he said...* Xander gathered Spike into a hard hug, *want need* and the purr *growl* rattled out of Spike's chest, low and stuttering, infinitely soothing, dying away too fast.

"Gotta go to work, Spike. Sorry."

"I know. It's alright." Murmured into his hair, soft lips on his neck. Another minute and they got out of the shower, drying off slowly, Xander rubbing his towel through Spike's hair, Spike drying Xander's back and planting little kisses all along his spine as he did.
"Ohh, Spike...fuck...don't wanna go to work, just wanna stay here with you." Xander turned and caught Spike's mouth in a hard kiss, probing deeply. *Blood, smoke, spice ... the best, oh the best taste... "Can't get enough of you."* Spike shivered, kissing Xander back; forehead and eyes and nose and cheeks, jaw and chin, down his throat. Xander rested his hands on Spike's hips and pulled away the tiniest bit, making Spike look up at him.

"You all right, Spike?" Spike looked at him, his eyes shimmering gold for a moment, and then he sighed and leaned his head on Xander's shoulder, arms around Xander's waist.

"I'm all right, pet. Just - never been... I've always had somebody, you know? Always had the bloody Family. Now they're gone. Darla's been gone forever, and Penn. Then Dru... now Angelus... I just feel - queer. On my own." Spike looked back up at him, and Xander smiled a little, touching Spike's solemn, down-turning lips.

"Not on your own, you know. I'm here. I'm not - your Sire, not anything really, except...yours."

"You're everything, Xander. Everything." Spike kissed
him, hard, and the love love love that came with it was almost overwhelming in its strength and need.  God - can I do this? Can I be enough? Please let me be enough...love you yours

"Fuck. I really need to get ready. You gonna be ok here today? I could be sick -" Spike laughed softly, pushing Xander's hair back off his forehead, petting his hands through it.

"No, love. You go on. I'm knackered - gonna sleep 'til you come home, I reckon."

"All right." Xander peered at him - did his own hair-mussing, grinning. "Love the manga look, Spike. You really should quit with the hair-gel."

"'S my trademark look, pet."

"Yeah, but...this is so..."

"Poufy?" Xander laughed, pushing past him to grab his comb.

"No - it's just...makes you look less...hard, I guess. Looks like you do in bed with me." Spike slipped up behind
him, putting his arms around Xander's waist and leaning his chin on Xander's shoulder.

"That's just for you, love. I'm the Big Bad to everyone else. Right?" Xander rubbed his head on Spike's, sighing. Watching his solitary reflection in the mirror. So strange - a little scary. Xander put his hand up, to touch Spike's cheek, wanting confirmation that the mirror couldn't give him.

"Yeah - can't let 'em know the Big Bad has a soft spot for the carpenter. Would ruin the whole evil undead rep." Spike kissed Xanders' neck and Xander just rested there a moment. Then he forced himself to finish with his hair, brush his teeth. Spike was behind him the whole time, hands on his shoulders, on his hips, and Xander felt the need and wished he could stay. He turned around finally and pointed to the clothes on the floor - the duster that was dripping blood-tinged water and the smear of it on the door jamb.

"We'll talk about that when I get home. Right?" Spike cocked his head at him, the link going silent, and Xander shivered.

"Whatever you want, pet." Xander kissed him swiftly
and then walked into the bedroom and got dressed, hurrying now, almost late. Spike curled himself into the bedclothes, hugging Xander's pillow, and when Xander finally left he was asleep.

*Looks younger then me, sometimes. But he's seen firelight go to electric light and cars take over the world...saw us go to war and go to the moon...made so many people die. I shouldn't feel what I feel for him. But I can't not. Not when I can feel...* Xander bent down and kissed Spike's temple, and went silently out.

**13 Talk**

Xander met Oz as he was coming into the house. Oz was going out, his instrument case in his hand, keys dangling from his fingers.

"Hey Oz."

"Hey. Gonna go hang with Devon and the band, maybe practice a little."

"Sure - that's cool. See you later." Oz grinning and bouncing down the walk to his van, Xander pushing inside, dropping his tool belt, wondering if there were any sodas left in the fridge. Spike in the kitchen, smoking and eating toast, methodically buttering and then
spreading jam and crunching noisily. He'd already lit some candles for the kitchen, and the rest of the house was dim, the saffron light of the westering sun making glowing haloes around the edges of the curtains but not providing much illumination. The radio on, playing something full of brassy horns, women singing:

"He makes the company jump when he plays reveille... He's the boogie woogie bugle boy of Company B..."

Xander walked up behind Spike and put both hands on his shoulders - bent down to kiss his neck and the soft skin just behind his ear. Spike turned his face up, slim hands reaching and pulling Xander in for a kiss, butter and crumbs and blackberry jam, sticky-sweet, lush. Xander sighed happily into the kiss and Spike twisted in his chair, turning around so they were face to face, pulling Xander down into his lap and really kissing. Ohhh, that's so nice...love...wanna... Xander slid his hands up under Spike's t-shirt, caressing the cool back, feeling ribs and spine and shoulder blades, stark under the satiny skin. Spike's hands were on Xander's hips, his fingers slipping into the waistband of his jeans in the back, just brushing with his fingers at the swell of muscle - the little dip at the very top of Xander's buttocks, sliding into the crease there.
Nice, nice, oh, just...

Said you weren't gonna get distracted. Things to talk about?

Right. Talk. Ohh, fuck... Xander reluctantly pulled away. Spike was smiling at him - a small, sweet smile that was so very different from the usual expressions - the smirk or the sneer or the arrogant amusement. This smile was...relaxed. Real. Xander couldn't help but smile back.

"What, love?" Spike asked, and Xander reached to touch his cheek - run his fingers back through hair still mussed from the bed.

"I like your real smile. Spike..." Xander sighed and looked down at the pale hands on his thighs that lightly kneaded the muscle there. Fresh coat of black nail-polish and a little cut on one knuckle, nearly healed. And the eyeliner again, smudgy black that made the blue eyes wider, more vivid.

"Yeah, pet?" Anxiety - fear? shot through the link and Xander looked up sharply, catching the same things in the wide blue eyes before Spike shut it down.

"Tell me about this. This - link? You said...that night you came back that 'it worked'. What worked?" Xander clasped his hands on the back of Spike's neck and leaned
back a little, rubbing crotch to crotch. The change in angle sent a little shock through his groin and he felt it from Spike, too - sudden darkening of the eyes and want want clear as day.

"It's something that happens when you - we - share blood. I drank from you, you drank from me. It makes a link - a bond. Get's stronger if we keep doin' it, the blood sharin'. It'll never go away but if we never did that again it'd get...weaker."

Spike lifted his hips just a little, and Xander grinned.

"So - why? I mean, why does that - work that way?"

"Dunno, pet. Just does. If you were my...if you were like a minion, like a thrall, then I could keep track of you - make you do stuff. I could...hurt you through it. But you're..."

"You can control me that way?" Xander frowned at him, and Spike huffed in annoyance.

"No love, if you were already controlled. Look - sometimes a vampire'll need a human for something - for work in the day, or protection. Somebody to run errands, take care of money. It happened a lot more before - when there wasn't phones and 24-hour shops and the bloody Internet, you know? Somebody to take care of the soddin' horses an' hire the maids. Don't need to do it
so much, now. Most never do it. Angelus did, once or twice, for Dru. Before she turned me. She needed lookin' after." Spike looked at him uncertainly, as if mention of Drusilla were off-limits, and Xander sent *want want* right back at him, grinding his hips a little, rubbing his fingers up and down the nape of Spike's neck. The hair there was like raveled silk, the skin even softer, and Spike shut his eyes and pushed into the caress.

"Ok. So it's just a really nice extra. Stronger like - I'll be able to feel you further away, or stronger like...we can read each other's minds?" Spike didn't open his eyes, just started up that rusty, thready grumble in his chest. Xander almost laughed, watching Spike purr and rub his head into Xander's hands, so cat-like it was ridiculous. *Wonder if they're related, cats and demons. Wonder if he'd like a saucer of milk?* A sudden image of Spike on his hands and knees, black collar around his neck and tongue going out to lap... Xander shivered and Spike gasped, eyes opening wide.

"Somebody's thinkin' nasty thoughts..." he husked, and ground his hips up, holding Xander tight to him, denim and heat and hard flesh.
"Mmmm...wanna bowl of milk, kitty kitty?" Xander whispered, and Spike leaned up and nipped at his throat, making Xander's breath catch.

"M'not a cat," Spike grumbled, the purring starting to peter out. Xander felt a smile stretching his mouth, every bit as lascivious as the one Spike usually wore.

"No, but you'd look good in a collar..." Spike raised an eyebrow - leaned in to nip at Xander's throat again, hands going down the back of Xander's jeans, kneading his buttocks, pulling him open.

"Why pet - what a nasty little idea." Spike's fingers were going lower, groping and sliding, trying to find entry, and Xander tangled his hands in the silver-blond hair and tipped Spike's head back, claiming his mouth in a frenzied, demanding kiss. *We'll never find out what we want to find out* the soldier grumbled, and Xander couldn't help it, he had to laugh. Spike squeezed his buttocks, and one fingertip just brushed over the sensitive skin of Xander's opening.

"What's funny, pet?" Xander laughed again, soft, leaning his forehead to Spike's.

"Just - I've got the soldier in my head trying to make me stop kissing you."
"What?" Spike looked a little shocked, pulling back to look straight into Xander's eyes. "Don't he like this?" That finger again, probing in a bit, just breaching the muscle, making Xander shiver.

"Oh yeah, he likes. But I was gonna talk to you when I got home. Ask some questions... Oh..."

"You wanna talk?" Spike didn't sound pissed, just...amused, and a little puzzled. Abruptly he pulled his hands out of Xander's jeans and stood, steadying Xander as he stumbled a little, getting his feet under him in a hurry.

"What - "

"Strip," Spike said, and there was that smile, the one Xander had been trying out a minute ago. *Oh, I think he does it better, much better...* Xander just stared at Spike, who turned and went into the bedroom. Then Xander started to strip, yanking at his boots and shucking out of his jeans. There was the sound of a drawer opening and closing - the rustle of clothes - and Spike stalked back into the kitchen naked, grinning. He moved like oil on water, all smooth and glide and soundless, head down and eyes gone the color of the sea at twilight. Looking up at Xander through his lashes - looking at Xander as if he was going to eat him alive. The eyeliner made him look
like an Egyptian prince - or a pirate. What was coming through the link was mindless want and it made Xander shiver.

Sparks of pure lust tingled over Xander's skin, and he took in a deep, deep breath. Spike sprawled back down in his chair, a tube of gel in his hand. He opened it and squeezed some out - slowly slicked himself with it, dragging his fingers down the length of his shaft and up - back down to cup his balls and fondle them, then up again, circling the tip of his cock and smearing the pearl of pre-come that was there over the head. Xander watched, his own hands wandering over himself, one hand going to his chest to tease his nipples into peaks, the other just lightly stroking his own erection. His finger came away wet, and he saw Spike staring - saw the tip of the vampire's tongue come out between his teeth.

Xander stepped up closer and put his finger to Spike's mouth - gasped as the cool, wet flesh took his finger in to the base; sucking and licking, tiny scrape of teeth. Oh man, oh FUCK, he is so...

"S-Spike..." Spike let his finger go - reached up and captured Xander's hand and squeezed more lube out, onto Xander's fingers.
"Turn around, pet. Turn around and bend over and make yourself ready for me. Wanna watch..." His voice was low, rasping - breathless - and Xander felt a heavy pulse of arousal go through him - knew his cock was leaking freely now, felt the twisty little fire in his belly that would build and build. *Fuck, his voice...could come just from that...yeah, turn around*

Xander caught a shaky breath and turned - bent over, one hand reaching back to pull himself open, the other slicked and ready, teasing himself, sliding a fingertip in and making shallow little thrusts, twisting. He moaned, panting, and heard Spike shift in the chair. Xander pushed the finger in deeply, shuddering, then a second finger, feeling his hips start that rise and fall, wanting *oh, touch me, Spike, come on...fuck...*

"Xanderrrr... " Spike groaned, and Xander added a third finger, pumping now, and suddenly Spike was pulling at him, turning him, and his fingers slid out. Spike pulled him over his lap, holding his cock steady, his eyes gone golden and his chest moving with hitching, needless breaths.

"Come on - take me in...so fuckin' lovely, Xander..." Xander put his hands on Spike's shoulders and lowered himself, stopping when he felt the tip of Spike's cock
pushing at him. He took a deep breath and leaned to catch Spike's mouth with his, kissing hard, biting at the vampire's lips. And pushed down, one smooth, hard push that engulfed Spike; the cool flesh easing the burn a little, Spike's mouth gasping helplessly under his, his body arching up as Xander went down, ruthlessly. *fuck, hurts good, oh man,*

*oh...FUCK...* Xander felt his buttocks on Spike's thighs - felt the full length of the vampire inside him, the stretch and burn of it just a part of the fire, the delicious fire in his belly, his balls. He sat frozen for a moment, just breathing, lips open against Spike's, hands trembling on Spike's shoulders, eyes shut. Spike's hands were on his hips, tight and cool, anchoring him, and when he started to move, to ride up, the hands held him down.

"Spiiike..." low, needy, ragged.

"You wanna talk, love. So talk. What do you. Wanna talk about?" Spike wasn't any better, the words coming out in separate mouthfuls of air, voice gone husky and low. Xander clenched inner muscles, rolling his hips a little. Spike took in a hard breath, and his fingers tightened on Xander's hips, hurting a little. "Xander..." he warned, and Xander opened his eyes. *need need...fuck, let me...* Spike was staring at him, demon-eyed, grinning. *Oh, gonna get*
him for this... Xander gulped in a breath and let one hand slip down Spike's chest, to rub and pinch at the pale nipples. Spike lost his grin.

"What about - this link. Gets stronger?"

"Yeah. To a point. Then it'll stop unless...oh..." Xander dragged his teeth over Spike's throat, nipping, and Spike shuddered, his own hips rolling up involuntarily, driving in a little deeper and Xander tried to wiggle around, to get more.

"Unless what?" Xander bit at the cool, pale flesh like expensive vanilla ice cream...mmmm... started licking in broad strokes, throat and jaw, back down to shoulders, alternating little bites. Every time his teeth nipped, Spike would move, thrust just a little, and it was heaven and it was driving Xander crazy.

"U-unless we...make it p-permanent." Spike gasped, and Xander sat up oh gods, ohh niice...

"Permanent how?" Spike stared at him, tongue going out to lick his lips, hips just moving, undulating, and Xander leaned back a little, doing his own little hip-roll thing, letting his slippery hand drop down to his cock, to glide up and back, just once. Spike watched him - looked back up into his eyes.
"There's a spell. S'real...sssimple. Makes the mark - permanent. Makes you mine forever. Claims you. Marks you...for every vamp...every demon to see. Nno...turning back." Spike bucked under him, and Xander braced on his shoulders again, ready to move, to have more. And the hands tightened again, stilling him.

"Oh fuck, Spike, please..." Spike just looked at him, and one of his hands slid over Xander's belly to his cock, fingers just fluttering around it, moth-touches.

"Talking still," Spike said, and Xander tried to gather his thoughts a little. Sent want want need you love you spilling the physical into the link and watching Spike react to it, eyes going wide, mouth open in gasping breaths.

"A spell...marks me...what about...you? Marks you, too?"

"Yeah. Same. Marked - bound - linked...forever...aahhhh..."

Spike was moving again, his hand loosely gripping around Xander's cock, and Xander braced his feet and moved, up and back, hard as he could. The wonderful slip and drag of flesh inside him, making him open and hot and there, just there, ohh, again ...

He was gasping, panting. Spike was motionless under him now, hands back on Xander's hips but helping this time,
lifting him, pushing him down. Hard and harder, flesh impacting flesh, loud enough to drown out the radio, insistent as a heartbeat. They moved together, hands and mouths licking and stroking and mauling, teeth biting. Spike's hand tight on Xander's cock, pumping and squeezing and his other hand clawing at Xander's back and Xander's own fingers digging into Spike's shoulders, making bruises, a ragged nail drawing blood so that Spike hissed and craned up to bite Xander's mouth, lips, tongue.

He was suddenly the demon, the strangely rigid flesh solid against Xander's throat, the fangs prickling and prickling. Xander gasping and then Spike's hand slipping behind to tease the straining flesh around the vampire's cock, to push inside Xander a little, more friction, more there, and Xander threw back his head and yelled and Spike bit, striking snake. Fangs like brands, cascade of lightning, fire in Xander's veins and up through his cock and spattering on the heaving belly and chest pressed to him.

Xander felt Spike withdraw the fangs, lick and lick at the wound, and then Spike's wrist at his gasping mouth, wetness there, and Xander bit heedlessly, deeply, and Spike roared, arching up into him, pounding into him as Xander drank the blood that flowed out. Sparks on his
tongue; the blood tasting rich and spice and cool... never give this up, never give him up... love you love you

Finally Spike's body slowed - his wrist dropped away and Xander leaned into him, gasping, feeling the vampire's belly heaving under him, feeling the dying twitches of the final moment of orgasm in him, pleasurable little twinges through his groin. The pounding of his blood in his ears began to slow, and the radio was suddenly clear, and Xander started to laugh.

"What..." Spike gasped, and Xander pushed himself up a little, quick kiss to the scarlet, swollen lips.

"This song..." he said, and laughed again, and sighed, and draped himself over Spike, chest to chest, arms around his neck.

"Isn't it romantic
Merely to be young on such a night as this?
Isn't it romantic?
Every note that's sung is like a lover's kiss.
Sweet symbols in the moonlight,
Do you mean that I will fall in love perchance?
Isn't it romance?"

"What - getting fucked on a kitchen chair isn't romantic?" Spike laughed, too, and Xander hugged him.
"Can we do it?"

"Do what, love?" Xander sat up, Spike shifting inside him, more tiny sparks up his spine, down his thighs.

"Can we do the spell? Make it - permanent?"

Spike stared at him, the hands that had been rubbing slowly up and down Xander's back frozen at his shoulder blades. Nothing at all came through the link.

*Oh FUCK, didn't think about that at ALL...fucker's sake...what if he says no - bound to say no - dammit, DAMNIT.*

**Pack**

"F*ck, Spike - sorry, I'm sorry, I should think first, you don't wanna -"

"Hush, pet." Spike's hands moved again, jerkily - up Xander's back to his shoulders, to his face, cupping his jaw, fingers delicate on his cheeks, thumbs just under his lower lip, pressing lightly.

"Spike, I -"

"Do you - really? Really want to?" Spike asked - whispered - and Xander saw it, saw the look. A look he'd seen in the mirror for years. His own look, so familiar.
Hope. Desperate, desperate need. Suddenly the link slammed open as Xander poured everything out - everything he'd been feeling for two years - all of the longing, the loneliness, the need. A rush of emotion that seemed to physically strike the vampire, knock him back in the chair and shake him. Spike took in a hard, shaking breath, and then it was Xander's turn to be knocked back by the flood of emotion so strong it was almost tangible. love love want need always you always want mine mine MINE And they were kissing, each as if the other were the last breath, the last drop of water, the last solid thing in a flood, and Xander felt tears threatening, and felt them, cool and slippery on Spike's lips.

"Oh, we're a pair, we are. Love you, Xander. We can do it, anytime. Anytime you want."

"Love you. Fuck." Xander wiped at his face - used his thumbs to wipe the moisture off of Spike's cheeks as well, smiling shakily and wanting to leap up and scream and jump and act like a fool. He sent it through the link instead, wild leaping joy and delight, possession and wonder, want, and Spike laughed aloud.

"Still wanna talk, pet?"

"Mmmm...yeah. What - " Xander rubbed his hands over Spike's shoulders and down his arms - stopped at his
wrists and held them. Thin, they're thin...like a girls, but he can punch through a wall - through a rib-cage... "What about - Angel. Are you...ok?" Spike shivered a little, turning his wrists in Xander's grasp - not fighting at all as Xander slowly lifted Spike's arms up and over his head - held Spike's wrists together behind his head and lightly brushed his lips over Spike's face; cheeks and forehead, nose and eyes, chin and jaw and lips - not kissing, just...knowing.

"He knew. 'Bout the soldiers. 'Bout what they did. Xanderrr... " Xander let his tongue flicker out and trace Spike's lips - pulled back when Spike tried to press their mouths together.

"What love?"

"Kiss me...just..." Xander kissed him - soft, soft; delicate touch of tongue to upper lip, darting at his teeth, no pressure. Xander leaned his chest on Spike's and felt Spike shift in him, hardening again, pushing at him from the inside.

"He knew. Knew?"

"Yeah. Didn't care. Didn't...try to help. I - he ended it, love. He didn't...come for me. Didn't care. Left me again,
just like before. Said he would - kill me. He's not - we're not..."

"No more claim on you," Xander said, and brought Spike's arms back down - settled them around his own waist and then sighed as Spike hugged him close.

"No more claim. He could try, but...the demon - won't recognize him." Spike looked up at Xander, his eyes flickering, watching. Xander pushed himself up and let his fingers run over Spike's collarbones and throat - down again to his chest, rubbing with the backs of his fingers and then with fingertips, over and over the erect nipples, the ripple of muscle and bone along the vampire's ribs, across his sternum and down his belly. The gold-green murk of the shuttered house like a gauze, making the edges of things blurred, making the sharp-edged beauty of the pale body under Xander softer - ethereal.

"What are you doing to me, love, what..." Spike whispered, and Xander glanced up at him, smiling just a little.

"Knowing you. Learning you." loving, loving you...want every inch of you Spike closed his eyes and started to move, sinuous rise and fall, and Xander moved as well, slow rhythm of hip and thigh, rocking and sliding. They were both silent, blind to each other, knowing only skin,
only breath and wet touch of tongue. Xander felt the heat gathering in his belly, the tug and push in him of Spike. The vampire's cool flesh was soothing to him; under his thighs, against his chest and inner arms, against his neck where Spike mouthed the bite mark. Their orgasms built slowly as they both shifted and strove and gasped, and when they came it was silent; each with their arms around the other, tight enough to hurt. Earthquake of flesh running through them both, ringing through them as if their bones were hollow.

After a while they managed to pry themselves apart and stumble into the bathroom, and while they were drying off from a shower Xander thought of another question.

"Spike - how am I managing...all this sex? I know I'm a healthy young man - " he grinned when Spike snapped his towel at him. "But seriously...how?"

"My blood. Vampire's are the fuck all night and all day kind, and you've been getting my blood, so... you're getting a little of that too, pet. And healing just a little faster. S'why you're not all dizzy and tired when I drink from you." Xander thought about that.

"You don't take that much blood. Do you?" Spike tossed his towel at the towel-bar and missed, and cocked an eyebrow at Xander.
"No, I don't. But you lot are fragile. My blood makes you a bit tougher. You're not a demon, but you're not quite... the same as the other boys, anymore." Uncertainty was in Spike's voice, and Xander hung his own towel up, and regarded Spike's.

"Ok. Another plus, like the link. And I'm not picking up your towel." Xander's stomach suddenly made the most obnoxious noise possible, and they both laughed, heading for the bedroom.

"Guess it's pizza time," Xander said, grabbing an old pair of faded jeans. Spike's hands on his wrists stopped him.

"Let's go out someplace, eh? I'll buy you a steak. You eat too much pizza."

"You wanna - go out?" Xander just stood there, and Spike shifted a little, looking uneasy now, his hands fiddling with the buttons on his own jeans.

"I - yeah. Want some real food, want some wine, want to see you being treated nice. Me an' Dru - she loved to go out to the posh places; get all dolled up, get treated like a queen..." Spike looked at Xander, his head a little to one side, his expression serious. "You don't want to?"
"Yeah, I - I guess I do. I'm just...I don't want any of the
gang..." Spike smirked at him, stepping up close to kiss
him.

"Don't worry about them, pet. We'll go someplace they
can't afford - won't be anywhere near us. We'll go to
Calisto's. That suit you?"

"Calisto's? Wow. Umm...think I can eat without
embarrassing myself?" Xander felt a little flutter of
nerves in his belly. It was definitely an expensive place -
one he'd never set foot in, and never hoped to.

"Wouldn't embarrass me if you ate with your fingers,
love." Spike kissed him again and finished dressing; jeans
and Docs and t-shirt, and Xander just looked at him.

"What?"

"Will they let us in, dressed in jeans and stuff? I've got a
suit but it's - it's damn ugly."

"Nah - got a dress code an' all there. We'll go shopping
first."

"Shopping? Ummm...Spike. Do you have a fever?" Xander
made a show of putting his hand on Spike's forehead,
making a worried face, and Spike poked him in the ribs.
"Stop that. I wanna take you out someplace, we both have to dress nice to go there, so we go buy some posh gear. Dolly, love."

"Uh. Dolly?" Spike just looked at him, then rolled his eyes.

"Simple, love. Right?"

"Right. Ok. Shopping." Xander finished dressing and did a quick check of the doors while Spike made a phone call and blew out candles. Then he tried to talk Xander into wearing a little liner. Xander just laughed.

"I am so not the eye-liner type, Spike. That's for the drop-dead gorgeous evil undead and the quirky musician types. I'm a manly Construction Man type. I'd look silly."
Spike just shook his head, reaching to pet Xander's hair beautiful sexy mine so soft through the link. Making Xander shiver. Me. That's me he's thinking that about. Xander made sure the spare key was on the porch for Oz

"So, we're off to the hell of the 24-hour Super-"

"No! I mean, no. Go downtown - that place near the post office? Can't remember what it's called..." Spike lit a cigarette and looked thoughtful, and Xander tried to remember what was near the post office. *Lucky Garden.*
Shoe repair. That place that sells sewing machines. The dress shop Cordy was working in and... Oh.

"Brennermans?"

"Right. They've got posh stuff there - nicked me a shirt outta there once - Dru burned my old shirt."

"Really? I can't imagine. Could it be because you...oh...wore the same damn shirt for three years?"

"It got washed, pet. She had some spell or other she was trying out. Didn't work, though - just torched me shirt."

"Yeah, right, spell. I'll have to remember that one, " Xander teased. Can't believe I'm joking around with him about Drusilla. Too weird.

"Speaking of shirts...what was that, last night? Your clothes were all bloody - "

"Hellmouth, love. Always something to kill, isn't there?" Spike flicked his cigarette butt out the window and Xander nodded. Yes, there was, but... Xander decided to leave that alone, for now.

Coward, Harris.

No, just...selfish. I can't...
Brennermans was a rather high-end men's shop, and Xander remembered looking in the windows from time to time, thinking mostly that he wouldn't be caught dead in white pants and matching sweater. *Hope it's not white pants...uh...season. Really don't like that.* They pulled up in front of the store, and Xander was happy to see there were no other customers so close to closing time.

It took almost twenty minutes to find clothes that both Spike and the clerk agreed on, and Xander felt vaguely foolish trotting out of the dressing room in this or that 'ensemble'. But he had to admit that the final choice looked good. He looked - like a grown-up. Dark charcoal trousers that the clerk said were *Irish Linen*, as if they were the Holy Grail. And a thin, v-necked cashmere sweater, a creamy almost-white that made his construction-worker tan look darker and his hair almost black. He pushed the sweater sleeves up and held out his arms and Spike clapped his hands.

"Perfect, love. We'll take those, then. Gotta wear 'em out, though, so lets get those tags off."

"Wear them out?" the clerk - Robert - inquired, stepping up with a tiny pair of scissors. Robert's dark-blond hair was streaked in about five other shades of blond and worn in a floppy style that Xander associated with
various chick-flicks he'd been forced to watch with Willow and Buffy.

"Movin', aren't we? An' just realized tonight all the good stuff's in boxes and probably a bloody mass of wrinkles." The clerk nodded and smiled and snipped tags. Spike disappeared into a changing room and came out a few minutes later in black trousers of the same linen and a red silk shirt.

"Spike! No way."

"What, pet? This looks good on me."

"Well yeah, but - remember Drusilla? The 'spell'?"] Xander made little air quotes with his fingers.

"Yeah... " Spike seemed puzzled.

"Well, I know why she burned your shirt, ok?" Robert made a small, strangled sound, and Xander smothered a laugh. "Get anything but red. I mean - I'm getting dress shoes here - the dreaded loafer! You can wear something besides red." Spike scowled at him and Robert stood back, one hand to his mouth, looking at Spike critically. Then he turned to Xander and they both spoke at the same time.

"Blue."
"Now love - " Robert scurried off and Xander walked over to Spike, smoothing the sweater over his chest. Spike watched his hands - reached out when Xander was close enough and did the same, closing his eyes a little. Spike, Xander had discovered, was rather...intrigued...with the ultra-soft cashmere.

"Just think how nice that'd feel on...mmmmm...various other...places..." Xander let his fingers brush lightly over Spikes' groin and the vampire made a tiny whimpering sound.

"Xan-derrrrr... " Spike purred, and Xander swayed in close to him, lips just touching...

"Here we are!" Robert trilled behind them, and Xander jumped. Robert was holding another silk shirt over his arm, but this one was a deep, deep slatey blue - almost a gun metal color - and Xander knew it would be perfect. Spike just stared at it for a moment, a little dazed, and then he shrugged out of the red one and pulled on the other.

"I knew it!" Robert crowed, and Xander smoothed the shoulders of the shirt, smiling. It was perfect - it made Spike's pale skin look like alabaster and it made his eyes so blue they seemed electric. His hair even had a more silvery sheen to it in contrast to the shirt.
"Totally...edible," Xander whispered, and Spike's eyes flashed gold at him for a second.

"Right. We'll take the red one, too, and another of these sweaters here - "

"Shoes, Spike, " Xander said, grabbing Spike's duster - and the money in its pocket - and herding Spike towards the shoe racks. Robert followed Spike with his scissors and Xander piled all their clothes on the counter, folding the jeans and t-shirts into a neat pile. Spike still had a huge - to Xander at least - amount of money left from the bag he'd had stashed in his crypt. He'd given half of it to Xander - told him to put it in his bank or in a jar or whatever and use it when he needed it. He could always get more. Xander had looked at him and nodded and not thought terribly hard about where the 'more' would come from. *In for a penny in for a pound. Or so they say.*

In a few minutes Spike and Robert were back with the extra shirts, and Spike was wearing...well, they were a bit more bootish then the shoes Xander had chosen, but they were definitely not Docs. Robert had them rung up in minutes, everything tucked away in silver and cream striped bags. Spike pulled his duster on and they left, heading across town to Calisto's. It was a Greek restaurant, near the back of the UC Sunnydale campus.
The surrounding neighborhood was quiet, tree-lined, and expensive. The Dean of the University lived there, as well as a number of the professors and, Xander was sure, Cordelia's old house was around there somewhere.

Xander parked and they walked to the restaurant, and Xander couldn't keep the smile off his face. Spike looked amazing. Totally different, but his essence - his predatory self - was there for all the world to see in the way he walked, and smiled, and looked at you with eyes like cobalt fire. Xander felt the slow heat of arousal waking in him and fought it, not wanting to embarrass himself. A sudden blast of *hot want* from Spike made him groan. Spike caught his hand and laughed at him.

The restaurant was crowded and Xander didn't think they'd get a table, but then a familiar-looking person bustled up with menus and a big smile, and they were seated in minutes.

"Spike," Xander whispered. "The maitre d' looks kinda like...Clem. Only not so floppy."

"Yeah. Cousin. Clem's got lots of family. How we got a table on such short notice." Spike grinned at him and he grinned back, and then the ouzo came, tiny measures of liquor tasting strongly of licorice. Xander wasn't sure if he liked it or not. The tables had real linen cloths on them
and candles in colored glass holders and Spike glowed. *How'm I gonna even eat? He looks so...love you love you*

And Spike smiled back, his eyes blazing in the candlelight.

He'd *wanted* steak - or at least - he'd *thought* he wanted it, but Spike had read the menu and described everything to him and it had all sounded so different and so *good* that Xander had ended up letting Spike order for him. First were stuffed grape leaves and a salad with cucumbers and feta cheese. Then fish-and-lemon soup, octopus with rice and lamb with tomatoes. Spike annoyed the waiter by insisting on no garlic, and Xander just smiled and ate, amazed at the new and interesting flavors, amazed that he was *liking* octopus and fish soup. *It's the clothes. You're ACTING like an adult, too. Willow would be so proud*

The thought of Willow made Xander frown for a moment, and then Spike launched into a story about him and Dru in Greece, on the train from Athens to Patras to take a ship to Italy. Their waiter eavesdropped, doing a poor job of busing an adjoining table. Xander was fairly certain that Spike edited out quite a bit of the eating of the other travelers and the terrorizing of the staff, but by the time Spike was finished, the chubby old man who'd been so annoyed over the garlic was beaming and
nodding and patting Spike on the shoulder, all pretense of not listening gone. He talked to Spike a mile a minute in Greek and Spike talked back to him, not looking even remotely like he wanted to tear the man's throat out. The waiter finally waddled away, and Xander looked at Spike in astonishment.

"I didn't know you could speak Greek, Spike."

"Well, you pick things up, you know? Comes in handy, pet. It's not hard to learn languages - you should try some time." Spike picked at the last bit of his lamb, and Xander stiffened in his seat when he felt a socked foot rubbing his ankle.

"Uh...languages? No - not me. French in high school was hard enough." Spike snorted, his toes wiggling up Xander's pant-leg.

"High-school French. Not the same thing. You learn it by speaking it, not just staring at a bloody book full of it. You pick something sometime that I can speak and I'll teach you some. Demon language, maybe." Xander just stared at him, and tried to ignore the agile toes that were inching along his inner thigh.

For dessert there were baked quinces I don't even know what a quince is, but I like it and then they were done.
The waiter came by with a package wrapped in brown paper and shoved it into Spike's hands, all the while talking and smiling and bobbing. Spike answered him, smiling faintly. They left money on the table and walked out.

"Hold this for me pet?" Spike asked, and handed the package to Xander. Spike lit a cigarette and slipped his arm around Xander's waist and they strolled back to the truck. The moon had set long ago, and in the clear vault of the sky the stars seemed to be just barely out of reach, like Christmas lights strung across a ceiling.

"What was up with the waiter, Spike? Another cousin?"

"Nah. He heard me talking and was excited because he's from Patras. Wanted to reminisce."

"Hmmm. That was nice of you. To talk to him."

"Sure. Got us free baklava." Spike tapped the package and Xander looked at it.

"What's that?"

"Ohh, pet, you've never had it? Honey and butter and nuts and pastry...better then any bloody Twinkie."
"Better then Twinkies? Never!" Spike just turned his head a little and kissed him, and they stole kisses off each other all the way to the truck. And all the way home. *This is so weird. Is this Spike? Is this what expensive clothes and good food does to vampires?* Xander laughed to himself at that - expensive clothes hadn't made Angel easy to be around.

Oz was still gone when they got there, and the baklava barely made it to the kitchen counter uncrushed. After a while, in the bedroom:

"I've never actually been asked to put clothes back on, even by Cordelia."

"C'mon pet. Please?"

"Ok...wait..." There were several minutes of quiet rustling and breathing.

"Mmmm...ohh...feelsss...mmmm..."

"You really like that, huh? How about...here..."

"Xan-derrrr...ohhh"

"Spike...fuck...ahhh..." Panting, gasping, and creaks from the bed, and then, slowly, silence.
"Damn. This has to be dry-cleaned, doesn't it? You are taking it in and handing it to the person behind the counter."

"Mmmm...anything, pet. Where's the other sweater?"

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14 Reckoning

Spike woke around two when Oz dropped something heavy in the living room. He lay on his back for a minute, wondering if he wanted to get up or not. Oz quietly cursing decided for him *what in bloody hell is he doin' out there?* and he pulled on the first jeans that came to hand - an old pair of Xanders so worn and washed they were like felt. He stumbled out to the kitchen and dug around for a pot to heat water for tea. *Need to get a kettle. Next time I'm out...* He found his smokes on the counter and got one out - lit it, inhaling deeply. He leaned there, watching Oz push through the door with a box that rattled - tapes, cd's, and even some vinyl, sticking over the top.
"Hey, Spike. Sorry 'bout the noise."

"No problem, mate. What're you doin'?"

"I had some stuff stored with Devon and...he needed me to move it, so... Thought I'd go through it, see what I wanted to keep." Oz put the box down on the kitchen table and stood there, looking at Spike. "Got a job."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Spike - Need to talk to you a minute." Spike blinked at him.

"Aren't we?"

"Well, yeah, but - in a serious kinda way. You mind?" Spike ran his hands back through his hair and glanced at the pot. *Not boiling yet*

"Sure, mate. No problem." He slumped into a chair and started going through Oz's music, making a pile of 'heard' and 'haven't heard'. Oz watched him, leaning on the edge of the table.

"Saw Devon last night."
"Yeah, so Xander said. So you just said." Spike looked up at him - noticed that Oz looked tired. "You mind handing me that, wolfling?" Spike gestured at the ashtray near Oz's hands, and Oz pushed it across to him, finally settling into a chair himself.

"Yeah. Devon. He's - got something going - since I left. Kinda took the band off in a new direction and...well, I'd kinda planned on staying with him but now, I don't think so."

"Huh." Spike squinted through smoke at a .45 Grave cd, trying to remember if he'd heard it before. Decided he hadn't and put it in the 'haven't' stack.

"Xander said - I could stay here. Remember, the night you guys got me out? And I think...for a while...I'd like to take him up on that."

"Right. What does any of this have to do with me, wolf?" Spike stubbed out his cigarette and looked at the pot again. Still not boiling. Did I turn the damn stove on?

"Well - this is your house too, Spike. Need to ask you - if it's ok with you." Spike looked at him, startled.
My house? This is Xander's house. I don't...

He's scared* the demon whispered, and Spike realized it was so.

What of? That I'll tell him bugger off...? Why?

"This is Xander's house, mate, an' if he says stay, you can stay. I don't -" care, he was going to say, but something in Oz's expression made him stop for a moment. It's that pack thing. Belonging... DO I want him here? Spike looked at Oz, scenting his distress - really looking at him. He was still thin-looking; from traveling maybe, or from nightmares and his eyes were shadowed in his face. He was nearly as pale as Spike himself. Needs this. I don't mind - we don't

"I don't mind havin' you, mate. You're good company an' you can help keep the gang off Xander's back. Stay as long as you like." Oh, that's relief, that is. Wonder what else is goin' on here? Oz grinned at him, standing back up.

"Thanks, Spike. I'm gonna finish up with my boxes." He turned and went back outside, and Spike realized that his
hands were shaking a little. *He'll know* Spike shifted in his chair - got up and got another cigarette and turned the burner up to 'high' on the stove. *So what if he knows? Xander has to know...even if he's not saying...and wolfling was here when Jack fixed it. He knows...everything already* Spike glared at the pot. He actually wasn't sure if Xander knew - knew that Spike slipped out of bed and house in the middle of the night, two a.m., a little later. To hunt. To put the fear of William the Bloody back into the local demonic population. To feed. He'd told Xander not to buy anymore blood - no point in wasting his money - and hadn't touched what was in the 'fridge since he'd gotten back. Xander didn't seem to notice - or if he did, he didn't comment. It made Spike uneasy. He was just waiting for something to happen. For Xander to decide he couldn't handle it or couldn't allow it or...

*Something. Has to say something, and then...*

*He wants us. Wants the claim*

*He doesn't know what the claim IS*

*Didn't TELL him! Want him - need him* Spike snarled silently at the demon. He hated to admit it, but he was
afraid. He knew that despite his explanation, he hadn't told Xander everything about the claim spell. He was pretty sure that when he did, Xander would reconsider.

*Still a white-hat. Still one of them...can't really want this*

*We hear him! Wants it*

*Maybe*    Spike pushed the thoughts away - pushed them down somewhere with Angel and Dru and the nightmares he was still having.

*Teeth and claws. You can't trap this forever*

*Sod off*

The water boiled at last and Spike made tea - got his bottle of whiskey out of the cabinet and added a healthy slug to the cup, frowning. He sat and drank it and looked at music and the next time Oz came inside he asked which one Oz liked best out of the 'haven't heard' stack, and in a while they were listening to a band called The Brandos and talking about Oz's new job. Oz had stacked five or six largish boxes in the living room - one holding a particularly nice sound system - and Spike carried the music out there and watched Oz go through his stuff. A
lot of the cassettes had suffered in storage - too much heat or damp, and they would hardly play. Soon there was a large discard pile, and Oz was sorting a box full of loose wires, jacks, empty jewel cases, random tools and guitar strings when he found the bag of marijuana. Spike settled cross-legged on the floor and began to roll a joint, just listening to the music and watching Oz work. *Wonder what Xander'll say. Don't know if he thought the wolf would really move in. Wonder if he wants...*

The pot was good, and Spike and Oz smoked and talked about music - smoked and looked through Oz's books, and finally just smoked; sprawled on their backs on the floor, listening to a live recording of some Chinese band Oz had brought back from Tibet.

Xander walked in, bringing wood and sweat and *sweet* smell with him, dropping his tool belt at the door. Spike twisted over onto his belly and grinned at him, feeling the familiar shivery heat of arousal stir in him as he looked at his boy. *Mine. I'll tell him - tell him about the claim. He - has to want it. Can't leave us...love, want you* Xander blinked - grinned at him and walked over, kneeling down beside Spike and kissing the top of his head.
"'Lo, Spike. Oz. What's all this?"

"Xander. Hey. It's my stuff from storage. Want some?" Oz gestured with the roach he was holding and Xander nodded, reaching for it and taking a long drag.

"Thanks. So, you gonna stay, Oz?" Xander croaked, holding his breath, and Oz just stared at him. Spike started laughing, rolling onto his back again and putting his head on Xander's thigh, laughing at the surprised expression on Oz's face, and at Xander's grimace as he let out his breath and coughed.

"Yeah - I - I was hoping I could stay. Thanks." Oz took the roach and held it gingerly, his fingers close to the coal. Spike reached up and pulled Xander down to him, kissing him, tasting smoke and sweet, iced tea and mmmmm...just him. My boy...want Xander slid his hands along Spike's shoulders and chest - finally sat back, smiling, his tongue going out to lick his lips.

"Need a drink. You want something?"

"Yeah - got any a those beers left, pet?"

"I'll see." Xander stood up slowly and then fished in his
pocket. "Hey, before I forget - Oz, here." Xander tossed something jingly to Oz - dropped a similarly noisy thing on Spike's chest. Spike grabbed it - held up a key ring with four keys on it. The keys were color-coded. He looked up at Xander, who was grinning down at him.

"Ok - blue is front door, red is kitchen door, and green is bathroom door. And Spike - against my better judgment, the big key is to my truck." Spike examined the keys, knowing that he was grinning like an idiot, but not caring. He looked back up at Xander.

"Thanks love," he said, and Xander just laughed.

"What is it with this house and doors, man?" Oz asked, attaching the smaller ring to his own rather spare set.

"I dunno," Xander said, making his way around boxes and piles of things to the kitchen. "But, like Spike said, that bathroom door comes in handy on exploding-demon nights. So...are you gonna set your stereo up Oz? 'Cause I'm thinkin' it's way better then the old boom box here."

"Sure. I've got a bookshelf at my folk's, I'll get it tomorrow, we'll get all this - " he waved his hand around
at the mess. "Get all this squared away."

"Cool." Xander went into the kitchen and Spike could hear him opening a beer - getting a glass from the cabinet and opening the 'fridge, pouring something. Spike just lay on the floor, listening to the mortal's heartbeat, the keys clutched in his hand. Listening as the steady ta-tum suddenly jumped, beating a little faster.

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"This...blood. It's like - old. Can you still drink it?" Xander's voice sounded... *is he mad?* Spike wanted to say something...reassuring. But his brain was working at half speed, and the long afternoon of talking in circles and talking about everything and nothing with Oz had made him feel...safe.

"Nah, s'no good, pet. Just throw it away, eh? I'll find me a nice chica later, something spicy..."

Dead silence from the kitchen, and the link, that had been quietly percolating with affection and arousal went
absolutely dead. Spike froze where he was - didn't move, didn't think. Oz had gone stiffly silent as well, eyes locked on a book.

Love... Spike heard Xander's heart speed up even more - heard his breathing go ragged, and Spike finally shook off his paralysis and jumped up, darting into the kitchen, letting the keys drop. Xander was standing by the 'fridge, glass of water in one hand, the two packets of blood in the other. Staring at the blood.

"Xander, pet..."

"N-no, Spike, it's ok. It's - " Xander turned and dropped the packets into the trash and then leaned against the counter, staring at Spike. His hands were shaking, and set his water down with a chattering clink on the counter. No, no, don't love, please...oh gods, what do I...

"Spike. It's ok. I'm - I'm being..." Xander stopped and rubbed his hands over his face - looked up at Spike and gave him a small smile. But his eyes were wide and wet, and Spike felt his hands clench - felt his nails split his palms.

"C'mere," Xander whispered, and held his arms
out. *But*… Spike hesitated, confused. Then he stepped up close and burrowed into the familiar warmth and scent, the reassuring thud and rush of heart and blood. And the link finally opened again, full of *love* but there was an undercurrent of *fear sorrow* that made Spike pull away a little, looking closely at Xander in the warm golden light that glowed through the blinds.

"Love - tell me. What do you...I'm sorry, love -"

"No, Spike, don't. I'm not - I'm not upset about...what you said. About you - going and finding someone... I mean, I am, but..." Xander leaned his forehead on Spike's, arms tightening around his waist, and Spike wanted to crush him close - kiss him until he couldn't breathe, never let him up or out or away from him. He tried not to hug Xander too tightly, aware he could hurt him. *Love you, love you...never let you go...pet, please* Xander leaned back, and Spike looked at him - looked into his dark eyes, searching for *forgive* something.

"Tell me, pet. Tell me what you mean." Xander nodded - wetted his lips.

"I'm - it's what I said, Spike. I don't care that you're
hunting. And I should. I'm supposed to be a good guy - supposed to be, you know, helping the Slayer keep the world free of evil. Or at least Sunnydale. And all I care about is that you don't k-kill me or mine. That you leave the gang alone. And that girl at the coffee shop and that guy that sold us the clothes... I'm - I'm such a fuckin' hypocrite and I don't even care..." Xander stopped, taking a shuddering breath, and Spike could hear his heart pounding so fast, could smell the fear and the misery coming off him. He pushed his fingers back through Xander's hair, so gently, kissing his cheeks and his lips, telling him love you love you every way that he could.

"You do care, love, or you wouldn't -"

"No - hush. Don't say anything, Spike. I care - but I guess... I guess I don't care enough. I'm not going to ask you to - stop. I'm not. That would be... I dunno what it would be. It feels wrong. I told you - I expect you to be a vampire, and that's... part of it. I wish you could just - travel to the other side of the planet every night and hunt in Budapest or something, but that's wrong, too. I just don't - " Xander stopped again and this time he was crying, silently, and Spike held him close, rubbing his hands over Xander's back, shaking. Fuck, should have
said, should have... Don't know if it's enough, please let it be enough...love, don't leave me please, please  Something of that got through, because Xander sent it back, fierce and desperate love you mine and lifted his head, wiping at moisture, sniffing.

"How can I not care? I should feel - I should feel h-horrified or - or disgusted. Something. And I don't know what to do about it." Spike kissed where the tears had been, tasting salt and sorrow with a flicker of his tongue.

"Maybe you don't need to do anything." It was Oz, standing in the doorway to the living room, hands tightly folded together and eyes wary. Spike felt a growl in his chest, getting louder, and pushed it back. The wolfling was family and he could say - whatever he liked.

"Wha'dya mean, Oz?" Xander whispered, voice thick with tears.

"I'm not trying to - justify - anything. But. From what Giles has said, about the Slayer's history and everything - all these things, all these demons and vampires and...well, werewolves...we've all been around as long as humans - longer, even. So maybe death by vampire or -
whatever - is part of life, just like...any other kind. I mean - we all die eventually, and dead is dead. It's all natural because it happens to everybody. So maybe - Spike's just doing what he has to do, and it doesn't mean anything, really. Doesn't have to mean he's evil, doesn't make you...guilty by association. You can't stop him, Xander. Not even with the love thing." Xander stared at Oz for a minute, bewildered, then laughed a little.

"The love thing, Oz? Tell me what that is, please, 'cause I don't think I've tried it.

"You haven't. But you might. It's that 'if you really loved me you would' thing. You know?"

"Oh. That." Xander looked at Spike, and Spike felt a tiny surge of sorrow and Xander touched Spike's lips, fingertips as warm as sunlight.

"I dunno. Maybe I would have. But that - never works. Things don't work like that."

"Right. They don't. I can't tell you what to feel, Xander. But...you're in love with a vampire. And he's in love with a human. You might never be - easy - with this. But it's just - what he is. What you both are. Don't
let this...make you hate yourself...or him. He's only a monster if you make him one." Oz looked at them for a long moment, and there was some emotion in him, so strong that Spike could hear his heart pounding. But the werewolf took a hard, deep breath and then he turned and went back into the living room, turning on the lone lamp and settling back to sorting his things. Spike waited, while Xander thought about what Oz had said - while Xander ran his hands over Spike's chest and arms, learning me, knowing me and finally looked at him, eye to eye.

"I love you, Spike. No matter what. Maybe it is - justification. But this place - everyone knows, what goes on here. We've seen it all our lives and we take our chances. I love you. I won't stop you and I won't...I won't try to make you feel guilty - " Spike couldn't help it - he laughed softly, pulling Xander close.

"Love - I've been alive for 140 years. I haven't felt real bloody guilt since the night Dru turned me. And maybe I should, poncey, soul-having bastard that I am. But I don't. I won't hurt your mates, Xander. I'll try not to hurt the Slayer, but she can't seem to stop herself from attacking me and I'm bloody well not gonna let her stake me. I can promise you that." Spike pushed his fingers
through Xander's hair - pulled him close for a soft kiss, and then pulled away, looking straight into the wide, anxious eyes opposite his own. "But anyone and anything that hurts you - tries to hurt you - is the walking dead. And the Initiative, love, is gonna learn what a Master vampire can do. You couldn't stop me if you tried. But - when I hunt, love...I don't even have to kill 'em. I...haven't been." Xander looked up at him, his eyes searching, the link full of love truth please

"You haven't?" Xander whispered, and Spike felt a wave of relief so strong he closed his eyes for a moment.

"No love. Truth I promised you, remember? Won't put anymore deaths on you. Not ones that you'd...regret. I'm not a fledge, too stupid to control himself. Or Angelus, always wanting to - break things. I take what I need from three or four - leave 'em where they're safe. It's not hard." I chose this. I gave him this. I'm stronger then the demon, stronger then Angelus - stronger then they know Spike stretched up to kiss again, savoring the warmth. "Love you, Xander, love you more than...more than anything." mine mine for always love you

"Yeah. For always. Thank you, love - for doing that for
me." Xander drew him close, kissing back, and Spike let the familiar surge of lust and love, tenderness and fierce, possessive joy wash over him - catch him up and fling him, dizzy, into the ether. He knew only Xander's warmth - his scent and taste - felt only his skin like finest suede, soft and sun-touched and surging with life. *Mine my boy my love...never leave me never let me hurt you, love don't*

"Won't hurt me, Spike. You won't. But..." Xander looked at him, frowning, and *listen listen* came through, loud and clear. "You be careful, Spike. If Buffy finds out about you - about the chip - you know what she'll do. And Giles will probably help her. I don't want to run away, but I won't let her touch you, and if it means we leave Sunnydale - leave California - we will. But you be careful, and be smart - don't make me worry about you all the time, ok?" *MINE your mine never leave*

"I'll be careful, love. Promise. You'd...really leave here?"

"If I had to." Xander's gaze was serious - a little troubled, and Spike smoothed the sable-dark hair back, and hugged him close. They just stood together, arms tight and cheeks touching, eyes closed. Until the phone
rang and Spike jumped, cursing. Xander shuffled over to the phone and Spike didn't let him go - kissed his neck and deliberately nibbled at the mostly-healed mark he'd made, grinning when Xander gasped a little.

"Spike!" he hissed, covering the receiver and trying to glare at the vampire behind him.

"Hello? Hey, Giles. Right now? Oh...damn. Ok. Gimmie - half an hour, I just got home, I need to shower... Ok. Bye."

"The gang need you, Xander?"

"Something bad happened - Riley heard it on his radio. I guess - Adam got one of the soldiers. Tortured him. We have to go over there. We've really got to get this...thing. You up for this, Oz?"

"Sure. Gotta find my shoes..."

Spike felt the tiniest stirring of fear - tromped ruthlessly down on it and killed it. *It'll be fine. I got some stuff to tell them and...Xander knows. He knows. It'll be fine*  He let Xander go, to shower and change, and he followed a moment later to put on his black, armoring
himself against the gang - against the slurs and the snark, knowing he had to be in total control. If he let slip the demon - he could lose everything. Won't do that. Won't lose this - won't lose my boy. And...don't want to hurt the wolf. Family. This is my family now. Mine to protect - my town to control. He went out to the living room and picked up his keys - held them tight in his fist like a talisman against all bad things. William the Bloody, and I won't fuck this up

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The atmosphere at Giles' apartment was subdued. Buffy and Riley were on the couch holding hands, but they were both tense. Willow was at her laptop *She's like computer nerd extraordinaire, these days* and Tara was next to her, looking uncomfortable, hiding behind her hair. Giles was tight-lipped when they walked in, his eyes darting from Xander to Oz and narrowing when he saw Spike. *don't don't don't* Xander thought, and Spike went silently to his place on the steps, pulling his duster around him. Anya was in the corner of the couch opposite Buffy and Riley, but she didn't meet Xander's eyes when he looked at her.
"Giles - what's up?"

"Please sit down, Xander. And Oz, you as well. This is for Riley to tell." Xander and Oz settled on the stools by the breakfast bar, and Giles leaned next to them, arms crossed, frowning. Willow looked up from her computer and smiled weakly at them, making a little wave at Xander and Oz. Tara just smiled, but her eyes were dark. Riley glanced at them - sent a venomous look at Spike.

"Why does that - hostile - have to be here?"

"He's supposed to be helping us, Riley. To stop Adam." Xander was amazed at Buffy's quiet tone. Amazed that she'd spoken up for Spike. Riley looked at her angrily.

"Help how? Do you really trust him? I don't understand why -" 

"Riley - please. Just - let it go, ok? Tell us - what happened. Xander and Oz don't even know what happened yet." Buffy sounded - tired. Riley scrubbed his hands back through his hair - clasped his fingers together between his knees, ignoring Buffy's abortive move to
take his hand again.

"I kept a radio from the Initiative - I've been listening to it, mostly to steer clear of patrols..." Riley looked at Xander and Oz - looked down again, mouth grim. "Today, early this morning, I heard - up in Breakers' Wood, near Adam's cave. They found...Mason. He was - on my team. He was tortured. Adam tortured him and killed him." Riley shuddered, and Buffy reached hesitantly to touch his shoulder. He looked at her and sighed, and she hugged him, eyes brimming with unshed tears. Xander sat frozen on the stool. Thinking. His duster. All...bloody. And his Docs. The blood on the door. Oh fuck. Xander looked up at Spike, who was staring straight at Riley, eyes glowing gold. His face was a mask of utter hate, and Xander suddenly pushed SPIKE! as hard and loud as he could. Spike flinched and jerked his head around to look at him. His expression softened and his eyes were human again. He nodded once at Xander.

"So - he's moved from demons to humans. What's the plan then? What are we doing?" Xander asked, remembering the demon carcass they'd found in the woods; Adam's first experiment. Amazed that his voice sounded so...normal. Giles glanced over at him and then
rose, going to stand behind Willow and Tara.

"I've asked Willow to see what the coroners' report says - see if there's anything at all there to help us understand this. And I want to hear from Spike, as well. Have you had any success in contacting him, Spike?" Xander felt himself tense as Spike stood up, a slight smirk curling up the corner of the vampire's mouth, his whole being screaming 'Big Bad'. Guaranteed to piss off at least half the room.

"You're in luck, mate. Talked to him last night. Seems he's got some kind of - ultimate soddin' plan. Wants the Slayer and her gang to set-to with the soldier boys and the demons and provide him with - how did he put it? Oh yeah. All the bloody spare parts he needs." Spike's smile was tight and malicious and Xander could practically feel Buffy switching into Slayer mode from across the room. Riley was on his feet, and Giles was scowling. Buffy stalked over to Spike and got up in his face, and Spike just stood there, looking down at her, never once losing the smile.

"You'd better be telling us the truth, Spike. And you'd better have something for us, because otherwise I'll be more then happy to let Riley work out some frustration
on your undead ass." Spike hissed, and even in his human face, it was a shivery sound. There was a small gasping noise from Willow, and Xander glanced over to see her holding Tara's hand, both of the witches wide-eyed and ready to *Fuck, they're ready to do some kind of magic here and who fucking knows what the hell it might be - Tara might get it right but Willow is freaking out and she could send us all to Siberia or something*

"Keep your toy soldier away from me, Slayer. I dunno if I could tear out his heart before this fucking chip knocked me down, but I'd be bloody willing to try. You don't want another dead soldier on your hands, do you?" Buffy aimed a ferocious punch at him and Spike mostly dodged it, falling into a loose stance, ready to fight. A little blood trickled down from where Buffy's ring had cut the skin over his cheekbone. *Stop! Back off, damnit!* Xander felt like he was going to fly apart - he was so tense his muscles were shaking, and he desperately wanted to intervene somehow - to stop this. Beside him, he could feel Oz trembling, and he tried to calm himself down, as well. Nothing articulate was coming through the link, it was *HATE* and Xander gasped at the intensity of it - at the almost painful need for violence - for blood - rolling off Spike in waves.
Spike glanced over at him and like that, the link went dead. Spike straightened out of his crouch and shot a look of pure amusement at Riley, and then Buffy.

"You lot never learn. Can't get anything out of me if I'm laid up, can you. And this Adam - he thinks I'm so useful. Can't begin to tell you how pleased he was to see me." He stalked over to the table and drew something out of an inner pocket - tossed it down next to Willow's computer. Floppy discs, four or five, unmarked. Willow looked at them as if they might be poisonous, and then reached tentatively for one. Spike reached up and felt his cheek - looked at the blood on his fingers and casually licked it away, ignoring Willow's flinch, Buffy's noise of disgust.

"Frankentron had 'em up in that cave - has a bunch of stuff. He talks more than the Watcher, here, so while he was gassin' on 'bout his master plan I nicked 'em." Spike looked down at Willow, who unconsciously moved a little closer to Tara.

"Well - w-what's on them? I mean - are they schematics or - or the directions for how to build your own Adam or what?"
"Well now, that's your job, innit Red? You're the computer expert. You tell us." Spike sauntered into Giles' kitchen and opened the 'fridge. "Oi, Watcher! You're supposed to have a little treat in here for me, wasn't that the deal?"

"The deal was for you to find us something we could use. Until Willow can look these discs over, we don't know what you've brought. For all we know it could be the kitchen supplies inventory or something equally useless. You'll have to wait." Spike slammed the 'fridge shut, making it rock on its feet. He came around the kitchen corner fast and snarled straight into Giles' face, demon flickering out and away almost faster then the eye could follow. Giles flinched back hard, and Buffy practically leaped across the room, snatching a handful of duster and yanking Spike back.

"That's it, Spike - you don't threaten anyone here - get out!" Buffy had a stake in her hand, poised to attack, and Riley was behind her, furious. Spike shifted again, demon and then human, head down and eyes flickering over everyone in the room. *calm please Spike*

"Guys..." Xander said, wondering what in hell to say next.
"Guess you don't care how many G.I. Joe's buy it, eh Slayer? So long as your toy is safe."

"Shut. Up."

"Hey - here's the coroners' report. Buffy, you wanna wanna read it?" Willow's voice was high-pitched with anxiety, and she looked from Buffy to Spike and back again, clearly unhappy. Anya got up off the couch and came over, casually walking between Buffy and Spike.

"I'll read it, Willow. I'm sure this Adam doesn't have anything up on me, but I'm always happy to check on someone's technique."

"Anya -" Giles glared at her, and Buffy rolled her eyes, taking a step back. "Buffy, please - just try to ignore him. He can't actually hurt me; let him bluster all he likes," Giles said, looking over Willow's shoulder. Spike smirked at Anya, skirting around Buffy and Riley and heading back to the stairs. Xander thought he might pass out. My god. That was SO not careful. We are going to have a LONG talk. Fuck, I think I need a...drink or something. Thank god for Anya  Xander caught Anya's eye and smiled, and she smiled back, raising her
eyebrows. *She knew EXACTLY what she was doing. You go, girl. Christ. I actually said that. Thought it. Whatever* Xander got up and went into the kitchen.

"Giles, you mind if I get a glass of water?"

"Hmmm?" Giles turned away from the laptop and peered at Xander. "Oh no, of course not. Please help yourself. Everyone, please..." Giles turned back, squinting at the screen, glancing at Anya in irritation as the ex-demon scrolled too fast down the page. Xander filled a glass at the tap and leaned against the sink, drinking and watching Spike. Spike seemed to be having a fight with himself - he was glancing around the room, muttering, his fingers rolling and fiddling with a cigarette. He glanced up at Xander and then away, and love you washed through Xander, strong and warm. Xander smiled - emptied his glass and rinsed it; put it in the dish rack.

"Wow - he really got inventive there." Anya said suddenly, pointing to something on the screen, and Tara made a choking noise and got up. Riley was back on the couch, Buffy hovering indecisively over him.

"What - what does it say, Giles?" Buffy asked, and Giles
took off his glasses, giving them a brief polish before
shooing Willow away from her chair.

"It says - first of all - he was dead for two days when they
found him. He - was - partially flayed and had many slash
wounds and...puncture wounds. And... " Giles sighed,
rubbing his forehead. "He was...nailed up to a tree."

"Fuck!" from Riley, muffled behind his fists, and Buffy
flinched, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"It doesn't actually say the cause of death, though," Anya
said, peering at the screen.

"What do you mean? It's obvious, isn't it?" Buffy's
mouth was tight, her eyes dark. Anya shrugged.

"Well, not really. People can survive a lot of torture. All
of these wounds - they might have killed him, but most
of them weren't enough to do it. I wonder why it's not in
here." She scrolled the screen again, frowning, and
Willow looked thoughtful.

"Well, they - they don't know who did it - I mean, they
don't know it's Adam. Maybe they think it's a - serial
killer or something, and they're, you know, withholding
key evidence so they can catch him. Or...something like that." Willow reached over and tapped something, closing the screen.

"I'm really very sorry, Riley," Giles murmured, and he stood up and came into the kitchen, picking up his tea kettle and filling it, staring blankly into space, not noticing Xander at all. Xander looked over at Spike - saw something flicker across his face before being wiped away, the faintly amused smirk settling into place.

He did it. That night - after Angel came - he went out and ... found this guy. And...fuck. He put one of those nails in Angel Xander swallowed hard, then pushed it away - pushed it all away. Knew he was going to do this. Can't STOP him from doing this. He still - dreams. I know he does. They hurt him, and he's...reciprocating. It's what he DOES

Deal with it, Harris. In for a penny...

Oh fuck you. I know, I know. Fuck Xander went back to his seat, watching as Willow fed one of the discs into the computer, and Tara went over to Buffy, smiling softly, putting her hand gently on Buffy's arm. Riley had gotten up and was standing looking out the window, his back
rigid. Spike... watched them all, his eyes glittering in the dimness. Lucifer or Gabriel, Xander couldn't tell. *An angel with one wing dipped in blood. That's him - so perfect, and so... He tortured that man and came home to me and I...love him...anyway. God.* Next to him, Oz was looking studiously at his hands. When Xander took in a hard breath, Oz looked up, his eyes dark, his face set. He looked - angry, almost.

"Oz?" Xander whispered.

"Don't hate yourself, Xander. Accept it or don't, but don't take it on yourself." Xander stared at him - glanced back at Spike and then nodded.

"I'd do the same myself, if I could," Oz murmured, and Xander looked at him in surprise before turning his attention back to Willow, who was saying something about the discs.

"They're encrypted. It'll take a while for me to break this."

"You c-can do it, Willow," Tara said softly, and Willow smiled at her.
"Yeah - just give me a day or so, Giles, and I'll - I'll have the code. I think. I think I will."

"Alright, Willow. Thank you." Giles went over to his table, picking up a book and laying it down again, frustrated. "In the meantime, we need to do some research. There have to be some spells we can use to stop Adam. Since conventional weapons don't seem to hurt him, and he's...stronger then you, Buffy, we need something very powerful. If you could do a spell while you were fighting..." Giles stopped, at a loss, taking off his glasses and rubbing his forehead.

"Super Slayer, with all the combined powers of the SuperFriends!" Xander said in his best 'Saturday Morning Cartoon' voice. Spike was shredding a cigarette all over Giles' stairs, frowning.

"What was that?" Giles asked.

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A half-hour later they had the basics of a plan. Anya, Tara and Giles were going to prepare the spell; Willow was going to concentrate on the discs. Buffy was going
to get Riley back to his place and do a campus patrol, and Giles had asked Xander and Oz to patrol in town. And 'oh yes, do take Spike with you', with an irritated glance at the shreds of paper and tobacco on the stairs. Spike was practically vibrating with poorly-contained tension and he was up and out the door before Xander and Oz could even say their goodbyes. The link was a roil of agitation and anger, and Xander was starting to get jumpy himself. He smiled and waved at Buffy and Riley, who were back on the couch and fairly oblivious. Anya had stepped outside after Spike for some 'fresh air'. Xander gave Willow a quick hug.

"Are you ok, Xander?" Willow asked, her hand lingering on his forearm.

"Sure Wills. Why?"

"Well, vampire living at your house and he seems kinda - edgy?"

"Oh." Xander looked at Willow, wondering what, exactly, to say. He decided he'd go for 'mostly the truth' and see how that worked. "Well, he's actually not all that edgy when we're home. It's just, you know - " Xander made a gesture around the room, encompassing Giles and Riley
and Buffy. "He's not happy to be around Riley, and he and Buffy never got along, and Giles makes him crazy, so...coming here is kinda hard."

"Well sure, but - we're helping him, Xander - protecting him and - and feeding him. He should try to be - grateful." Xander snapped his mouth shut before he said anything. What waited on the tip of his tongue was unkind in the extreme. He took a deep breath and looked over at Tara, who was frowning.

"He's not grateful, Willow, because he was kidnapped and maimed. And when he comes here he gets his life threatened and he gets told that if he dies it won't actually matter to anyone. You try and be all smiles and puppies with that in your face. He's helping us, and he doesn't actually have to, so maybe you guys should just lay off him." Willow was wide-eyed now, and she looked like she might actually cry - or smack him. Tara stepped up close to her and took her hand.

"W-we are kinda hhard on him, Willow. He d-didn't aa-actually hurt anybody, he j-just ... got growly."

"Tara! But he- he threatened Giles!"
"No, Wills, he didn't. He - growled at him. Buffy threatened him. As usual. I'm actually kind of suprised he even turned those discs over to us. And Giles should have kept up his end of the deal." Xander looked at Willows' shocked, disbelieving face and shook his head.

"He's trying, Willow, he really is - we get along fine at home. No need to worry about me, ok? How's things at school? Are your classes fun?" Willow gave him a hard look but allowed herself to be distracted, and after a few minutes of conversation about professors and papers, they were both a little calmer. The feelings coming through the link had calmed, as well - in fact, Xander had the distinct feeling that Spike was laughing.

"Ok, gotta go. Good luck with the spell thing, you guys." Oz was already slipping out the door, and Xander waved to the room in general and followed. Anya was sitting outside on the steps with Spike, sharing a cigarette. Xander stared for a second and then grinned and walked over. As soon as he was close enough, Spike reached out and grabbed him, pulling him down onto the step just below him and wrapping his arms around Xander's shoulders. The vampire rubbed his cheek against Xander's hair, kissing the top of his head. For some reason, Xander didn't feel a moment's
hesitation in letting Anya know exactly what was going on between him and Spike. Oz lingered by the door, head cocked as if listening.

"Spike - that was so not careful in there." Xander felt Spike smirk into his hair and he leaned back into him, curling his hands around Spike's calves. "Anya - thanks."

"Sure Xander. I've decided that if we aren't going to be orgasm friends we can be just regular friends. Besides, the not-quite-humans in this group have to stick together."

"Yeah? Ok. Ummm. But - I'm all human, Anya." Anya looked at him, a small smile on her face.

"You're having orgasms with a vampire, Xander. That makes you different no matter what." Spike finished the cigarette and flicked the butt away into the shadows.

"I really need to go stomp somthin' into the ground, mate. How about you and the wolf meet me at my old crypt? I'll bet I can find something to dismember on the way." Xander twisted a little, looking up at the vampire.

"Are you sure? I mean - the Initiative is still out there -
what if they're patrolling?"

"No worries, mate." Spike reached into a pocket and held up a hand-held radio. "Soldier-boy had it in his jacket. I'll know where they are." Xander just stared for a moment, then he nodded. Better they get Riley then Spike. They probably won't torture Riley.

Although, if they did... Xander pushed that not surprisingly soldier-generated thought away and focused on Spike again.

"Ok. You know how to work it?"

"Sure." Spike leaned down and kissed him, hard and deep and love and then he was up, moving fast. In a few seconds he was gone. Xander blinked after him, then stood up as well

"Guess we'd better go, Oz. Anya - I'm glad you're - well, I'm glad we can be friends."

"Me too." Anya held her hand up and Xander pulled her to her feet. "You were my first friend here, Xander, when I lost my powers. And you guys - " she gestured to include Oz, "you guys treat me like...I'm one of you. I can
tell that the rest don't really like me." Xander opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again.

"Yeah. You're probably right. But give them a chance, ok Anya? They're just - human, you know? They really are good people - good friends." Anya smiled at him - smiled over at Oz.

"I'm with Spike, you know? I like this world, even if it is hard to get along without my powers. Although dog racing is very strange. So I'll do what I can to help with the Hellmouth stuff. I don't want Sunnydale to be sucked into a hell dimension - some of them are pretty horrible. There's one that's always Tuesday. Can you imagine? Besides, there are many ways of making money and having orgasms that I haven't even explored yet." Anya smiled and headed back inside. Xander and Oz walked up the steps and out into the parking lot, making their way to Xander's truck.

"Everybody was pretty excited in there, when we left," Oz said, and Xander glanced back towards Giles' apartment.

"Yeah? What about?"
"About Spike - about you. Guess that whole performance tonight kinda - got 'em riled up. And of course you taking sides..." Oz didn't finish, but Xander knew exactly what he meant. He unlocked the truck door and slid in - reached over and unlocked Oz's door.

"Well, too bad. I'm not gonna even pretend to join the 'I hate Spike' club just to make them happy. They're wrong, and I don't mind pointing it out. I'm done with being the get-along guy." Oz shrugged, not saying anything, and Xander drove out of the parking lot, thinking. Very faintly, he could feel something from Spike - it felt gleeful and...hungry, somehow, and Xander wondered if he were fighting something. Or feeding. Xander looked over at Oz, who was staring out the window, one leg pulled up to his chest.

"Oz? Did you mean it? About...killing that soldier? Any soldier?" Oz looked over at him, then back out the window, his fingers tapping absently on his shin.

"Yeah, I did. I feel like I want to. If we were out patrolling, and we found a soldier...I don't know exactly what I'd do but I...feel...like I'd like to hurt him. I don't know." Oz sighed, and rested his chin on his knee. "They wanted me to be an animal, Xander. They wanted me to
be some mindless, evil thing. Something it was ok to hurt and hate. When I - changed - when I was human... they wouldn't look at me. They pretended I wasn't even there - talked like I couldn't hear them or...couldn't understand them. They made me an animal so they could do whatever they wanted to me. They - hurt me - so I'd change back. " Oz's eyes had gone dark, and he seemed to curl in on himself, tucking down. "When I found out I was a werewolf, and even when I might have killed someone - you guys all... You treated me like a human, and you worked to figure it out - to fix it. They just - wanted me to be a hostile. They didn't care that I was mostly Oz." Oz's fingers had tightened on his leg, knuckles white, and after a moment Xander reached hesitantly over and put his hand on Oz's rigid shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Oz. I'm so sorry." He let his hand rest there a moment - squeezed the tensed muscle and let go. The rest of the ride to the cemetery was silent, but it wasn't a bad silence. Oz finally relaxed a little.

"I guess that's three of us that know now. You think Anya will keep the secret?" Xander blinked, surprised. He hadn't really even considered it.

"I - dunno. I hope. I'm not really ready to face that, right
now. Not when everything is so...

"Yeah... I think she will. She gets stuff more then everybody thinks. I think she just likes to... keep people off balance."

"I think you're right." Xander found a place to park that wasn't too conspicuous and they walked in silence towards Spike's crypt - exchanged alarmed glances and started to run when they heard the sounds of fighting. They rounded the Robinson memorial and skidded to a stop. Spike was fighting three fledges - and if the gleeful, fang-edged smile on his face meant anything, he was enjoying himself. Xander and Oz settled on convenient tombstones and watched. Spike's movements were liquid, graceful - and vicious, and Xander flinched a little at the blooming streaks and splotches of blood that were rapidly appearing on the clothes of all three of the fledges. Xander couldn't tell if Spike was using his hands or a weapon - wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Fuck. Glad he's on my side. He's...scary.

Ours. Never hurt us Xander wondered what made the hyena so certain of everything. It was nice to have that
kind of confidence somewhere inside himself, but a little weird when it vied with his own insecurities. Spike noticed them and in a flurry of moves faster than Xander could track, all three fledges were dust, eddying down to the ground in swirling clouds. Spike tossed his stake into the air and caught it - tucked it away. Xander noticed a knife in his other hand - realized it was the straight razor that Spike carried. *Is that better or worse then hands?* Xander shivered a little at the thought of that surgically sharp blade slicing into flesh.

"All relaxed and ready to patrol, then?" Xander asked, standing up as Spike sauntered over, tucking the razor away. The demon features sank away, giving over to the human ones and Spike swept Xander up in a hard embrace, kissing him with an intensity that took Xander's breath away. The mortal pressed as close as he could to the hard, cool body, feeling the sizzle of desire start in his belly. *Want you love you want* and Spike groaned into his mouth, groin to groin and hardness to hardness. Xander finally pulled away, smiling, conscious of Oz and where they were.

"Mmmm. Not relaxed at all, pet." Spike kissed down his throat and nibbled at the bite mark. "Fix that soon enough."
"Hmm, yeah -" Spike stiffened suddenly, and pushed Xander away, head up and scenting, the demon back in seconds. He stalked over to his old crypt and kicked the door in, then disappeared inside.

A moment later he came out, cradling a limp body. It was a girl - nobody Xander knew - college age. Her clothes were torn, and her throat, and she lolled in Spike's arms, eyes glassy, her lips blue-tinged and smeared with blood. Oz moved towards them, his hand going out to the girl.

"Is she alive?" Xander whispered, and Spike looked down at her.

"For about another minute. She's bled out, pet."

"We gotta - gotta get her to -"

"Xander." Spike's tone stopped him - his look. He looked - disgusted.

"What? Spike, we have to -"

"No, love. She's bled out. She's fed. She'll be a fledge by
tomorrow." Oz's hand dropped, and he stepped away.

"What do we do?" Oz asked, quiet, and Spike looked back at the girl.

"Gits. They could barely fend for themselves and they're turnin' whatever comes their way. I'm surprised it even worked. The blood's thin, around here. Too many minions makin' minions..."

"Spike," Xander said, and Spike stopped talking and looked at him. "What do we do with her?"

"Usual. She's turned enough, a stake'll finish it." Spike lay her down on the ground - dipped his hand into his coat and found his stake. A moment later the girl brown hair, dolls' eyes, tan skin was gone and Spike was brushing at his duster. Xander sighed, and looked over at Oz.

"Guess we'd better patrol, huh." Oz nodded, looking at the space where the girl had been.

"Yeah - go from here over to the Bronze and back?"

"Ok." Spike had gone back into the crypt and now he
emerged, stuffing something into his pocket. "What'cha got, Spike?"

"Oh, they had a bit a dosh lyin' about - might as well take it. Ready, then?"

"Yeah. Ready." Xander fell into step with Oz, and Spike slipped his arm around Xander's waist, tugging him close.

"She was already gone, love. Nothing you could do. Don't fret, eh?" Xander looked over at him - saw dark eyes and so-perfect face - felt love you safe like a warm breeze through his soul. He nodded, and they walked in silence for a while, the only sound the steady whisper of static from the Initiative radio Spike had somewhere in his duster. Xander felt questions crowding behind his teeth - knew he had to ask some of them - one of them - or scream. He took a deep breath, and felt Spike's fingers tighten for a moment on his waist.

"You're gonna ask about that soldier, aren't you pet." Spike said, and his voice was low - tense - and there was a brief skitter of fear from the link, then nothing.

"Yeah." Xander sighed - stopped walking and turned, resting his hands on Spike's shoulders. "What killed him,
Spike?" Spike's own hands had gone to Xander's hips, and they tightened there for a moment. Spike's blue eyes were half-lidded, speculative. As if weighing his response.

Truth    Xander thought, and Spike nodded slowly.

"Put one a those nails into him - through his skull. Right where... Well, you know where." Xander held Spike's gaze as long as he could, then he glanced away, shivering. Oz was sidling back, step by step.

"Oz. It's ok. You need to be here, too. You've kind of - thrown in with us, you're - pack. It's ok." Oz nodded and settled on a tilting tombstone, stake idly turning in his hands. Xander took a hard breath and turned back to Spike, the link oddly silent. He tentatively sent love you and got a flood back; relief, fear, anger, love. Xander kneaded Spike's shoulders through the duster, the leather creaking softly. "Ok. You got one - did something really nasty to him. Are - are the rest going to be like that?"

"Probably." Spike looked at him, and reached up to touch Xander's lips, so gently. "But maybe not. I was - when I found him, that soldier - he almost had
me. Those damn tazer things of theirs, they're wicked, love. But I got him, in the end, and I was gonna - was gonna nail him up and leave him, is all. I've never really been one for... But I - started remembering." Spike shivered suddenly, and Oz shifted on his macabre seat, tense.

"Remembering what, love?" Spike took in a hard breath and glanced over at Oz.

"Just - what they did. I kinda...got lost, for a bit. An' then he was dead." Spike slid his fingers up under Xander's shirt, caressing his back. "I don't like to lose control like that. It...scares me. I never did that before." Xander kissed him gently, just slowly re-learning the cool cave of his mouth; smoke and spice, and blood Xander pulled away, and looked at him. *Truth, remember? Vampire-truth. And werewolf-truth. They both want to kill what hurt them. The hyena does - some part of me...does.*

"Ok. Fuck, Spike. I know you have to do this. I love you. Be careful. If he'd gotten you with that tazer..."

"All right, pet. All right." need you mine love you A long moment of silence, just being close, then Xander gave Spike a last kiss and pulled back.
"You too, Oz. Be careful. I don't know what your plans are, regarding the Initiative, but you don't get to play John Wayne either." Oz nodded at him, a small smile on his lips. "Now it's time to save the city of Sunnydale from inept evil and smelly demons. You game?" Xander asked, grinning at Spike and the demon grinned back. Oz howled, the sound strange and shivery coming out of his human mouth. Spike roared, a cry that boomed and echoed away across the cemetery. Faintly, something roared back, and Spike laughed.

"Our next kill awaits, gentlemen." They grinned at each other and started towards the sound, an easy lope, elbows and shoulders brushing occasionally. Oz shifted into the wolf a little so he could make wolf-on-the-hunt sounds; yips and snarls that Spike answered.

_Hunt!_ The hyena was ecstatic, and from somewhere, a memory welled up, and Xander lifted his chin and made the whooping, nerve-scraping ululation of the hyena. _Pack. Finally_ He looked over at Spike - at Oz, at supernatural creatures who were... _Family_ came from Spike, and Xander whooped again. _Family_
God, I hate this place Xander shifted uneasily, watching Buffy and Colonel McNamara argue in vicious whispers about the Adam project. Which the Colonel obviously knew nothing about. He also seemed disproportionately horrified by Giles' holdall full of magical supplies. Jesus. This man is a moron. Who put him in charge? Giles was looking more pissed off by the moment, and Willow more nervous. Just as Xander was going to say something to her, the power went out. They all froze, and in the bluish-white wash of the emergency lights, the Colonel looked truly spooked. A technician frantically tapped codes into a keypad, finally giving up in frustration and muttering 'we're locked out'. McNamara seemed to finally gather his wits; he snapped orders, shot Buffy a venomous glare and then he and most of his troops were gone. The two soldiers left to guard them looked nervous as hell, and Buffy had them unconscious on the floor in moments. Willow dove for a computer terminal Thank god for backup generators and started calling up
schematics to the underground warren. Xander felt the sweat collecting along his hairline and trickling down his back, slicking his palms. It was making the stock of his rifle slippery, and he hoped he wouldn't have to actually use it - he might drop it, he was so nervous. *Wish Spike were here. Where...* He sent a questing tendril of thought out along the link, hoping for a response, but Spike was blocking him - or too far away. Somewhere with Adam, getting the Frankentronic creature's "ultimate soddin' plan" going.

"They've got every door locked open - except for the exits..." Willow murmured, frowning. On a security monitor, Xander suddenly realized that the cells the 'hostiles' had been held in were open, and that hell was literally breaking loose in the Pit. Xander nudged Giles, pointing with his chin towards the monitor, and Giles grimaced.

"Found it!" Willow crowed, and in minutes they were moving. Out in the Pit it was chaos - worse then what the monitors had shown by far. The space boiled with demons and soldiers, all of them fighting at a desperate pitch, and something was on fire somewhere, acrid smoke billowing up to the ceiling. Suddenly Xander felt *careful* and he turned and saw Spike vaulting over a railing, bypassing the stairs. The vampire dodged a
soldier, snapped the neck of a warty demon and bounded up to the group.

"Got your secret hideaway all picked out then?" he asked, and Xander grinned at him. A soldier let loose a spray of bullets and Buffy tackled Willow to the ground, rolling them both over and over. Xander ducked down as well and watched in amusement as Giles clocked a demon across the face with some item of magical paraphernalia - he was pretty sure it was the magical gourd that had so horrified the Colonel.

"Here!" Buffy yelled, and flung open door 314. They piled in, and Xander and Spike stood for a moment by the door, out of sight to those inside, watching the riot.

"I'll keep you safe, love," Spike whispered, shrugging out of his duster. "You keep that safe for me, right?"

"R-right," Xander stuttered, and suddenly he was being kissed, cool lips and tongue frantically claiming his, and love you safe mine Xander put his hand to Spike's neck and pulled him closer, and then they were breaking the kiss, panting, and Xander crushed Spike's duster to him. "You - you be safe safe careful you hear?" A body rocketed past them and then spun around, catching itself up short and it was Oz, halfway to wolf; claws and fangs and sleek russet fur and eyes as black as tar. Oz grinned
and yipped a high-pitched howl that Spike answered, that roaring cry that echoed across the Pit and made everyone - everything - pause for a split second.

"Go love, they'll miss you." Spike pushed at Xander, pushing him back through the doorway, and Xander watched as he and Oz plunged into the fray. The first thing Spike took down was a soldier. Spike grabbed - punched - and then the soldier was falling away, chest gaping open, and Spike was hurling the mass of muscle and blood in his hand to the floor, turning to the next live body. *His heart. That was the soldier's heart. Oh fuck.*

Xander slammed the door - manhandled a gurney across it and turned to see Willow and Giles kneeling on the floor, hastily setting up the circle, putting spell components in little clumps. Buffy was standing by another door, ready to go.

"What the hell was that sound?" she said, and Xander shrugged.

"There's a lot of big stuff out there. I saw Spike - he's gonna make sure nothing gets in here."

"He'd better. I'm going, Giles."

"Give us five minutes, Buffy, ok?" Willow looked up from a bowl of - something - and Buffy nodded.
"Right. Barricade this when I get in." Then she was gone, slipping away, and Xander pushed a shelving unit back across the door, wedging it as best he could in the narrow space. The hyena longed to join the fight, and Xander tried to soothe it, telling it they'd fight another way. The hyena was not happy. Xander propped his rifle against the wall and settled cross legged on the floor.

Willow began to chant while Giles mixed various things, and Xander simply waited, eyes closed, feeling Spike - feeling a gleeful rage, feeling strength that he'd never imagined, and a sort of wicked joy. No fear. He doesn't feel any fear - at all

Suddenly Xander felt something - else. Warmth and light, silence. The spell.

He hastily shut down the link to Spike and concentrated. Something... girltouch redhair powerpowerpower surged through him, and hard after that he felt darkman fatherfighterteacher demonkiller and shuddered as Giles' power swirled over him. They seemed to float for a long moment, and then the sensation of movement - of light - and suddenly there was Adam, and Riley - what the hell is he doing here? another soldier - two white-coated doctors. But they were wrong somehow, all of it was wrong, like looking through the thick end of a glass
bottle. And then Slayer slammed through him, and that was eternal and that was bloodandbones and that was lonelylonelylonely and Xander felt himself gasping for breath, somewhere far away - gasping and shivering but holding tight.

He felt the soldier react - surging up to push knowledge and courage into the vessel, the hand. And the hyena whooped, lending bloodbloodblood to the cresting wave of energy and perception. Xander could feel Willow - Giles - beside him, in him, and he could feel the three of them pouring everything they had into Buffy. Things got - bright.

Xander could see the magic - lines of force and energy that curdled around the wrong that was Adam and the dead figures on the floor. Then they were moving and then there was heat and something - a different, rawer power that pulsed with a blinding light in my their Buffy's hand.

With a look, an easy breath, that spot of sun-bright poison was banished, pushed into a ripple of otherwhere and gone. The lump of black and green-red rot wrongness that was Adam crumpled and fell away. We her me stood for a long moment, seeing the Riley soldier, with bright red, glittering life spilling down his chest. And
then blackness rushed in and they were back, settling into their bodies with a jolting tingle as if they had fallen from some height. Xander blinked, staring dazedly at Giles - at Willow. They stared back, and then Giles was looking towards the secret room, towards where Buffy was, and Willow was saying Wow and the outer door exploded inwards.

Something was there - darklife bloodlust and then it was stumbling, crumpling, and Spike took its place, streaked with blood and ichors, panting, game-face. He was darklife as well, but also olderthan chaos malice lovelovelove Xander pushed the heels of his hands hard into his eyes and then it was just Spike, and he felt the last bit of the spell wisp away into nothingness as Buffy and Riley heaved open the other door and staggered in.

Riley was all bloody down his chest and hands, and Buffy looked like she'd been in a whirlwind. Willow and Giles were struggling up, and Xander did too, holding out his hand to Willow, grinning at her like an idiot and love you love you safe coming in hard from Spike. He looked over at the vampire, nodded once, pushing back love you love you and Spike grinned and darted out again, into the ringing, blue-washed blackness of the Pit.
"We gotta help - whoever's left out there," Buffy panted, and they gathered themselves; Riley grabbing up Xander's abandoned gun, Giles hastily stuffing components and other detritus into the holdall.

Willow staggered, holding her head, and Xander grabbed her, folding Spike's duster over his arm, holding it close to his body.

"Let's just get the hell out of here. Is there a way to open an exit from here? We can just grab whoever we see on our way out." Xander had no desire to 'muster the troops' or whatever Buffy might have in mind.

"That sounds reasonable," Giles said, and he turned to Riley, who was frowning.

"I don't know about any overrides on the exits - maybe Willow ...?"

"Yeah, I'm - I'm on it, guys. Get me back to that other room, I can do that." Xander got an arm around Willow and they all sidled out into the Pit. It was - horrifying. Blood, body parts, innards - it was a slaughterhouse, and almost impossible to tell the human dead from the demon. Willow gasped, putting a hand over her mouth, and Giles muttered something under his breath that sounded like *good lord*. The stench was incredible, the
noise deafening. Something came at them, yipping, and Xander lunged and knocked Riley's arm aside, batting at the rifle barrel.

"Don't! It's Oz!" Xander yelled, and Riley shot him an incredulous look but pointed the rifle to the floor. Oz circled them, half-human, then more human, panting and wide-eyed, spattered with gore. He hadn't changed fully into the wolf, but his clothes were still torn from the shifts. He hitched unconsciously at jeans that had split along one seam, exposing a pale hip-bone.

"Get up there - second level - there's an entrance. It's where we came in - it's clear, comes out on campus. We blocked it open. Go!" He morphed back, snout and fangs but still on two feet, and pounced on something scaly that was heading for the stairs.

"Oh my god! Oz! Is he gonna be ok?" Willow's eyes were huge in startlement and shock, and Xander pulled her into a stumbling walk.

"Yeah - he'll be fine. He wanted to kick some ass, too. He came in with Spike."

"Where is Spike?" Giles panted, grabbing the rail and beginning to climb the stairs. Xander knew exactly where he was - behind, left - but he made a show of looking
around. Saw him, as the vampire leapt onto the back of a Fyarl demon and started twisting it's head off. Xander nudged Giles and pointed.

"Look - he's killing one of your cousins." Giles shot him an irritated look and Xander just grinned. Whatever had caught fire was still burning and the smoke was thicker, tinged with the reek of burning plastics and insulation. It was nauseating. Xander noticed that what was left of the demons and the humans were starting to form ranks and maybe even organize, and he sent home home home at Spike, hoping he'd get out before he got recognized. Spike wrenched the demon's head around and looked up at him, then he looked around and dove off to one side. A moment later he and Oz were dodging bodies and knots of battling figures, heading towards them through the smoky murk. The stairs rang as Spike leaped, half the flight in one go. Oz was edging towards more human then wolf and he pushed past, getting up ahead of Buffy and Riley and beckoning them on, showing the way.

"All the bad guys dead, all the good guys unhurt then?" Spike asked, and Xander almost laughed at the sarcasm that dripped from his voice. "I take it the spell worked, Red?" Willow shot an amazed glance at Spike and then a huge smile stretched across her face.
"Oh, it was amazing! It was just - I could feel Xander and Giles right next to me! Well, sort of next to me, sort of inside, only not inside, if you know what I mean and then we were whoosh and then we were Buffy and then..."
Willow babbled on, panting, climbing, and Xander grinned at her and dropped back half a step, Spike's hand on the small of his back, just a moment's pressure and love you love you

They came out in a wooded area of campus, fairly dark, behind one of the dorms. Willow was still babbling, bouncing, and generally acting as if she'd drunk a triple espresso, and Giles and Buffy were much the same, comparing notes on how the spell had felt and Buffy reassuring Giles that Adam was dead. Xander felt the adrenal-laced tension in his own body - he wanted to run or fight or fuck or something, just to get it all out. Behind them something rustled, creaked - something came out of the concealed hatchway they'd just exited and Spike pounced, pulling a draggled, bloodied figure out into the light. The person cringed, raising shaking hands up before his face, a warding gesture that made Spike snarl.

"Lab rat," he said, and shook the figure.

"I remember you," Buffy said, stepping closer, a stake appearing in her hand. "You were with Sunday's gang."
"Please - please help me..." the boy moaned, and Spike laughed.

"You got out - help yourself, wanker." Spike shoved him roughly, and the boy - vampire - stumbled to one knee.

"Please. I can't. They put - put something in m-me, l - it won't let me ch-change. It won't let me change." They all stood there, staring at the boy as he struggled to his feet, hands held out to them in supplication. weak kill it was coming from Spike, and the hyena agreed. Sick ones die

"What do you mean, you can't change. Do you mean - your demonic aspect?" Giles was looking at the boy with a narrow-eyed, speculative look, and the vampire licked his lips, eyes darting from Giles to Buffy and then to Spike.

"Yeah. My o-other face. If I try to ch-change, it hurts. H-hurts so bad."

"There's your precious Initiative, Riley." Xander muttered, and Riley shot him a dark look. Somewhere behind him, Xander could feel Oz shivering - could hear small whines of anger or distress that the werewolf couldn't contain.
"What do you want," Spike asked, and the boy looked at him, his eyes wide and full of hate and fear and desperation.

"Just - would you...please, would you end it? Just k-kill me. I can't..." His voice broke and he covered his face with his hands, struggling for control.

"Not a problem," Buffy said, stepping up, her arm going up, and Spike rounded on her, snarling.

"Fuck off. You don't end this for him - he's got a right to something better." Buffy's eyes were wide and startled, but she looked from Spike to the shivering boy and backed off, her arm falling down at her side.

"Fine. You do what you want. He's harmless, at least, so it doesn't matter what happens to him. I just want to go home. Come on, Riley." She turned on her heel and walked swiftly away, and Riley was right behind her. Willow clutched Xander's hand in hers, wide-eyed.

"What - what are you gonna do, Spike?" she whispered.

"Help him," Spike said. He looked around at them, grim-faced, and then the demon was there, and he turned back to the boy. Rage had replaced the feelings of disgust, and Xander shivered. Oz came up on his other side, and Xander reached out and put his hand gently on
Oz's shoulder for a moment. Oz glanced at him, then away, back to what Spike was doing.

Spike stepped up to the vampire and pulled him close - murmured something in the boy's ear, so soft, and the other nodded. Then Spike was bending to him and the boy was lifting his chin, eyes closed, and Spike was biting him - drinking him dry. As the vampire's life ran out into Spike's mouth, Xander felt it - a surge of energy and magic, ephemeral and sorrow fear lost oh lost that made him gasp in a breath. He realized he'd bitten his lip through and licked it gingerly. Spike lifted his head and let out a keening wail that made all of them shiver, and Willow's hand in Xander's clenched down so tight he flinched. Then suddenly the boy was dust, collapsing in Spike's arms and gone, and Spike was slapping at his clothes, pointedly not looking at any of them.

"I think - I think it's time we went home, don't you, Willow? Tara and - and Anya will be..." Giles' voice was strained, and Xander saw some expression - surprise, maybe - before Giles schooled his features back to neutrality.

"Uh - yeah. Home. That'd be...of the good. I don't think I'm gonna sleep for a week." Willow turned to Xander and gave him a hug, and Xander felt girltouch redhair
again, her power back to the low and elusive hum he was used to. It had been - amazing, having Willow right there. Almost like when they were just kids, sitting under the covers in Willow's bed with a flashlight, Willow and Xander and Jesse; telling each other their deepest lies and darkest secrets and fondest dreams. Then she was slipping away, and telling Oz goodnight, and Giles was there, the faintest tang of *demonkiller* still coming off him, dark but also somehow glowing at the edges. Just for a moment. And then he was only Giles, pushing his glasses back up and settling the strap of the holdall more comfortably across his shoulder.

"Xander - I would...I would very much like to speak to you about what we did, tonight. We're going to Buffy's house, a kind of...debriefing with popcorn. Are you coming?" Xander looked at him, and felt *want* from Spike, and saw Oz studying his gory hands, so silent all this time, and he shook his head.

"No, I think - I just want to go home, Giles. I'll come around tomorrow after work maybe, ok? I'll call you." Giles just looked at him, his gaze steady and absolutely blank, and then he blinked and glanced at Oz - at Spike.

"All right, Xander. I'll expect to hear from you. Goodnight. Oz." He turned and marched off, Willow
trotting along in his wake, and Xander sighed, his shoulders slumping. Spike was suddenly there, pulling him close, burrowing his face into Xander's neck and inhaling, scenting. Xander did the same, unmindful of the gore that streaked Spike's clothes, wanting only this, only Spike, *want you need you* as hard as he could, and Spike's arms tightened around him and cool lips kissed Xander's throat, his jaw.

"Want you too," Spike breathed in his ear, and they stood there for another moment until Xander remembered Oz, and where they were, and reluctantly pulled back.

"Let's go home, ok?" he whispered, and Spike's eyes flashed gold at him, and the vampire nodded, sweeping his duster up from the ground where Xander had unknowingly dropped it. He tossed it over his shoulder and moved around Xander to drop an arm over Oz's shoulders, hugging him close.

"You did good, wolfling. Saw you bring down your share a those bastards. Feelin' all right?" Oz shrugged, eyes intent on the ground, then he looked up at Spike - over at Xander.
"I didn't think I could do it - kill a human. But, being there - it was..." Oz trailed into silence, and Xander and Spike shared a look, and sorrow came from Spike.

"You gonna be ok, Oz?" Xander asked softly, and Oz shrugged again. When he spoke his voice was barely above a whisper - choked with emotion.

"I don't think... Not really. Not for a long time - maybe not ever. But...it helped."

Helped that he killed them. Killed humans - other men. And woman - those doctors. His choice, his...revenge. I would have too, probably - I DID want to be out there. Part of me did. Xander started walking - they all did, headed towards Lowell house where they'd left their vehicles and snuck into the Initiative.

"You know - the hyena really wanted to be out there with you. It was kinda pissed when I told it no."

"Super-Slayer spell not really enough for it, huh?" Spike asked, and Xander smiled a little.

"It was ok, actually, once we got it going. It was - pretty strange. Feeling those guys - Willow and Giles and then Buffy. I could feel...what I've only seen before. It was...amazing. Kinda scary." They walked in silence for a
few more minutes, and then Xander looked over at Spike.

"Do you think - the Initiative is through? I mean, after that, they can't go on, can they?"

"Who knows? Bloody fools. They were stupid enough to do this in the first place... But probably they'll be out of here now. Losses were too high, I imagine - it'll be hard to cover this up. Don't fret, love. I reckon we've seen the last of them." safe safe now and Spike's gaze steady and serious. Xander sincerely hoped so. They walked on, Spike's arm cool and possessive around Xander's waist, his other still over Oz's shoulders, holding the shorter man close. Oz's arm had slipped around Spike's waist, below Xander's and Xander noticed that - noticed, and considered it, and decided that it was all right. He didn't feel any jealousy, or uneasiness. It just felt...

Pack. No harm the hyena said, and that feeling of being in a den, in a nest, came over him and he nodded to himself. Pack. It was all good.

By the time they got home, the edgy adrenaline rush was fading, and Xander felt as if lead weights had been attached to his limbs. They all wearily walked around to the back of the house, going in the bathroom door so that Oz and Spike could strip and clean up without
trailing anything nasty through the house. Xander lit some candles, their soft glow relaxing him further, and went to get clean clothes for the others. He found flannel pajama pants and a t-shirt for Oz, then hesitated over Spike's drawer, wondering what the vampire would want. He heard the shower start, and glanced back toward the bathroom. Spike was standing in the doorway, nude body dappled with blood both human and demon. Even his hair was matted with it, and Xander felt a tugging on his throat as drying matter pulled the skin there - something smeared on him when Spike had kissed him.

"What do you want to wear, Spike? Jeans?"

"Can I - have a pair of your sweats, pet? Want something - "

"Comfy?" Xander grinned, and Spike ducked his head, looking up at him through his lashes and smiling that small, real smile that made Xander want to kiss him into breathing.

"Yeah, comfy." Xander pulled out an old pair of dark grey sweats and one of Spike's t-shirts. He took the pile of clothes into the bathroom, skirting around Spike with an exaggerated 'eewww' face and piling the clothes on the toilet tank.
"There you go." Xander looked at Spike, and Spike looked back, cocking his head to one side, just smiling. Happy. He looks happy.

"So - you got 'em, huh? A bunch of those soldiers - the doctors. You get 'em all?"

"All I could find, pet. Got a good number. The wolf got a few. They were as panicky as a virgin on a troop ship - it wasn't too hard."

"So is it...over? Are you done with the Initiative?" Spike's eyebrow went up, and he took a step closer to Xander, glancing over at the steam-fogged cubicle of the shower.

"I dunno, love. If I see any more of them out and about - I imagine I'll do for 'em. But I think they'll be pullin' out now. Doubt I'll get anymore chances. I imagine soldier-boy will tell us what's what, in a day or so."

"Yeah, I imagine." Xander picked up his washcloth and dampened it under the faucet - wiped at the smear of blood stuff on his neck and jaw. "Just don't... " Xander tossed the washcloth towards the washing machine, avoiding Spike's gaze.

"Don't what, love?"
"Don't... I'm just worried, is all. I don't want you hurt." Xander finally looked at Spike, frowning a little, and Spike looked back, serious now and yours coming softly through the link. "If Riley finds out about what you did, tonight, he could...well, he could try, and even if he didn't hurt you, he'd know... Just, be careful love. All right?" Spike came up close to him - brought his face so close to Xander's, lips just millimeters from Xander's mouth. Xander shivered at the proximity - the cool, smoke-tinged breath that Spike pushed gently across his skin.

"Don't worry 'bout me, love. I'm gonna be careful. You'll see." Spike very gently, very carefully kissed Xander on the lips, not letting any other part of him touch the mortal, and Xander kissed him back - pulled away finally, and smiled into the clear blue eyes that could so easily captivate him.

"Trust you." love you need you

"Thank you, pet," Spike murmured, and love love you mine Xander looked at Spike for a moment longer, then stepped around him and headed into the bedroom. He took off the soldier gear and put on sweats and a t-shirt, then went into the kitchen and grabbed a soda out of the 'fridge. so tired He headed for the living room and
collapsed on the couch. He took a long drink, turned the TV on and started flicking through the channels. *Amazing how crappy even this many channels can be* was the last thing that went through his mind, and then he was asleep, drifting down into a strange other place.

His father was trying to kill him. Xander struggled, gasping, trying to fend off the blows - trying to get away. His father was screaming - his eyes were blazing with hate and anger. Xander had never seen him so angry - so out of control. Then suddenly it wasn't his father, it was something - else. Something dark, something *bloodandbones* and he was contorting in agony as the *dark* thing tore into his chest - tore out his heart and he was falling, down his stairs, heading for the concrete at the bottom and blood was arcing away from his body, painting the *dark* thing with slashes of crimson, spattering on the walls. Xander screamed, trying to stop his fall, knowing he was *dead, I'm dead, tore out my heart* but still trying to stop his tumble down splintering wooden risers. *It's gonna hurt, to hit the bottom, oh god it's gonna hurt* Someone was yelling at him.

"Xander - XANDER! Wake up, pet, wake up, wake up."

The voice battered at him, too loud, too *fearful* sharp, and he moaned and pushed weakly at whatever it was that was holding him - shaking him.
"Xander! Come on love, wake up now, just a dream need you need you come back Xander gasped in a great, whooping breath, clawing at the arms holding him, desperate for breath, for something to ease the burning fading pain in his chest. He opened his eyes, panting, and Oz was there, wide-eyed, holding a towel in one hand, looking utterly freaked. Xander breathed, breathed - realized it was Spike holding him tight against a cool chest, arms wrapped around him, lips in his hair as the vampire crooned into his ear, quiet now, so soft.

"Come on, love, that's it now, you're awake, just a dream, love, wake up now, just a dream, I've got you, pet, I've got you." Spike was rocking him, stroking his sweat-damp hair back from his forehead, and Xander finally relaxed. He blinked and swallowed, then tried to talk. All that came out was a sort of croak, and Oz was up and out of his line of sight, sound of the 'fridge opening and then he was back, a glass of water in his hand, holding it up to Xander's mouth. Xander tried to take it - to do it himself, but his hands were shaking and totally limp, and he surrendered to it and let Oz tilt the glass to his lips and sipped at the cold wonderful water. After a minute he was done, and Oz set the glass on the coffee table, smiling just a little, his eyes still wide, his hair damp from the shower.
"You ok, Xander?"

"I - " Xander coughed, swallowed, tried again. "I think so. I - what happened? I fell asleep out here and then...I was...my dad was... " He stopped, the images too clear, too ugly, and Spike hugged him hard, tugging him around so that he could look at Xander. Oz put the towel on the floor, picking up Xander's fallen soda can, mopping spilled soda.

"Just a dream, love. You feel ok?" Spike's eyes were as wide and freaked as Oz's, and Xander felt a little flutter of fear down in his belly.

"I'm fine, I guess. What's the deal? I've had nightmares before - why are you guys all..." Xander waved his hands loosely, trying to explain. "Why are you guys all wigged out?" Spike kissed his forehead, cheek, then lips, quick and soft, his hand trembling on Xander's shoulder. love you safe safe

"You were - thrashin' around, pet. Like a seizure. We couldn't wake you up - you were screaming and... It was weird, love. What in bloody hell were you dreaming about?" Xander looked from Spike to Oz, seeing the same fear, the same bewilderment.
"I - dunno. It was... Tara and Willow were there, and....all of you guys were, everybody. It was so strange. Giles was gonna train you to be a Watcher, Spike - you were both wearing these tweed suits - "

"That *is* scary," Oz said, and he grinned, and Xander couldn't help it, he giggled. Spike frowned at him, but *laughter* was coming through the link, and Xander reached and patted his cheek.

"You look hot in tweed, Spike," he snorted out, and Oz started giggling too, his eyes losing some of the panic and his body losing its bow-string tautness. He swiped at the floor and put the stained towel on the coffee table. Spike glared at the both of them, and then reluctantly he started to smile.

"What else did you dream about? Me in tweed wasn't the worst part."

"It was pretty bad," Xander said, still chuckling, and he rubbed his hand back through his lank hair. "Yuck. I need a shower now, too. Ok. What else. I dreamed about...Principal Snyder. He told me... wow. He told me I was a whipping boy raised by mongrels and set on a sacrificial stone." Xander shivered, remembering that. It was...too close to what he'd always felt, about himself - his family. Tainted blood, never quite good enough, and
Spike was pulling him close again, smoothing back his hair and kissing the side of his neck, shushing him. *mine my own WANT you*

"Now, love, that's not so. You know it isn't. He's the one got eaten by the snake-Mayor, right?"

"Yeah. He's dead."

"Never mind him, then. Anything else?" Xander closed his eyes for a minute, then opened them wide as the final images came back to him. "Yeah. I was - back in the basement and my dad came crashing through the door. He was...trying to kill me. Then he *did*, only it wasn't *him*, anymore, it was something...else. Something...dark. Blood and bones..." He whispered the last, catching at some memory, and then it was gone and he looked up at Spike - over at Oz.

"That's got to be the weirdest dream I've ever had. And you guys - couldn't wake me up?" Oz shook his head - reached back for the glass of water and offered it to Xander again, who took it himself this time, drinking it eagerly.

"Yeah. Spike was yelling in your ear practically and you were just - out of it. It was freaky." Xander realized suddenly that he was on Spike's lap, tucked up in the
corner of the couch and he stretched his legs a bit, settling his head on Spike's shoulder. Oz took the glass back and Xander smiled at him.

"I'm glad I woke up. That...wasn't nice."

"M'glad too, pet," Spike murmured in his ear. *Love you mine never leave me love you*

"Never leave you, Spike," Xander whispered back, and kissed the soft skin just behind the hinge of Spike's jaw, gently. At that moment the phone rang and they all jumped, Spike cursing softly and Oz pushing himself up and going to answer it.

"Hello? Oh hey, Buff... Yeah, he is. You wanna talk to him?" Oz came over and silently handed the phone to Xander who sat up a little bit.

"Buffy?"

"Xander! Are you ok? The weirdest thing happened here -"

"I'm fine, Buffy. By weird, do you mean - some sort of freaky dream?"

"Yeah! You too?"
"Yeah, me too. It was - really strange. Spike and Oz were kinda - wiggin'. They couldn't wake me up."

"It was the first Slayer."

"What?" Xander sat up straighter, glancing at Spike, who was frowning. *He can hear everything she's saying* Xander remembered. *Oz too. No more private phone calls* "What do you mean?"

"The first Slayer. She was - pissed off, or something. That spell we did to take Adam down, it - I dunno what it did. But she wasn't happy. She tried to kill all of us in our dreams. Well, she *did* kill Willow and Giles - what about you?"

"Yeah, she got me, too. But I'm guessin' you got her?"

"Yeah, I kicked her mud-encrusted, five-thousand-years-in-bed-head butt."

"Cool. Guess I owe you one." Spike bared his teeth at that and Xander caressed his cheek, ginning at him.

"Nah. Just tell me one thing. Did you see this guy with...cheese?" Xander felt a hysterical laugh bubbling up and he snapped his teeth shut for a moment to keep it in.
"Ah, actually...I did. He told me - the cheese would not protect me." There was total silence from Buffy, and then an explosive breath, as if she'd been holding it. Oz was staring at him, hand clamped over his mouth and belly heaving as he tried to stifle laughter.

"Thank god. I thought I was going crazy. Ok. So, you're all right, everything's fine now, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. I'm gonna - get a shower, go to bed. I don't suppose she'll be back, huh?"

"I really don't think so. Xander..."

"Yeah?"

"It was - great, tonight. What you did - that spell and everything. I could feel you there - you made me brave." Spike growled, very low, and Xander put his fingers on the vampire's lips, looking at him and thinking yours yours always

"It was pretty cool, wasn't it? I'm - glad I could help." There was a moment's silence, and then Xander softly said, "Goodnight, Buffy."

"Goodnight. See you later, ok?"
"Ok." Buffy hung up, and Xander set the phone down on the coffee table. Spike looked - pissed, and Xander took a deep breath and started levering himself up.

"I really need to get a shower, and then I really need to go to bed. Work tomorrow and all."

"Oh yeah - I gotta work tomorrow too," Oz said, with a sort of surprised look on his face, like he'd forgotten all about it.

"You got a job then?" Xander asked, standing all the way up and grabbing Spike's hand, tugging at him. Spike resisted for a moment then came to his feet, still pissed-off looking. Sulking the soldier snapped, and Xander almost laughed.

"Yeah, over at that shop - the Magic Box? I figure maybe I could learn a few things, you know - useful sort of Hellmouthy stuff. Plus - employee discount for all your apocalyptic needs." This time Xander did laugh, and started out of the room pulling Spike along behind him.

"Cool. Need me to wake you up?"

"Nah - I've got an alarm. Thanks, though."

"Goodnight, Oz."
"'Night, Xander. 'Night Spike." Spike rolled his eyes at Oz and Oz just grinned. Xander bent over the candles in the kitchen, blowing them out, then dragged his sulky vampire through to the bedroom, shutting the door quietly. Spike pulled away and slumped on the bed, staring at the floor.

"I'm gonna shower. Wanna join me?" Xander asked. Spike glanced up at him, then away, and the link was dead silent.

"Already showered, " he mumbled, and Xander nodded slowly.

"Ok. I'll just be a couple minutes." He turned and went into the bathroom and took a fast shower and brushed his teeth. Back to the bedroom and Spike already in the bed, curled up tight on the far side, quilt practically over his head. Xander looked at him for a minute, then walked over and sat on his side of the bed. He set his alarm, blew out the candle on the bedside table, and slid under the covers. Spike didn't move, and Xander sighed - shifted over, finally, and wormed his way around the tightly coiled body, settling his chin on Spike's shoulder and covering the vampire's tucked arms with his own.

"Spike," he breathed, and love you love you as hard as he could. Spike twitched, then was still again.
"Spike - please. Don't shut me out, love. Please? You're...it's scary, Spike, when I can't hear you." Spike twitched again - uncoiled a little and finally mine mine mine mine came through the link, fragile and almost imperceptible.

"Course I'm yours, love. Course I am. Why would you think I wasn't? Spike?"

"I could hear her, you know. Slayer. Tellin' you how great that spell was. The Scooby Gang to the rescue an' all. Guess you - wanna be mates again, eh? Guess you're...back in the gang again." Spike rubbed his head into the pillow, drawing a deep breath, and Xander tugged at him, making him turn over. He could see just a bit in the dark room - more then he usually could. The barest illumination from a streetlight edged around the top of the curtains, so that he could see Spike's face, but not his expression. He knew Spike could see him much more clearly, though - if he chose to.

"Look at me, Spike. Please? It felt - really good to help them. To actually be of use to them - to the...fight, whatever it is. I liked it. But - I'm not going to abandon you, love. Don't you know that?"

Spike shifted, turning over onto his back and then more, until he was on his side, facing Xander. Xander knew that
he'd changed - two glowing gold eyes were suddenly there, staring at him, and Xander reached up and gently stroked Spike's face, feeling the alien contours, catching his fingertip on a razor-edged fang and pricking it just slightly. Spike inhaled, and Xander felt his cool tongue lapping at his finger, taking the drop of blood.

*He's so much OLDER - done so much more...how can he be so - scared? I'm the one that should be scared...* "Spike - I won't ever leave you never leave mine always mine

Spike shivered, and when he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion - strained and almost inaudible.

"Dru...left. She chose me - chose *me*. Saw me at my worst and wanted me. Made me hers forever an'...she's gone. And my mum...she denied me, at the end. Didn't...didn't want me. The Family - they never took to me. I didn't care...but... Angelus...everyone leaves, pet. Everyone leaves m-me and...I can't help it if I just - want too much." He stopped, and the eyes winked out - closed. Xander slid his hand around Spike's throat - cupped the nape of his neck in his hand and tugged Spike close, carefully finding the vampire's lips in the dark and kissing him, slow and gentle, mindful of the fangs. Spike was frozen for a moment, and then he began kissing back - the fangs withdrew suddenly, and Xander kissed harder, pushing Spike flat and curling his arms under Spike's
shoulders, holding him close, cradling him. He whispered to him as he kissed, whispered and felt, and did his best to reassure this... This demon. This man. This child. He expects me to LEAVE...and all I can do is hope to be enough. Let me be enough...

"I love you - love you. Never felt this way about anyone - never want this to end. Love you, you're mine, my Spike and I see you and I choose you, love, I choose you..." Spike was rigid - trembling in his arms, and suddenly he took in a deep, shaking breath and hugged Xander hard, claiming his mouth in frantic, bruising kisses that Xander returned whole-heartedly, pressing every inch of himself to the cool, shivering body beneath him.

"Oh, love you, Xander, love you...sorry, don't be mad..."

"No, love, not mad... " The kiss deepened - slowed - and after a while they were locked together, Spike wrapped around Xander like a second skin, Xander pressed tight to Spike, rocking his hips, as deep inside Spike as he could get, his lips and teeth on the vampire's throat, marking him again and again, Spike crying out as Xander drew blood and then soothed the place with his tongue. Spike shuddered to orgasm, silent again, and then Xander felt the fangs, prickling over his shoulder, teasing, and then sinking in, and he was rigid, gasping, the fire-and-ice of it
rolling over him, wringing him dry. They lay together, fingers and lips gently touching and knowing, until they both slipped into dreamless sleep.

16 Details

Xander lay on his back in bed, his mind only half-awake and his body not even close. Something had woken him... Ah. The shower. Spike was back. Xander shifted in the bed a little, letting himself drift. In a few minutes there'd be cuddling and quite possibly sex, and he grinned in anticipation. Squinted at the clock and saw it was only 4 a.m. Spike was back early. Did that mean he was hurt? Xander's eyes opened wide in the darkness and the sleepy languor left him. *Love what hurt* he sent, and what came back was the mental equivalent of an eye-roll. Xander giggled and slipped out of bed, the exhaustion and strangeness of the past twenty-four hours completely gone. He padded into the bathroom, looking for clues. The duster was hung up, as usual. *Not dripping blood, that's good* Docs there - one upturned sole showing the beginnings of a hole. *Needs to get those re-soled, again.* Spike's clothes were in a tangle near the washing machine and Xander picked them up. Jeans - whole but bloody. Over shirt - torn and damp. Xander touched a finger to a damp place on the red silk and grimaced when it came away smeared with blood. T-
shirt - definitely shredded - in fact, garbage. Xander tossed it into the trash, dropped the rest of the clothes back to the floor and turned to the shower.

Spike stood in the stall, arms crossed, grinning at him, the open door dripping onto the floor and a bank of steam eddying out. Something on his body - blood?

"Got me all sorted then, love?" Xander grinned back and stepped into the shower, gasping a little at the temperature Spike had the water set on. He pulled the door shut and immediately began to feel a little breathless from the steam.

"You're back early. I wondered if you were hurt. And - you are!" Xander grabbed Spike's wrists and pulled his arms away from his body. Underneath were two sets of deep, parallel scratches, still oozing just a bit, a crisscrossing V-shape from collarbones to navel.

"What happened?" Spike pulled Xander closer, resting his forehead on Xander's and sighing. *Uh oh. This is the 'I love you lots I did something you'll hate' pose. What now?*

"Spike..." *Tell tell love you*
"Went and collected my 'leven pounds, didn't I?"

"Eleven...pounds? What?" Now Xander got the actual eye roll and he put his hands on the tiles on either side of Spike's head and leaned into the vampire's body, pressing his groin lightly to Spike's, letting his tongue find the strong tendon of Spike's neck. Need already coursing through Xander, making him hard. Spike shifted, hands on Xander's hips, and drew in a small breath. "Tell me, Spike, before I haf'ta...torture it out of you." Xander bit lightly at Spike's neck, right above his collarbone, and Spike shivered, his fingers tightening down, his head going back into the wall with a soft thump.

"Poncey bastard owed me, ssso I went to c-collect..." Xander continued to nibble and lick - softer, harder, his hips keeping up a firm pressure. He felt Spike's erection pressing insistently at his, and he did the little hip-roll thing, eliciting a breathy moan from the vampire.

"What bastard? What eleven pounds? How'd you get the cuts?" Xander bit down suddenly on Spike's throat - on the jugular - and held him, almost hard enough to break the skin but not quite. Spike arched fiercely into
him, his hips pumping mindlessly, and Xander shook him, just a little, letting the hyena have its fun.

Mine mine kill what did it mine

"Xan-derrrr..." Spike moaned, and Xander bit a little harder, feeling his teeth sink in.  _Tell_

"Drac - that bastard - got my...p-pound of flesh, didn't I; got that bastard...please, please..."

Xander let go of Spike's throat - grabbed his shoulders and turned him, pushing him into the wall, running his hands down Spike's arms and capturing his wrists; lifting and pressing the vampire's hands against the tile, above his head. Xander's own cock was throbbing with want, the hyena desperate to re-claim what was theirs, and the _want want want_ coming off of Spike - the sub-sonic growl that was vibrating through Spike's chest - was pushing Xander over the edge. He filled his palm with soap and roughly slicked himself - forced two fingers into Spike and groaned aloud when Spike surged backwards, ready and eager and _please fuck now NOW_ washing through him, a wave of desire and need that made Xander's knees weak.
Xander kicked Spike's legs further apart and then he was pushing in, forcing himself in, the pants and whimpers of mingled pain and pleasure only spurring him on. He'd learned a lot about that, these past couple of weeks. How much Spike could take - how much he needed to take, sometimes - and it no longer made him angry, or sick. Now it was another turn on a wheel - soft and gentle, playful, passionate, brutal - and he wanted it as much as Spike did. Wanted to claim what was his, however he could. Rival Someone else had touched what was his - hurt what was his, and he needed - the hyena needed - to wipe out all memory of that other; to re-establish its own supremacy over all others in Spike's life.

Which was exactly the same reason Spike had done - whatever he'd done - to Dracula.

Xander surged forward and buried himself, and Spike moaned aloud - the moan going to a rising wail as Xander once again sank his teeth into Spike's throat and began to thrust furiously into him, hard as he could. Which was damn hard, lately. Spike was right - Xander wasn't like the other boys, anymore.

As he drove into him, Xander slipped one hand around
and began to stroke Spike's cock, hard and tight, making it rough. Spike was nearly silent now, gasping for one hard breath after another, his body like iron under Xander and his hips moving in helpless, furious counterpoint to Xander's. The surges of want and lust that they were both sending to each other only made them more desperate - more frantic - and Xander felt the wave of fiery heat, like lightning, rippling through him as he neared orgasm. Spike writhed under him _blood need_ and Xander brought his arm up, pushing it against Spike's mouth. They both bit down at the same moment; Spike's blood like champagne in Xander's mouth, alive and tingling with _magic demon mine_ Spike's fangs in his forearm, a point of heat and shuddering _want_ that encompassed his whole body, and they both stiffened into orgasm, Xander groaning into Spike's neck, Spike snarling and growling like some kind of feral cat, the demon to the fore and his jaws locked down hard on Xander's arm.

It took long minutes to come down from that, and Xander just leaned on Spike, gasping harshly, letting his cock slip free by slow degrees, curling his arms around Spike's heaving ribs and resting his forehead on the water-warmed back. He couldn't help his tongue going out to taste Spike, again and again, little licks that
gathered in the spice and smoke of him - taste of unreal and unliving flesh that was everyting mine always mine. Spike was mouthing the bite on Xander's forearm - soothing it with strokes of his tongue, kissing gently where he'd bitten so deeply a moment before. That's gonna be sore Xander thought fuzzily.

Love you love you yours from Spike, and he turned himself, gathering Xander into his arms, his eyes half-shut and the look of a satisfied cat on his face. Xander kissed him, tasting blood and whiskey and Spike, content to just lean there and slowly re-learn every inch of Spike's mouth. Xander had no idea how long they stood there, just lost in each other, lost in the feel and scent and taste of the other. But Spike shivered suddenly, and Xander realized that the water was cooling off.

"Come on, love, let's get dry and get into bed and you can tell me all about your adventures tonight." Spike snorted, shooting him a look, and they got out and dried off. The cuts on Spike's torso had sealed, and were starting to fade - they'd be gone by the time Xander got home from work, he was sure. But the sight of them brought another wave of mine mine KILL IT from the hyena, and Spike laughed softly and pulled Xander into the bedroom, tumbling the human down into the
rumpled covers and kissing him hard.

"Don't worry 'bout Drac, pet. He'll be healin' for days - and on the move, as well, since I burned his fuckin' house down." A brief wash of rage and glee from the demon and Xander shivered, wondering just what Spike had done.

"Why didn't he just - do the mist thing or the bat thing - get away from you?" Xander squirmed around, getting the covers over them, and Spike settled behind him, pressing as close as he could, one arm under Xander's pillow, elbow bent and fingertips in Xander's hair, the other curling around Xander's chest, held tight by Xander's own arms. Spike buried his nose in the damp sable hair and inhaled. *love you smell good*

"'Cause he's a wanker, that's why. That gypsy shite is for the food - he wouldn't pull it on another vamp. 'Sides, he thought he could beat me." Spike laughed, kissing the back of Xander's neck. "He was pretty weak from tusslin' with the Slayer and still thought he could take me on. He always did have more balls then brains. An' I'm not above takin' advantage of a situation, neither."

*Sick ones die* the hyena insisted, and *outsider* from the
demon.

"So - he's gone. That's good." Xander shuddered a little, remembering the feeling of being under Dracula's thrall - the otherness that had been like mist in his brain, drowning out his own thoughts and impulses, smothering everything into dullness. Spike felt his unease and nuzzled closer, murmuring reassurances, and Xander closed his eyes. Smiled, when he felt the bone-deep rumble of the purr start, Spike knowing how much Xander loved that. Xander felt safe, there, enfolded and protected and love love and he let himself remember.

*`*`*`*`*

Xander walked beside Willow, heading for the cemetery - out on patrol - something he'd done with the gang so seldom lately it was almost strange. The Initiative gone and Riley gone and back already, things settling into Hellmouth normal and he felt...all wrong, being there. It was not pack and Xander wished he'd agreed to meet Willow somewhere else.

Willow was doing her hyper-drive double-speak thing, wringing her hands and going on about secrets - the
reason he'd agreed to come out at all. Willow had told him she had something important to talk about, and he was wondering when she was going to just blurt it out and say it. She was terrible at innuendo and couldn't keep a secret to save her life. Spike was off doing something nasty to some vamps that had been stupid enough to choose the old High School as their nesting place. He was taking his Master of Sunnydale title seriously - at least for now. He'd told Xander he wasn't going to kill every demon or vamp he came across, but he was going to keep the more foolish and foolhardy from messing with the Hellmouth. *No opening portals into demon dimensions and sending us all to Hell on MY watch, pet*

By the time they got to the cemetery, Willow still hadn't actually said anything, even though she'd talked almost non-stop the whole way, and Xander was almost glad when Buffy warned them away. But too late, whatever she'd been on about was suddenly there, and Xander found himself looking into a pale and dark-eyed face that held them all spellbound. *Dracula? He really exists. Who'd have thought? But still, cheesy cloak. That's SO last century. Spike'll laugh...* Then Dracula was gone - or rather, was a bat - and they ducked and covered until he - it - flew, squeaking,
away. Huh. Wonder if Spike can do that? That's...fairly cool. I'll bet Angel can't.

They spent the next hour at Giles' house, listening to Buffy rave about her apparent notoriety with the undead set; to Willow stammer about dark and penetrating eyes, and to Anya - who'd come by to borrow a book from Giles - about past dates with the Prince of Evil, or whatever. Xander shared a look with Giles and Tara of mingled incredulity and amazement, and left when Riley and Buffy started to bicker about...something. And I so don't care. Dark Prince or not, even Buffy wouldn't go for a guy in a cape.

Xander walked briskly back towards the cemetery - he was going to meet Spike at the vampire's old crypt, get the truck and go for a game of pool. Friday night, and they had both felt like going out and doing something...mundane. They were also going to talk about Oz. Ever since the night the Initiative had gone down, Oz had been... He'd been wrong, somehow, in a way Xander couldn't put his finger on, but that bothered both him and Spike. The werewolf was quieter then ever, so serious, and he looked tired - looked haunted, as if his thoughts were too much for him. He only seemed happy when they did their own patrols, and then he was
more feral, more vicious, than Xander had ever thought the quiet boy could be. Spike and Xander were both unhappy and uneasy, and were determined to fix it, whatever it was. Xander entered the cemetery, something just on the edge of his awareness, making the hyena cast about, senses as open as possible.

And then...there was... Xander found himself standing in the cemetery, hands lax at his sides, staring into space. Something had... He tried to think, retracing steps in his mind. Willow-babble. Dark Prince. Giles' house. Walking to the crypt...nothing. A blank wall of mist - flickering images that made no sense. A wolf Oz? dark eyes, long-nailed hand just touching his cheek... Xander shivered all over, wondering how long he'd been standing there. He felt as if spiders were crawling on him and he brushed half-heartedly at himself. No...not spiders...nothing was...

He couldn't seem to finish a thought, and he could feel, somewhere deep in his mind, the hyena going into full panic-mode. But even that seemed dull and far away - wrapped in cotton wool and unimportant. What was I...? Spike. He was going to meet Spike. He'd left his truck parked near Spike's old crypt and they were going to... Xander stumbled forward through the cemetery, bewildered, and finally the crypt was in view. There was
a faint light inside it - Spike had a lit a candle, it seemed, and Xander stopped outside the door, swaying just a little. Inside he could hear voices - Spike and...Riley? *How long was I standing there? I should...* He listened to the conversation but it only came through as a sort of low buzz - no words, just tone and cadence, and he finally turned away and wandered off - found his truck and sat in it, waiting. A few minutes later Spike was there, leaning into the open window, grinning at him.

"I'm gonna kill Captain Cardboard, pet, you mind?" he said, gleeful and utterly serious. Then, abruptly, Spike was wrenching the door open, dragging Xander out, and Xander was pushing at him, confused.

"What in hell is up with you? Xander?" Xander looked at Spike *vampire* and giggled a little, wobbling in Spike's fierce grip.

"He's gonna make me, you know, immortal. Just get Buffy to him and - poof!" Xander giggled again and Spike was game-faced, snarling.

"That bloody bastard. Fuck, should have... Come on, Xan-love, get in the truck." Spike pushed him inside,
digging his keys out of a duster pocket, and started the truck. Xander rocked a little in his seat, humming to himself. Spike vampire not the Master rival shot him glances of mixed fury and anxiety. When they got to the house he hustled Xander up the steps and inside, startling Oz who was curled on the fold-out couch they'd acquired; something Tibetan and voiceless playing on the stereo, a book propped on his knees.

"What's up, guys?"

"Bloody Dracula. He's fuckin' thralled Xander, the wanker." Spike pushed Xander down onto the edge of the mattress and Oz dropped his book, eyes shifting from green to black and back again as he took stock.

"Dracula? Wow. Is - Xander hurt?"

"Nah. Not hurt. Just - under his spell, like. That ponce's got the trick of it, almost as good as Dru." Spike lit a cigarette and puffed hard, staring at Xander. Xander watched him, hearing the hyena howling somewhere. The hyena was trying to use the link, but the soldier was blocking it - blocking them all, and seemingly blocking Spike, as well.
The soldier mumbled about infiltrators and perimeters and Xander felt as if he'd been re-set, somehow, or just...put on standby. He wanted to get up, kiss Spike, go find Dracula and *He promised. Immortal. Dark gifts...* A flicker of coiling mist, white on white, a blur of a face; red lips and chilled fingers on his jaw, scent of age and earth and something like burning, like lightning. The crawly spidery feeling came over him again, and Xander jumped up, feeling his hands clench together, feeling his shoulders hunch as the skittering twitches washed over him. He wanted to claw himself bloody, but the mist blinked across his vision again, drowning that thought, so he rocked instead, plucking at the hem of his shirt, rolling it in his fingers, twisting it.

The Master was... chose him to be... Xander thought he was talking, but he couldn't be sure. He put his fingers to his mouth and sure enough, his lips were moving, his tongue. He giggled at that and absently clawed his cheek, feeling *spiders... no, not...*

"Mustn't touch, mustn't touch..." he sing-songed, and Spike stepped over to him and pulled his hand away.

Dimly, he could hear Oz and Spike talking, then Spike was leading him into the kitchen, sitting him in a
chair. Xander stared at the candles in the middle of the table, lost in the flicker-jump of the flame in a moment, content to just stare.

The dullness that had settled over him was horrifying - everything was muffled, except for that nasty sensation of bugs crawling over his skin. He fought it, but it was like fighting mist - he couldn't get a grip on it. Then something was pushing at his mouth - rim of a glass, and he drank without thinking, choking as he swallowed a huge mouthful of Spike's whiskey. He coughed, gasping - felt someone pounding his back and then the glass again, and more of the fiery liquid burning down his throat. He swallowed convulsively, Spike's voice murmuring in his ear, Oz's particular scent dark warm pine earth in his nostrils.

After a bit the candle flames started swimming, merging, and he put his head down, shuddering. It was - horrible. His skin seemed to be trying to crawl off him and he couldn't touch mustn't touch and it was driving him crazy. He clawed at the table-top, whimpering, and the mist again, a voice whispering mine But it wasn't Spike's voice and the hyena howled, frantic and furious, and Xander watched the mist darken to black, and then everything was gone.
When he came to himself he was in the corner of the living room, rocking unsteadily on his feet, his head pounding. It was just sunset outside, and he hummed to himself, fingers tapping restlessly against his thighs, more of that babble coming out of his mouth but he couldn't stop it and Master wants her, wants her, have to go... she's chosen too, she's... He sank his fingers into his hair, moaning, yanking furiously, and suddenly there were cool fingers on his wrists - on his hands - delicately prising his fingers apart and pulling his hands down, stilling them.

"Xander - love, don't. What is it?" Spike's voice not Master rival and Xander twitched away, looking dazedly around at Spike. The vampire's face was drawn, exhausted, and his eyes red-rimmed. Smoke and whiskey smell like a wall around him and even as Xander stood there, mute and uncomprehending, Spike snarled. The demon came to the fore and then gone, and Spike looked over his shoulder at Oz, who was hanging up the phone.
"Buffy's at Anya's place - they thought that'd be safer. Willow said Giles and Riley found a place, they're pretty sure it's Dracula's lair. They're headed over there now."

Xander heard the words but all that he comprehended was *Buffy - Anya's place...found the lair...Master needs her, have to go, have to go, have to GO!* He wrenched at the cool hands holding his wrists and Spike tried to soothe him, petting his face.

"It'll be alright, love -"

"Got to go, got to take her - let me go, letmeGO!" They hyena was hysterical - Xander couldn't tell if it wanted to stay or leave, just felt the panic and it made it all worse, made the *spiders* worse, and he screamed, battering at Spike, knowing he had to go.

Suddenly Spike was gone - backing off, demon snarling but Oz there, too, hand on Spike's arm and saying something. Spike hissed at him but then he nodded his head, a fleeting touch to Oz's shoulder, and they were still, watching him.

Xander watched them back, uncertain, but the mist suddenly cleared, just a bit, and he saw *dark eyes*
Master...wants and he knew Dracula was awake - was calling. The sun was down. Xander bolted, hearing the others behind him and not caring. He headed for Anya's apartment, for Buffy get to the Master his lungs burning as he ran. The rest was a blur - Anya all suprised to see him, still talking about Dracula - Buffy hollow-eyed on the couch, watching him, Dracula's bite-mark dark on her throat. Then Anya was... Hurt her? Didn't hurt her...in the closet and that was all right.

Then he and Buffy were walking along the street, going towards a house It's a castle! that Xander had never seen before. Xander could feel Spike somewhere behind him - the soldier couldn't block that, even though he tried. But it didn't matter - Xander just needed to get there, and everything would be better, be better then, he'll give me... They went inside, Dracula taking Buffy, and Xander felt himself relaxing, safe now until Riley was there, saying something and threatening the Master! and Xander launched himself at the ex-soldier, snarling. Then pain exploding in his head, and nothing, nothing.

When he struggled awake, head throbbing, the first thing he saw was Spike hovering over him, eyes wide and anxious and golden, the demon barely leashed.
"Xander - you all right? Xander?" love you love you MINE Xander struggled upright, Spike helping him, and he clutched at his head.

"Christ. I feel... What did I - oh my god! Is Buffy ok? Is Anya - what did I -"

"Love, shh, it's all right, everyone's all right. He's gone, gone for now, the Slayer got him."

"Oh, man..." Xander felt his jaw, wincing, and Spike snarled.

"Riley, that fuck -" kill him hurt you KILL HIM

"No, no, Spike, it's ok, I attacked him and he just - he was trying to save Buffy, it's..." love you yours always HOME and Spike gathered him close, hugging him so hard he could barely breathe.

"I've got you now, love, got you now. We'll go home, we'll -" mine mine protect

"Ok, Spike, ok..." Xander hugged him back - turned his head and caught Spike's mouth in a hard kiss.
"Hey, guys -" Oz's voice, quiet, and they broke apart. Spike pulled Xander to his feet, steadying him, and Xander smiled at him, *love you* and turned to meet Giles and Riley and Buffy, coming through the door.

"Buffy! You ok? Did'ja get him?"

"Oh yeah. Got him. Got him twice, actually."

"Gypsy shite," Spike muttered, and Buffy frowned at him.

"Spike! What're you doing here?" Spike scowled back, going through the ritual of lighting a cigarette, the link thrumming with rage and hate, so strong that Xander felt his heart begin to pound.

"The boy was actin' all funny, me an' the wolfling thought we'd better keep an eye on him." Spike blew a lungful of smoke in Buffy's direction and she shifted, hand clenching down on the stake she held. "Thought you might need a little help with the ponce." Spike made a vague gesture around at the castle with the cigarette.

"No, I didn't need any help, and Xander didn't need your help, either."
"Hey - the more the merrier, huh? I can't believe he thralled me! I didn't - hurt anybody, did I?"

"Nah, you were fine, man. We got you drunk last night, you were passed out for hours." Oz grinned at him and Xander stared back.

"You did? No wonder my mouth tastes like the bottom of a shoe." calm calm love you Xander pushed that hard through the link, and Spike, who had been pacing agitatedly up and down finally stilled, flicking his cigarette butt away.

"I think it's definitely time to call it a night. Wouldn't you say, Riley?" Giles was polishing his glasses and Riley grinned at him, gathering Buffy close into his arms.

"Yeah, I think you're right - I know you must be tired after your...encounter with the ladies of the night." Riley sniggered into Buffy's hair and Buffy looked wide-eyed over at Giles.

"What? Giles? Did you have an...encounter?" Giles flushed, fiddling with his glasses, finally putting them back on and straightening his shoulders.
"I was just about to - to stake them when Riley arrived - " They wandered out, talking, and Buffy looked back over her shoulder.

"You'll get Xander home safe, right Oz?" she called, and Oz nodded. Then they were gone, and Spike immediately swept Xander up in another hard hug, kissing his neck and face, finally his mouth, slow and sweet and *home want you love*

"Yeah, let's go home." Xander touched Spike's cheek, cupping it, and Spike rubbed into the contact, eyes closing. *need you*

"So, why'd you get me drunk?"

"You were really freakin' out. It seemed like a good idea." Oz smirked at him and Xander pulled him close for a one-armed hug, still tangled with Spike.

"Thanks. I think. I need an aspirin and I need to brush my teeth and... these are the same clothes I was wearing yesterday. Gah. I need a shower."

"Need somethin' else, too," Spike murmured, rubbing
against him, and Xander drew in a hard breath, scent of smoke and leather and spice, scent of Spike, and his body responded immediately - helplessly.

"Oh, yeah...I... What about the Dusted Prince? What did Buffy mean, she got him twice?" They walked out, Xander pulling Spike as close as he could, Oz right there and Xander let his free hand linger on Oz's shoulder, not wanting to exclude him.

"Oh, his bloody Gypsy tricks. He's not really dusted." Spike glanced back at the castle, the demon flickering out and back, *kill it* surging through the link.

"Spike..." Xander protested, but the hyena was raging, wanting some sort of revenge as badly as Spike did, and he let it go. *Don't care what he does* The soldier was uncharacteristically silent, and Xander caught a feeling of - embarrassment? *What the hell? Have to find out what THAT'S all about. But later...god...my head*

They made their way home, Xander feeling as if he'd been in a boxing ring. He'd fought Dracula's thrall every minute, and it had exhausted him. Like fighting wet sheets, that clung and suffocated. He stumbled through the door and *home home* letting Spike manhandle him
into the shower, almost falling asleep under the spray and the gentle caress of Spike's hands, his lips. He managed to brush his teeth and then gone, out. His last coherent thought was actually Spike's thought - *protect family love you* and then oblivion.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Now, Spike in the bed with him, cuddling him close and telling him - telling him he was safe, that everything was all right.

"So he's really gone, this time?" Xander asked again, and Spike stroked his chest, the grumbling purr vibrating through Xander's back.

"He's gone," Spike agreed, but *mine mine* was still shuddering through the link and Xander turned a little, looking at Spike in the growing dawn-light that was creeping in from the kitchen.
"What's wrong, love?" Xander asked, and Spike's eyes flashed golden for a moment, and then back to blue, wide and anxious, the purr petering out.

"Never would have happened if...if I'd had my mark on you. If we'd..."

"You mean - the spell? To make this... permanent? You know I want to -"

"I know, pet, I know. Not blaming you. It's - it's me..." Xander felt cold wash over him, felt a sudden, sickening feeling in his stomach like leaden ice.

Means it's me, it's me, doesn't want...should have guessed...

"Xander, love, hush. I want you love you, don't think... Bloody hell!" Spike sat up, cross-legged, sinking his hands into his hair and scrubbing violently, as if it would clarify his thoughts. Xander sat up also, cross-legged as well, waiting. love you tell me

"This - spell, this claim. There's some more stuff about it that I didn't tell you - couldn't tell you."
"What stuff? Spike - " Xander reached out and cupped Spike's cheek in his hand, rubbing his thumb lightly along the vampire's lower lip. Spike closed his eyes, nuzzling into Xander's touch, and they were silent for a moment, just feeling, sending reassurance along the link.

"Spike, just tell me, ok?" Spike's eyes opened and he looked at Xander, his gaze going over and over Xander's face love you sorry please don't leave his need and his fear shivering through the link. Xander let his hand drop to rest on Spike's, rubbing the knuckles, feeling the fine bones in the back of Spike's hand.

"Greyson said -"

"Who's Greyson?" Xander lifted his right hand, Spike's left, to his mouth, letting his lips rest on the cool, bony knuckles of Spike's hand, letting his teeth just lightly graze them. Spike shivered, his eyes flickering to gold and back.

"He was - this vamp me and Dru met in Casablanca. He had a claim on a woman. He told me about the spell - taught it to me. This spell...it makes us - one. You get - you get things from me. You get immortality, of a sort." Xander stared at him, his tongue licking over
Spike's fingers and Spike hissed in a breath, watching him.

"Immortality - of a sort? What's that mean?"

"It means - you won't age, Xander - not after a year or so. You won't get sick, and you won't die of - of a heart attack or anything like that. But - you can still die. You can get hit by a bloody car and get your skull crushed - just like I can get staked, or burned. But you'll change, pet. My blood'll make you stronger..."

"Isn't it already? I feel - different, since we - since the link. The hyena -"

"It's stronger. Or - more there, maybe. Sometimes, when we patrol, you're eyes'll catch the light - they'll shine green." Spike looked anxiously at Xander at that, and Xander felt his eyes going wide.

"Really? Wow. They are more there... It's like - I can talk to them better or - or something. They were kinda - faint, before. Now - I can remember so much stuff about fighting and hunting. It's - pretty cool. I like that part." Xander grinned at Spike, and Spike raised a small smile back, but there was still unease fear in the link -
and Xander rested his cheek on their clasped hands, looking at Spike _my love mine love you_ silently urging him to not be afraid.

"How much stronger will I get, then?"

"Some. Not much more. You're still human. Just - with extras." Xander had to laugh at that, and Spike's eyebrow went up _git_

"Tell me what else, Spike. Tell me everything."

"They'll know - your gang. The Slayer for sure - Glinda for sure. Red maybe, the Watcher maybe. The wolf. You'll feel different to them - more like me. But you'll feel that way to every demon and vamp in the world, too. They'll know not to fuck with you, 'cause that'll mean fucking with me."

"Well, that's a definite plus, Spike. I mean - almost like a get-out-of-jail-free card. No more demon magnet! Unless - it doesn't mean extra magnetic - uh - demon-attracting qualities, does it?" Spike grinned and reached with his free hand and pushed it through Xander's hair, tugging gently.
"No. It'll mean - you'll be able to walk into Willy's and get a drink and nobody'll even look sideways at you."

"Ok then - that's a plus. Supposing I actually want to get a drink at Willy's. So far - two pluses: stronger, and no more random demon attacks. Oh wait, three pluses - I get to be with you forever." That smile - the real one, and Xander couldn't resist kissing the softly curved lips.

"Ok. Is that all?" A twist of fear again, and Xander pulled his knees up, resting his chin on them.

"'Fess up, Spike." Spike ducked his head - looked around the room for a moment and then got up off the bed.

"Half a mo, love," he said, and darted into the bathroom. He came back a moment later with a paper cup half full of water and his smokes and lighter. He put the cup on the bedside table and lit a cigarette - drew in a huge lungful of smoke and blew it out at the ceiling, watching it swirl away.

"The spell says...'one mind, one heart, one body'. That means - we'll share things. Like pain. Like pleasure. It'll be like the link, only - more. You'll know if I get hurt - if I'm drunk, or tired, or...whatever." Spike tapped ashes
into the cup. They sizzled faintly, and Xander wondered if he would have heard that noise two months ago.

"The sex'll be bloody brilliant." Spike grinned, that 'wanna fuck you now' grin, and Xander blinked.

"Oh? I see now - this is just a plot to get more sex, isn't it?"

"Got it in one, pet." They grinned at each other for a moment, the break in the tension a palpable relief. Spike took a last draw off his smoke and dropped the butt into the cup.

"If -" Spike stopped, and regarded Xander for a moment, head to one side. He was cross-legged again, hands clenched on his knees.

"If I die, or you do - the other won't live."

"I kinda don't think I'd care to live if you weren't there anyway, Spike." Xander said softly, and love you always

"Yeah. Me neither. But it won't be pretty, love. The one left alive'll...linger a bit. It'll hurt."
"Death always does." They were both silent after that never leave me from Spike, and Xander sent his love - his desire - as strongly as he could. Reassuring as best he could. What if I'm not enough? What if - I've never been with anybody more then a few months - what if...he doesn't want me after...

"Xander..." Spike ran his fingers back through Xander's hair again - his favorite thing made even better, now that it had grown so long. "You'll always be enough, love. Don't think that." Xander smiled weakly, and nodded.

"I'll try and remember that. It's just - I hope I can do this, Spike. I hope I can - keep you happy, for so long. What if -"

"Trust me, love? You can. You will." Xander took a deep breath love you

"Anything else? Any more?"

"One - more thing. The...biggest thing." fear again, a broken-nailed skittering down Xander's back, and he shivered.
"When we do this - we'll share - memories."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean - you'll remember everything that I ever did. And I'll -"

"Fuck! Really? You mean - I'll know what you did - what you were like when - before you were turned?"

"Yeah, and...everything else, too. What I did with Dru and Angelus and Darla - everything we did." Spike looked utterly freaked out, and it finally hit Xander, exactly what he was saying.

"Oh. Oh. You mean - I'm gonna remember the people you killed and...what it was like to be in love with Drusilla and...all that." Spike nodded, looking down, and Xander scooted closer, enfolding him in a tight hug. After a moment he pulled away a little, making Spike meet his gaze. "Remember - how? I mean... All the time? Like...like having a movie in my head or something? Or - what?" Do I REALLY want to know - everything? How he killed - how many - how much he loved Drusilla? Do I want to know it all? What if - what if I start to...forget me? Xander knew Spike could feel his
hesitation, and he knew he was hurting the vampire. But he had to know.

"When we do it - the spell - we'll remember. But after a couple of days - you'll have to try hard to know stuff. Have to think about it like - like trying to remember a book you haven't read in a while or - how to do something you haven't done since you were a kid. It'll be like - you watched a big movie about my life and you can see the details when you want, but mostly it'll just be in the background." Spike had put his hands on Xanders thighs while he talked - was rubbing gently, up and back, along the outside. It felt good, but Xander put his hands over Spike's and stopped him, just holding him there, the cool hands under his tense with fear.

"Damn." Spike looked at him, startled. "You're gonna know all about - well, everything from when I was a kid and...all the really embarrassing stuff I've been hiding from you..." Xander smiled at him, and Spike rolled his eyes, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Bloody hell, love, this is serious. You -"

"I know it's serious, Spike. What - what was she like? That woman..." Spike dug his fingertips just a little
into Xander's thighs, kneading gently. Thinking.

"She was - she was full of laughter, pet. She thought everything was so...fun. A grand adventure. She was from Poland - very poor, she said. Very strict. Religious. And then Greyson and she... He thought she was beautiful - wanted to turn her but he got...distracted, I guess."

"Distracted?" Spike raised a faint smile, but love you please please was in the link, sad and desperate, and Xander leaned forward and kissed Spike softly. love you

"Yeah. Distracted by her... well, just by her. Just wanted what she was instead of...what she might have been. She was - I liked her, Xander. She wasn't a vampire. She wasn't - a demon. She was herself. Maybe more herself then she could have been if he'd never met her. She had time, you know? To do things and to - live. And someone to live with her - love her - all the time." Spike looked helplessly at Xander, the pain in his eyes as clear and sharp as broken glass - as ice over rushing, treacherous water.

Xander could feel that pain - like a blade, twisting in him, and he closed his eyes and considered, for a long
moment, what Spike was saying.

_Not like I'm alone in here to begin with. And it's not like the things that the soldier or the hyena want just...happen. I control them - they're part of me but I'm still...ME. How different would this be? I wouldn't even be getting something that talks back, just...extras_  He opened his eyes again, meeting Spike's gaze.

"Is it ok to say I'm scared, Spike? 'Cause I am. I want this, so much - want you so much it hurts. I'm afraid I won't be me, anymore... Will I still be - me?" Xander knew his voice cracked on that last, and Spike pulled him close and just kissed him; aching-sweet, desperate, loving, and Xander let the touch and the scent and the feel of mine my own surround him - seep into him and carry him away. He gave himself up to Spike for long, long moments, and when Spike finally pulled back _love you please mine stay stay_ Xander knew what he would do.

"You'll be yourself, love - I promise you that. Just yourself. Nothing can touch your soul, love - nothing can touch you - change you - unless you want it to."

"Then - we do it, Spike. As soon as we can." Spike just
stared at him for a moment and then he smiled, and the relief that came from him was overwhelming. Relief, joy, love. Then Spike was kissing him again, laying him down on the bed, and there was an edge of passion in this kiss - the sweetness was still there, the love - but now there was want need and it sent a rush of shivery fire over Xander's skin. To be wanted, so much...

Eventually, Spike pulled back and looked down at him.

"You really want to do this, love? It's - a lot to give up."

"Exactly what am I giving up, Spike?"

"Your friends, maybe. Your - human life." Xander rubbed at the back of Spike's neck, where he'd held the vampire tight to him. He met Spike's gaze, serious; reinforcing everything he said through the link, sending want you want this love you always as he spoke aloud.

"I won't miss being the punching bag of every demon in Sunnydale. And as for the gang - I won't live my life to please them, or anyone. Except you. Oz knows - he accepts it. And Tara does, and Anya. I dunno about Buffy, or Giles - they're kinda hard-wired into the demon-equals-evil thing, and I don't know how much they can
change. Willow... She's been my best friend all my life. She'd be the one I'd really miss, if she - if she couldn't understand. If she wouldn't. But I want this, Spike. I want it more then I've ever wanted anything." Xander shifted under the vampire, one leg bent a little, settling Spike's lean belly and groin into the cradle of his own - pressing him close.

"I want you - want this - and you want this - that's the amazing part - that's the part that...freaks me out. Not the link or the spell - but that you want me - just...me. " Xander couldn't believe he'd said that, and now he waited for what Spike would say - nervous, even now, of hearing second place do for now only if we don't TELL anyone.

How can you think that? Can't you tell... The soldier was incredulous and angry, and Xander shushed him.

"Course I do, love - course I want you. You...you're..." Spike gave up talking, pressing his face into Xander's neck and just thinking at him beautiful sexy brave hearthfire demonkiller builder laughter mine mine MINE

In moments they were moaning, writhing; Spike kissing
Xander's mouth bloody, Xander raking his nails down Spike's back and the both of them hard, ready, desperate to take and be taken, to seal the pact in blood and sweat and semen, in gasping breaths and guttural cries, in the strain of flesh and muscle and bone. Mindless, heedless of noise or damage or anything but the all-consuming desire to be one; the same flesh, the same breath, taken and consumed and wanted, in ways neither had ever been wanted or needed, before.

When Xander arrived at work two hours late, his split lip still swollen and his whole body stiff and sore, the look Manny gave him was long and considering, and Xander almost told him what he was going to do. But then didn't, as Manny put his gnarled hand on Xander's shoulder, and nodded once, serious and silent. Xander figured Manny knew, already.

`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Two days later, a Friday night, and Xander and Oz and Spike sat around the kitchen table, eating the stir-fry Oz had made, uncharacteristically silent. Tonight. Tonight the claiming, and Spike felt like he needed to go out and kill something. He was beyond hyper, his senses amp...
up so high he thought he might lose it; the bloodlust and the need for Xander making a whole-body ache that he could barely tolerate.

*Can't believe this, can't believe he's gonna... Oh, love you, love you, this is more than I ever...ever thought I'd get, more than I... my boy, my own...* Spike couldn't keep his eyes off Xander - could barely refrain from touching him, taking him *right here* and who cared if the wolfling got an eyeful, he just needed -

*Calm calm love you* from Xander, like honey, like smoke; something warm and sweet curling through him, petting him from the inside and he closed his eyes, sinking into it. *Be mine forever, after tonight. Mine and...never be alone, never be left behind, never... Oh, love you love you* The same thing - a muddle of nerves and love and reassurance - was coming from Xander, and Spike finally opened his eyes and got a smoke, staring sightlessly out into the darkness through the open kitchen door, taking deep breaths of the salt-laden air, scenting the *warm salt sweet* of Xander and the *earth dark pine* of Oz, the peppers and cooked rice and beef, the candle wax and the laundry soap and the blood from some small cut Xander had got at work, the swirl of spicy-green smells from the bag of herbs the wolfling had brought from the
Abruptly Spike stood up and paced outside, standing on the porch and watching the faint glimmer of the sea, listening to the booming of the surf and the insects in the grass and the dry rustling of the leaves of the eucalyptus. The medicinal scent of that tree overwhelmed even the cigarette smoke and Spike breathed and breathed, trying to calm himself. The demon was utterly silent - frighteningly so. It wanted, so badly, and now Spike felt as if it were crouched somewhere down in him, waiting to pounce.

*Don't hurt him, can't hurt him, you've got to make sure -*

*C'course we won't hurt him - it'll be... it'll be fine. You'll see.*

*But when he...remembers...* Spike shuddered all over, putting his hands on the rail and bowing his head, breathing.

*Know all our secrets, that's all...know everything and... we'll know him - HAVE him, here, inside, forever. Never be alone, never be left, never...*
He could still leave, could still...

NO, he won't, he won't...loves us, wants this...

MIN the demon snarled, surfacing for one moment and then away again, and Spike stalked back inside and opened a cabinet - pulled out his bottle of whiskey and took a long, long drink. The fiery liquor burned his throat - sent warmth coiling out from his belly, and Xander got up from the table and came and leaned into him, body to body, tucking his head down into Spike's neck and nibbling at his throat a little, where the mark would be.

"You alright?" Spike set the bottle aside and put his arms around Xander, hugging him close.

"I'm good, pet. We should - get started. Gotta make the draught..."

"Yeah. Ok. Let's...get this cleaned up so we can..." Absently, Xander stepped away and started clearing dishes, and Oz got up and silently joined him. They'd asked Oz to stay, just in case. With magic, nothing was ever sure, and they wanted him there if they needed help. And to keep any unexpected guests away.
Spike could smell sweat and nerves from the wolfling - he was as on edge as they were. As the others cleared away the mess from dinner, Spike got the herbs out and began to prepare them, crushing them to near powder with a mortar and pestle, carefully sifting in the different components. It was a spell so simple as to be laughable. Greyson had passed it on to him with a small smile, knowing that one of Spike's line - Aurelius - would have no trouble with such a simple charm. *Simple is sometimes strongest* Greyson had said, and Spike agreed. It didn't make him any less nervous, but at least it was an easy thing to do - nothing much to muck up. Drink the potion, love his boy, take his blood, say the words. That was all. He glanced up at Xander, who was standing with a dishtowel in one hand and a glass dangling from the other, staring at nothing. Oz gently relieved him of both, and set them on the counter.

"Xander, why don't you go make sure everything's set up in the bedroom, OK? I can finish this." Xander blinked - looked at Oz - blinked again and then nodded, stumbling away to the bedroom. Spike felt the *love afraid want love* through the link and crushed more herbs, his hands shaking.
Fuck, gotta calm down. This is gonna be fine, gonna be -
A hand on his shoulder stilled him, and he looked up into Oz's face; calm green eyes and small smile, waft of dish soap and wolf-smell and leather from the half-dozen braided bracelets around his wrist.

"You all right?"

"Bloody hell, wolf, I'm..." Spike put his head down on his wrist, shivering, and Oz's hand moved, stroking his shoulder and back, gently kneading the tension-wracked muscles.

"Gonna be fine, Spike. Gonna be fine. I see you two - makes me... envious. You love each other so much, and...this is going to be amazing..." Oz's voice was soft, his tone one of utter calm, and Spike lifted his head and looked at the werewolf - really looked.

Oh fuck. This is - this is hurting him. This is...gotta fix this, soon as Xan and me are...gotta fix this.

"Thanks, pet. That - means a lot to me - to us." Spike smiled at him - his real smile, as Xander would say - and Oz blinked and ducked his head and went back to the sink, wiping an already spotless counter, something else
coming off him now; a scent of sadness and arousal that made Spike catch his breath.

*We'll take care of you, wolfling. You'll see.* Spike carefully dusted his hands and then went to the 'fridge, lifting down the small copper that he was to make the draught in. It was filled with sea-water, and Spike set it on the stove, turning on the burner.

*The sun's metal and the mother's blood, the living green that springs from the dust of the dead. Roiled in air, drunk in darkness, spoken as one. Give each of the seed, of the blood, of the vow, and it is done. Hyt k'ku, hyt v'lyl, hyt hydu - one heart, one mind, one body*

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Lying in the darkness, the faint taste of the potion in his mouth - earthy, bitter, green and salt. Xander beneath him, around him, the light of the single candle showing eyes as wide and as dark as the sea, mouth open on a breathless moan *love love love* pounding through the link as steady as the mortal's heartbeat - as vital. Slowly, with infinite care, they let lips, teeth, tongues rest on the other. Spike's mouth was flooded with Xander's taste -
sweet and salt and sunlight, cool water, clean wood. The demon came forward, oddly subdued - so focused that Xander was the only light in a tunnel of black. Spike moved, writhed, thrust, and felt his orgasm from very far away - felt it as a wave rolling in; smooth, heavy and unstoppable. Beneath him, Xander arched up, gasping, and as their climax took them they took each other, tooth meeting tooth through sweat-slicked flesh and flesh of the living dead. Spike sucked the heady nectar of Xander's blood into his mouth, feeling hot semen spattering his stomach and chest, feeling his own body pouring it out, a roaring in his ears. Then they were whispering, saying the words:

Hyt k'ku, hyt v'lyl, hyt hydu. And....

White light. A confusion of colors and things. A red-haired girl crying, a broken crayon...sight and sound and smell and taste cascaded through him - fast and then faster, and Spike threw his head back and roared, aware of Xander doing the same, aware of pain as the images and the sounds and the emotions built stronger and higher and faster - too fast to comprehend, too loud to hear, too bright to see. Spike jerked up and away, falling half off the bed, his hands knotted in his hair in an agony of sensation. Dimly, the scent of the wolfling came to
him - a voice - but the life-time that was flooding through him was too much, too fast, and he cried out one more time and fell into it, into a stutter of day and night, hate and love, joy and pain, until it wound into darkness and he knew nothing else.

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When Xander woke, it was to a cool cloth on his forehead and the dim, aqueous light of mid-day coming greenly in through the curtains. The face above him slowly resolved into Oz, and Xander reached a shaking hand up and touched it - touched Oz's cheek before his arm fell limply back to the bed.

"Hey - Xander." Oz smiled at him - glanced towards the kitchen and then back. After a moment Spike was there, slipping into the bed from the other side, sharp scent of cigarette smoke and whiskey.

"Sspike," Xander whispered, and his throat felt ragged and full of sand.

"Here I am, love. C'mon." Spike eased his arm under Xander's shoulders and lifted him, holding Xander against
his chest. Oz had a cup, water and a straw, and Xander drank gratefully. Oz set the cup down and touched his hand, then stood up and went away into the kitchen, leaving them alone. Xander closed his eyes, leaning back on Spike gratefully, lacing their fingers together and sighing in utter contentment. A random thought surfaced, and Xander frowned a little.

"Spike, there's something - with Oz... it's worse than it was?"

"Yeah. He's... We'll see to it, don't fret." A moment's silence, and Spike hugged Xander a little closer. "So, can I go and kill your father, love?" Spike asked, and Xander chuckled weakly, squeezing the fingers in his.

"Sure. An' then, I'll go kill Angel, 'kay?"

"Whatever you want, love." Spike kissed his cheek - temple - and then settled back against the headboard, pulling Xander close.

"What - when is it?"

"Next day. We did the spell last night. I've been awake about... four hours. Feel alright, love?"
"Mmmm. My head hurts a bit - my throat. What - what happened? Did something - did we do it right?"

"Worked a treat, love. Can't you feel it?" Spike kissed his throat - where the mark was - and suddenly something flared up inside. Xander gasped. It was the link, but changed. It was - more. Deeper. He could feel the emotions, the love you love you that he was used to, but there was something else, too. It was as if he were inside Spike's mind, and for a moment he could hear Oz's heartbeat in the next room, hear the radio next door and, very faintly, a siren somewhere in downtown Sunnydale. The scents of the room flooded into him - he could feel the threads of the sheet and he could, somehow, feel the coolness of Spike's body against his back and his own heat flooding back towards himself. Spike at the same time. It was something like the Super Slayer spell had been, only infinitely more intimate, and he wallowed in the emotions that Spike was directing towards him, and brushed tentatively over the other things - how Spike felt about Oz, Giles - Buffy. Echoes of the past came to him as well; a brief flash of Drusilla, spinning and spinning, a veil of sheer silk floating around her and how love had surged up in him. Spike, love and desire. Himself, in their bed, telling Spike I love you and
the joy that had leapt up, joy and awe and love love He shivered, overwhelmed, and the sensations retreated, leaving only the link as it had been, and the steady assurances Spike was sending him.

"God - Spike. That's... Love you. I - I can't even...

"Shush, love, it's all right. Don't need to talk. I know. Love you always always mine

Yours

17 Telling

A week since the claim, and the memories had finally subsided - leveled, and lost their subtle but substantial grip. The first day or so it was all Xander could do to get up - walk around. Every thing, every touch, every sound, seem to trigger something, and he'd stand for long, long minutes just lost in memory.
"Let's rent a boat, William. A row across the lake would be lovely."

"Of course, Mother." People galloping past on horses, carriages with well-dressed women sitting inside, nod of head and bow, bow... Walking slow because Mother is ill and mustn't overdo. Two little boys in sailor suits tossing bread crumbs to the ducks and the boatman bobbing and touching his cap, undoing the painter and giving the little rowboat a shove. Mother smiling, so pale, her parasol casting a slant of shadow across her face and throat and the Row crowded with people and horses, the quiet ruffling of the lake-water a balm to frayed nerves...

And now Xander knows that Spike - William - didn't like horses. Or, rather, loved them, for their beauty and romantic Arthurian allure but had never ridden all that well and had never been a part of the 'horsy' set. Had, in fact, had a faint contempt for something so...physical. And that horses had scared him, a little. Then Xander would blink - swallow - look up and see Oz watching him, or feel Spike's fingers in his hair and gone again, another memory rising up like bubbles in a pool.

"You've been a naughty, naughty boy, Spike - Miss Edith says you must be punished." Curve of red lips, tumble of black hair, sharp nails scoring his chest and the rope
biting into his wrists. Rope he can snap in a moment but they both like this game so he doesn't, only arches up to her touch, her golden eyes flickering to brown and back again, long pale thighs clasping his, glitter of the knife as it twitches restlessly across his chest, belly...

Xander gasps awake from that one, feeling the surge of arousal and he's on the floor by the kitchen door, Oz touching his shoulder, Spike leaning against the wall and just as lost as he is, reliving some part of Xander's life that makes him snarl when he comes back from it.

It's overwhelming, exhilarating - terrifying. Xander lets Oz pull him to his feet and he sways there a moment, not letting Oz's hand go, because another memory surfaces. This kitchen, this table, Oz saying it will be alright and Spike seeing hurt, seeing loss... Vowing to fix it and Xander looks at Oz and smiles. Yeah, fix it. Just let me... just let me get my bearings, let me get all this...settled. The hyena is bewildered by the rush of remembrance so foreign and so overwhelming and has retreated to a grumbling sulk somewhere down below conscious thought. The soldier is vacillating between horror at losing control so often and so completely and glee at a centuries' worth of mayhem he can plunder for skills and techniques.
Xander sits at the table, drinking a soda, and...

"Thee canna do this, boy, it's too much!" Angelus, furious. Fist twisted tight in Spike's shirt, the threads popping as he yanks and tries to jerk Spike down to his knees. Angry over careless mayhem, gleeful chaos. And of course Spike fights back - ALWAYS fights back, even when he knows he's going to lose - fist driving into that sneering mouth, knee coming up to sink into a vulnerable groin, the grin stretching his mouth as both hits connect and blood is trailing over Angelus' mouth, now. Angelus wheezes and doubles up and drives his head forward, and they are stumbling back, crashing into a spindly-legged table and Darla is looking on, a bored expression on her face, a glass of wine in her hand. Drusilla is on the bed, bouncing excitedly, her eyes gleaming and Spike winks at her and then yelps as Angelus crushes down on top of him, sharp elbow in the belly, fangs snapping at his throat, one hand twined in his hair and the other trying to break his ribs with hard, rabbity punches. Growl, heave, roll, and Spike is on top, rapping that damn great Irish head into the hearthstones with a satisfying crack and then Darla is there, wine-bottle swinging...

Xander groans and puts his head on the table and Spike is laughing, mumbling something. Xander looks up and catches Oz's eye - the werewolf is looking a bit spooked.
"It's a madhouse, a madhouse!" Xander exclaims, his best Charlton Heston, and Oz grins at him, some of the tension flowing away.

"When do you think this'll... settle down?" Oz asks.

"I think..." And that memory comes to him - a slim, pale man vampire in a grey suit, ashy-brown hair blowing in the ever-present breeze from the sea, grey eyes full of laughter and life. A woman beside him; auburn hair, plump, pale blue eyes and the same laughing look to her. Talking about the claim, talking about...

"A couple days, maybe? Not too long. They'll fade." Spike leans on the chair behind Xander and combs his fingers through Xander's hair.

"Right, wolfling. Give it a few days and we'll be right as rain. Greyson said... he could remember if he wanted to. " Oz nods, then, and sighs as Xander and Spike both zone out again, and when Xander surfaces it's dark outside. Oz is watching something on TV about the birth of Blues music in the south and Spike is smoking and looking angry.

"What is it, love?"

"Can't believe they left you there - fuckin' bastards - you were six, you were so scared..." And Xander knows what
Spike is remembering. Himself getting his tonsils out and his parents dumping him in the hospital and gone, stuff to do, and he had lay in the bed and shivered and cried. Not knowing why he was there, not knowing what would happen next, too scared to get out of the bed and not knowing how to call anyone and he'd finally wet the bed and then cried even harder, absolute horror because now, now... Xander shook that off, pushed his head back into Spike's caressing fingers. love you warm and sweet.

"I can tell the wind is risin', the leaves tremblin' on the tree..."

Tremblin' on the tree...

I can tell the wind is risin', leaves tremblin' on the tree...

All I need is my little sweet woman..."

A man's reedy voice from the TV, the recording scratchy and a little distorted, the guitar stark and unaccompanied. Somehow, it makes Xander shiver.

"Yeah, well... I got ice cream and toys from all the nurses when they figured it out. And Wills brought me a coloring book the next day." Spike snorts, crushing out his cigarette, and Xander leans over and kisses him, soft and slow.
"Come make it all better, love..." he whispers, and somehow the memories are easier to take when they're lying in the bed together, close as they can possibly get; Spike beneath him and around him, murmur of his name, cool mouth against his and want need and Spike's blood like nectar, the claim mark a raised glyph under his tongue. Then the memories wash in and out without so much...baggage. Xander sighs in bliss and relief, cool skin against his and the link wide open and fire in the grate, Drusilla writing in her journal, letting her hair be brushed and brushed to a silken cowl, warm and safe and loved, loved...

Monday - ten days gone, and they'd managed to avoid Buffy, Giles - everyone, really. Even gotten in a couple of their own kind of patrols; the demon and the wolf and the hyena running through the night, being pack, being family, and it's all part of the fix that Spike and Xander know Oz needs. But not all of it. And Xander has tried out a few of those memories - tried a move, here and there, from Spike's street-brawling days and after the second or third try it had been like he'd known them all along. The soldier was ecstatic. And a new thing - images, through the link. Old ones - memories - but new ones, too - what Spike was seeing, or Xander. What either of them were thinking. Spike amused himself by sending little flashes of
Xander and himself fucking - just glimpses of thigh and arched back, rib or curve of throat or sweep of buttock. Enough to make Xander hard for hours. He got his revenge by sending images of his co-workers, naked. Beer-bellies aplenty, and Spike just laughed at him when he came home - laughed and tackled him to the bed, as ready as Xander was.

The memories had finally sunk under, but Xander still woke shuddering from nightmares. Nightmares only to *him* - memories of hunts and fights and Spike learning what sort of damage a railroad spike could do to a human body. Drusilla having tea-parties with blood in the teapot and half-dead little girls listless at her party table. Angelus...showing Spike how much more powerful he is then a five-year fledge and Spike seething, in agony. Too beaten to even move, too lost in Drusilla to run away, too desperate to be *part of* to abandon his only family. And other things - the Initiative among them, and Xander really wants to *hurt* Riley now. Those memories were fading, as well - were already losing their hard-edged brilliance and becoming nothing more than vague scenes, scatter-shot across his night-time brain. For that, Xander was thankful. His own life had caused Spike more anger then anything, and Xander had wondered if he would get a call sometime. The police, telling him his dad
was dead. But Spike overheard that thought one night, curled tight to him, and whispered in his ear - in his head. *Yours to do, or not, as you like. Your choice, your revenge, love...your family*

Tonight they were all three sprawled on the sofa-bed, watching the 'Alien' oeuvre and eating take-out from the Ethiopian place. Spike was on his back, propped up with a plate on his stomach. With one hand he deftly scooped up eggs and lamb and vegetables with a piece of injera bread, with the other he idly rubbed Oz's ankle-bone. Xander grinned at that, then groaned and heaved himself up from his prone position when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Xander? It's - it's Giles. I need to speak to you - can you come over here tonight?" Xander felt an unexpected and unwelcome clutch of anxiety, and immediately Spike twisted around, looking at him.

"Something up, Giles? Something wrong?"

"No - no. Nothing is...wrong, precisely, but I've never gotten your side of the spell we did, the...ah...Super Slayer spell, and I really need your...experience to put into my journal." Giles's voice sounded odd, and Xander frowned at that. Oz was watching him now, too, and
Xander wondered if he'd ever get used to them being able to hear everything that was said on the phone.

"We're in the middle of dinner here, Giles, when - "

"Oh, say in an hour? And Xander, please tell Spike that Buffy wants to meet him at the Bronze. She wants to talk to him about...about the Slayers he killed."

"What?" A silence, and a sigh from Giles, and Spike is on his feet now, plate set aside and eyes going gold for a moment.

"There was... there was an incident, last night. On patrol. Buffy...got hurt, and she wants to know - she wants to know how Spike killed the Slayers."

"Is she ok?"

"Oh yes, yes, she's fine, a minor wound, really, but in light of her new...dedication to training and...learning, Buffy feels that... She needs to know - how it happened."
Xander frowned again, not happy at all. But he couldn't put Giles off anymore, even if he wanted to. And something was making him not want to. He wanted to tell them - the whole gang. He was tired of sneaking and lying. He just wasn't sure if he wanted to yet.
"Ok Giles, I'll tell him. See you in a while." Xander hung up and sighed, and looked up at Spike and Oz. Spike looked ready to do...something. Fight, or yell, or punch something. Oz looked worried. Xander went over to Spike, slipping an arm around his waist and calm love you

"Guess I'm seein' Giles tonight. And you're seein' Buffy."

"Do you think - what do you think?" Oz asked, stabbing idly at some cooked egg, and Xander shrugged.

"I - don't really know. He says - well, you heard what he says, but I don't know if that's all he wants. He sounded...strange. Maybe 'cause of Buffy, maybe not." Spike ran his hand up and down Xander's side, giving a little squeeze, then sat back down on the bed, picking up his plate again.

"We'll know when we get there, love. Nothing to worry about." His even tone was belied by the tremor of anxiety that ran through the link, and Xander sent back safe love you

"Yeah." Xander sank down as well, and Oz slowly ate a forkful of egg.

"You know, I think I'll go to the Bronze tonight. See what's up with the band that's there - maybe play a little
pool. Mind if I tag along, Spike?" Spike grinned over at Oz.

"What, are you sayin' you don't trust the Slayer, wolf? Think she'll need double-teaming?" Oz laughed, and bounced a little on the bed, wolf eyes and fangs and claws for a moment, then himself again.

"Nah. But you're supposed to be all unable to fight back, you know? I just don't want her getting...overzealous."

"Oooh." Xander raised his eyebrows in mock amazement. "Big two-dollar word from the wolf. I gotta get me some of those. But first, the rest of my dinner."

Xander dropped Spike and Oz off at the Bronze, and couldn't repress a shiver of unease as he watched them walk inside. love you safe came from Spike as the door closed, and Xander sent it back hard, then drove on to Giles's apartment. The complex was quiet, and he sat for a little bit in his truck, thinking. Feeling Spike faintly through the link; arrogance and amusement and something like nostalgia. Brief image of Buffy, looking angry, shoving a plate of chicken wings across the table. He wondered what they were saying. Sighing, he got out of the truck and walked down - knocked gently on the door. After a moment Giles opened it, and wordlessly ushered him inside. Papers were strewn over the table -
books and several half-empty cups of tea precariously piled among them - and Xander eyed the mess with suspicion.

"Been doin' some heavy research?"

"Something like that. Please - sit down." Xander did, perching on a stool by the breakfast bar, and Giles leaned on the edge of the table, glasses off and thumb rubbing over his forehead as if he had a headache.

"Xander...when we did the spell... You could feel Willow and myself, could you not?"

"Yeah - I could. It was like - Willow was power, and you were..." Xander stopped and looked at Giles, and Giles looked slightly uneasy. "You were - demonkiller. And not - like Buffy is, you know? It was...darker."

"Ah. Yes, well, in my younger days I committed my share of rebellious acts, and I'm afraid some of those acts involved...darker magics then I currently...employ."

"You and Ethan Rayne?" Giles shot Xander a hard look and then sighed.

"Yes, Ethan and I. We were - friends once. A long time ago. Did you feel - anything else?"
"From you? I felt - teacher. And fighter, and...father."
Xander fiddled with a loose button on his work-shirt - glanced up to see Giles looking at him with a rather startled expression, one that melted into a small, pleased smile.

"Well, I, uh, suppose that, in my time here, I've certainly assumed many of the...well, responsibilities one might associate with a father, especially towards Buffy..."

"Yeah. You kind of have. For all of us, really. I mean - Willow's parents are gone a lot, and mine... They're just gone, you know?" Xander couldn't help but smile back at Giles, and the tension in the air seemed to lessen a bit. He could sense amusement from Spike again, and the sort of jumpy energy that personified Spike in on mode. Flicker of something - pool cue and table and Buffy's startled face, brief glimpse of Oz, and he relaxed more, knowing the vampire was all right.

"Yes, well... Back to the...point of your visit. You could feel Buffy as well, I assume?"

"Oh, yeah." Xander shivered a little, remembering. "Buffy was....blood and bones. And eternal, and... lonely." Giles was staring at him now, and Xander started feeling uncomfortable again.
"Really, Xander, I'm quite amazed. You seem to be able to...to express how it felt much better then any of the rest of us. I wonder, is that because of the soldier, or the hyena?" Giles voice was so soft - so even, that it took Xander a moment for him to really register what he'd said. And then he stared in amazement at the older man.

"Wh-what?" Giles was watching him closely, being The Watcher, his pose one of relaxed indifference. Ready to pounce Xander thought, and unconsciously straightened on the stool.

"I could feel - both of those things - those entities. The hyena seemed....eager? Excited? And the soldier was very... Well, Buffy said it made her feel brave."

"Yeah, he did. Giles - "

"Why didn't you tell me Xander? How long has this - possession - been going on?"

"I'm not possessed, Giles. They've...they've been there since they happened. The hyena never left, I just got more...control over it. And the soldier the same way - when the spell was broken and we all went back to normal, he just...stayed. It's not... They don't hurt me, or anything - I mean, the soldier helped with Angelus, remember? And the hyena helps, too - they both do. I
can fight better because of them. They don't - control me, or anything. They're like...Jiminy Cricket, only - you know - with the schematics for a land-mine and a craving for a rare steak from time to time."

Giles looked at him, frowning, and then stood up and paced closer, his eyes dark and his arms at his sides, tense.

"And how does Spike fit into all this?" Xander felt a wave of icy dread pass over him, followed rather swiftly by sickly relief, and he swallowed, watching Giles.

"I felt him as well, Xander. Buffy and Willow both seemed to think it was - part of the other two. They seemed to have a much more...muddled recollection of what happened. But I remember distinctly that he was there, in you, with the rest. With us, for just a moment. I've had - suspicions - since he moved in with you, and Angel - "

"Angel? What's deadboy got to do with this?"

"When he was here last, he came by, on his way out of town. He said that I should keep an eye on Spike. And I have been, as best I could. It's been difficult, considering how little you two - three, including Oz - are around. And then we did that spell, Xander, and Spike is in your head. How is that possible?" Giles was very close, now, and his
eyes had a hard gleam that Xander associated with the darkman Ripper part of the Watcher's past. The hyena growled a warning and the soldier dredged up memories - two, then three, a rapid stutter of images - Spike fighting, particular moves. Xander shook his head, dismissing them, telling the soldier in no uncertain terms to stand down.

"Giles... This is gonna take a while."

Xander finally stopped talking and Giles simply stared at him, utterly motionless. Xander looked at him for a moment then got up and went into the kitchen, getting a glass of water and gulping it down. His stomach was in knots, and he was thankful to be out from under the scrutiny of the older man, if only temporarily. After a moment Giles followed him into the kitchen and began making tea, moving in a jerky fashion that showed how far away his thoughts were. Xander leaned in the doorway, watching him.

"You say - you say you can see... Xander, demons don't have souls - you know they don't."

"But they do, Giles. You said so yourself. Remember the demon trapped in the book, the one Willow scanned? You said its soul was trapped for all eternity. I can see them, Giles. They really are there. My boss is a demon.
Hell, half of Sunnydale employs demons! Some are just really good at hiding. But I can see them if I want to, Giles - I can see Willow's soul, and Buffy's... I can see yours. And I can see Spike's, Giles. Both of them. It's...it's the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

"Xander, I... This is all so..."

"I know it's hard to believe, Giles. But it's true. Don't you have - isn't there something you could do - some spell or...something so you could see them, too?" Giles was shaking his head and Xander started to get angry. "I'm going to accept that you aren't just going to believe me - I mean, I'm not Willow with the magic powers and the nerd powers and I'm not a thousand-year-old ex-demon, and I'm not Tara who can see auras, and I'm sure not Buffy, so yeah, I can see where you'd think I was...lying, or under some damn spell- " Xander realized he was shouting, way too close to Giles in the narrow kitchen and he choked it off, taking a deep breath and trying to calm down.

Knew he'd be like this! Didn't we tell you? He doesn't trust us, Harris, he won't believe until he can cut Spike's soul out and examine it under a microscope

OURS. Keep it away! The hyena was snarling, and Xander laughed shortly, rubbing his temples. Giles was standing
in front of the stove, arms crossed, frowning, his stance defensive and maybe a little spooked. *Ok, god, got to calm down, Spike'll think...*fuck, *I don't KNOW what Spike'll think, but it won't be good* He reached for Spike through the link but got nothing - the vampire had shut it down. The knots in his belly tightened. *So not good - damnit*

"You know, this won't exactly help my case here, but the soldier thinks you don't trust me. And the hyena? It wants to hurt you." Giles stiffened at that, and shot him a wary look.

"Do you want to hurt me, Xander?"

"Oh for god's sake, Giles! Of course I don't! You know, Spike and Oz neither *one* had a problem with this - they believed me right off. Why don't you?"

"It's not a matter of *belief*, Xander, it's - " Giles was cut off by a sudden *thump* as his front door flew open and banged sharply into the wall behind it. And Spike was there, furious, blocking the link but half into game-face and growling deep in his chest. Behind him Oz staggered in, panting, looking as if he'd run a marathon.

"Spike! What in *hell* - " from Giles, full-on Ripper in an instant.
"Hey, you guys ok? What's -"

"Sorry, Xander, I - " Oz reeled a little, gasping, and Spike grabbed his arm and pushed him onto a stool, glaring at Giles. The link crashed open suddenly and Xander felt rage fear MINE and he moved hastily, catching at Spike as the vampire rounded the corner of the kitchen doorway, going straight for Giles who was trapped at the back of the minimal kitchen space. Spike snarled, full demon, and Xander yanked his arm hard, making him stop, sending calm calm CALM

"It's all right, Spike - I'm ok. I should have - I just got pissed off. It's ok. Giles didn't do anything." Spike stared at him, panting a little, then whipped his head around as Giles made some aborted movement. Giles froze. Xander did, and Oz was dark-eyed, tense, on the verge of wolfing out.

"Watcherrrr," Spike growled, and Xander shook Spike a little, making him look back, making Spike focus on love love yours calm now yours calm

"Spike, it's OK, you need to calm down. Spike?" The vampire stared at him another long moment. Then finally he blinked, taking a deep breath. The demon subsided and Spikes human face was there, scowling. He leaned forward and kissed Xander, hard and possessive, his
hands coming up to cradle Xander's face, fingers in Xander's hair and love you love you Xander kissed back just as desperately, pulling the shivering body close to him, hands under the duster and digging into Spike's back. Slowly, they pulled away from each other, and Xander saw that Giles had buried his face in his hands, glasses dangling from his fingers.

"You felt - it just kept gettin' worse. And then, the last couple of blocks..." Spike made a vague gesture with his hand. "I got worried, is all. Oi, Watcher! Don't piss my boy off, right?"

"Don't, Spike." Xander pulled Spike a little further away from Giles, tightening his grip around Spike's waist. "I was just... I told Giles about Jack, and what he gave me and what I can see and...he doesn't believe me."

"He'll just have to get over it, love. What brought all this on, anyway?" Spike pushed a staying lock of hair of Xander's forehead - gently ran his fingers back through the dark strands.

"When we did that spell - Super Slayer. He could feel the hyena and the soldier. And you, too."

"Huh. So he's all in a panic, hey?" Spike broke away from Xander's embrace and walked around to the front door,
shutting it with a brusque push. Then he came back to Oz and rubbed his hand gently over the werewolf's back and sweat-damp t-shirt.

"Sorry 'bout runnin' you into the ground, mate."

"S'okay, Spike. It's good for me." Oz grinned, still panting, and Spike grinned back. Giles slammed a can of soda down onto the breakfast bar next to Oz.

"I'm so glad you're all friends again, but Xander we are not finished here. And Spike - I don't know what you've done -"

"Nothing I wasn't asked to do, Watcher. Chip, remember? You've got a bloody nerve - "

"Stop - stop! Giles, we're together, you're just going to have to...deal with it. This last week we...we made it permanent. It's called a claim, and it's... It's done, Giles. "

"Claim. CLAIM? Really, Xander, have you - have you lost your mind?" Giles was shaking with the intensity of his emotions, his expression one of horror and sadness and fury. "Have you forgotten that Spike has, on numerous occasions, tried to kill all of us? Has nearly succeeded? He is not - "
"Giles - you don't understand. This claim - I know what he's thinking, Giles. I can hear him, I can feel him."
Xander advanced further into the kitchen, getting into Giles' face and making him flinch away. "And he can do the same with me. We know - more then anyone around us - exactly how the other feels. Exactly. I've never been this loved, Giles. Never. I've never been... accepted like this, wanted like this. He can't lie to me, Giles. And I can't lie to him. Do you get it?" Xander was shouting again, Giles was looking more Ripper by the moment, and Oz's eyes had gone black, his shoulders tense. Spike just stood there, watching, and what was coming from him was rage and hate, bitterness and...sorrow. Xander caught his breath - looked over at him.

"What is it, love?" he asked, softly, and Spike shook his head - patted at the duster and pulled out cigarettes and lighter.

"I'm just sorry, pet. Didn't want trouble for you. Didn't want you to be unhappy."

"Not your fault, Spike. Not at all." love you mine always Spike smiled at him, flicking open the Zippo and lighting up.

"Spike, damnit, how many times - " 
"Piss off, Watcher." Spike sat heavily on the table's edge and smoked, staring at the floor. Giles pushed past Xander, out of the kitchen and straight for the vampire, to snatch away the cigarette or to grab Spike up from his perch - something. But before he got there Oz was between them, head lowered and his stance screaming 'back off'. Spike had reverted to the demon, and was growling very low and soft. Xander moved hastily to Spike's side and Giles froze again, staring at Oz - at Xander - and took a careful step back.

"Xander, I think that - what you've done is very dangerous, and very foolish."

"And I think you're wrong, Giles. What Jack did - what he gave me, means I can see what people really are. I can see you, Giles. I can see what you did as Ripper - I can feel it. The taint of the demons you summoned, the love you had for Ethan - the things the two of you did... It's all there, Giles." Giles stared at him, and his hands were shaking as they took off the glasses, methodically polished, replaced them. Giles sank slowly down onto a stool, and Xander leaned next to Spike, pressing into him, needing the contact. Spike slipped his arm around Xander's waist and leaned his head on the mortal's shoulder, and Xander sighed. Oz relaxed, slipping back,
and Spike touched his hand in passing, shooting him a grateful look.

"I don't know what to tell you, Giles. I don't know how to convince you." Xander spoke softly, defeat in his voice.

"I do." Spike sat up again, finishing his cigarette. He stood up and flicked the butt into the kitchen, sending it neatly into the sink. love you mine

"You want to know about the Sidhe - about Jack? There are books to read - people to talk to. That's the easy part. You want to know about the bloody claim? Call Angel. Ask him. Bloody poufter knows all about them. And I'm sure you'll believe him, won't you, Watcher? Believe the broody bastard when he tells you that we're linked now - blood to blood." Spike took one step, then another, until he was crowding Giles back on the stool and Giles had gone still again, obviously forgetting Spike's supposed helpless state in the primal fear of being prey. Spike's voice was low and rough and soft, and it raised the hairs on Xander's neck. "Nothin' to separate us but death, Watcher - and even that for only a little while. A very nasty, miserable little while. Don't be gettin' any ideas. My pain is his pain, my pleasure is his pleasure, and my death is his death. And the same goes for me, Watcher."
Linked. You call Angel, ask him all the questions you want. He'll tell you.

"Well, that didn't go very well," Xander sighed, wearily climbing the steps up out of Giles' courtyard. The three of them walked slowly across the parking lot to Xander's truck; Spike smoking, Oz fiddling with the soda he'd taken with him, Xander restlessly tossing and catching his keys. The hyena was so hyped that Xander felt like screaming, and Oz suddenly made a low, growly noise.

"I really wanna hunt something down and kick its head in," he muttered, and Spike grabbed him in a fierce, one-armed embrace.

"That's the ticket, wolfling! A spot a' the old ultra-violence and we'll all feel better." Oz nodded in agreement, and Xander slipped his arm under the duster, around Spike's waist.

"So what happened with Buffy?" Spike snorted, getting his other arm around Xander and steering them all to a stop against the hood of Xander's truck.
"She got herself staked by some fledge. Got her all in a tizzy, so she wanted some kind of blow-by-blow explanation of how I done for those two Slayers. Couldn't exactly do a reenactment for the silly bint, so we...talked about it. Got me some free beer and wings, at least. An' I told her what she didn't want to hear."

"What's that?" Xander asked. Spike turned to look at him, eyes blue and clear as a noon sky, utterly calm, utterly feral, and Xander shivered just a bit.

"Slayers spend all their time dealin' out death - rollin' in it, persuin' it, dodgin' it. Eventually - they all wanna know - what it's like. They all got a death-wish, and I got to be their soddin' fairy vampire. At least I did for those two." Spike tipped his head back, looking at the sky, and Xander and Oz shared a look across him.

"Let's go fuck something up, guys," Xander said finally, pushing away from the truck and going to unlock the doors. As Oz slid in behind Spike, Xander looked over at him, smiling just a little.

"Hey, Oz - thanks for - for being on our side, back there. Thanks for standing up for us. I - we - really appreciate it."
"It's ok," Oz murmured, fiddling with the bracelets around his wrist. He glanced down - back up - and his eyes sparked green in the dimness. "We're pack. I couldn't not, you know?"


"You're gettin' as freaky as the two of us, love. Have you smokin' and swearin' and fornicatin', next." Xander laughed aloud, starting the truck, and the ride to the cemetery was full of sharp-edged mirth as their combined nerves and blood-lust wound higher and higher. They went to Spike's old cemetery and started hunting, Oz half wolf and Spike full demon, and Xander knew his eyes were the hyena's eyes, green-glowing and merciless. They loped in a loose formation, Spike to the fore, alert to every sound. Xander drew in deep breaths over his tongue, almost tasting the air. Spike's blood was telling, more and more.

The air was heavy and warm; summer air, full of the ripe, green smells of growing things. There was the faint tang of the sea, the stronger scent of the river; complex smells of mud and water, dead fish and rotten wood. Fresh-turned earth, damp stone, Spike's duster, Oz's rich wolfy
smell. Night-insects made a background cacophony of drones and buzzes and whines, and an owl called and called again, disturbed in its own hunt. Suddenly Spike held up a hand, and they all slowed and stopped, listening. Voices - quarrelling and loud. The breeze veered a little and the scent came to them - of earth and magic and blood. Vampires. Spike grinned, and Oz yipped low in his throat. Xander was silent, but he could feel the building excitement coming from Spike and he fed it with his own - gleeful images of slaughter.

As one, they bolted, silent on the springy grass; Spike's duster snapping a bit, Oz keeping up a steady grumbling sing-song and Xander finally raising his chin and loosing a full-throated shriek as the nest came into view. Seven vampires - all roughly the same twenty-somethings - unremarkable clothes, various collegiate hairstyles. Three females, four males. They had a swath of junk spread out over a large tomb - clothes and wallets, cd's and a player, various other things. Squabbling over the loot. Xander took it all in in a sweeping glance as his call froze them for one crucial moment. Then they were on them, scattering the vampires like a flock of birds. Oz pounced on a female, all claws and fangs, jaws in her throat and ripping in one quick snap and shake, tearing half her neck away. A swipe of clawed hand at the rest and she was
dust. Spike leaped for two males close together, a roar of pure unholy joy splitting the night. He was a flurry of leather and hard-angled limbs, bones snapping under his fists and feet, fangs and fingernails shredding flesh. In moments neither vamp could stand and he turned on the next closest, happy to draw out their deaths.

Xander went straight for a male who had managed to get several strides into the bushes. He leaped onto the vampire's back, bringing him down, and his hands went to jaw and temple. With a quick, hard twist he snapped the vamp's neck, rendering him immobile, then finished him with a stake. He couldn't actually bring himself to decapitate - without a weapon it was simply too bloody, and he didn't trust his new strength that much yet. He glanced up to see Oz circling with the last female, swiping and lunging, and the vampire limping on a broken leg, blood at her stomach and throat. Spike dusted the last of his - he always got the highest count - then he too watched Oz, who darted in, feinted, then finished the reeling demon off with a wrench of powerful arms, tearing head from body in one clean jerk. want fuck mine was coming in hard from Spike, and Xander gasped in a breath and laughed the hyena's ululating laugh, sending the thought right back, his cock rapidly hardening in his jeans.
"My god," someone said, and all three of them whirled around, snarling, tensed to attack. Buffy and Riley stood twenty feet away, staring.

"Oz? Xander? What - what are you doing?" Xander was the first to recover, straightening out of his crouch, running his hand back through his hair. He was panting, keyed up, and he knew, from the sudden flinch, that his eyes had caught the light and flashed the balefire green of the hyena.

"Buffy," Xander said, and then couldn't think of anything else. His heart was pounding, he was slick with sweat, and adrenaline and arousal were making him shiver uncontrollably. *pack pack pack* through the link and Buffy was not pack and Xander wasn't sure he could string together a coherent sentence. Spike stalked forward a step or two, head still lowered and predatory enough for Riley to take a step back and Buffy to raise the stake she carried.

"Sslayer. " Spike hissed, and stopped, head to one side, regarding her.

"What is going on? Xander, why are you acting so weird? Was that - what Giles said? The hyena? What are you doing out here with Spike? And Oz?"
"Pa'rol, Buffy," Oz said, and Buffy caught her breath as Oz stepped out of the shadows, blood streaked up his arms, across his mouth. He was still partially the wolf - fangs and claws and more hair then usual -and the tar-pit eyes that were like a shark's. His words came out faintly distorted - slurred through the fangs. "We pa'rol. You know?"

"You patrol? With Spike? Have the two of you gone crazy? You're going to get yourself killed, Xander!" A low hiss from Spike, and he'd moved closer to the two of them, still with the demon's face. Oz went a little more wolf, growling low in his throat, and Xander finally gathered his wits enough to take a step closer, try on a wide smile. It felt more like a snarl, and must have looked like one, too, because Riley's eyes got very wide and Buffy firmed her stance a little, as if she expected Xander to attack her.

*Spike! Back off!* Spike stopped his advance, swaying just a little. Oz prowled over to the vampire, leaning into him the merest fraction, and the sudden extra surge of lust from Spike almost made Xander forget what he was doing.

"Buffy - we patrol. Kill demons - kill vamps. Spike's being...Master of the Hellmouth, you know? We keep the
dumb fledges out of the school and away from the stuff they shouldn't mess with. Keep the worst of the demons out. Hadn't you noticed...how slow it's been?" Buffy was looking at Spike and Oz, but at that she tore her gaze away from them and looked hard at Xander.

"I had kinda wondered... *How* long have you been doing this, Xander?"

"Oh - a month or so, a little longer." Xander moved restlessly, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Spike had his hand on the back of Oz's neck - was rubbing his thumb slowly up and down the nape, in the short, newly indigo-blue hair. *want pack fix it* and the steady surge of *need* made Xander shudder, and he wanted to be *home*, right now. He took a step towards Spike and Oz, almost missing what Buffy was saying.

"Xander, I don't like you guys being out here, and I don't like *Spike* being out here. And as for him being the 'Master of Sunnydale', that's a laugh." Buffy seemed to settle herself a little, and took a step towards Spike. Oz and Xander both stiffened, and Oz growled, deep in his chest. Buffy stopped, and let Riley pull her back.

"I think - we need to talk about this when...when everybody's not so tense. I'm going to talk to Giles about
this, Xander. Just - get home, ok? Leave the patrolling to me."

"Not what you've been saying for the last four years, Buffy. Don't worry about us - we're pack. We protect our own." Buffy's mouth opened silently, a hurt little gasp, and her expression softened for a moment.

"Xander - please, tell me what's going on! You've been - you just haven't been around lately, at all, and you and Willow seem to be - fighting all the time, and...you're just..." Xander felt a jolt of guilt - he hadn't meant to upset everyone - but it was drowned in what was coming off Spike - lost in the subtle arch of Oz's throat as he let Spike continue to pet him. Xander looked at Buffy, fighting for coherency.

"I know it's been weird, Buffy. But -it's going to get better soon. I'm still your friend. I've just had - so much happen to me lately... I'm still here, Buffy. I promise you." Buffy looked at him for a long moment, then nodded, finally relaxing out of her stance, letting her hand drop all the way to her side.

"Ok, Xander. I - I still want to talk to Giles. Just - go home and do something...not quite so freaky, ok? I - we need to get going. My mom..."
"What about your mom, Buffy?"

"She - she's been sick, is all. Dawn's home alone with her, I need to get going. We'll talk later Xander, ok?"

"Is she gonna be ok, Buffy?" Xander felt a little surge of fear she'll be ok - has to be and Buffy kind of nodded, kind of shrugged.

"We don't really know. I - gotta go."

"Yeah," Xander said softly, and she and Riley turned and walked slowly away. Spike sent a last snarl in their direction and then he turned to Xander, letting the demon's face go, head cocked to one side.

"She'll be alright, pet. Joyce is tough. Want to go home now?" The worry over Joyce was still there, but it faded as Xander stared at Spike and Oz - the vampire's pale fingers stroking through ink-dark hair, Oz's eyes still dark behind his lashes, half-closed. Xander shook his head fractionally, throwing off the intense desire to simply want HAVE pounce on the two of them.

"Yeah. Home. Let's go." By the time they'd gone a half-dozen strides they were running, and Xander sent a long and wavering cry chasing after Buffy and Riley, hoping they heard it. Hoping it scared them, just a little.
The drive home was silent, the tension in the truck palpable. Once there, Oz got first crack at the shower, being the goriest, and Xander and Spike stood in the kitchen, gulping down orange juice and a beer respectively, eyeing each other.

"Is what I think is going on...going on?" Xander finally asked, and Spike lit a cigarette, tossing his duster over a kitchen chair.

"You mean the wolfling? We have to - fix this, love. He thinks..."

"Yeah. He thinks he's...being pushed out?"

"Something like that." Spike took a long drag, watching Xander. "I want to do something. I know how to fix this - I think I know. But it has to be the three of us, and it has to be...you have to be willing, love, and so does he." Xander finished his juice and put the glass in the sink.

"You're talking about more than...sex, right?" Spike grinned, every bit as wolfish as Oz for a moment.
"Yeah, I am. Although that's almost enough right there. We need - he needs - to really be a part of this. Of the pack. We need to share our blood with him, pet. Just a little." Xander leaned back against the sink, crossing his arms over his chest, frowning. Sheer nerves made him lean and turn on the radio, soft jazz spilling out into the quiet. yours always only yours from Spike, comforting - reaffirming.

"You think that'll work?"

"It'll fix a lot of it. And...I need this too, Xander. If he was - if this was a nest, vampires, we'd all have shared - we'd all be...linked. The demon wants to claim him, make him family, and that's - the only way it knows." Xander rubbed his hands back through his hair - watched Spike reach and stub out his cigarette.

"But he can't bite us, Spike. I mean - Oz is family, but I don't wanna be a wolfman."

"And I like you pelt-free myself, love. He doesn't have to bite - just get the blood in him. Just a little cut, from each of us, and let the blood flow a little... He keeps away from the cut, that won't hurt either of us, and he'll get what he needs. "

"Will it be - "
"Like us? No. That small of an amount, the one time - no. It'll be just enough, is all." Xander pushed away from the counter and went to lean into Spike, untucking Spike's t-shirt and worming his hands up underneath, caressing ribs and shoulder blades. He ghosted kisses over Spike's face, jaw and throat. Spike sighed and hugged him close, his own lips teasing the claim mark that shone palely at the juncture of Xander's neck and shoulder; a silvery hieroglyph against the work-tanned skin. The link thrummed with want but with acceptance, as well. Xander sighed and shifted, and they separated slowly when Oz came out. The werewolf was in sweats and a torn 'Dingoes' t-shirt, and he sank down onto a kitchen chair, looking worn and a little down. Spike tipped his head towards the back of the house and Xander nodded.

"Hey Oz, we're gonna clean up real quick and then - we need to talk about something. We'll be right back out, ok?" Oz looked up at them, his eyes dark and his face clean of all expression. He nodded once and went back to studying his hands, and Xander and Spike went into the bedroom and stripped, moving quickly to the bathroom and showering without the usual foreplay. They were both aroused - tense - and Xander felt a ripple of fear in his belly. Oz needed something from them - needed to belong, and Xander wanted to help him - let him know,
however he could, that he was a part of them, a part of the pack. He hoped Spike was right - that this was the way to do it. The thought of driving Oz away, of somehow screwing this up, made him feel a little sick and a lot terrified. Spike was roughly towel-drying his hair and he stopped and came over to Xander - leaned into him for a long, hard kiss.

"It'll be alright, Xander. You'll see. We'll fix this, fix the wolf. Don't be scared, love." Xander smiled shakily at him.

"Yeah. I trust you, Spike. I guess...I just don't trust me, maybe. Don't let me screw this up, ok?"

"Not a chance, love," Spike whispered, and love you beautiful mine made Xander grin. He leaned in for another kiss and then slipped away to brush his teeth while Spike went into the bedroom. When Xander joined him, Spike had lit their bedside candle and spread the sheet and quilt smoothly over the mattress and up around the pillows. The lube was discreetly tucked half-way behind the candle and Spike was pulling on the gorgeous brocade robe he'd 'nicked' from somewhere a month ago. Man's got to have a proper dressing gown Xander got his own robe and together they went back out to the kitchen.
Oz was still huddled miserably on his chair, his knees drawn up and his forehead pressed against them. He seemed to be shaking, and when Xander walked up to him and put his hand on the thin shoulder, he raised a pale, tear-streaked face to them. Immediately, Xander pulled a chair up close and sat down, tugging Oz over into a gentle embrace.

"Oz - come on. What is it? What's - tell us what's the matter." Spike settled onto the table on the other side of Oz, leaning elbows on knees, feet dangling, his expression for once totally serious.

"Oh, I... I'm just... scared, I guess." Oz sat up and wiped impatiently at his face; pushed his fingers back through his hair, making the glossy dark-blue strands stand up wildly.

"Scared of what, pet?" Spike asked, and Oz glanced at him, letting out a short, harsh laugh.

"Of...me, I guess. Ever since the Initiative...ever since they got me, I've felt like...what if I am a monster? I mean...I went in there with you that night and I...killed those people, and I didn't...even care, Spike! I didn't care. They were people, and I..." Oz stopped, putting his head back down on his knees, and Xander gently rubbed his
back, looking over at Spike. The vampire looked back, frowning.

"I can't help you with that, pet. I did the same, and you know I don't give a fuck for who I killed in there, or how I did it. They all had it comin', and I'd do it again tomorrow if I could." A flash of gold, the demon flickering out and then away, and Xander looked at Oz, thinking.

"You said that - death by vampire - or by werewolf - was natural, Oz. That - dead was dead." Oz lifted his face, tear-streaked again, and gave another of those strangled laughs.

"What if I was wrong, Xander? What if I...said that just to make myself feel better? 'Cause if Spike - if William the Bloody is natural, if he can...still hunt and feed off people and you can love him, then that puts me just about up there with Jesus Christ, doesn't it? What if he really is a monster? If he is, then I am too. The Initiative wanted me, too, and...I did the same things he did, Xander, I killed them -"

"Enough now, pet." Spike's voice was stern but quiet, and Oz rubbed at his eyes with the hem of his t-shirt and looked up at the vampire. "You and me, we're worlds apart. You got bit - got this wolf thing - you never wanted it. You let them lock you up in a bloody cage every month
so you wouldn't hurt anybody. Fuck, you went to the ends of the earth to find a - a cure, or whatever you want to call it." Spike reached out and cupped Oz's cheek in his hand, fingertips rubbing lightly through the soft hair over the werewolf's ear, his thumb resting gently just under Oz's lower lip.

"Me, I saw Dru, right before she bit me. I didn't know exactly what she was but I knew she wasn't human - knew she was offering me the Devil's road. And I took it, wolf, I took it gladly. I wanted what she was offering and the first time I tore the throat out of a human I only wanted more. Until Xander I never gave a moment's thought to the people I was killing, and I wouldn't now except it would hurt him." Spike glanced over at Xander and the love you from Xander was so fierce it made the vampire draw in a sharp breath. Spike looked back at Oz - let his hand drop to cover the werewolf's slender fingers, lacing them with his own.

"What you did - you'll never do it again. You never would have if they hadn't done it to you first. They tried to make you a monster, but they failed. You're no bloody monster, pet, never will be. You're family here - part of the pack. You told Xander: don't hate himself, for what I do. Don't you go hating yourself for what you were driven to, wolfling. You got your revenge. You took back
what was yours. Now it's done, and it's just us, fightin' the good fight and pissin' off the Slayer whenever we can, eh?" Spike grinned at him, and after a moment Oz smiled wanly back, and Xander rubbed gently at the nape of Oz's neck, pushing his fingers through the soft, thick hair.

"You've been pack to me for a long time, Oz. Even before the werewolf thing. The hyena always wanted you. I was doin' the whole 'denial' thing, of course, or maybe we'd...maybe we'd have been better friends. But you always felt - right to me." Oz pushed back lightly into Xander's hand, looking calmer, and Xander kept up the gentle caress, ignoring the want from Spike that threatened to drown him.

"Spike's right. You're no monster. You belong here. You're doing what most people in Sunnydale would never even consider doing. You're fighting the monsters they won't even acknowledge exist. You're doing the right thing, Oz. Nothing can change that." Xander glanced up at Spike - sent a question through the link, and Spike raised his eyebrow and nodded, silent.

"We love you, Oz. Family, like Spike said."

Oz looked at Xander, his jade-green eyes steady and calm, finally, and infinitely old. There was sorrow there,
but it was giving way before something else, and Xander had to smile, and Oz did too. The werewolf reached out and took Xander's hand in his - clasped it fiercely, the same with Spike's in his other hand. He looked between the two of them, and he seemed to have resolved something in himself - seemed to be putting aside the fear that had weighed him down for so long.

"Family, then." Oz said softly, and ducked his head, then looked back up and his smile was wider, almost laughing. "Thank you." Spike leaned forward, slipping his hand free and curving it around Oz's neck, pulling him close. The kiss that followed was slow and soft and utterly sensual, and Xander felt the tension and the *want* that had hovered all evening suddenly slam through him like a tidal wave, and he knew he made a small, desperate sound in the back of his throat, watching them. Oz's hand in his clenched down tight. Spike finally drew back, and Oz just sat there for a moment, eyes closed. When he opened them they were black, and Xander felt a twist of desire and excitement in his belly - felt it from Spike through the link, *need pack need NOW* and Xander pushed himself to his feet. He tugged the werewolf up, the heady scents of both Oz and Spike making him reel for a moment.
"C'mon Oz. Somethin' we gotta do. Somethin' for all of us, ok?"

"Ok," Oz breathed, and Spike slid down from the table, pausing only to blow out the kitchen candle and slip something out of a pocket in his duster. The radio had switched to a song now, soft flute, guitar, rat-a-tat of a drum. The three of them turned and walked into the dimly golden cave of the bedroom, and Spike quietly shut the door.

"I believe in fires at midnight when the dogs have all been fed. A golden toddy on the mantle a broken gun beneath the bed. Silken mist outside the window. Frogs and newts slip in the dark too much hurry ruins the body. I'll sit easy... fan the spark kindled by the dying embers of another working day. Go upstairs ... take off your makeup fold your clothes neatly away. Me, I'll sit and write this love song as I all too seldom do build a little fire this midnight. It's good to be back home with you."
The bedroom seemed warm, with the candle burning - faintly perfumed with sweet-grass and the citrus shampoo from the bathroom. Xander led Oz to the side of the bed and then stopped there, his robe falling open and his eyes huge and dark. Spike could hear their combined hearts, pounding in double-time; could hear Xander's breath shortening to pants and Oz's catching on a thin thread of noise - a whine that seemed to come involuntarily from his throat.

Spike shed his robe to the floor and moved up behind Oz. He lay his straight-razor, that he'd snatched out of his duster, at the foot of the bed, and put his hands lightly on Oz's hips. The wolf twitched, nerves and startlement, and Spike bent a little and nuzzled into his still-damp hair. The earthy scent of the wolf was strong, and Spike breathed it in - moved his face down to the frail skin at the nape of Oz's neck and just hovered there for a moment.

Oz twitched again, and Spike felt Xander's hands skim his - slide up Oz's t-shirt and cradle the werewolf's jaw. Xander bent and kissed Oz, gentle and slow, a mirror of
what Spike had done in the kitchen, and Oz made another thready sound, a whimpering noise that made Spike want to pounce on him and kiss him - fuck him - until that sound became a scream. want want want was the only coherent thing from the link, and Spike felt the first tremble of almost uncontrollable arousal - the need that was driving all three of them.

The demon, wanting to take and have. It was like some hot and coiling snake, slithering out from his belly and lacing through his bones, and Spike groaned and pressed his mouth to Oz's neck - began to kiss; behind his ear, his jaw, along the edge of the t-shirt. He slid his fingers up under the hem of the shirt and pushed, lifting it, and Xander finally broke their kiss, gasping a little, letting Spike maneuver the shirt over Oz's head and toss it aside. Xander gave a little roll of his shoulders and his own robe slithered free of him, puddling around his feet.

Spike stepped closer, pressing his chest to Oz's back and the werewolf gasped, shivering. Spike ran his hands down Oz's arms, tracing the curve and swell of bicep and triceps, the delicate bones of forearm and wrist and the long, agile fingers. He lifted Oz's hands up, bringing them around to rest on his own hips, and Oz clutched fiercely, grinding back. Xander had leaned in for more kisses - quick, nibbling ones all along the werewolf's jaw and
throat and chest. He lingered over the pale circles of Oz's nipples, grazing with his tongue and then with his teeth, and Oz made that *noise* again, tipping his head back, his eyes closed and his mouth open.

Spike couldn't tear his eyes from the pale, fragile sweep of Oz's throat, and he bent swiftly and grazed his teeth over the jugular. Whimper. Harder pressure of teeth and the whimper was louder - needier. Oz's pulse jumped and fluttered under Spike's mouth, and a soft moan escaped him.

Xander slipped to his knees, his eyes fixed on Spike's, and his hands rose and tugged, pulling Oz's sweats down and then off, carefully disentangling them from his feet. Spike tore his gaze away from Xander's and looked down, at a heaving belly, jutting curve of hipbone, dense triangle of dark, auburn hair. Oz's cock was straining upwards, darkly engorged and slick.

Xander put his hands on Oz's hips, stroking the knob of bone under pale skin, pushing up to trail his fingernails over the edge of the ribcage that came and went with each panting breath the werewolf took. Xander dipped his head down, rubbing his cheek into the crease of flesh between Oz's hip and thigh, licking and sucking, and Oz moaned, bucking forward, his rich scent intensifying, the
wetness at the tip of his cock pulsing out, shivering droplets. Oz's fingers dug into Spike's buttocks, almost painful, the pressure of his buttocks on Spike's cock delicious and teasing.

"What's he taste like, Xander - taste him - " Spike whispered, and Xander swayed upright and extended his tongue, lapping delicately.

Oz strained against Spike's hold on his wrists - twisted his hips forward, but Xander pushed him back, and Spike felt his own erection slip along the channel between sweat-slicked buttocks, making him press harder. Oz was gasping helplessly now, his knees bending as Xander took the tip of his cock between his lips and sucked gently. Then suddenly Xander stood, whole-body slither, and he was pressing his mouth to Spike's, tongue slipping inside and the werewolf's taste exploded across Spike's tongue, mixed with Xander's own unique flavor. They both surged forward, pressing into Oz's trembling flesh, and Spike broke away from Xander's mouth to pant harshly in Oz's ear.

"You taste like almonds, wolfling - like earth and almonds and - " Spike let one of Oz's hands go and lifted his own hand to turn Oz's head, bending in for a kiss that was rough and demanding, deep as he could go. Oz tasted
like almonds there, too, and Xander was suddenly stepping away, up against the bed.

"Oz - I want you. We do. Is that - " Xander stopped, his hand lifting and coming to rest on the pale shoulder, rubbing there. "Is this ok? Will this be ok?" want scared through the link, and Spike knew what Xander was saying - took a step back, letting go, not touching at all and the wolfling swayed a little, his breathing rough and rapid.

"You gotta - gotta say yes or no, Oz. I don't want - don't want this to be wrong." Oz put his hand over Xander's, holding it still, looking up at him and his eyes cleared, wholly human.

"I want it. I need it. The wolf does. It's like I'm lost out here, just...drifting. I - we need to be - part of something. Tied to something. It hurts - " Oz stopped, head bowed, and Spike moved forward, enfolding the smaller, leaner body - pulling Oz back until they were touching along their whole length, no gaps between. Xander stepped close again, doing the same, holding Oz safe pack tightly between them. Spike could feel the werewolf's heartbeat, strong and rapid and steady, and he inhaled the combined scents of the three of them. It was a warm, heady mix and Spike felt the purr start in his chest, almost more vibration then sound, and Oz laughed.
"God, that's... " he twisted around to flash a grin up at Spike, teeth and the wolf's eyes, and Xander stepped away again, backing up into the bed and collapsing back on it.

"Bring him here, Spike... wanna..." Xander wormed upwards, ending propped on his elbows, legs in a wanton sprawl. Spike grasped the slender hips in his hands and steered Oz forward, knee behind knee, nudging him up onto the bed. At the last moment Xander twisted aside and Oz was on his belly, head bowed between his shoulders, trembling.

Spike lay on the other side of the werewolf, the purr fading, and he and Xander began to work they way down the pale body, licking and kissing and biting, going from feather-light touches to bruisingly hard ones. Their hands stroked afterwards, their own erections digging into Oz's hips or thighs. Oz whimpered, gasped, moaned aloud. His hands clenched in the quilt and his hips writhed, digging into the mattress. Spike motioned to Xander, sending an image through the link and Xander immediately complied. He tugged at Oz until the werewolf lay over him, groin to belly. Xander bent his knees, getting them between Oz's thighs and pushing them apart, all the while holding his jaw and kissing him. Spike's mouth moved from Oz's nape down his spine, trailing wetness,
leaving little bruise marks from teeth and suction. Spike lay flat on the bed, letting his tongue slip between the tautly muscled buttocks, gathering the dark, salty flavor of the werewolf into his mouth. His tongue glided over puckered flesh and the slick perineum, and he gently pulled Oz's scrotum into his mouth, rolling it with his tongue. Oz bucked, gasping, and Xander's hands slid down, combing briefly through Spike's hair before going back up to knead Oz's back and shoulders. Spike let his tongue slip back up, to probe gently and then to push in, and Oz cried out, shuddering. Spike continued to fuck the werewolf with his mouth, stabbing and licking and going as deep as he could until Oz was grinding into Xander, his head down on Xander's shoulder, fists clenched in the quilt, and his voice breaking, trembling:

"Please, please, Spike - please, need it, need you, please - " Xander stretched, reaching, and Spike felt the lube being pushed into his hand. He flipped it open and slicked himself, his own want a fierce ache in his belly, his face rippling between human and demon, barely in control. Xander let his legs fall - did a quick re-arrangement of limbs and Oz was on his knees, face to Xander's chest. Xander lifted his legs, opening himself, and Oz yipped in startlement when Spike's cool, slick hand reached around and coated him in lube. He
pumped forward mindlessly into the loose grip and Spike withdrew. He sent a question to Xander *can you* and Xander responded by pulling Oz closer, legs around the werewolf's ribs.

"Oz, come on - want you in me, Oz - want you to fuck me..." Xander whispered, and Oz lifted his head and moved, a little clumsy, shaking hand guiding himself forward to rest against and then *push* into Xander. Xander arched his back and groaned, but it was *want yes NOW* through the link and Spike scrambled to his knees - put a hand on Oz's hip and rubbed the tip of his cock down, into the slick crease, and then he, too, was pushing, pushing in, and Oz threw his head back, his breathing rapid and hoarse, his mouth open. Then Spike was in, going deeper, and he pushed harder and *Oz* was going deeper and Xander was writhing, urging him forward, chanting breathlessly.

"Oz, fuck, so good, Spike...ooh..." his voice choked off as Spike surged forward again, deep as he could go and Oz *howled*, and then the three of them were moving, thrusting, finding the rhythm that *worked*, and Spike set his teeth on Oz's shoulder, holding and letting the prickle of fangs spur Oz on. They strove together, breathless, fingers leaving bruises, nails scratching. Spike pinched at Oz's nipples, reached and did the same to Xander, and Oz
was trembling now, gasping, and Spike suddenly reached behind him, feeling over the quilt until his fingers found the chill, flat shape of the straight razor. He pushed forward hard, crushing Oz down onto Xander and the two of them cried out. Xander's eyes were wide and glinting green in the candle-glow, and Spike bared his fangs at him in a snarl.

"Hold still, hold still wolfling." They all three were frozen, trembling, Xander and Oz panting harshly, Spike feeling the demon fighting for control - desperate to claim the werewolf for its own - be the Master of the nest, the pack. But Spike didn't take without asking - not in this, not with Oz.

"We want you to taste our blood, wolf. Take us into you - take you into us. Be - linked. Be family from the inside out. It won't be like - not like me and Xan. But close. You'll be able to feel us - all the time. And we'll feel you." Xander was arching upward minutely, his hands clenching on Oz's hip and thigh, and Spike sent wait wait, barely able to control his own desire. Oz lifted his head, looking around at Spike - at the straight razor. He stared at it - up at Spike, for a long moment.

"You really - want that? With me?"
"Yes!" from Xander, emphatic, positive, and Spike nodded.

"Fuck yeah, wolf. Want it. Want you. Will you?" Oz moved, twisting his hips a little, and Spike and Xander both caught their breath, oh want want in the link and impossible to tell who was thinking it.

"God. Yeah. I want to do it. Please, I want to," Oz whispered, and the hyena and the demon both roared in triumph. Carefully, Spike drew the razor over his forearm, the skin slicing cleanly away from the blade. Blood began to flow, and he held the wound over Xander's chest, letting the blood spatter over sternum and pectoral. Xander held up his own arm and Spike cut him. Xander did the same as Spike, letting his own blood fall onto his chest, mingling with Spike's. The scent hit them all like a hammer-blow, and Oz lifted his head, wild-eyed.

"Taste it, wolfling. Taste us. Take us into you." Spike whispered and Oz turned black, fathomless eyes on him for a moment before lowering his head. He ran his tongue over Xander's chest, chasing the scarlet trails, pulling the flesh into his mouth and sucking, cleaning every drop away. Spike went back to a sinuous and steady rhythm with his hips, the heat of Oz's body like
fire around him, the heady scents of blood and sweat and musky sex making him giddy. Xander was moaning softly and he reached for Spike's arm and pulled it to his mouth, sealing his lips over the cut and sucking, his tongue fluttering over the skin. Spike did the same, tasting want and love and mine in Xander's blood.

The flow stopped after another moment, the cuts sealing themselves off. The razor clattered to the floor and Spike pushed forward, crushing Oz down, feeling the tip of his cock find that place inside and Oz yelled, hips pistoning.

Xander did his best to move beneath their combined weights but could do little, only lock his hands behind his knees and hold himself open, accepting them both onto him with low, urgent moans. The image came to them both simultaneously and Xander stretched up as Spike leaned down, and they both drove teeth into opposite sides of Oz's neck, biting the muscle there, breaking the skin and pulling the hot, rich blood into their mouths. Oz tasted like dark earth, rain, green - tasted feral and salt and other; the lunar magic of the wolf like a vein of pure sugar in bitter chocolate.

Oz threw his head back and howled - full-throated, wavering - the wolf calling his pack-mates to him. Spike felt the familiar fire and ice of orgasm sweeping through
him, urging his body to frantic movement. He felt Xander's own orgasm through the link - felt Oz through Xander, overlapping sense of bodies, and he wrenched his fangs away and roared into the night, Xander's own cry echoing beneath him, the heat and sweat of Oz soaking through him, burning him.

Long, long moments passed in a daze, as their bodies gradually slowed and then stuttered to a halt, exhaustion weighing them down as they slipped sideways, crumpling in a heap. Oz was trembling between them, panting, and Spike nestled close, letting his thigh slip over a sweat-slick hip, letting his fingers trail randomly over ribs and chest, shoulder and arm. Xander did the same, pressing close and touching, letting his hand brush Spikes' again and again as they both petted and soothed the werewolf.

Oz was finally limp, his breathing near-normal, and Xander squirmed free and made a staggering trip into the bathroom - came out with a towel, one corner warm and wet, and did a quick, gentle clean-up. Then he lay back down, once again enveloping Oz, and Spike put his arm over Oz's ribs and pulled Xander close, leaning up for a kiss and then settling back down, nuzzling into Oz's damp hair. Xander kissed Oz lightly, again and again, and finally Oz stirred, a tiny smile on his lips and love pack faint and thready.
"Oz - was that you? I felt that - I felt you, Oz..." Xander whispered, wide-eyed, and Spike felt Xander open up to Oz - open to him - sending pack love you ours Oz jerked, startled, and then looked at Xander - looked around at Spike in wonder.

"Is that how you feel? Is that what it is? Like...someone inside, holding me..."

"That's it, love. That's the link. That's us."

"Already?" Oz asked faintly, and Spike kissed the back of his neck, settling closer. us ours pack

"Yeah - you've magic in you, same as me and same as Xander does, since the claim. Powerful blood. It'll...fade a bit. Won't be this strong again. But it won't ever go away, no matter how faint it gets. We'll always be there in you, wolfling. Always."

_________________

The Charlton Heston imitation is from *Planet of the Apes.*

Robert Johnson - *Hellhounds on my Trail*

Jethro Tull - *Fires at Midnight*
Spike woke to voices - low and tense - from the kitchen. He curled himself a little tighter, surrounded by the scents of Xander and, more faintly, Oz; content to just lie and listen. He could hear the wolfling - could feel him, as well, a thready pulse of worry affection directed not at him but elsewhere. He picked out the blonde witch's voice after a moment, and then Dawn? What's she doing here? Spike listened harder, but what they were saying didn't make much sense - something about the Magic Box, and the Slayer, and -

"Spike!" Spike jumped, wincing. Dawn was somehow able to raise the pitch of her voice up high enough to shatter glass, and it was not kind to vampiric ears - or wolf ears either, probably. Spike poked his head above the covers and saw Dawn, standing in the doorway with arms akimbo, her face a mixture of shock and possibly embarrassment as Spike sat up and the sheet slipped down to his hips, exposing more skin then she'd probably
seen before.

"Bloody hell, Niblet, what are you doin' in here!"

"I was going to use the bathroom. What are you doing in Xander's bed?"

"I was sleepin', before you came in here and shrieked like a banshee." Spike made a move to throw the covers back and get up and Tara was suddenly in the doorway, her eyes huge and her hand going out.

"Spike! Why don't you - w-why don't you let D-dawn get in the bathroom be-before you get up?"

"Does Xander know you're sleeping in his bed?" Dawn asked, arms crossed, eyebrow going up in that smug 'you're in trouble now' look that she must have practiced from the cradle.

"Course he knows, Bit, now get outta here so I can get dressed." Dawn scowled at him and stomped past to the bathroom, pointedly shutting the door and not slamming it. Spike flung the covers back and stalked to the dresser and Tara made a small choking noise and whirled around, darting back into the kitchen. There was laughter from
Oz and Spike hastily yanked on a pair of jeans and went into the kitchen as well, not bothering to do up more then the first two buttons.

The house was pleasantly dim, the curtains drawn and the light a greeny-gold through the leaves of the trees surrounding it. Tara was sitting at the table with Oz, both of them with a soda. Spike made a growly sort of noise in his throat as he stomped past, snatching up lighter and cigarettes from the counter and doing the microwaved-water-and-tea-bag tea that was fast, if not as tasty as real tea. After a moment's hesitation he grabbed his bottle of whiskey out of the cabinet and slumped into a chair. Tara stared at him for one long second - shirtless, jeans slipping half off his hips, hair a wild, un-gelled tangle - and her face went painfully red. She bowed over her soda and the laughter from Oz faded a bit, guilt seeping in. Oz was...different, in the link. There was no mistaking him and the image-heavy flow he used, and what he sent easily translated into something Spike and Xander could both understand. The wolf seemed to have more control over the link then Oz himself did, but Oz was learning fast.

"Somebody want to tell me what in bloody hell you three are doin' here at - at - " Spike squinted at the microwave
and saw that it was one-thirty. "...bloody early in the afternoon?" He lit his cigarette and poured a healthy dollop of whiskey into his tea - looked up at Dawn's disgusted noise and snarled at her.

"Lay off, Bit. It's too early for one'a your soddin' lectures." Dawn flung herself into the last kitchen chair and Oz took a sip of his soda - glanced over at Dawn and then looked at Spike.

"When I got to work today Mr. Bogarty was dead. *Vampires* The gang came in to get some stuff and...Buffy didn't want Dawn to -"

"Didn't want me around, as usual -"

"Didn't want Dawn to see...him, so she asked Tara and me to - hang out with her for a while. The gang's going to see what's what."

"Huh. Dead, huh? Somebody gettin' outta line, then. Have to look into that." Spike drained the rest of his tea - eyed his cup and then Dawn, and poured straight whiskey in, this time. *Too damn early for this shite, why does this always happen to these people? They're ALL demon magnets.* Dawn sniffed a
little, trying out weepy since righteous anger hadn't done a thing.

"Some weird homeless guy practically attacked me in the street -"

"What?!" Spike all but roared, and Dawn flinched back and then sat up straighter, looking a little shocked and a little pleased.

"He was all up in my face and he said - said he was a cat, and that I didn't belong."

"Well, he was crazy, obviously." Spike drained his cup and hunched up over the table, feeling a headache coming on.

"It scared me," Dawn said, little-girl voice and sniffles, and Spike rolled his eyes, stubbing out his cigarette.

"Oh, Dawnie, it's ok..." Tara patted her arm and Dawn scrunched down in her chair, looking pitiful.

"Come on, Little Bit, nothin' to be scared of. You know we wouldn't let anything hurt you." Dawn smiled shakily at him, leaning into the circle of Tara's protective
arms. The phone rang and Oz got up to answer it, letting his hand brush over Spike's shoulder as he passed, *pack* warmly through the link, and Spike reached for another cigarette, ignoring Dawn's automatic scowl.

Most of what he felt for her was from Xander - memories of a skinny ten-year-old who had hung on Xander and followed him like a puppy-dog, trying to worm secrets out of him about what her sister was up to. Movie nights at Red's house when the Slayer had been coerced into bringing her little sister and Dawn and Xander had pigged out on soda and ice cream and driven everyone else batty with the resultant sugar high.

Memories of a budding twelve-year-old who had cried on Xander's shoulder when she fell in front of the whole class and split her skirt, and who had very formally asked Xander to the Sadie Hawkins dance at her school. Slayer's little sister, and who ever heard of that before. Spike had his own memories - the very first being Dawn sitting stiff and bewildered next to Joyce on the couch the night he'd made the deal with the Slayer. She'd asked what sort of music they played in their 'band' and Spike had given her five lines of a Sex Pistols song before he'd realized that Dawn had probably just heard more four-letter words in that one minute
than in her whole life. He had shut up, glancing apologetically at Joyce who was looking a bit shell-shocked herself.

Just lately Dawn had taken 'obnoxious teen-ager' to an all-time high, but Spike didn't blame her. The Slayer was being particularly bitchy, G.I. Joe was always hanging about and who wouldn't be annoyed by that, and now Joyce was sick, and that had to make Dawn all kinds of miserable. Spike plumed smoke up towards the ceiling and glanced at Oz who was coming back into the kitchen, face blank but the link tense with *Slayer*

"That was Buffy - she and Giles are going to come and get Dawn in a little bit." Spike tensed, wondering if the Watcher would dare start anything. He glanced at Dawn and relaxed a bit. He wouldn't, not in front of the Bit. And Tara, who was as uninformed as the rest, as far as the Watcher knew. It wouldn't do to have to twist the Slayer's head off in front of her little sis. Oz settled back into his chair, feet up on the seat and chin on knees. There was still tension in what he was sending, but it tapered off when Spike sent *calm* to him, letting his own tension bleed away.

"I'm hungry," Dawn said, sitting up suddenly and looking
at Spike expectantly. Spike stared back at her, nonplussed.

"Don't look at me, Niblet. You know I don't cook."

"Can't we order something? Please? I was supposed to get school clothes today and of course Buffy had to go off and do Slayer stuff so I won't have anything decent to wear when school starts next week and I thought we'd be at the Mall so I didn't eat any breakfast and I'm starving, Spike." They all stared at her.

"Christ, Bit, you been takin' lessons from Red? We could get - we could get pizza, I guess." Dawn grinned and bounced in her chair and Oz got up again, getting the phone. He knew Spike wouldn't touch it if he didn't have to, and Spike was glad that Oz didn't mind. Spike hated phones. Scared from Oz, and Spike grinned around his cigarette and sent a little flicker of an image - something from that day, a week past, that they'd claimed him. Oz on the bed with Xander, back arched, throat taut and working and his hips moving just so... He grinned when Oz made a small groaning noise and stepped hastily around the doorframe into the living room. Teach him to be snotty Spike thought, and poured a third whiskey. He was gonna need it, if the Watcher and the
Slayer were going to be in the house.

The pizza arrived ten minutes before the Slayer did, and by that time Spike had been persuaded to finish dressing. Oz had sent him sexy and then that little-doll image that was Dawn to Oz, and Spike had suddenly realized he was sitting half-undressed with bruise-marks on him from sex in front of the Slayer's little sister. *Promised Xander I wouldn't push it. This would be...pushing it.*

Spike had stood up and walked around to the bedroom door, aware of the wolfing and Tara watching him, making sure to be completely behind Dawn. *Course there's pushing and there's...pushing* He'd smirked to himself and then stretched hard, reaching up to the ceiling, arching his back. The jeans had slid a good three inches lower, and Tara had made a squeaking noise in her throat, dropping her pizza.

Oz had just stared, eyes half closed, very still. The link roiling with arousal and want and Spike had grinned and went to find a t-shirt. Hard on that performance came something from Xander, *want* and *stop that* in the same thought, and he'd sent *want now* right back, smirking to himself. Spike pulled on a t-shirt and then after a
moment's consideration added socks and his boots. You never knew when you might regret being barefoot. He fixed his hair and sauntered back into the kitchen where Dawn, oblivious, was nose-deep in her second slice of pizza, happily babbling about some new movie she wanted to see. Tara wouldn't even look at him, and Oz was now grinning into his own pizza, and the weird little flash of 'I am not getting a hard-on in front of Dawn' thoughts - image of nuns and dead kittens made Spike break out in startled snorts of laughter.

"Bloody hell, wolfling," Spike muttered, and sprawled back down in his chair, pouring more whiskey and getting a slice of pizza. Dawn hopped up and went to the 'fridge and grabbed a soda, then stood there for a minute.

"Spike, you don't have any blood."

"Hmm? Oh - no. Drank the last of it yesterday. Have to get some tonight." Something from Oz then - a mental shiver and hunt. The wolf, intruding with its own red-tinged thoughts.

"Oh," Dawn said, her tone a little disappointed, and she came back to the table, popping open her soda. Spike smirked at her and took a huge bite of pizza. He'd gotten
into the habit of having a bag or two of blood around whenever he knew the Niblet would be coming over. She acted grossed out, but he knew that secretly she thought it was fascinating - in a sick sort of way - the many things he would combine with blood. Mostly he did it to give her something to dish about to Joyce and the Slayer, but also to subtly reinforce the idea that he was still unable to hunt for himself. *Keep 'em stuck in the 'helpless vamp' way of thinking. Can only be to my benefit*

Spike felt the insistent tickle in the back of his neck that meant 'Slayer', and he mentally steeled himself. He had no idea what Buffy's reaction to him would be - still angry over the patrol incident, or dismissive in the face of her problems with her mum? He doubted Giles had told her anything, but he was ready just the same. Oz answered their knock, and Buffy strode into the kitchen, an odd expression on her face as she saw them grouped at the table. Giles hovered in the living room doorway, looking from Tara to Dawn to Oz and then settling on Spike, his gaze becoming hard and cold. Spike lifted an eyebrow at him and stuffed a little more pizza in his mouth.

"Come on, Dawn, time to go," Buffy said, and Dawn stiffened in her chair, pouting.
"I haven't finished my pizza yet, Buffy. It just got here." Dawn took a huge bite, glaring at Buffy over pepperoni, and Buffy crossed her arms, glaring back.

"You can get a doggie bag or whatever. You need to get home and Tara and Willow have things to do -"

"I can stay here with Spike and Oz; they don't mind having me around." Dawn's voice was getting shriller and Spike steeled himself for the ear-drum-shattering shriek that was sure to follow. Buffy's eyes went wide and then narrowed dangerously, and Spike leaned back in his chair, grinning. *This could be fun.*

"Dawn -"

"You don't want me around anyway, so why don't you just go and do your precious Slayer stuff and leave. Me. Alone!" *There it is! Christ. Need ear-plugs when she's around*  Dawn shoved her chair back and fled to the bathroom, this time slamming the door hard enough to rattle the frosted glass panes. Everyone was silent for a moment and then Buffy threw her head back and made a strangled screaming sound of pure frustration.
"Aaaah! Why does she do this! She knows I have to do this stuff - it's not like I asked for those vamps to come in and eat Mr. Whathisface! And you -" Suddenly, Buffy was in Spike's face, a lacquered fingernail poking his chest, her eyes snapping. "You are supposed to be the 'Master of Sunnydale', how did these new vamps slip past your radar? Can't you even do this right?" Spike glanced down at the pink nail poking into his chest - reached and snagged a cigarette and lit it - blew smoke gently over the Slayer's head.

"Piss off, Slayer," he said, and Buffy drew back her fist and punched, slamming his head sideways, splitting his lip. Spike didn't bother to control the demon - he felt himself change, and licked thoughtfully at the blood that was welling from his mouth, his eyes never leaving Buffy's. He knew the link was nothing but rage and Oz's eyes were dark, his hands curling into claws. Reacting to Spike - to the link - so completely it was almost scary. Spike growled, low in his chest, pushing himself slowly to his feet and standing over the Slayer. "How's your mum, Slayer?" he asked, low, and dodged the next punch she aimed at him. Oz was on his feet as well now, and Tara, both looking shocked and a bit angry, and Spike took a step back and shook the demon away - took a long
drag of his cigarette.

"You are a pig. Don't you dare talk about my mother." Buffy's voice was choked, shaky and furious, and Spike grinned at her.

"Buffy - it's ok if you leave Dawn here. I can bring her home." Oz, trying to stop - whatever was happening, and Spike finally acknowledged the calm calm the wolfling was sending; staccato bursts of emotion that were anything but calm. Buffy blinked and looked over at Oz - at Tara, who nodded, trying on a tiny smile.

"Perhaps, with the excitement of the day, it would be best if you talked to your mother without Dawn's...commentary," Giles said, softly. He was as tense as the rest, standing in the doorway to the living room and glaring at Spike.

"I don't want to leave her here with this - this thing."

"He's not a thing!" Dawn, back from her sulk, standing in the doorway to the bedroom and looking as if she wanted to hit something.

"He's an evil, soulless mass-murderer, Dawn! He's not a -
pet! You think he likes you? If it wasn't for that chip in his head, he'd -"

"Slayer," Spike said, and his voice carried all the hatred he was feeling. Everyone in the room froze, even Buffy, and Dawn's eyes were huge, now.

"Don't dare presume to tell anyone what I feel." Spike let the demon come back and snarled, knowing that this wasn't exactly helping but hard put to rein in the rage he was feeling.

Wouldn't hurt the Niblet - she's practically Xander's little sis. This has to stop - they have to know. Won't take much more of this shite from her and FUCK Xander'll be pissed if I kill her  Buffy was shifting into a fighting stance, and Dawn was near tears. Tara and Oz were both frozen, and the link was pure wolf now - pack was the only thing coherent coming through and Spike knew Oz would be as upset as Xander if - something - happened.

The phone rang and they all jumped, and Oz moved jerkily to pick it up.

"Hello?"
"Let me talk to Giles, Oz." Spike could clearly hear Xander's voice, tight with anger, and he relaxed, settling back into his chair and finishing his cigarette, human again. He'd been aware of Xander, through the link, but hadn't realized he was that...upset. Dawn edged out of the doorway, ending up against Tara, who put a comforting arm around the teenager's shoulders. Oz silently handed the phone to Giles, who took it with a look of puzzlement.

"H-hello?"

"Giles. Please will you take Buffy and go?" Giles goggled at the phone, then turned away, lowering his voice.

"What are you talking about? Where are you?"

"I'm at work, Giles, and I can feel how pissed off Spike is from here, which means he is really pissed off. So would you please just - go home? Please? I don't want them to fight, Giles."

"He can't do anything to -"

"Maybe not. But anything she does to him, she does to me. Like that punch in the mouth. Did you forget about
that?" A long silence, and Spike heard Giles sigh - saw the hand go up; taking off the glasses, rubbing the forehead.

"I don't want this, Giles."

"Well, perhaps you should have thought of that before -"

"Don't. Just don't. We need to have a Scooby meeting about this. ASAP." Giles turned and looked over at Spike, who was doing his best 'I could kill you but I think I'll wait until tomorrow' stare. The Watcher hesitated, and then slid his glasses back on, clearly unhappy.

"You're right. I'll - I'll arrange it. I'll tell you when it's set up."

"Ok. I'm sorry, Giles. But...I love him. It's not going to change. Try to understand -"

"I'll call you." Giles hung up abruptly and Buffy looked over at him, puzzled.

"Who was that? And why were they calling you here?"

"It was a - contact of mine, just a confirmation on -"
something - and I wanted to hear it first hand, so to speak." Giles pushed his fingers up under his glasses, rubbing at his eyes.

Tired and pissed and it's his own damn fault, this mess. Wonder what he has to 'set up'... Better not be some half-assed plan to get me dusted. I WON'T hold back if they try anything. Spike felt the demon fighting to emerge again, and he pushed it back, smoothing it down as if it were a restless dog. Not now, not yet. Xander wouldn't like it he thought, and the demon subsided, growling. Buffy had moved to stand by Dawn and Tara and was looking at her sister as if she'd grown another head.

"Buffy - I think perhaps we should go. Dawn is perfectly safe here and - really, has had enough excitement for one day. Oz can bring her home when - when he's ready, can't you, Oz? Not too late."

"Giles -"

"Buffy, please? There really is no harm." Buffy stared at Giles for a moment, then looked back at Dawn.

"Dawnie -" she said, making her voice soft. Dawn
scowled at her.

"Stop it, Buffy. I want to stay. You should be happy you're getting rid of me for a couple more hours. Just because you hate Spike -"

"There's a very good reason why I hate Spike! He's tried to kill me more than once!"

"Yeah, well, you tried to kill him, too! I think you're even! He's - he's Xander's friend, and Oz's friend, too. They don't hate him, and -"

"They are old enough to think for themselves, although right now I'm kinda questioning what they're thinking." Buffy glared over at Oz, who shrugged, not wanting to add to the tension.

"It's so flattering to have all this drama because of me, Slayer, but why don't you listen to your Watcher over there? I can't hurt the Bit, you know that. Let her be."

"Spike, just shut up!" Buffy looked ready to tear her hair out, and Spike couldn't restrain a smirk. He poured another cupful of whiskey and drank it while Buffy looked from Dawn to Giles and back.
"B-buffy, it's really o-okay. I'll s-stay here and we'll just - j-just have pizza and watch some T-TV and then we'll bring her home before d-dark, ok? You had some th-things you w-wanted to do and I d-don't mind hang-hanging out with Dawn and th-the guys." Tara could barely meet Buffy's eyes as she spoke, but her soft voice was even and sincere and Buffy took a deep breath and deflated a little, smiling at Tara.

"You did spot Faith when nobody else could figure it out. I guess if you feel - comfortable - I'll have to trust you." Tara blushed bright red at that rather unequivocal statement of trust from Buffy and Spike had to admit to feeling a bit of shock, himself. *At least she's showin' some sense, trustin' Glinda. Wonder how long that will last*

"Ok, ok. We'll go. And Dawn - you just - just behave. And Spike - " Buffy made a move as if to grab him and he put up a hand, warning her off.

"Don't go there again, Slayer. Already said I wouldn't hurt her, and the wolf and Glinda are here, anyway. You just toddle along." Buffy glared at him, but after a moment she turned and strode out. Giles shot a look at
Spike that was pure Ripper, and Spike grinned at him.

"Ta, mate. You call us, right?"

"Watch yourself, Spike. I'm sure there is some way around what - you've done. And I intend to find it." He turned and followed Buffy, and Spike caught puzzlement and distress from Oz. He reached for another cigarette.

"Don't fret, wolfling," he said, softly, and Oz slumped back into his chair, looking tired. Dawn hadn't seemed to notice what Giles had said - or it hadn't made sense enough to her - and she sat down as well, still scowling.

"Why does Buffy have to be such a - a bitch!"

"Dawn!" Tara exclaimed, shocked, and Spike sat up and frowned over at Dawn, letting his eyes, at least, show the demon.

"Watch your mouth, Bit. None of that. Big sis is just being - big sis. You know what she's like."

"How can you defend her! I mean, she hit you! And she's always -"
"That's the way it is, Niblet. She's the Slayer, I'm a vampire. We're never gonna be friends. She didn't hurt me, anyway, and it keeps things - interestin' don't you think? This isn't the soddin' Brady Bunch, we're not gonna have a row and then be all cozy. Don't fret over it."

"Well, I don't have to like it," Dawn muttered, and picked at her cooling pizza.

"No, you don't, but you bloody well don't have to make it worse, either." Spike hesitated, taking a couple of drags on the cigarette. "How is your mum doing, Bit? I - really do want to know." Dawn looked uncomfortable, and glanced at Tara for support.

"She's - she keeps having these headaches. They didn't find anything that first time she was at the hospital, so now she - she has to go back and get more tests... Buffy says - " Dawn bit her lip, and Tara stroked a hand down her arm, silently encouraging. "Buffy says she's gonna be ok. But now - Riley is sick, too -"

"What's up with Captain Cardboard?" Spike sat up straighter, crushing out the cigarette.
"He - well, when Mom was at the hospital that last time, one of the interns there - his name's Ben, he's really nice - he let me have his stethoscope for a while and I was listening to everybody's heart and Riley's was all - it was way too fast. The doctor said Riley could have a heart attack but he just says it's - it's a left-over from the Initiative and that he'll be ok." Dawn took a long drink of her soda and Oz looked over at Spike, *sick* coming through, that kind of weed-out-the-weak-ones thing that was purely pack. Spike nodded at him, thinking.

"Wonder what the soldier-boys'll do about it..." he mused, and Tara looked at him as well, concern on her face.

"You d-don't think - would he g-go back to th-them?" Beside her, Dawn made a face, shaking her head.

"No way. He's being real stubborn about it. Says he'll be fine. Buffy's really worried." Dawn went back to her food and the phone rang again. Oz rolled his eyes and answered, then handed it off to Spike, a little grin on his face. Spike took it with a twinge of unease. He wondered if he was going to get yelled at.

"Hullo?"
"Love..." A sigh came down the line, and Spike got up and went into the bedroom, shutting the door. He heard Tara saying something - distracting Dawn from the oddity of Spike getting a phone call.

"Wasn't me, pet. She came in here all pissed, ready for a fight -"

"I know. But you didn't have to fight back." Spike sprawled back on the bed, letting his boots dangle over the edge.

"Can't help it, love. She just rankles me. You know that."

"I know that." There was the suggestion of a smile in that, and Spike relaxed. *He understands. Course he does*

"So, pet...what are you wearing?" This time he got an actual laugh.

"About ten pounds of sawdust."

"Mmmm...all furry and sweet-smelling, I'll bet," Spike said, in his best bedroom voice.
"Well, there's definitely a smell... Gimmie one minute, Steve, ok? You ok, Spike?"

"Huh?" Spike stared at the ceiling. *What's that mean?*

"Well, she..." Xander fell silent, and Spike realized what he meant.

"Oh. Well, she took a jab at me, wasn't much. Don't fret over it, pet, it's already healed up."

"Damnit, why does she -" 

"Xander. Don't worry about it. I'd rather talk about what you an' me are gonna do when you get home than the Slayer and her anger-management problems."

"It's just -"

"I know, love." A moment’s silence, and then Xander sighed down the line.

"I gotta go, Spike. I'll be home - around six. Is Dawn still there?"

"Yeah - an' Glinda an' the wolf. Havin' some pizza, gonna
watch the telly. Nothin' to be worried about here. You stop thinkin' about this, you hear me? I don't want you coming home with extra holes or missing bits, right? I like your bits just like they are."

"I promise I won't chop off or ventilate anything. Love you."

"Love you, pet. Hurry home." He clicked the phone off and lay staring at the ceiling for a moment. *Gonna tell the gang. Well, really just Red and the Slayer. And Dawn. Maybe I should tell her now? She'd love to have one up on big sis. Or...maybe not*  He got up and strolled out to the kitchen. Tara was folding and then stomping on the pizza box so it would fit in the trash, and Oz and Dawn were in the living room, watching MTV.

"So - you got plans with Red today?" Spike asked, and Tara glanced at him, a small smile on her face.

"W-we're moving into our new room, t-today. Mostly j-just unpacking boxes and things. We got R-Riley to help move the heavy sstuff yesterday."

"Hrm..." Spike reached for a cigarette, lighting it and ignoring the tiny moue of disgust that twisted Tara's
mouth for a moment

"Spike." Tara was looking straight at him now, her hands wringing together in front of her, and Spike frowned. "What now?"

"I j-just - I n-know that you and B-Buffy don't - well, you're not ffriends or anything -"

"Not hardly, pet. What is it you want to say, eh Glinda?"

"J-just, for D-Dawn's sake could you - t-try to - get along?"

"Maybe if she'd stop hittin' me every chance she got I wouldn't get quite so - demony." Spike saw the flinch, but saw, also, that the witch took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders.

"Y-you're over wa-one hundred y-years old, Spike - mmaybe you should be the big-bigger person." Tara looked straight at him when she said that, and he just stared at her, utterly shocked.

It's a good point. We're stronger than that. Stronger than some bubble-headed blonde mortal. We should be

Piss off. She -

You know it would be easier on our boy if we didn't...push

She's the SLAYER. She just - makes me - wanna rip her heart out. Through her stomach.

Yes. But. Xander.

Oh fuck off Spike realized he'd been staring into space, snarling silently, and that Tara was giving him a 'you're so strange' look.

"I - can't help it, Glinda. It just - happens." Tara looked disappointed, but she nodded her head.

"Ok. I j-just wanted to ask."

"Bloody hell, witch! She's the Slayer. She gets within a hundred feet of me and I just - it's like ants, or something. Like - " Spike shuddered, aware of Dawn looking at him over the back of the couch, her mouth open.

"Ok, Spike. I just - I just wanted to n-know." Tara slipped
past him into the living room and Spike smoked furiously, wishing he could go and stomp something. He could feel *sympathy* from Oz, and tried to calm himself down a little. He finished his smoke and went into the living room, flopping down on the couch between Dawn and Oz, putting his feet up on the coffee table. Tara was standing by the bookshelves, looking over Xander's collection of worn sci-fi books and brand-new poetry, and Oz's more eclectic selection of religious texts, classics, and cheap mysteries. Spike had only added a few things to their library - Kipling and Huxley and Dinesen - and he watched Tara run her finger gently down the spine of 'Captains Courageous'.

"Spike!"

"Huh?" Dawn was poking him in the ribs and he batted at her hand irritably. "What, Bit?"

"I asked you, do you think he's good-looking?"

"Who?" Dawn rolled her eyes and pointed to a group of young men on the TV screen. The song finally resolved itself in Spike's head and he recognized the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"Why are you asking me?" Dawn sighed, obviously frustrated.

"Because Tara is a lesbian and Oz says the music annoys him too much for him to make a judgment about cuteness." Spike looked over at the werewolf, who was smirking into his soda. Coward Spike thought, and Oz slid down on the couch a little more, stretching his feet out to the coffee table and balancing the soda on his stomach. Tasty Oz thought back, and Spike snorted.

"Spike!" This time Dawn whacked him on the leg and Spike snarled at her, flashing fangs, and she grinned.

"Stop it, Bit!"

"Tell me! Cute, or not?"

"Yeah, cute, I'd shag 'im through the mattress any day. Right? Happy?" Dawn scowled at him.

"What's 'shag' mean?" Oz doubled up, laughing, and Tara seemed to be having a small fit over the Ezra Pound
collection. Spike glared at the VCR. *Fuck. Three hours until I can fuck Xander, five hours until I can kill something*  The video ended, another one started. This time the boys were much glossier and well-groomed, and Dawn made a tiny squeak of pleasure. The titles at the bottom of the TV screen said ‘N’Sync’.

"Now these guys are super-cute. What about these guys, Spike? Would you - uh - shag them?"

This time, Tara had to actually leave the room, and Spike's only consolation was that soda out the nose probably hurt even a werewolf.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The phone was ringing, and for a long moment Xander thought about ignoring it completely. But he knew he couldn't do that, so he pushed himself up from the kitchen table and went to answer it. Spike and Oz watched him from their places at the table, spoons held still over bowls of Oz's experimental vegetarian chili. *Probably the only werewolf on the planet who eats vegetarian*
"Hello."

"Xander. It's Giles -"

"Yeah, kinda obvious there, G-man. You are the only British librarian I know." A snort of amusement from Spike and Xander grinned at him. "What's up? Something new and nasty in town?"

"Actually - yes. And...I've gotten things organized here, so I'd appreciate it if the three of you could come to the Magic Box tonight. We're going to discuss...things."

"Things? You mean - me and Spike?"

"Among other things. Be here at six?"

"Sure Giles. Six." Xander hung up and sat back down, looking at Spike and Oz who still hadn't touched their food. They looked back at him, spoons at the ready. After a moment Xander crushed a couple of saltines into his chili. The link was love you from Spike, and pack from Oz, and Xander smiled at them.

"Yeah. We'll be ok. Wonder what Giles had to organize?"
"Better not be anything...stupid," Spike muttered, and *protect mine* came through loud and clear, with an accompanying flurry of rather bloody images. Xander winced and gulped some milk.

"Stop that, evil undead. There will be no evisceration or gouging out of eyeballs. Right?" Spike just rolled his eyes, finally taking a bite of chili and looking contemplatively at the ceiling.

"Hrmmph. S'good, wolf. Just needs a little - blood - or something."

"Well, it being vegetarian chili, that would kinda defeat the purpose." Oz ate a mouthful as well and stared down at his bowl thoughtfully. "Although, you're right, a little blood would definitely add something."

"Yeah, like major oogy-ness. It's perfectly...vegetarian, Oz. Very tasty in a...vegetable sort of way." Xander chewed furiously, glad of the saltines.

*bastard* from Oz, and Xander laughed.

"Pizza?"
"Meat-lovers."

The rest of the dinner hour was spent in a semi-heated argument over which vehicle they should take. Two days earlier Spike had gotten his DeSoto back from the impound lot - Clem, not surprisingly, had a cousin who worked there - and they'd spent the last couple of nights working on it. Or, rather, Spike and Oz had worked on it, and Xander had watched and handed over wrenches (Spike insisted on calling them 'spanners') and held work lights.

Cars had never done much for Xander - the deadness of the metal didn't appeal to him, and he didn't understand the workings all that well. He just drove them. Wood, on the other hand, was something entirely different, and he had a twisted piece of driftwood in the back of his truck that he was seriously thinking about carving into...something. Manny was being quietly encouraging, and Xander was slowly getting excited about it. And Oz was being encouraging as well - making a couple little comments about how hard it had been to do the 'first time on stage' gig, but then it had all flowed and become natural.
Since the claim, Oz was so much more - relaxed, if that were at all possible. The savage intensity had gone out of the hunt - he still did it, and did it well, but it wasn't the whirlwind release of intolerable pressure, now. Now it was - something they did, together, that strengthened the pack and kept the people he loved safe. Xander had asked him if he felt - odd - getting the overflow of his and Spike's link - if he felt odd not getting it all. Oz had shrugged, picking a halting tune out on his guitar.

"I don't mind. I need the quiet, sometimes" he said, and Spike had nodded and rubbed his hand briefly across Oz's back, telling him without a sound that that was fine. And he and Spike had privately agreed to try to keep their own thoughts a little quieter.

Spike finally won the vehicle argument by basically threatening to do something nasty to both the van and the truck. And since Xander and Oz could both sense his excitement - he'd hated not having his own transportation - they gave in. Xander felt a little strange sliding into the passenger seat, and he watched Spike operate the push-button dash with interest. Then he just held on for dear life, because Spike had apparently learned to drive when cars had lanterns in the back for taillights and no signals - or brakes, it seemed - and
nineteen-fifty-something DeSoto's didn't come with seat belts. The blacked-out windows did not help. Something like fuuuuuck from Oz and Spike started laughing and drove a little faster, flipping on the stereo and blasting Alice Cooper into the twilight.

"I can't go to school cuz I ain't got a gun...
I ain't got a gun cuz I ain't got a job...
I ain't got a job cuz I can't go to school...

So I'm looking for a girl with a gun and a job...
(and a house - with cable)

Don't you know where you are...
(you're) Lost in America..."

The drive to the Magic Box was over too soon, and Xander felt reluctant to exit the car. They sat there, staring at the darkened windows until Spike flicked his cigarette butt out onto the sidewalk with a curse.

"Fuck this," Spike snarled. love you pack MINE hit Xander and Oz both with a ferocity that made them flinch a little. "If any'a these wankers tries anything, they're gonna know exactly how I earned my name, 'cause I'm not puttin' up with any shite from anybody. I
mean it, Xander." The demon's glowing stare bored into Xander's own dark gaze. Xander reached over and cupped his hand around the back of Spike's neck - pulled him close and kissed him, hard and deep. Rested forehead to forehead *love you* between them, steady as a heart-beat.

"I know. Just - try to stay calm, okay? The less bloodshed the better. I'm not real happy about this either, but I can't - I don't want to lie about this anymore. I want them to know, Spike - they're my friends...I want them to know."

"I know, love." Spike sighed and pulled back so he could look Xander in the eye. "Just don't want them makin' you feel - " Spike stopped talking abruptly, but *mistake* was loud and clear, and Xander kissed him again.

"It's not a mistake. I didn't make any mistake, Spike. I *love you* knew what I was doing."

"Giles said -" Oz spoke quietly, but there was *fear* from him, and Xander turned around in the seat, fingers tangling in Spike's hair. Spike pushed his forehead into Xander's temple and rested there, eyes shut.
"What, Oz?"

"Said there had to be a way around it - around the claim. Said he'd find it."

MINE  and Xander rubbed his hand over Spike's neck.

Yours always love you  "Never happen. Fuck, let's get this over with. I just wanna go home." Xander dropped one last kiss on Spike's forehead then got out of the car, mentally and physically stiffening his spine. The hyena was tense and hyper  protect pack  the only thing it could think, and that same thought was coming from Spike and Oz as well, a trinity of resolution and protectiveness that made Xander grin. The soldier was mentally reviewing what he knew of the shop and checking off exits and possible defensive positions and Xander tried to back him off a little.  Not going to fight. Everything's going to be fine. We'll be calm, they'll be calm - no problems. STOP that  The soldier - dredging up a rather nasty episode from Spike's past for possible tactics - stopped and retreated, muttering.

The three of them walked up to the door, and Xander tapped on the glass. Inside, dimly, he could see a chaos of boxes and packing and building materials, plus
assorted cups of take-out coffee and crumpled fast-food bags. There was a light on in what looked like an office, and after a moment Giles emerged, dressed for work in jeans and a pullover sweater. His hair was mussed and he looked tired. He crossed the shop floor and came up the steps, peering out at them, then unlocked the door.

"Good evening Xander - Oz." Spike made a snorting noise of amusement at his deliberate exclusion and they stepped inside, going across a small landing and down a few steps to the back of the store and a table that was lit from beneath. There was a lamp lit on the display case, and more light coming from a back room, making the table area a spot of brightness in the dark shop. A wrought-iron staircase led up to a balcony and Spike settled there, half-way up. Xander sat a couple of steps lower, feeling the merest pressure from Spike's shin at his back. Oz settled on the last step, pulling his knees up and leaning back against the rails. Giles stood for a moment, staring at them, then he turned as the door opened, the little brass bell over the top jangling.

"Giles - are you in here?" Willow came through the door, followed a moment later by Tara.

"Here, Willow." The girls came over, picking there way in
the dimness.

"Oh - hey, Xander! And Oz! And - and Spike. Uh - hi, guys." Willow seemed confused to see the three of them and Xander wondered what Giles had told them to bring them here. Tara smiled at them from behind Willow, and Xander felt better for that, knowing there were at least four of them that were...  

Pack. Light witch is pack  Xander didn't really understand the other's utter insistence that Tara was pack - perhaps it had to do with her easy acceptance of himself and Spike, or perhaps her solidly grounded strength and gentleness - her inherent goodness that was like a warm blanket. Xander was glad the others liked her, but still felt amazement at the soldier's admiration and the hyena's protectiveness.

She'll side with us, Harris. Probably bring the other one in, too. Now did you notice that back entrance over there -

Shut up. Yeah, Tara is alright with this... Please, Willow, don't freak on me...

Pack from Oz, loud and clear, and Mine from Spike, a possessive that clearly included the werewolf. Xander felt himself grinning at that - at the love - the want - that
was coming at him. It was - *It's like a drug. I could get used to this*

The bell jangled again and it was Buffy and Dawn, Buffy telling her sister in an exasperated tone not to touch anything. Dawn was scowling, lugging a backpack, but her expression immediately lightened when she saw the rest of the group.

"Tara, hey! Hi Willow! Guys!" She bounced to each person, doing a hug and big smile, and Xander could tell she was doing her best to piss Buffy off. He hugged her anyway, and tried not to smirk when Spike scooted over to make room for her on his step.

"Dawn! Come down here!"

"I want to sit up here, Buffy."

"Everyone - please!" Giles said, and they all settled a little, looking at him. "Buffy, why is Dawn here?" Xander could feel the glare practically radiating off of Dawn, and he didn't dare turn around to look.

"It wasn't my idea! Mom was feeling better and she wanted to go out, so I had to babysit her. She could -"
"I'm not a baby, Buffy! I don't need -"

"Hey - Dawn - Buffy - " Xander raised his voice a little, and Buffy looked at him frowning. "How's your mom doing, Buff? I haven't heard much lately. Is she ok?" Buffy looked lost for a moment, her frown turning into a mask of worry, then she raised a small smile - something that was obviously for Dawn's benefit.

"Yeah - you've kinda been out of the loop, huh?" She looked around and moved a box of what appeared to be dried rats off of a chair and sat down. Willow and Tara were finding chairs as well around the lighted table, and Giles leaned against the display case behind him, arms crossed over his chest.

"She - she's been doing a little better but the doctor said - she has to have surgery. They found a - a shadow. In her brain. But he said - " Buffy looked away, towards Giles, who smiled faintly at her. "He said it wouldn't be a big deal, she should be home a few days after the operation. She's going in the day after tomorrow."

"Oh." Xander felt like he'd been punched.
Joyce is a trooper. No worries. That thought, from Spike, and Xander's eyes widened in amazement. He looked at Buffy - saw that she looked tired, and that her eyes were shadowed - a little lost.

"I'm sorry, Buff. But at least - they found something. Now they can fix it and it'll be ok. When, exactly? I'll come by the hospital if...that's ok."

"Sure, that's ok Xander. She has to go in around nine in the morning. They said...the operation will take a few hours." Buffy smiled at him, then turned her attention to Willow who had reached out a hand.

"We'll be there too, Buffy. I only have two classes then and I'm ahead in the reading for both of them and one of them, the professor kind of repeats himself a lot, and I mean a lot, I think he's kind of senile or something, but I'm sure he has tenure so, what are you gonna do? Anyway - " Willow glanced guiltily around at Tara, who had put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Anyway, I can miss those classes and Tara only has one really early class so we can both be there, ok? Is that ok?"

"Sure Wills, that's fine. I kinda - kinda need to have my family around me." Xander felt a little stab of guilt at
that.  

Haven't been much in the way of family. I should have - should have been around more. I should have worked this out sooner. It's not fair that I assumed they would all... I should have trusted them, they're my friends.

Calm love you from Spike, and Xander leaned back just a little, to feel the sharp bone of shin and knee press into his back. Oz had shifted ever so slightly and now his shoulder was against Xander's calf, and Xander felt better.

"So - Giles - you found out something about that glowy thing?" Buffy asked.

"What glowy thing?" Xander said, and Giles pulled a glowing, amber-colored sphere from a small box on the display case.

"That glowy thing. I was down by this old warehouse and the night watchman thought I was there for a rave - he thought I'd dropped it or something. And then - the next day - I see the same guy at the hospital only he's gone totally bonkers, like, overnight. I'm thinkin' that thing has something to do with - something."
"Do you think it made the guy crazy?" Dawn, her voice small and a little scared, and Buffy shook her head.

"Nah - I had it with me all night -"

"Not exactly a fair test, if you ask me," Spike said, and Buffy shot him a nasty look.

"Nobody did ask you, as a matter of fact, so just shut up, Spike."

"Actually, I found out that this is the Dagon Sphere," Giles cut in hastily, obviously trying to avoid a fight. "It was made to protect against an unknown evil. Against 'That Which Cannot Be Named'."

"So we're fighting nameless evil now? Is that better or worse than named evil?" Willow asked.

"Worse, actually." Giles set the sphere down gently into the box and then turned back to them, taking off his glasses to polish them on his handkerchief. "Usually, if a thing was not named, that meant it was an object - or being - of great fear or deep worship. So we must be very careful in investigating the origins of this object."
"Well, just find out what it is and I'll go kill it. I'm going back to that warehouse tonight to see if I can find anything else." Buffy crossed her arms, looking satisfied, and Giles sighed, obviously not happy with that approach.

"We really have a lot of research to do. The accounts of what, precisely, the sphere was used against are vague in the extreme. Please do be extra careful tonight, Buffy."

"Sure Giles. Careful is my middle name." Xander couldn't repress a snort, and Buffy looked over at him, grinning a little.

"Ok, so maybe my middle name is more like - Slightly Cautious. I'll be fine."

"Sure you will, Buffy. If you want any back-up - " Xander gestured to himself - to Oz and Spike, and Buffy's smile faltered.

"Uh - I don't think so, guys. I'm still not real happy with the whole 'patrol' gig you've got going. Besides, the less time I have to spend with Fangless there, the better." The growl that rumbled out of Spike's chest was sub-sonic, but Xander knew Buffy could hear it - he
watched her stiffen in her chair.

"Feeling's mutual, Slayer." Spike said.

Don't don't from Oz, and Xander sent calm as hard as he could. Spike shifted on the stairs and then was still, the growl slowly subsiding. The bell jangled again, making them all jump.

"Ok, sorry I'm late but I was getting ready. I have a date tonight that I'm hoping will lead to orgasms so I wanted to be prepared. Who knew a bikini wax could take so long? Did I miss anything?" Anya bounced down the stairs, smiling, looking sexy in a slinky black dress, and Spike made an appreciative noise down in his throat.

"I'll take that as a compliment." Anya said, perching on an unopened packing crate beside Buffy. Buffy rolled her eyes, looking away.

"Tell her about the 'Thing That Cannot Be Named." Dawn said, then mumbled under her breath: "Maybe I am going to Hogwarts."

"Well, we're up for the research, right Tara? We can do that, Giles." Willow looked around at the chaos of the
shop, obviously wondering how research was going to happen there. "When's the grand opening?"

"Three more days."

"What are we researching?" Anya asked, and Willow began to fill her in, Buffy adding her own commentary. Giles pushed his hands back through his hair and reached for a cup of tea near the cash register, and Dawn opened her backpack, muttering to Spike about homework on the third day of school and how unfair it was. Willow had just gotten to the 'unnamed evil' bit when Spike suddenly was on his feet and growling loud enough this time for everyone to hear it. *rival protect mine* from Spike, and Xander felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Something - something was out there. Oz's was head up, listening, his shoulders tense.

"Spike, what the hell are you doing?" Buffy was up, too, looking as if she was going to jump on Spike. The bell jangled as the door opened.

"Ah, Angel." Giles said.

*````````````````````*
Xander felt Spike readying himself for a headlong leap at the older vampire and he turned helplessly on the stair, wondering if his new-found strength would help at all. Spike was game-faced, snarling - unmoving. Dawn had his arm in a death-grip and she was staring with wide eyes at Angel.

"That's the guy who was trying to kill Buffy that time," she whispered, and Spike was awkwardly patting her hair, trying to be comforting and keep an eye on Angel's advancement across the room at the same time. *Weird. You'd think she'd remember him being her boyfriend, too. Guess the 'get you and your little dog too' stuff just makes the more lasting impression.*

"Dawn!" Buffy looked furious - although if it was because of Dawn grabbing onto Spike or Angel's presence, Xander wasn't sure. Angel stopped at the top of the steps that led down to the table area.

"Yeah, Bit, that's the poofter what tried to off your big sis. Wonder what he's doin' here, hey?" Dawn backed up a step, clutching her backpack, and Spike flowed down them, head down and predatory, stalking forward until he ran into Buffy's outstretched hand. Xander was
right behind him, hovering.

"Where do you think you're going, Spike?"

"Piss off, Slayer. This is between Peaches an' me."

"Oh no, it isn't - " Buffy started, moving into a fighting stance, and Giles was suddenly there, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Buffy, please. I asked Angel to be here tonight. We have - there's something we all need to...discuss."

"Giles, if this is about that - Dragon thing - Angel doesn't need to be here. I can handle this." Giles shook his head, and Angel came down the last step. The growl from Spike, that had subsided a bit, picked up again, and Buffy and Angel both looked at Spike. Xander was sending _calm calm calm_ as hard as he could, wondering if he should grab Spike or not. Oz's own _calm_ was there as well, as strong as the werewolf could send it. From Spike there was only an inarticulate rage. Angel took one more step and then stopped, frowning. Suddenly he changed, and Xander heard the indrawn breaths of the girls as his demon emerged.
"Spike, what in hell have you done?"

"You know, Angel. You know. Why bother with bloody 'Twenty Questions'?"

"Giles said - I didn't really believe him. My god..." Xander honestly couldn't tell if Angel was upset or dumbstruck - after a moment the demon subsided and Angel just stood there, staring at Spike. And I guess that's dumbstruck. Looks kinda like pissed off. Or happy. Sheesh. He needs little signs or something around his neck.

"Giles - why is Angel here? And what has Spike done?" Buffy was still standing between the vampires, and Giles still had his hand on her shoulder.

"Please - all of you. Sit down." Buffy sent a searching look over the Watcher's face and then retreated a step or two to her chair. Angel backed up, not taking his eyes off Spike, and settled slowly onto the steps. Oz relaxed back against the rails again, and Dawn stayed where she was, nearly at the top of the wrought-iron stairs, her eyes huge. Willow and Tara hadn't moved, and Anya appeared to be checking her lipstick. Xander reached and carefully put his hand on Spike's arm - tugged at him.
"Spike - come on. Sit down with me, ok? Spike?" The vampire was like iron - immovable - and Xander tugged harder. "Spike -"

"Feels a little like a set-up, doesn't it? Like the Watcher here is plannin' on doin' something... stupid. Are you plannin' something bloody stupid, Ripper?" Spike's voice was low and deadly and Giles retreated hastily, backing into the counter and freezing there.

"It's not a set-up, boy." A snarl from Spike and Xander got in front of him, blocking his view of Angel - putting his hands on either side of Spike's face and forcing the lambent gold gaze to meet his.

"Spike. It's ok. Come and sit down, love, please?" There was a moment of stunned silence, and Xander knew, knew what he'd done. Didn't care. He had to get this out - and had to stop any escalation. He didn't want a fight. *please please* The demon subsided, and the look Spike had on his face was delight and amusement. He knew, too.

"Alright, pet. For you." He smirked, and Xander smiled back, and then Spike turned and leapt lightly up three
steps and settled there. Xander turned around - met the
stunned gazes of Buffy and Willow.

"Xander - Xander I can't believe - did you just -" Buffy
was on her feet again, her eyes huge and wounded and
her voice quivering. "Somebody better explain this to
me, because I think - I think I've lost it."

"Buffy - you haven't lost it. Just - calm down -"

"Calm down? Did you tell me to calm down? Did you
just - you were just touching Spike. Like you touch - like
you like him. You called him love. Am I right, or am I
really going crazy - Giles, is that Dragon Sphere making
me crazy?" Buffy's voice was getting higher, a little
hysterical, and Xander moved towards her, putting out
his hand. Buffy jerked away.

"Buffy - come on. You've just got to - just take a breath,
ok? Buffy?" Behind her, Xander could see Tara
whispering in Willow's ear - could see Willow's hands
clasped in Tara's, holding tight.

"Xander - Xander are you really - Tara says you and Spike
are - are you really? Are you in love? Xander, what is
going on?" Tara put her forehead gently to Willow's hair,
and Willow blinked and took a breath.

"I'll tell you - I've wanted to tell you for a long time, Wills. I never meant to - to keep this from you. Never. It just... I was so afraid, Wills." Xander felt his voice cracking, and love you love you from Spike, warm and soft, calm from Oz, and Xander blinked and sniffed.

"Scared? Well, what are you scared of, Xander? I mean - what did Spike do to you? Did he do something to you? I mean, is that why we're here, Giles, Spike did something to Xander and we have to - have to fix it?" Willow looked near tears herself, and Xander heard Giles heave a sigh somewhere behind him.

"No, Willow, we're not here to do anything to Xander, or for him. We need to - we all need to sit down and talk." Buffy had been looking back and forth between Willow and Xander, and now she stalked around Xander towards Spike - stopped, confused, when Oz slowly stood up, his eyes shifting to black and then back.

"Oz - that is really - why are you doing that?"

"Just back off, ok? Listen." Oz said, softly, and Buffy slowly pushed her hands back through her hair, gripping
it and pulling just a little.

"God, I - fine, fine. I'll listen. We'll listen, Willow, and then we'll... I don't know what we'll do." She went back to her chair, sinking down, and Xander finally did the same, settling one step below Spike and sighing softly when Spike began to gently comb his fingers through Xander's hair. *love you*

"Something happened in Oxnard that I didn't tell you about. That has a lot to do with what's going on right now." Xander launched into his story, telling them what happened to Thomas - telling them about Jack. Watching the mingled looks of bewilderment and anger and sympathy and pain wash over the faces of two of his best friends in the world.

When Xander talked about Jack's gift, Angel made an inarticulate sound, and when Xander glanced over at him he was staring, open-mouthed. Xander went on - talked about Spike - about Parent-Teacher night and how the vampire had somehow lodged himself in Xander's brain. How he'd seen the love, and the despair, and the heart of the demon. The man. By the time he was done, Willow had a look of wonder on her face, her eyes bright with something that might have been tears. Tara was
studying him, looking intrigued, and Anya looked thoughtful. Dawn had slipped down the stairs and was sitting next to Spike again.

"That's - it, I guess. About - well, almost two weeks ago we - we made it permanent. With a spell. A claim. Now we're just...we're each others. I love him, guys. He loves me. I'm happy." Spike had never once stopped his gentle caress of Xander's hair and head, and now he leaned forward and gently pressed a kiss to Xander's temple.  

always love you mine always

always love you love you Xander thought back. Something like pride radiated from Oz and Xander brushed his knuckles over the werewolf's shoulder, happy to be done - happy that some of the room was happy for him - maybe for them, although he wasn't expecting it.

"Demons don't have souls, Xander." Buffy's voice was stern - sure of herself - but her eyes held doubt.

"Except that they do. And I can see them. And Spike has a soul. Two, actually. The demon and the human."

"I'm g-glad you t-told us, Xander. I'm - I'm h-happy for
the both of you." Tara smiled shyly at him, and Willow started, smiling a wobbly smile at the blonde.

"Can you see - is it alright, Tara? Are they alright?"

"They're...it's beautiful, Willow. Really -"

"Oh GOD! Are you - are you really ok with this, Willow? Really?" Buffy was on her feet, pacing, and Spike stiffened, the growl vibrating through the tips of his fingers as he rested them on Xander's shoulders.

"Well, I mean, if Tara says it looks alright, Buffy, and - and I guess Oz knows - has known for a while - I mean, Xander's happy Buffy, I can see he is -"

"Willow! That's Spike! The guy who kidnapped you and threatened to put a broken bottle through your face! This isn't - this isn't right, Willow!"

"What's wrong with it, Buffy?" Xander flinched back a little from the furious gaze Buffy turned on him, and protect mine coming in hard from Spike, making him twitch away from that, too.

"Everything is wrong with it, Xander! You went from
being all hot for Cordelia to gay, which is - which is fine, that's your thing now, fine, but now you love a vampire?"

"You did too, once, Buffy." Xander ignored Angel's flinch at that, though Buffy glanced at him. "Is it so hard to understand?"

"Angel is different, Xander, and you know it. He has -"

"A soul?" Buffy's mouth snapped shut and she frowned. "Like I said, Spike does too. And it's as shiny and pretty and real as your soul is. As real as any human I've looked at."

Buffy threw her hands up in a gesture of frustration and started pacing again.

"What kind of soul lets someone murder innocent people, Xander? What kind of soul lets someone kidnap a girl or - or torture someone or -"

"The same kind of soul that burned little kiddies with napalm and convinced a thousand people to drink cyanide Kool-Aid in the soddin' jungle somewhere and made the whole of Romania into a Bosch canvas. A human soul, Slayer. Just like yours." Spike's voice was
low and even and calm, and Buffy stared at him as if he were a statue come to life.

"Don't - don't try to make out like you're - like you're some kind of saint, Spike, like you're somehow better or - or different. You're not. You're evil, and you'd kill every person in this room if that chip weren't in your head and we all know it - you've told us enough times!" Buffy looked around, as if for a weapon, and suddenly Angel stood up.

"Buffy. Stop." She looked at him - ignored him, her eyes bright with tears, her hands groping among the piles of books and boxes on the table.

"Buffy - he is different. He always has been. This is - this is crazy, I agree. And I don't like it. But do you really think Xander's making this up? About the soul?"

"I don't know what I think, Angel!" Abruptly she sat down, and Angel stepped closer to her. She flinched away and he stopped, looking at her sadly. "I don't know what to think! Xander hates vampires - he hates Spike - or at least, he used to! And now suddenly they're - they're what, married or something? Giles, what is this - claim, what does it mean?"
Giles, who had been rubbing his forehead, silent all this time, raised his head and pushed his glasses back.

"I don't know the specifics, Buffy - I was hoping that Spike would tell us about it. But from what I do know, and from what Angel tells me... It's a link. A link through magic and through...blood. It is permanent, Buffy."

"Are you sure, Giles?" Buffy's voice was soft - thick with unshed tears.

"Yes, I am. Of that I am sure. The only real way to break the claim would be for one of them to die, and that would mean that the other would, as well. That's - part of the spell."

"It's true, Buffy." Angel added, his voice low and strained.

"Oh god - Xander! You let him - you let him do some spell on you that...that ties you to him? That will kill you if he dies? Xander, how could you?"

"Jesus, Buffy -" Xander closed his eyes for a long moment, then stood up, going over to where Buffy sat
helplessly twisting her hands together. Angel still hovered there, mute now and just as helpless. Xander crouched down, putting his hand gently on Buffy's. She looked down at him, her eyes impossibly huge, impossibly hurt. Behind him, he could hear Dawn whispering something and Spike answering, low rumble.

"This spell - I can hear what he's thinking, Buffy - I can feel it. I know everything about him. I got - all his memories, when we did the spell. I know what he was like before he was turned. I know about the time he spent with Darla and Angelus," brief glance upward at Angel, who looked grim, "and with Drusilla. I know...what the Initiative did to him. I know everything. I know exactly what he's feeling, Buffy - about me, about you... And it's the same for him. He loves me. Me. All my life - I've been second, Buffy. My parents barely acknowledged me, when they weren't... And I had exactly two friends at school, Buffy - and I had to kill one of them. And then - with you, and the Slaying... I was never - I was never really needed, you know?" Buffy was shaking her head, and Xander squeezed her hands, stopping the words he knew she was going to say.

"It's true, Buffy. You know it is. I never felt like I was
really part of anything. I was always one step behind - always the - the last resort. I'm first with him, Buffy. And the best part is that I know I am. He tells me - every minute of every day. I can feel it. I'm happy." Xander stopped, ducking his head for a moment, then looking over at Willow.

"Guys, I never - I never wanted to keep this from you. But I was so scared that you wouldn't understand. That you'd just - that you'd think it was just some mess I'd gotten into, that you'd have to fix somehow. And I was scared you'd tried to kill Spike."

"Xander - I don't...understand... He's tried to kill you - all of us - " Buffy sniffed, sniffed again, then snatched irritably at the handkerchief that Anya thrust over her shoulder. Anya grinned at Xander and glanced at her watch, eyebrow raised.

"I know he did. Fuck, Buffy, he's a vampire, what d'you expect him to do? We tried to kill him right back. That's just - the way it is. I mean - Angel - he tried to send the world to hell, Buffy, but here he is, still around."

"That's different -"
"Is it? It's not to me. Spike...is different, Buffy. When I look at him - I can see the love. I can see his soul, I can see his heart, and there's so much there... He's nothing like the vamps you dust every night, Buffy - I've looked at them, too. And I've - looked at your soul, Buffy. I know you - know all of you." Xander stood up, his knees popping, and paced back to the steps. Spike was watching him, immobile, iconic. The link was silent except for the faint pack from Oz, and Xander stood there looking at Spike, his gaze going over and over the line of cheekbone and jaw, eye socket and lips. Archaic somehow, that face. Holding secrets the others would never know. Holding Xander's heart and happiness in the steady, calm regard of eyes too blue to be real.

"You're my best friends, guys. I want you to understand more than anyone else what this means. I'll do anything to convince you - anything at all." The link surged open, Beautiful boy mine my own always always always and Xander gasped - smiled - sent his own love and want back, warmed by the flood of emotion. The others were talking now - Buffy questioning Angel, Willow and Tara talking again, Anya rather loudly announcing that her date started in thirty minutes and Giles trying to question Angel as well, crossing over to him and pointing to something in a book. Spike just smiled, his gaze never
leaving Xander's face, and Xander smiled back - stepped forward and took the vampire's face gently in his hands and kissed him. He meant for it to only be a soft, quick kiss, but once he'd started he found he couldn't stop - couldn't pull away, and he knelt on the step and lost himself in Spike. In the taste of smoke and blood and cloves, in the cool fingers that twined through his hair and gently held him - in the rush of emotion that throbbed through the link. Dimly he could hear the others falling silent - could feel Oz, who was carefully not intruding. Finally, finally, they pulled away from each other, and Spike was smiling that real smile at him. He heard a small sound behind him and knew the others had seen it. *Oh god, I love him...so much. And they have to know - they have to see...he is...all. Everything.*

*My love, my own...my Spike. Always love always.*

"Man." Dawn broke the silence, breathy little exclamation, and Xander grinned at her - turned on the step and sat back down. He leaned back into the vampire's embrace, and smiled at the room.

"What will convince you guys? That this is - nothing bad?"
"That was pretty good - you could do that again," Anya said. The ex-demon looked a bit - flushed.

"No, they couldn't" Buffy frowned at them. "I want to know - I want to know if this is why you're out patrolling on your own, Xander. If this is why you've been - avoiding us all. I want to know about this spell, and I want to know...about souls." Buffy's look was hard - determined - and Xander nodded.

"Ok, Buffy. We've been avoiding you because - because when you're around Spike you tend to hit him. Or threaten to kill him. And I - I can't stand that. So that's one reason. That, and lying to you guys just felt...wrong. I didn't want to lie, so it just seemed easier to...avoid having to say anything. We patrol because - because we need to. Spike really is being the Master here - he's cleared out three different demons who had plans for the Hellmouth, and we've gotten rid of a lot of the minions and fleges left over from - well, from the Master and from all that mess right before graduation. Oz and I - we both have something in us that needs that - the hunt. And you know Spike does. We're doing good, out patrolling. I've still got a lot of the hyena in here - it needs to kick some ass, sometimes." Willow looked alarmed at that, and Xander smiled at her.
"Don't worry, Willow - I'm in control of all this. You can ask Giles. I won't be eating any pigs or anything." Spike snorted at that, and Dawn made an 'eewww' noise.

"What about the spell, Xander?"

"Spike knows more than me." Spike shifted behind him - digging in his coat, and Xander heard the snick of his Zippo.

"Where did you get this spell, Spike? Where'd you learn about it?" Angel took a step towards them and Xander glared at him rival coming from Spike and Oz both mine from himself.

"You remember Greyson, Peaches? He taught it to me." Angel frowned.

"Greyson? I remember hearing about him. He - he had a claim on a woman. He taught you the spell?"

"Me and Dru, we met up with him in Casablanca. Him and his own. We liked each other. He told me about it - taught me the spell."
"What happened to them?" Xander could feel Spike shrug - watched smoke eddy around beside him and marveled that Giles hadn't said a word.

"Dunno. They left Morocco when we did. Margaret had family in Poland she wanted to find - some great-niece or something. Last I heard." Angel frowned.

"So what else did the spell do? Besides the link - the memories?"

Tell? from Spike, and Xander thought about it for a minute.

"Sure, tell 'em," he said, and Buffy frowned.

"Makes it so Xander's...stronger. He won't get sick. He won't drop dead from a heart attack or get cancer or...anything like that. He'll live...as long as I do. He won't age." The room was utterly silent at that, and Xander felt that familiar surge of excitement and anxiety when he thought about decades - centuries - with Spike.  *Let me be enough for that - for forever*

*Always enough* softly, and Spike's fingers at the nape of his neck.
"Wow. You're - you're never gonna die, Xander?" Dawn scooted down the steps to sit beside him, and Xander put his arm around her shoulders.

"Dunno about that, Dawn, but if I'm real careful I'll live a long, long time." Dawn was staring at him - her eyes flickered, dropped for a minute - and then she was tugging at the neck of his t-shirt.

"Xander! What's this? Did - what's this scar?" Her fingers brushed the claim mark and Xander fought the shiver it sent through him.

"It's my - claim mark, Dawn. Spike has one too." Buffy shot to her feet and stalked over - bent down to stare at Xander's neck.

"Spike bit you? How could he do that, Xander?" She looked at him and her eyes got wide. "Is the chip - not working?" She took a step back, and looked as if she might just snatch up a chair and break it apart for a weapon. Spike's laughter stopped her, and she scowled at him.

"That piece of military fuckin' hardware reads intent,
Slayer. I don't want to hurt him - and he isn't being hurt. So - I can bite him."

"Xander!"

"Relax, Buffy. It's not a big deal. He's not going to kill me or anything."

"But if he can bite you he could. He could turn you!"

"Not against his will, Slayer. So shut it." MINE and Oz flinched. Xander put on hand on Spike's calf - squeezed a little. calm calm calm

"Spike, I'm gonna -"

"No, you're not, Buff. Come on!" Xander stood up and went to stand in front of Buffy. "Listen - we came here tonight so we could tell you about us - about my gift, about his soul - about the claim. And Spike's been helping us - been a part of the team for months. I would really like it, Buffy, if you could just stop with the death threats now, ok? You're not going to kill him, because that would kill me."

Buffy's eyebrows went up, her mouth a grim, thin line,
and Xander took a deep breath, trying for calm. He didn't want a fight. He didn't know - he truly didn't know - if Buffy could take Spike if they fought, now. Spike had everything to lose and some payback to dish out, and Xander, going through and through all of Spike's memories of the other times the vampire had fought Buffy, had come to the conclusion that only luck had kept Buffy alive the few times they'd really battled. Spike was good. And he knew things about fighting Buffy never would. And he hated, passionately. And loved passionately. And he wouldn't hesitate, where Buffy actually might. And he wouldn't stop. And more than anything, Xander was afraid that if Spike and Buffy fought, and Spike won...Xander would be able to take it in stride. The notion that he might actually not hate Spike, even a little, if he managed to kill one of his best friends...was terrifying.

*She's the Slayer.* As she's so fond of saying. *It's her job - her destiny. She kills, and is killed. Nature of war - nature of life. Can't change it.*

*I know that. But I don't want to be the reason she dies. I WON'T. I don't want him to fight her. I don't want to...*

*Don't want to face yourself. Us. We don't care. Not*
ours. **Not pack.** If she hurts what's ours, she dies.

She's my friend. One of my very best friends. I don't want her to die. I don't want...don't want to lie down every night with her killer. If I do - if I do and it means nothing...then...I'm not me, anymore, am I? Not me, and not...right. I just want - just want them to understand, so I can have some happiness. I just want to be selfish and for nobody to die over this. Is that too much to ask?

Might be. She's...stubborn. She thinks she knows right from wrong and...you know she doesn't. No more then anyone else does. You've SEEN her.

**Yeah. Maybe I should...**

**Not pack** **NOT PACK** The hyena was scared, and so turned belligerent. Xander tried to soothe it. And then Spike's fingers, gently cupping his face, turning his head, and Xander came back to himself abruptly, blinking into the azure gaze that looked at him with concern and love.

"You in there, pet?"

"Huh? Yeah. I - I was just..."
"I know. I think you might need to be here though, for a bit." Spike smiled at him, and Xander nodded - turned back to Buffy who was staring with something like amazement at Spike.

"Please, Buff? I know you guys aren't friends - never will be. But...I love him. So please just - don't make it hard to be around you, ok? I don't want to lose your friendship over this. I don't want to have to...choose." There was a shocked gasp from Willow, and Xander looked over at her, feeling guilt but knowing...had had tell them the truth about this.

"Xander? You'd do that? You'd -"

"I love him, Willow. He's - part of me. Forever. It's never going to go away, or change. I just - I just want to be selfish and have all of you, ok? I want all of you." Xander scrubbed his hands over his face - looked up and Willow was right there. She flung her arms around him and hugged, hard. Then she let go, and smiled up at him.

"You've still got me, Xander - we'll always be friends. I think - it's kinda weird, you know? I mean - you hate vampires! Well, obviously not all vampires, but... Tara
says it's ok - she says she can see your auras and its...great. I can too, a little - I'm not as good at that as she is -" Willow shot a fast, smiling glance over at Tara, who ducked her head. "But I can see enough. And Spike - " Willow straightened her shoulders - took a deep breath. Obviously steeling herself for something. "Spike - I have s-something to tell you. If you ever hurt Xander - at all - I will hunt you down and beat you to death with a - a wooden shovel. Got it?" Xander gaped into her 'resolve' face, and almost laughed aloud at the whooo! of admiration from Oz. Spike's own thoughts were amusement and rival and Xander shivered a little.

"Fair enough, Red. Just remember - it cuts both ways. Anything touches what's mine, and it won't live to see another day. Or - who knows? Maybe it'll live just long enough to wish it'd never been born." That voice, low and measured and utterly serious, and Xander shivered all over.

William the Bloody, oh fuckin' yeah

"Well, all this testosterone and estrogen is really great and all, but I'd rather be having hormone surges in the back seat of a Jaguar XJ6. Xander - Spike - I'm glad you finally came out to everybody, and that soul thing... Mr.
Giles, I'll be here Monday morning to get your accounts set up. Goodnight!" Anya hopped off the packing crate, smoothed her dress down, and marched out. Everyone stared after her for a moment, and then Dawn sighed.

"Does this mean I have to do homework still?"

"Of course it does," Buffy said, automatic, and Dawn stuck her tongue out. "I still want to ask a few questions, Xander. About souls." Buffy looked - troubled - and Xander wondered what she would ask. Was pretty sure he knew.

"Tara? Do you think you could take Dawn home? She really does have homework. And - Oz? Could you go with them? I think some - some wolfman muscle might be a good idea." Buffy smiled at Oz, and he stood up, grinning back.

"Sure, Buff. I hope you're ok with this. They're really - just fine."

"I think I'll just...wait and see." Buffy glanced over at Angel and then looked away. Spike came down the steps, shepherding Dawn.
"See you later, Bit. Wolfling - you be careful. Protect pack I found out who killed the owner."

"Who?" Giles asked, and Xander turned to look at Spike, wondering the same. Spike took a last drag off his cigarette and grinned.

"Harmony. She's got her some minions. Told me she was the Slayer's number one nemesis and that she was gonna take her out."

"Harmony?" Buffy stared at Spike, her mouth twitching, then she took a deep breath and laughed, startling everyone. "That's the new gang in town? Oh my god. Harmony. That is just..." Buffy kept laughing and Giles frowned at her. But Xander couldn't fight back a grin, and neither could Willow or Oz. Tara just looked puzzled, and so did Angel.

"She's just - not the sharpest crayon in the box," Xander said, by way of explanation, and Buffy snorted, putting her hand over her mouth.

"Understatement of the year! Who would be stupid enough to turn her? Can you imagine listening to her babble on about fashion and makeup for

"So she's not really very bad?"

"Oh, she's bad. Bad clothes, bad makeup, bad attitude." Buffy sniggered and Xander wondered if he should tell her about Harmony's soul. Decided not to. He really doubted Buffy would stake their old schoolmate.

"You guys go on - I'm gonna talk to Xander for a little bit and then go check out that warehouse again. In bed by ten, Dawn! Don't make mom come home and find you awake."

"Sheesh, Buffy, I'm not six! I know when bedtime is." Dawn rolled her eyes and slung her backpack over her shoulder, and she and Tara and Oz headed out. Angel had wandered off into a corner and was examining a book, and Willow abruptly sobered, looking at Xander.

"Are you gonna - ask about souls, Buffy?" she said softly, and Buffy looked at Xander too.
"Yeah. I am. I just... I just need to know...some things. Ok, Xander?"

"Sure, Buffy. Let's - go in the back here, ok? Private."

"Yeah. You too, Willow." Buffy looked over at Giles. "Is that ok, Giles?" The Watcher straightened from examining the Dagon Sphere and took off his glasses, looking at Buffy with concern.

"Of course it is, Buffy. Xander has...used his gift, with me. I think - it would be a good idea."

"Ok. Deep dark secrets revealed. Yay." Buffy smiled at Giles, but the smile was a little wobbly, and Xander put his arm around her shoulders, feeling how fragile she was - how small. *So much weight on these shoulders. I hope...she can bear it all*

*Love you* from Spike, and Xander nodded, closing his eyes for a moment. *Love you too*

"Come on, Buff. I promise I won't tell anybody who you really had a crush on in tenth grade." Buffy smiled at
him, and Willow took his other hand, and they walked into the back room of the Magic Box.

_Alice Cooper - Lost in America_

19 Reveal

The back room had been mostly cleared, and there were a couple of padded work-out mats stacked against one wall. Xander grabbed one and Buffy grabbed another and they spread them on the floor - settled cross-legged in a circle. Buffy looked scared and Willow looked nervous, and Xander took a deep breath, trying to settle his own nerves. *Wonder if leaving Spike out there with deadboy and Giles was a good idea?*

*Calm, love, calm*

*Amusement* from Spike, and *protect mine* and Xander sighed

"Something wrong, Xander?" Willow asked, and Xander shook his head.

"Not really. Just - I hope Spike and Angel don't - you know. Fight."
"Oh." Willow looked towards the doorway, frowning. "Yeah. Me too. Maybe Giles will - keep them calm?" Xander snorted.

"Fat chance. He's ok right now. So long as Deadboy doesn't do anything stupid."

"Right. Like Spike could take on Angel." Buffy gave a dismissive flick of her hand, and Xander frowned at her.

"Actually, he probably could. Angel isn't - at his full strength, you know? Pig's blood and all. Spike's got some damn good moves. One time in Istanbul -"

"Xander - please. I don't want to hear any gory tales from the crypt." Buffy held up her hand, stopping him, then frowned. "Isn't it kinda...creepy to have his memories in your head? To have him in your head?"

"No - not creepy. I don't remember everything all the time. The first couple of days I did. And he did too. We couldn't even leave the house. It was crazy. It was like - this big movie, just playing out in my head. But now..." Xander shrugged. "I have to really want to remember - to try, like you would if you were trying to remember...French or something." Buffy groaned, and
Xander and Willow both smiled. "I know what he was like before he was turned. And I know how much he loves me. It more than makes up for any...creepiness." Willow looked intrigued at that, if still a little uncertain, and Buffy looked down at her hands, picking at her nail polish.

"I don't...know if I can be happy for you, Xander - not right away. Spike is - the enemy, to me. I mean, I know with that chip and everything he can't... But I just don't trust him, Xander."

"I know, Buffy. Just - if you try, that'll be enough, for now. Ok? Just try?" Xander looked at her hopefully, and she smiled finally, nodding.

"I'll try. Just - keep that wooden shovel in mind. Ok." She rubbed her hands up her arms, and her smile faded. "About this soul-seeing stuff..."

"Yeah. Are you sure you want me to? I mean - it's pretty private, what I can see. I only looked the one time."

"When did you?" Willow asked, and Xander shifted a little, looking at her.
"Thanksgiving. When you guys were arguing about the Chumash spirits. I just wanted to know...and you were both there. I've seen Tara, too. And Oz - everybody, I guess. Except Dawn. I - haven't seen her. Too much teenage angst." Willow giggled and Buffy rolled her eyes.

"No kidding. She's just so -" 

"So fourteen. Isn't it awful?" Willow cut in, and Buffy smiled at her.

"Ok, ok. I won't go off about Dawn. More important things to do here. Go ahead and - and look, Xander, or whatever you do. I really want to know what you see."

"Ok," Xander said, and he reached out and touched her hand. "It'll be fine. Taisbean." The seeing shimmered to life, and Xander smiled. Buffy's soul was intensely white - the power of the Slayer shining like a beacon. Her own features shifted and morphed into the features of the other Slayers - all of them, from the First to the girl who had died and made Buffy the One - a shifting so rapid and random it made Xander a little dizzy. The sparks - the life - that danced around and through her were white as well. But there was darkness there - black and bloody
red, like slashes across her, and Xander looked for a long moment - felt - as well.

*Love, for himself - for Willow. For all of them, strongest for her mother and Dawn. Loyalty and a fierce protectiveness to match Spike's. Guilt - for times she felt she had failed them - failed herself. Fear for them, and a mistrust of Spike that was tinged with the smallest bit of guilt. Loneliness. Jealousy - for what Willow had. For what HE had, with Spike. Longing for that for herself. Angel was all tangled up in that longing. Desperate desire to just be HERSELF - just be Buffy and not the Slayer - not the One. And resolve - a stubborn resolve to BE the One - to handle it, to TAKE it - to keep them all safe. One girl in all the world... Another fear - hidden and pushed away behind walls, but still there. A fear that she would never have anyone - that she would always be alone - that she would die that way. That somehow...she was incapable of love...of being loved*  Xander took in a hard breath - reached and took Buffy's cold hands in his. She was looking at him with trepidation, and he smiled a small smile at her.

"I can see how much you love your family, Buffy - how much you love all of us. How much you would do to keep us safe. Your power - the Slayer power - is like...a
bright, white light. It just makes you glow. And you glow - your love and your loyalty. All the Slayers are there in you - all of them... And your...loneliness. And...your love for Angel." Buffy gasped, and there were tears in her eyes. Xander dropped his voice down almost to a whisper. "You aren't alone, Buffy - you aren't. We're here for you - we can help you, if you let us. And...you're so love-worthy, Buffy. There's so much in you to love. Please don't think that you're...not worthy." Tears slipping free, tracking down her face, and she leaned across the space between them and hugged Xander hard. He hugged back, stroking her back, feeling hot tears fall onto his neck. Then she pulled away and swiped at her eyes, sniffing.

"Where's Anya and her handkerchiefs when you need one?" she said, shakily, and Xander smiled at her. "God, Xander...I - I'm glad you're my friend. Thank you for - telling me."

"You're welcome. And - I'm telling you the truth, Buffy. Always telling the truth about what I see. Ok? You really are...a special person. And I don't mean the Slayer stuff." Buffy sniffed again - squeezed his hand.
"You are too." Beside him, Willow shifted a little and Xander looked over at her.

"Wow. He's right you know, Buffy. We'll do whatever we can to help - you can count on us." Willow smiled softly at Buffy and Buffy patted her hand.

"Yeah. I know. I just...don't want you guys to be hurt taking on my job. But..." A quick, smiling glance at Xander. "I'll try, I promise." Xander grinned at her - looked over at Willow, who swallowed nervously.

"Ok. Me now, I guess, huh?"

"Yeah, you." Xander smiled at his oldest friend in the world, and saw her. Willow's soul was like sunlight - brilliantly golden with a fiery scarlet edge. The sparks that whirled around and through her were gold and red and black. And there were black lines through the gold, as well; coiling and almost alive. Her power. It's...older than she is. Darker. Stronger than she knows. Willow's power made Xander nervous, and the hyena growled somewhere down in the bottom of his mind not pack Xander shushed it and concentrated on Willow again.
Oh... Love again - so much love - and bubbles of happiness for him. Even though it was SPIKE that made him happy, she was glad he wasn't alone any more. And there was...fear. Fear that she wasn't smart enough. Or strong enough, or just...not ENOUGH, for anybody - anything. Fear that she would let them all down. And a desire, so strong, to KNOW and to DO and to LEARN - a desire for more that was as fierce as Buffy's protectiveness. And through it all, like a thread of purest silver, was Tara - lifeline and grounding wire all in one.

"Wow - you really love Tara, don't you, Wills? You're all gold and red, but - your magic is there and it's...its dark. It's so strong. You have to be - careful, Wills. Be careful with it." Xander saw her frown - then nod, and he hoped she would listen to him. "And, Willow - you are enough. You're good enough and smart enough - you always have been. Don't doubt yourself." Willow smiled at that - a shaky smile, and she wiped at her eyes a little.

"You could see Tara in me?"

"Oh yeah - she's...all through you."

"Oh." Willow's smile got bigger, and then she, too,
leaned forward and hugged him. "I just - get so scared sometimes, Xan. I mean - I feel like I just never know enough, you know? The more I learn, the better I can help you guys - help Buffy - and sometimes it just seems like I won't ever have enough magic to do anything. The magic's...all I've got."

"Hey - don't be silly, Willow. You're more than the magic. You're the big gun in the Scooby gang!" Buffy joined the hug, and they all sat there for a minute, just enjoying the closeness. Xander could hear Giles' voice in the other room - Angel's as well, both a little loud. The link was full of anger hate protect MINE and Xander was about to jump up when he felt something else. It was vague - barely there - but it was fear and it was clearly from Oz. Xander pulled away from the girls. What's wrong what's wrong to Spike, and the vampire was there, in the doorway, looking pissed and anxious at the same time.

"Xander, it's -"

"Oz - yeah. Fuck."

"Oz? What do you mean? Is - is something wrong with Dawn? I didn't hear the phone-" Buffy was climbing to
her feet - Willow was - and Xander just sat there, staring at Spike, trying to feel what was wrong. Out in the shop, the phone started to ring, and Spike cursed. His souls were entwined - almost one - and the human part seemed to be soothing the demon - distracting it. Xander jumped up, hearing Giles saying something in a voice that was tight with anxiety and they all hurried out to the other room. Spike was snarling a little, baleful golden eyes staring at the Watcher, and they all waited while he finished speaking and hung up the phone.

"That was Tara. Apparently Harmony and her gang were waiting at the house tonight - to find you, Buffy. And - somehow - they managed to snatch Dawn."

"Oh my god, Dawnie!" Willow cried, and Buffy whirled on her heel, getting up close to Spike.

"Where is she taking her - where's Harmony hiding out, Spike!"

"She took over my old crypt. Sure to have her there. Watcher, call the house and tell the wolfling -"

"Tara said he was tracking them. He was knocked unconscious for a few minutes." Giles said. Angel was
watching them, a strange look on his face.

"Let's go then - we've got stakes in the car." Xander said, already heading for the door.

"I don't need any help from Spike -" Buffy started, and Spike was game-face, snarling.

"Not gonna let Xander go alone, not gonna let anything happen to the Niblet. So keep up or sod off, Slayer," he growled, and bolted past her, catching up with Xander. They were both through the door and getting into the DeSoto by the time Buffy came out, and she shoved roughly past Xander and climbed into the back seat.

"Giles is bringing Willow in his car - he's got some weapons in the trunk. Let's go. If I don't get her home before my mom gets there..." The DeSoto roared to life and Buffy let out a startled yelp as Spike gunned the car away from the curb and tore down the street. The stereo was still on and Alice was still singing at top volume.

"God, Spike, where did you get your license - a Cracker Jack box?" Buffy yelled, hanging grimly onto the back of
"Never got me a license, Slayer!" Spike yelled back, still game-face, grinning like a madman now, and Xander and Buffy shared a look that was equally horrified and resigned. In this moment, when Buffy was on, Slayer-mode, there was nothing but her in the seeing. The other Slayers had retreated and Buffy's purpose - her focus - was so intense she was like a flare of magnesium in the corner of Xander's vision. It was somehow...comforting.

"You see my burning fuse...From a mile away

I took your cruel abuse...Lord took away my shame

I learned to bite the hand...That used to pull my chain

We'll fight, cause we ain't on the same side...

We're in an unholy war, unholy war...I'll try, yeah I'll fight until I die

Unholy..."

Spike watched Xander walk into the back room with the girls - turned slowly and eyed the Watcher from where
he was hovering near the display counter. Spike sauntered over to the counter as well - dropped his cigarette butt into a cup of cold coffee. Giles edged away and then stopped when Spike smirked at him. *Calm* from Xander, and *love*

"Ssso, Watcher. Tell me, why don't you, why you thought bringin' the great pouf up here was a good idea?" Giles frowned, and over at the bookshelves Angel shut his book with a snap, glaring over at Spike.

"Shut up, Spike," he grated out, and Spike leaned back against the counter, fishing out another cigarette and lighting it with a snap.

"How's your shoulder, Peaches? Still sore, maybe?" Angel growled and advanced on him, and Giles held up a hand, looking nervous.

"Let's all just - just calm down, shall we? I asked Angel here because, as you said, Spike, he had information about this claim spell."

"Yeah - but that's not why you had him come up here. He could have told you about the spell on the 'phone. Why'd you really want him here? Did you think
he could do somethin'? Did you think he could - break the spell?" Angel was still glaring, standing a few feet away, and Giles shuffled a little, looking back and forth between the two of them.

"Well, I - yes, Spike. I was - am - worried about Xander. He seems to have leapt into this without much thought, as usual, and I-" Giles stuttered to a halt as Spike turned on him, demon's visage flickering out and back.

"You sayin' something against my own, Watcher? Better not be. Xander isn't stupid - he knew what he was doing. I told him everything, and he chose it. He didn't give himself up to me for - for nothing. For a good shag. Don't presume you know anything about him, Watcher." Spike glared at Giles a moment longer, then turned a sneer on Angel, watching the older vampire glower at him from under his brows.

"And Peaches here - he can't do a bloody thing about this spell. What'd you think, he'd just come up here an' say 'piss off, Spike', and I'd tuck tail and run?" Spike snorted - took a long drag and blew the smoke at Angel. Giles fiddled with his glasses.
"Well, yes, actually, I rather thought that, as your Sire, he could-"

"Sire?" Spike laughed, and Giles looked bewildered. "He isn't my Sire. What, did he tell you he was? Tell you he could- fix it all?" Spike laughed again - looked over at Angel who was looking murderous. "You should know when to shut up by now, you great git."

"Spike," Angel hissed, and Spike smirked at him. Giles was polishing his glasses, looking alarmed.

"Not his Sire? But you - I thought for sure - is Drusilla your Sire? Surely not -"

"Course she is, Watcher. She chose me, she did the deed. The pouf didn't have a thing to do with it." Spike finished his cigarette and watched the butt bob in the coffee - felt awe and love and friend from Xander. He could see - just in flickers - what Xander was seeing. He could see Slayer. Her SOUL. Bloody hell. THAT'S what he sees? That's... Do WE look like that? He blinked - realized Angel had been saying something.

"Sorry, Irish - wasn't payin' attention. Was seeing what Xander was seein'. Slayer's soul - amazing thing." Angel
shut his mouth with a snap, staring at him.

"You can - you saw Buffy's soul? What-

"Don't ask. Maybe Xander'll tell you some time. Maybe he'll look at your soul, Angel. Bet that'd be a real treat. Think your soul does that to its hair, too?" Angel turned away in disgust, shaking his head, and Spike fished in his duster for his flask - took a long swallow.

"Listen - both of you. There is nothing you can do to change what's happened. It's done. And the more you fight it, the more you hurt Xander. He won't take you actin' like he's some kind of a soddin' kid - some kind of a fuck-up - very much longer. He'll leave here, and you'll be lucky if you know he's still alive. So get over it and move on." Giles stared at him, open-mouthed, and Angel strode back over, getting up way too close.

"Listen to me, Spike - I won't let you weasel your way into this group just to fuck them over when you're bored of it all. Giles wanted me up here to make sure you understood this: you're being watched, Spike, and you'd better be on your best behavior or I'll -"

"You'll what, Angel? Try to take me out? I think we've
done this, and I wasn't the one ended up bleeding, was I?" Spike's voice was half growl, and he tried to calm himself. "I've got family here - me and Xander and the wolfling are pack - and they'd both take you out if you fucked with me, you bastard." Spike clenched his fist around the spiral nail in his pocket, the urge to pull it out and drive it through the solid rock of Angel's stupid head almost overwhelming. You miserable cunt, you back the fuck off "You don't order me, or try to make me, or tell me anything, anymore, Angel. You understand?" They were toe to toe, demons to the fore, snarling, and Giles was frozen against the counter.

Fuck. There's the witch. She'd better...better watch herself. That power of hers - like a snake, all twisted around her He shook his head a little, pushing the images away, still snarling at Angel. Giles fumbled at his glasses and almost dropped them from nervous tension.

"Wha- what do you mean about Oz, Spike? What does he have to do with this?" Giles asked, and Spike spared him a hateful glance.

"Just what I said, Watcher. We're - " He stopped abruptly. He could feel - something. In the link. It was faint, barely there. It was Oz. And he was...afraid. He
struggled for a moment with the demon - finally pushed it away to listen, and Xander was in the link, asking What's wrong and Spike darted into the other room, meeting his worried gaze.

"Xander, it's-"

"Oz - yeah. Fuck."

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

His old crypt was silent - seemingly deserted - and they approached warily. Willow had convinced Giles to take her to the Summers house - she was worried about Tara being alone and about Joyce coming home to no daughters and a terrified stranger; Angel was nowhere to be seen. Bloody poufter can't even keep up Spike thought disgustedly before pushing open the crypt doors. Xander and Buffy both crowded in behind him. The inside was dark, but he could hear voices, very faintly, from under the sewer access cover. The faint pulse of fear protect help that had been coming from Oz was stronger - was loud, and Oz was there, graceful wolf trotting up to the crypt and pushing against Spike's leg. Xander crouched down, running his hands over the
"Hey Oz - you ok?"

_Dawn_ and Oz let out a muffled sort of bark, clearly eager to get on with it.

"Oz?" Buffy looked down at the wolf - looked at Spike. "So - are they in there?"

"Down underneath. I'm gonna heave that cover off. There's a ladder on this side, but the hole's big enough you can just drop down - nothing underneath to catch on. You get down there fast, Slayer, and the wolf and me'll be right behind you. Xander, you get Little Bit, she'd gonna be scared out of her mind."

"Yeah," Xander breathed, standing back up and flexing his hand around the stake he was carrying.

"How many?" Buffy whispered as they glided across the dirt floor. Spike crouched down and grabbed the stone slab, muscles tense and ready to lift. _Listenin' to me. Guess you've got some sense, Slayer - keep usin' it and we'll have the Niblet back in a trice_
"Only four or five when we met up a couple nights ago. Dunno if she had more or not. Didn't seem to. Ready?" Buffy nodded, and Oz pushed his muzzle into Spike's shoulder. Careful from Xander, and Spike sent it right back, careful love you. Then he lifted and swung the cover off in one movement, lowering it as quietly as possible to the ground. Buffy looked down into flickering dimness - some kind of fire light - and jumped, straight and graceful. Oz was next, silent on his wolf-paws, and Spike grinned over at Xander and followed, duster rustling like crow's wings around him. He landed easily and crept forward, hearing Xander land behind him. There were voices ahead - Harmony stuttering something, a deeper male voice answering - and Dawn's panicked heartbeat, thudding over all. Sounds like she's losin' her gang. Stupid chit. Almost got you, Niblet, be brave. They went down a short stretch of tunnel and then into a larger chamber and Buffy was flying forward, kicking and punching, and Harmony shrieked "Slayer!" and Oz leaped on a heavy-set female and then Spike was in, full-body slam into a hulking male. The demon roared, delighted, and Oz answered, yipping howl that had fight pack BLOOD behind it, delight in the mayhem. Something - a brief shock of Wha-? Fuuuck... from
Xander, and then nothing, the link shutting down hard. Peripherally, Spike could see Xander over by Dawn, giving her a quick hug and then attacking the chains that bound her to the rock wall. The big vamp under Spike grunted and heaved him up and Spike snarled and slashed his straight-razor across his throat - slashed again, putting supernatural muscle behind it and the panicked face fell back - away - as the vamp's neck was severed. Dust puffed up from his disintegrating body and Spike turned, searching. Buffy staked another male - her second - and Oz was standing, panting, in an eddy of dust. Harmony was gone. Xander did something with a tool - with his multi-purpose knife that he carried everywhere - and Dawn's hands fell, free of the chains. She threw herself on Xander, crying, and Xander hugged her close, rubbing her back. Buffy ran over and Dawn went from Xander to her, babbling incoherently.

"Shhh, Dawn, it's ok, mom'll kill me for letting you get kidnapped by vampires, you better not say one word to her or I'll... C'mon, it's ok, shhh..." Dawn pushed back from Buffy, wiping her eyes with the flat of her hand, face blotchy and eyes swollen.

"I'll tell mom you killed vampires in front of me! You're not supposed to do that!" She looked over at Spike and
smiled a tiny smile.

"Thanks for c-coming to get me Spike. Oz? Is that Oz? Wow!" Dawn scurried over to the wolf and knelt down, running her hands through the soft fur and Spike smirked at the *scratch nice* Oz, in a display of utter doggishness, leaned into Dawn and let her scratch behind his ears, mouth open in a wide, panting grin.

"Wonder where that stupid cow Harm scampered off to? Guess we'd better go find her. You up for patrol, Xander?" Spike lit a cigarette and Xander nodded, looking around.

"Sure. Guess we'll - tell her to get out of Sunnydale, huh? I just - I don't think I can stake her, you know?" *Know her* and Spike nodded. He'd figured they wouldn't be able to off one of their own, no matter how marginally she came under that heading. He could remember Harmony - most clearly, he could remember her fighting for her life and her classmate's lives against the snake-mayor's hordes, and he reluctantly agreed with Xander's *helped us* and Oz's *frightened girl*

"She tried to bite Willow, you know. And she kidnapped my sister - why shouldn't we stake her?" Buffy said,
tucking her own stake away into the back of her pants.

"'Cause she's...Harmony, Buff. She went to school with us. And...she's got a soul, too. I've seen it." Xander shifted uncomfortably, glancing at Dawn. Buffy stared at him.

"You're kidding, right? Harmony has a soul? Xander - " Buffy stopped - pushed her hands slowly back through her hair. Spike leaned against the wall behind him, watching them. *What's got the Slayer all troubled now?*

"Xander - am I...am I killing - murdering - people like...like Angel? If Harmony has a soul, could she be - good? Could she..."

*Ooooh, that's it, is it? Huh. Doesn't make' kill first ask second' quite so nice now, does it, Slayer?* Xander glanced over at Spike, *love you* and shrugged at Buffy.

"I don't - know, Buffy. Kidnapping Dawn wasn't good... Most of the demons you kill - the vampires - they really are evil. I looked, out on patrol, and I've looked around a lot, and... they're different, Buffy. Most of them really do just want to - kill everything. Some don't. But the ones that don't - aren't around much,
when you are. A soul doesn't mean instant white-hat status. If it did, we humans would all be saints, wouldn't we? It's not - black and white." Buffy sighed, and looked over at Spike again - looked at Dawn, who was hugging Oz.

"I guess - I guess I'll just...rely on you to tell me the difference, okay, Xander? I don't want to...slay anybody that might not...need it." She sighed again, and pushed a loose strand of hair off her face.

*Tired Slayer. Worried about her mum, her sis...and now this. Maybe it'll tone her attitude down a notch.* Spike shivered a little, and flicked his cigarette butt away. *Still wanna taste her blood. See what you've done, love? Made me...almost feel sorry for the Slayer, for a second* He frowned over at Xander, *damn pitiful slayer love you STOP that* and Xander stifled a giggle - turned it into a cough.

"Yeah, ok - guess you'd better get Dawn home - where'd deadboy get off to?"

"Don't think he's been gettin' off - probably half his problem..." Spike muttered, and Buffy shot him a venomous look.
"He's gone. He said - we didn't need him, he wasn't part of the team and he'd just - be in the way." She looked angry at that - tossed her head, dismissing him. "Come on, Dawn - we need to get home." Dawn nodded and stood up, one hand still on Oz's back, and they all filed back out to the main room. Buffy looked in utter bewilderment at the collection of unicorn figures that Harmony had apparently been amassing, and Spike sneered at the fluffy bedclothes and throw-pillows she'd heaped on a big four-poster bed.

How in hell'd she get that down here? Christ. Unicorns. Be a mercy to stake her, sorry excuse for the evil undead. Makes us all look bad Buffy went up the ladder first and stood at the top, watching Dawn climb. Xander was close behind him, fingers edging around the sides of the duster and burrowing up under his t-shirt - trails of fire across his stomach. Spike leaned back a little, resting against the solid warmth of the man, and Buffy, reaching down to help Dawn climb off the top of the ladder shot them an irritated look. Oz made a breathy, yipping sound - wolfish laughter - and leaped up, clearing the edge of the hole and disappearing.
Love you want you mine from Xander, and Spike turned in Xander's embrace and pulled him close - kissed him, taste of sweet love love you running his own hands up under Xander's shirt.

"Hey! You guys get up here!" Buffy yelled, and Xander pulled back, grinning.

"The Slayer shrieks," he whispered, and Spike reluctantly let him go; watched him climb the ladder and couldn't resist a grab at the taut body-part in jeans that hovered so enticingly just above him.

"I saw that, Spike!" Buffy growled, and Spike smirked up at her.

"He slipped, Slayer - don't want him fallin' now, do you?" She rolled her eyes.

"I'm getting Dawn home, and then I still have to go over to that warehouse. Are you guys gonna find Harmony?"

"Sure - oh..." Xander looked over at Oz and Dawn, and nodded.

Naked from Oz.
"Oz needs to go home with you, Buffy - his clothes are there." Buffy blinked - looked at Oz - blinked again.

"Ah - yeah. Right. God I hope mom's not home! Let's go, Dawn, we need to hurry." Dawn sidled over to Spike - grabbed him in a quick hug that took him totally by surprise.

*Way to piss off big sis, Niblet*  She grinned up at him - hugged Xander too.

"Thanks for rescuing me guys. Sorry you had to do it." Dawn strode out of the crypt, looking far too bouncy.

"Yeah - thanks, you guys." Buffy stood for long moment, just looking at the three of them, then she hastily went after Dawn. Oz yipped - brushed close past Spike and Xander and followed. Spike leaned back against a tomb, watching Xander *want you* surging over him, wash of fire.

"Sssooo...havin' a little...fantasy, Xan?" Spike whispered, and Xander came up close to him - put his hands on either side of Spike and leaned into him, heat and weight pressing him back.
"Oh yeah..." Xander brushed his lips over Spike's - over his cheek and jaw, moth-touches, and Spike shivereded.

"I thought about you, in here - thought about comin' over some night, after patrol. All...worked up from the slaying. Finding you here, in your...lair." Xander's hands came up - pushed at the duster and slid it off. Then his hands were at the hem of Spike's t-shirt, pushing, and Spike lifted his arms, letting Xander pull the shirt up and off.

"What did you think you'd do, when you found me?" Spike asked, voice low, and Xander put his palms flat on Spike's chest, rubbing lightly.

"Oh, I thought...thought you'd be here, like this, in your jeans and boots - just...drinking some of that whiskey - smoking... Lurking..." Xander grinned at him - lost the grin as Spike pulled him close, groin to groin, subtle pressure.

"Yeah? And what then, love? What's next...?" Xander leaned forward again and ran his tongue over the claim mark - lightning down his body, straight to his cock, and Spike arched up, gasping.
"Then - then I'd just push you down, like this - " Xander pushed him back, laying him back along the cold marble, mouth hot and wet on his collarbones, sternum. Xander's hands slid down Spike's arms to his wrists - brought them out and up, pinning them.

"Hold you down, taste you - kiss you - bite you..." Xander murmured, and did that, nipples and ribs and side of Spike's throat - hinge of jaw and the soft underside of his chin. Sinking his teeth in, just a little, and Spike writhed under him, panting now.

"Xan -"  

"Mmmm..." Xander rocked his hips, pushing down tight, their erections crowding close through the denim. The buttons of Spike's fly pressed in hard and he arched up, hissing, basking in the razor-edge of pain that licked out - became pleasure.

"Don't move," Xander said, and he let Spike's wrists go - wrenched open the buttons and pulled. Spike put his legs around Xander's waist and squeezed, lifting his hips, and Xander yanked the jeans down. The tomb was icy under his buttocks and back, Xander like a furnace
against his cock, and Spike moaned softly, arching his back. Xander fumbled for something in a duster-pocket - grinned and held up a squashed tube of gel.

"Never know -" Spike said, and Xander ducked down - came back up between Spike's legs, the jeans across his back. He pushed his own jeans down, freeing himself, and then leaned back up, pressing Spike's wrists down again, full-body rub of hot flesh.

"When I thought about this - you let me, let me fuck you - you wanted me... God..." Xander sealed his mouth over Spike's, all teeth and push, and Spike kissed back, fucking his tongue into Xander's mouth, tasting the essence of him, letting the demon out so that he could graze a fang over Xander's tongue - taste the rich, sweet blood that welled there. Xander ground closer, his cock slicking wetness over Spike's belly; a bar of flame that threatened to brand Spike - immolate him. His own cock jumped, pressed tight between two bellies, and he pulled Xander closer with his trapped feet, wanting more.

Want in me love please and Xander let one wrist go - moved back an inch, and Spike felt the cool gel smearing on him - felt a fingertip stroke and circle and push in, slow. A ripple of shivers ran out from that point, and
Spike moaned into Xander's mouth - pushed the demon away as Xander leaned up a little, moving his lips down over Spike's neck.

"You taste so good...feel good...love this, right here - " Xander bit gently along the top of Spike's shoulder - pushed the finger deeper, skating over that place, and Spike arched up, gasping.

"Ooh, pet...again, again - " Xander's finger twisted - thrust - then he pushed in another, rasp of callus and scarred knuckles, blunt fingernails just ghosting over that most sensitive place. Spike writhed, hips moving in shallow thrusts, and Xander leaned into his neck and rasped his tongue over the scar there - raked it lightly with his teeth. *Beautiful vampire mine want*

"You want me? You ready for me?" Xander whispered, and Spike turned his head a little, tongue and lips on Xander's throat.

*Yours want NOW* "Ready love, ready, in me..." Xander's fingers slid out - his hips moved back a little, and Spike opened his eyes. Stared at Xander - into wide eyes that were black in the dimness. Spike felt the tip of Xander's cock pushing at him - pushed against it and sighed in
pleasure as Xander pressed slowly in. Xander's hand closed around Spike's balls - holding them up, tug and pressure, and then his slick palm covering Spike's cock, rubbing. Spike reached and pulled Xander down - pulled him closer - and Xander's hand was on his wrist again, holding him still.

"No, no touching, just let me..." Stronger push, going deeper, and Spike lifted his hips, arched his back - wanted, and Xander smiled at him. Thrust in hard and froze for a moment.

"Oh, yeah - dreamed about this - you so tight and...cool, like this... Wanting me - needing me..." Xander moved back and forth, strong thrusts that rocked Spike back a little, the marble slick under his spine. Xander leaned over him, faces inches apart, his hands and Spike's wide on the tomb, his hips moving faster, cock pushing deeper. Spike felt tingles of electricity - of fire - prickling out over his body, centering on the burning brand that was Xander's cock in him.

"You need me, Spike? You...need this?"

"Know I do, Xan...you know...you make me alive, you - " love you love you beautiful my own always
Yours always MINE  Xander kissed him, frantic pressure of tongue and teeth, claiming Spike's mouth with his own, claiming his body with his own - his soul, with his own. Thrusting harder now, collision of flesh loud in the stillness, and oh there, there love fuck... and Spike was pulling him closer, legs like a vise around Xander's ribs and Xander suddenly let go of his wrists. One hand snaked down between them, grasping Spike's cock and pumping it, rough and fast. The other hand threading through Spike's hair, lifting his head, turning it, Xander's mouth on Spike's throat, on the scar.

"Wanted to make you mine - wanted to have you - want you..."  Mine only mine  and Xander's teeth sank deep, tearing flesh. Spike's back arched up like a cat and he roared - turned his head and let the demon come, let the demon take; the sweet and living blood, spiced with magic with love with himself and with the tiniest flash of the wolfling, exotic and heady and needed. He drank - felt Xander doing the same, good so good want this always and Xander's body pounding into him, the heat of him in Spike doubling as Xander came. Spike's own orgasm was thunder - fire - and he pulled away from Xander's neck and cried out again, moving helplessly, instinctively, shudder and push against the heat of
Xander's body, against his slowing thrusts. And then - flicker of images; himself, on his back, arched and gasping and glowing...

*Oh, what is - that's...*

_You love, you, beautiful_  He saw himself - the demon and the human parts of himself entwined and glowing, golden-white, almost painfully bright. Sparks of light, gold and scarlet and white dancing and whirling, around him, through him... Spike shuddered, gasping, the final moments of orgasm a drawn-out ecstasy. Finally Xander lay over him, panting, heavy and immobile and Spike hugged him close, kissing shoulder and throat - soothing the bite with his tongue, cleaning the smear of blood away. _Love you pet, oh...love you thank you_

"God. Spike - love you so much. Did you see - how beautiful you are? Doesn't seem...real, sometimes. Too good."  Xander burrowed into Spike's neck, hands slipping under his shoulder blades and pulling him close, and Spike ran soothing hands over Xander's back.

"It's real, love. _Real_  Never let you go."  They lay together for a long moment, and Spike heard the whispered Ceil that ended the seeing.  Xander shivered -
shivered again when he slipped free of Spike's body, and he pushed himself up.

"Getting cold. Stupid crypt. Damn - nothing to clean up with." Spike sat up, limpeting onto Xander, arms and legs tight around his body. *So warm*

"Don't wanna let you go," he whispered, resting his head on Xander's shoulder, and Xander's hands were strong around his back - strong and sure and *safe, safe and loved* stutter of images, memories; Dru and himself curled under blankets, sound of rain, dry rushing of a fire. The whole family around a table - playing cards - Darla laughing and Angelus pouring her spiced cider, slipping a card to Spike under the table - the three of them on the pull-out bed in the living room, casual sprawl of bodies that touched without tension, himself and Xander and Oz... *Family protect* Xander raised one hand - gently turned Spike's face up, the dark eyes searching. *Full of love, full of... understand*

"I know, love. I...know. We'll have this, for as long as we can. They know, now - no more hiding it, and we'll just...just be... *family ours never leave* Soft kiss, to forehead and each cheek - to lips, and Spike sighed into it, loving it - loving that Xander knew, that he knew and
didn't care, how fragile this felt to Spike - how much he wanted it. *Want too much*

*Don't want enough. Give you everything - anything -my own always love you love you* Spike hugged Xander hard, then leaned back a bit, smiling at him.

*Real smile*

"All for you, love. Better get home. Wolfling'Ill wonder what happened. And -" Spike made a gesture down at them, at sticky, drying matter that had adhered rather uncomfortably to both of them. "Need a shower."

"Always with the bath fetish. Maybe we should have a bath - soak in that tub..." Spike raised an eyebrow - smirked.

"Sounds nice. Like to fuck you in there - in all that hot water..."

*Want* from Xander, and Spike grinned - leaned back as Xander let him go and watched his boy squirm out from between legs and jeans, stumbling a little. In the end they sacrificed Spike's t-shirt and walked home in the thick, summer air, Spike's duster over his arm and
Xander's arm around his waist, stroking along rib and belly, *beautiful* through the link. Spike noticed - as did Xander - a scurrying blonde presence in the bushes, but they both ignored it. *Hunt her another day* Spike thought, and Xander agreed.

20 Key

Xander parked his truck outside the Magic Box and sat for a moment, thinking. The mid-September sun beat down strongly on the roof, and he stretched in his seat, muscles tired from work. There was sawdust on his jeans that he brushed at half-heartedly, and the radio was playing, some new song he didn't recognize - a woman's voice, rapping about a 'One minute man'. Xander listened for a moment, but couldn't concentrate on it. A week since Dawn had been kidnapped. A week since he'd... *seen*. He'd waited - through the various events of the week - to bring this to Giles. But he couldn't wait anymore. Spike was on his way - he could feel him - and he could just faintly hear the DeSoto, roaring through
Sunnydale like one of the resident monsters. It made him smile, and he turned off the truck and got out and went up to the door - pushed inside. The Grand Opening was happening tomorrow - Giles had delayed it for various reasons - and the shop was still a bit of a mess. Some boxes were, in fact, scattered across the larger area right below the landing, and a couple looked as if they had been crushed.

"Hey, Giles? You here?" Xander called, looking around. He heard a noise, and Giles stepped out of the back room. He held a towel to his head, and he looked - woozy. Xander stepped quickly over to him, catching his elbow and guiding him to a chair.

"Giles, you ok? What happened?" Giles pulled the towel away from his head, revealing a large, swollen bruise. There was a smear of blood on the towel.

"Jesus!"

All right?

Fine... Giles...

"I assure you, I'm perfectly - perfectly fine, Xander. Just a small bruise, a slight...concussion." Giles put the towel back onto his forehead with a wince of pain, and Xander heard the ice wrapped inside crunching together.
"Are you sure? Do you want me to take you to the hospital?" He crouched down, looking up at the older man, and Giles smiled faintly at him.

"No, no, I really am fine. I've been hit in the head enough times that I know when I need immediate medical attention, more's the pity."

"If you're sure." Xander looked at Giles for a moment - held up three fingers. "How many fingers, Giles?" he said.

"One too many, pet, you do it like this -" Spike's voice, from the back door, and the vampire strode over, cigarette pluming smoke and smirk firmly in place, blanket tucked under his arm.

*Mmmm, pet, smell good*

Giles rolled his eyes and started to stand up. "Spike, what are you doing - oh, yes, that's right." Giles subsided back onto the chair and looked at Xander, frowning.

"Yes, we're still shaggin' like rabbits, Watcher, did you forget? Must've gotten hit a little harder then you thought."

*Stop that* Xander patted Giles' knee and stood up. "So, what happened, Giles? Who - or what - hit you?"
"Ah - well. *That* is the mystery of the moment, although I dare say an hour's worth of book-work will answer the question. The - demon - was rather distinctive." Spike hopped up onto the display counter, ignoring Giles' automatic wince and glare. He looked around for someplace to put out his cigarette and dropped it into a half-empty cup of tea.

"So - what made it so distinctive, Watcher? I'm guessin' somethin' *other* than that stench?"

"Yes, the smell. Well, apart from that, it wanted the Slayer and *only* the Slayer. Most demons will happily take out anything in their path, but this one was extraordinarily focused and please do *not* touch that, it may very well transport us all to a dimension that is overrun with creatures that rival Tyrannosaurus Rex for bloodlust and size." Xander hastily put the little velvet box with the oddly-shaped crystal in it back and looked guiltily at Giles, who took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You know, I really could use some aspirin or, perhaps, a drink of something...Irish," Giles said.

"That's what Darla thought, and look what it got her," Spike muttered. He lifted his legs and spun around on the
counter, dropping down behind it and rummaging for a moment.

*Spike, be nice* Xander thought, and Spike snorted in amusement. A moment later he popped back up, grinning, a rather dusty bottle in his hand.

"Let's all have a sip, shall we?" He unscrewed the cap and raised the bottle to his lips.

"Don't you dare!" Giles growled, and Spike glanced over at him, eyebrow raised. "There are cups in the office," Giles sighed, and Spike laughed.

"I'll get them. So, you're ok, and you think you can find out what this demon is. That's - that's good." Xander went back into the cramped office, looking around, and found a stack of paper cups.

"Well, I'm not unconscious or dead, so I say, 'Bully for me'," came Giles' rather peeved voice.

*Laughter* from Spike and Xander grabbed two cups - hesitated - and grabbed one more.

*Might need it. Hate this.*

*Be all right love* Xander came back out and lined the cups up on the counter. Spike cheerfully filled them, and Giles
hauled himself out of his chair and came over. He scowled at Spike and picked up his cup.

"Cheers," he muttered, and tossed the whiskey back. Spike did the same, and Xander took a mouthful and tried not to gag. Spike laughed again, earning an amazed look from Giles.

"Here, pet, I'll have yours too, then," Spike said, and tweaked the cup away from Xander. Xander let him have it, coughing.

"I'm just not manly enough for the hard stuff, I guess," he croaked. Giles dabbed at his head gently and then sighed, laying the now-dripping towel down on a crumpled nest of newspapers.

"Now that we've all had a drink, perhaps you'd like to tell me why you wanted to speak to me, Xander? Spike, put it back." Spike growled, but he pulled the bottle back out of his duster pocket and bent down, shoving it away in whatever cubby Giles had secreted it.

"It's about...about the other night, Giles. When Dawn was kidnapped? I - I saw-"

"Oh good lord," Giles whispered, and he went white. Xander made a grab for him and Giles waved him away,
leaning on the counter and looking at Xander rather wildly.

"Giles, what -"

"Of course, of course, how stupid of me, it would only take one look and..."

"Giles," Xander said, loudly, and the Watcher stopped talking, frowning at him.

"I suppose that - whatever you saw - you shared it with Spike?" Xander glanced at Spike, who was pawing through a box full of copper figurines.

"'Course I did, Giles. And Oz." He shrugged at Giles' horrified look. "We don't keep secrets, Giles, we're pack. It just - doesn't work that way."

"Yes, Spike said something to that effect that night. What did he - what do you both - mean by it?"

_Tell?_

_No harm_ from Spike, and his eyes flashed up to meet Xander's for a moment, bright with suppressed laughter. The amusement he was feeling bubbled in the link, and Xander tried to ignore it. Freaking out Giles wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind for this meeting. Although,
the mood Spike was in, it was probably inevitable. He'd been in this mood pretty much the whole week. As he'd put it - "They know we're together now, love, so we can do what we like and not have to worry." Xander knew that meant, at least in part, that Spike felt free to touch - or kiss - him at any time. Which was nice. But which also meant that he'd pretty much abandoned all restraint when it came to the gang and what he would do or say. Which could have its drawbacks. Xander smiled at Spike and turned back to Giles.

"Well...it's to do with the wolf and the hyena. They both want a pack. And the - demon, it wants a nest, you know? We all just want...family. So we kind of...claimed Oz." Giles stared at him - at the both of them - and his mouth came open, but no sound came out. Spike rolled his eyes and ducked down - retrieved the bottle and poured another cup-full. Hesitated, then poured a second.

"You - you - you did what? You claimed -? Really Xander, I don't - I simply don't know what to say. What were you thinking - thank you." He took the cup Spike held out automatically and drained it - crumpled the wilting cup in his fist and tossed it over his shoulder.
"Cheers," Spike said, tossing back his own drink and the surprise in the link made Xander giggle. Giles glared at him and Xander choked it off.

"Sorry, you just - oh, never mind. Giles, it wasn't the same as what Spike and I did -"

"Although shaggin' was involved both -"

"Spike!" from both of them, and Spike subsided, going back to the figures.

_Love you sorry STOP that_ Xander took the elastic tie out of his hair and let it fall, long, down his neck and to the tops of his shoulders. He combed his fingers through it and smirked a little at Spike's instant, unwavering gaze. Giles began to edge around the end of the counter.

"Maybe 'claim' is the wrong word. We didn’t do that spell or anything, it was just... Oz felt like he was being pushed out - like he wasn't a part of our...pack, anymore. It was hurting him, Giles." Xander watched the older man open one drawer and then another and finally come up with an industrial sized bottle of aspirin. He opened it and shook three out into his palm and put the bottle away.

"I'll...I'll reserve judgment on that, Xander, until I've spoken to Oz. Why didn't he come with you today?" Giles looked around, and Spike held out the bottle, not looking
at him. Giles sighed and took it - poured a small measure into Spike's cup.

"He's working down at the Bronze a couple nights a week - helping the bands set up and stuff, doing the sound for them. He wanted to get back into music somehow now that the Dingoes have kind of...moved on." Giles tossed the aspirin into his mouth - swallowed them with the whiskey and then eyed the cup with distaste.

"Don't fret, Watcher - I imagine the alcohol killed any vampire cooties," Spike smirked, and Giles scowled at him.

"Come into the back. We need to talk about this. Buffy should be arriving in about ten minutes."

"Buffy?"

"This concerns her sister, Xander - it's only fair she be here." Xander had a sinking feeling in his gut - he didn't want any confrontations. They'd told the gang what was going on, sure. And they'd even kind of worked some stuff out. But the past week had been - crazy - and Xander really didn't want some sort of tension-breaking fight happening. Joyce had had her surgery - and it had gone surprisingly well - but she was still in the hospital, and the gang was on eggshells about it, hoping to hear
back about the test results of the tumor that had been removed.

Riley had had his surgery, too - after being chased down by six other Initiative members and Buffy. Spike had heard about *that*, and Riley had found out a day later that the six soldiers and one doctor hadn't made it out of Sunnydale. The bodies hadn't turned up yet, alive or dead, but there had been one night of total silence from Spike - the link shut down so hard that Xander had felt as if Spike were dead. He knew he *wasn't* - there was always this pulse of *Spike*, just below conscious thought that kept him aware of the vampire no matter what - but the total, *deliberate*, silence had been... It had been horrible. Xander had felt adrift - *lost*. He'd lain in bed shivering, until Oz had come home, and the rush of concern from the werewolf had been like water in the desert. Oz had come straight to him - slid into the bed beside him. They'd both talked until dawn, hands laced together under the sheet, the slow whirl of the box-fan in the window competing with the crickets and the distant surf. Spike had come in with the sun just behind him, through the back door and straight into the shower. Then he'd crawled in between Xander and Oz and finally opened the link, and they'd both just hugged him close, Spike's chaotic and bloody thoughts gradually dimming down to
nothing and all three of them finally sleeping. Xander's lack of guilty feelings for knowing what had happened to the missing men had, perversely, made him feel guilty, and it had taken a long talk with Spike and Oz the next afternoon to dispel any notions he might have had of feeling sorry for them. Spike had gotten some information out of the soldiers - what the Initiative was doing at its installation in Brazil - and it hadn't been pretty. Spike had, Xander suspected, 'lost it' again with those soldiers, and he hoped that this was the last of them to come to town. Spike's duster was lighter for having been emptied of its cache of spiral nails. Riley's buddy Graham had been at the hospital with Riley, who wouldn't leave Buffy, and so had lucked out of any retribution. But Xander suspected Spike had plans for him.

And now - who knew what would happen when he told Giles what he had seen? The three of them walked into the back of the shop, and Xander stopped in the doorway in surprise. The room - once an area for storage - had been cleared and fitted up as a training room, complete with equipment and a place for Buffy to change and clean up.
"Wow - Giles! This is great!" Giles had settled onto an old couch that was against one wall, and he smiled rather tiredly at Xander.

"Thank you. I did it as a surprise for Buffy - she saw it just last night."

"She must have loved it." Xander walked over to a rack of weights, running his finger over them, and grinned over at Spike who had leaped past him and landed a ferocious punch on the heavy bag. It swung alarmingly, creaking, and Spike attacked it again, punches and kicks that were blindingly fast.

*Like a cat with a new toy* Xander thought, and Spike growled and landed a last punch - turned and *pounced*, one fluid movement, pushing Xander back against the weights and pinning him there with his body.

"Wanna see what else I can do with toys?" he murmured in Xander's ear, and the accompanying mental image made a flush of desire surge through Xander's body.

*Oh fuck yeah*

"Can you please not do that where I have to see?" Giles said, and Spike snarled over his shoulder at the older man, flashing fangs.
Be nice or-

Or? Punish me? Another flurry of images, and Xander groaned, pushing weakly at Spike's shoulders.

"Cut it out, Spike. I could really live forever without a hard-on in front of Giles!" Xander hissed.

"Might make him shut up for once," Spike muttered, and let his teeth just graze the claim scar. One hand was on Xander's hip, holding him close, and the other was tangled in his hair, rubbing his scalp, tugging gently. The sensation sent little sparks rippling over his scalp and down to the claim scar - all over his body.

Fuck...love... Xander closed his eyes - took a deep breath of the smoke and leather smell that surrounded him. Spike was doing a full-body, slow-motion grind against him and he shuddered as their groins pressed together. Spike was already hard, and Xander was rapidly getting there.

Watcher would leave if we let him do it the soldier whispered, and Xander groaned again.

No, no, NO! NO sex in front of...anybody! Damnit Spike was kissing him now, whiskey and cloves, the demon there and the fangs just prickling Xander's tongue - and Spike's - as the taste suddenly intensified to copper
*magic mine mine* and the vampire's blood sparked in Xander's mouth.

Spike pulled away abruptly, grinning, human again. He did a final grind of his body into Xander's and then turned around, getting a cigarette out and lighting it.

*Slayer*

"Oh fuck," Xander said, and straightened up from where he'd half-collapsed against the weights. He could feel the insistent tickle that was Slayer, as well, although he wasn't sure if he was feeling it himself or through Spike. *Thank god it was cold this morning* he thought, and adjusted the sleeves of the flannel shirt he had tied around his waist. Giles had laid his head back on the couch and shut his eyes, and for a moment he looked so very *Old, he looks old, and so tired. This must be hard on him, doing his job without any support...any friends his age.* Xander went over to the pommel horse and jumped up on it, letting his feet dangle. Spike came and leaned next to him, and a moment later they heard the door bell jangle, and footsteps.

"Giles?"

"Back here, Buffy!" Xander called. Giles hadn't moved. More footsteps, and then Buffy was in the doorway, the
automatic smile for Xander crumpling a bit when she saw Spike - going to open-mouthed shock when she saw Giles.

"Giles! What happened?" The Watcher stirred - lifted his head with a grimace.

"The usual, Slayer - demon came to kill you, found him instead. Now you got somethin' new to hunt down." Buffy shot an irritated glance at Spike and strode over to Giles, sitting gingerly on the edge of the couch and looking at Giles with an air of worry that was just slightly tinged with exasperation.

"I'm all right, Buffy. But what Spike said is, essentially, what happened. However -" Giles pushed himself fully upright and looked over at Xander and Spike. "However, that is not our main concern at the moment. Xander and - and Spike know...something...about Dawn." Buffy stared at Giles for a moment, a look that was part horror and part guilt flashing across her face. Then she turned to stare at Xander.

"How do you know?"

"You - know too? What's going on with her, Buffy? What - is she?" Buffy drew in a sharp breath, looking at Giles again.
"It's a long story, Xander. I want to know how you know." Spike glanced at Xander, *afraid* in the link, and Xander nodded. Buffy *was* afraid. But of what? He cleared his throat nervously.

"Well - the night she got kidnapped, when we went to get her? I was still - *seeing* - and...when we got to the crypt I saw...Dawn. And she..." Xander stopped, biting his lip.

*Be all right*

*Yeah* "She looked...different."

"How did she look different, Xander?" Giles asked. Buffy was tense, her hands digging fiercely into her knees.

"She - most people, you look at them, you see their physical body and their soul is like a ghost, kind of. Sometimes the soul is really distinct - almost separate - but most of the time it's like a copy of the person laid over them, just...glowing and kinda transparent, you know?" The other two nodded, and Spike shifted a little until his shoulder was touching Xander's knee. Xander pressed against him, letting his hand slip down and rest on the back of Spike's neck. "But when I looked at Dawn, her - soul, her - ghost... It was just - it wasn't right. It flickered, like it was having trouble staying in place. It
kind of shifted, from looking like her to you, Buffy, to Joyce and to - to all of us - then back to herself, but there wasn't any... I'm not saying this right. There wasn't any life to it - it was like still images instead of something that lived in her. And - there was this green glow, this green - energy - all around her. Kind of like a - fountain of light that just kept flowing out and going back in. It was - beautiful, it was really amazing, but... it wasn't right. What is she, Giles?" Giles had been staring at him with wide eyes, and now he blinked - took off his glasses and started to rub his forehead, but winced and stopped when his fingers touched the bruise. Buffy glanced over at him, biting her lip.

"That night that you guys told us - you know -" Buffy made a gesture with her hands and Spike smirked. Don't don't don't Xander thought, and Spike sighed.

"Well, I went back to that warehouse that night. And there was this - monk - there. He was tied to a chair, and there was a - woman. Well, a demon of some kind. He called her the Beast. We fought -"

"Kicked her ass?"

"Not so much kicked her ass as...she kicked mine." Buffy glanced at Giles and Xander twitched a little from the burst of laughter that came through the link from Spike.
He pushed his knee harder into Spike's shoulder and rubbed his fingers up Spike's neck, squeezing just a little. Spike shot an amused glance up at him but didn't say a word and Xander focused on Buffy again.

"Wow - ok, so it was some kinda freaky demon mojo or something? I mean - what happened?"

"She's really strong, Xander - I don't know what she is. But - anyway - I grabbed the monk and got out of there and the building kind of collapsed on her, so maybe she's dead, I dunno." Buffy shot to her feet and went to stand by the heavy bag, pushing her fists against it, swinging it just a little. "The monk - he was really hurt - he told me that he and his fellow monks had been guarding a - key. For, like, forever. And the Beast wanted it. And it was really dangerous and they had to keep her away from it. So they -" Buffy drew her fist back and punched, setting the bag swinging. "They did some kind of spell and they turned the key into a person. Into a girl." Buffy punched the bag again, then again, hard as she could, and the eyebolt holding it in the ceiling creaked. A creeping sort of inevitability was coming over Xander, and Spike was very still beside him, cigarette forgotten in his hand and burning down almost to the filter.

*Does she mean...*
"Dunno, pet - seems..."

"No way, Buffy, no way-"

"They said, in order to protect the key, they sent it - her - to the Slayer. To me. They sent me a little sister." Buffy landed a final, crushing blow to the heavy-bag and stepped away, her arms folded tightly around her ribs.

"Jesus, that's..."

"But we remember her." Spike lifted his cigarette - snarled silently at it and pinched it out, stuffing the butt in his duster pocket. "She was in your living room that night, when we made pax... Xander went to the dance with her!"

"I know, Spike! I know! I remember. I remember the day they brought her home from the hospital! I was so upset, but then - mom let me hold her, and she told me I was her big sister and I'd have to help her, and keep her safe - " Buffy stopped and wiped angrily at her eyes, looked over at Giles. "The monks made up her whole life, and they changed - everything. Everybody. They changed us so it would be like she was always here."

"How is that possible?" Xander wondered, and Giles shook his head.
"We don't know. A spell of that reach - of that magnitude - it's almost unthinkable. I've tried to find out about this - Beast - about the Key, but...I'm not having much success."

"So, is this Beast really gone? When the building collapsed, did she die?" Xander slid down off the horse, bumping into Spike who snaked his arm around Xander's waist and pulled him close.

"I don't know. It was pretty destroyed. I guess we'll just have to - wait and see. Find out everything we can and - hope she's gone. The monk - he died." Buffy sat back down on the couch next to Giles. "Xander, do you think - does she have a soul?" Buffy's voice was so small and quiet, and Xander felt a surge of protectiveness sweep over him.

"Course she does, Buffy. It felt like - like she was trying to...*make* one - *grow* one. I think - whatever the monks did - it's not *finished* yet. There wasn't anything bad, in Dawn. Just - love, just...needing her family, being afraid of Harmony. She has a...a baby-soul, I think." Buffy smiled at that, and seemed to relax.

"In the meantime," Giles said quietly, "it is *imperative* that you tell no-one what we've just said. So far we four -"
"Five," Spike said, and Buffy stared at him.

"What do you mean, five?"

"Wolfling knows, of course. Or, will know."

"Spike, you can't tell him! You can't tell anybody!" Buffy was on her feet and across the floor, glaring up at Spike. Spike gently pushed Xander to one side, glaring back.

*Calm love, DON'T*

*Not pack* the demon growled.

"The wolf is *family*, Slayer. He already knows Xander saw something. We'll tell him this too. Deal with it."

"Listen, Spike -"

"It's ok, Buffy." Xander tried to get between the two of them, and Spike pushed him aside again, that sub-sonic growl shivering in Xander's bones. "Oz is one of us - he wouldn't tell. Spike's right. Did you tell Joyce?" Buffy blinked, open mouthed, then pushed her hands back through her hair in frustration.

"We had to. When she was sick - right before the surgery - she could...she could see Dawn. She kinda figured it out. So we told her. But - damnit, Xander! Why did you tell him? How do you know Spike won't - won't sell this to
the highest bidder! Or - sell Dawn out to the Beast! You can't *trust* him -" Spike growled, and Xander's hands slipped off his duster as he lunged forward, straight into Buffy. His hands were like claws on her shoulders as he propelled her backwards, five or six stumbling steps and straight into the wall with a crash. Buffy shoved him back, hard, and he reeled back a step and then crouched there, demon snarling into her face.

"Fuck you, Slayer! Xander is *mine*, and anybody he claims as family is family to me, too. Dawn is like his sister, and I wouldn't hurt a hair on her head!"

*Spike! Calm, back OFF* Xander got up behind Spike and put his arm around the vampire's shoulders - tugged him back.

"C'mon, Spike - it's ok. Relax, ok?" *Love you love you calm* Buffy was still standing against the wall, her eyes narrowed at Spike. She looked over at Giles - looked back at Spike.

"Why didn't the chip zap you, Spike? That hurt, you shoving me into the wall. What's the deal?" She took a step towards them and Spike snarled at her. *NO back OFF* Xander got between them - put his hands up.

"Buffy -"
TELL from Spike, and Xander turned around and looked at him - put his hands up to Spike's face, oblivious to the rage and the fangs - trying to block Buffy out, and Giles as well, who was on his feet by the couch.

"Spike - I don't think -"

"It's time, love. Tired of all of this nonsense. Just - tell 'em." Please love tell safe Xander sighed - bowed his head for a brief minute. "Ok, Spike - ok. Fuck." He turned around. Buffy was rigid, her hands clenched into fists, her breath coming in sharp pants.

"Tell me what, Xander."

"The chip - doesn't work any more." Xander said.

"What?" from Giles and:

"How long, Xander," from Buffy, deadly calm.

"Since - March."

"How - how did this - Xander, what is -" Giles sputtered, advancing on them.

"I can't believe it, Xander - I just can't. Why would you - why would you keep something like that a secret from us?" Buffy's eyes were wide and wet, but she was
trembling all over and Xander was pretty sure she was trying hard not to just launch herself straight at Spike.

*Calm from Spike and love you*

*Love you too*

*Protect pack* the hyena was tense - ready to fight.

"Why do you think, Buffy? What was I supposed to do, tell you and then let you kill him? Or try to? Six months, Buffy. Six months and he's still fought for us, and helped us, and hasn't tried even once to hurt you - or anybody. He let you hit him. Six months, Buffy."

"How did it happen?" Giles asked. He stood beside Buffy, his mouth pressed into thin, angry line.

"Jack. He owed me for what I did - said he'd pay the debt, any time, I just had to call him. And - I did. He - did something to it. It's not even what it was, anymore."

"Xander..." Giles was shaking his head, looking tired again.

"Get out. Because I'm going to -"

"*Stop it. Just stop it, Buffy!*" Xander felt - something. An unaccustomed rage. He got up close to Buffy, trying not to yell - knowing he might, anyway. "You threatened his
life when he couldn't even defend himself - you've hit him and belittled him and then expected him to help you, and he's done it. Done everything you asked - helped Giles, helped get Oz out, helped get Adam - he's been keeping the Hellmouth safe while you've been having your - your new college life and your boyfriend stuff and - and helping your mom and you don't get to do this anymore, Buffy! You don't get to threaten him any more." Xander had never shouted like that - had never felt so angry, and Buffy blinked in shock and took a step back. Giles was staring at him, and he closed his eyes for a brief moment.

*Love you pet, beautiful MINE* from Spike, fierce and warm and comforting.

"Xander, he's -"

"*What* is he, Buffy? You can't say 'soulless' 'cause that's not true. And you seem to forget that I can see him - I can feel him - everything he's thinking or doing. I know he's not out there murdering people every night. He told me so and I know it's true. He's mine and you won't touch him and you won't treat him like shit anymore." Xander stopped, breathing hard - jumped when Spike's hand slid up his arm and took his shoulder. He turned gratefully under the slight pressure and was folded into
Spike's arms, into Leather, spice, smoke, mine my own love you strong arms and solid body, comfort and home Lovely brave boy love you LOVE YOU

"M'not a boy," Xander grumbled softly, his face tucked into Spike's neck, and Spike chuckled softly.

"Course you're not." Spike kissed Xander's temple, and Xander felt the demon - felt the alien-ness of that face and nuzzled in deeper, not caring for a blissful moment what Buffy or Giles were doing.

"Xander -"

"You said you'd try, Buffy." Xander turned in Spike's embrace, his own arms under the duster and tight around the slim waist. "He's been - one of us, Buffy. Fighting the fight."

"But how can you - Ahhh!" Buffy made that frustrated noise, and held up her hand. "I know, I know. You can feel him. But I can't, Xander - how am I supposed to trust him?"

"Because you trust me, maybe? Because you know me and know that I wouldn't put you or Willow, or Dawn, or any of you in danger? If you can't trust Spike, can you trust me?" Buffy looked down at the floor for a long
moment, and then her fists slowly unclenched and she smiled a small, sad smile at Xander.

"Yeah. I guess - I can trust you, Xander. Trusted you with my life before - I guess I can now. How about it, Giles?"
The Watcher still looked angry, and he slowly shook his head.

"I'm not - happy with this. But six months - and the claim... Actions speak louder than words, Spike. If you - if you continue to show that you are in earnest with this - with helping us, then -"

"Then you'll what, Watcher? Condescend to notice me? I'm here for Xander, and him alone. I don't drain the lot of you because it would tear him apart. I don't let every demon in the Hellmouth carry on with their bloody stupid scheming because if the Hellmouth opens, Xander gets hurt. You getting it? You live or die on his say so, and no one else's. And the day you hurt him, you're fair game. No threats from you, Slayer, will ever change that. And there's sod-all you can do about it, unless you plan on dusting me. And I think you know what happens then."

"That wasn't nice," Xander said, into the stunned silence that followed. He scratched his nails slowly up and down Spike's t-shirt clad back.
"M'n't a nice man, pet. You know that."

"I know that. Nice to me."

"Well, yeah." Spike grinned at him, demon-eyed, ivory-fanged. *MY vampire love you always*

*Always*

"So - we've told our deep dark secrets. Are we gonna go get this demon what took out the Watcher or what?" Buffy was shaking her head, looking frustrated, and Giles sighed and wandered back to the couch, sitting down heavily.

"You don't make this very easy, Spike."

"I don't make it anything, Slayer - it is what it is. All you lot have to do is accept it." Xander pressed a kiss to Spike's lips and pulled slowly away, and the demon shivered and was gone.

*Love love you nice now* Spike grinned at him, eyebrow up, head to one side, and Xander had to laugh.

"Yeah, ok. Nice as the evil undead can be. Let's go demon-hunting, huh?"

"Don't mind if I do, pet,"
The song on the radio is Missy Elliot - *One Minute Man*

21 Two

It ended up taking until dark to figure out which demon had attacked Giles, and by that time Riley and Oz and the girls were at the shop as well. Dawn was at the hospital with Joyce. Xander made a mental note to go by there later - maybe he and Spike could sneak in - and Spike laughed through the link.

*See her every night* and Xander looked up from the book he was paging through, staring at him.

*You do?*

*Nice to me* Spike sent a flurry of images - himself, slumped despondently over Joyce's work-top, telling her
about Dru as Joyce sprinkled mini-marshmallows into his hot chocolate. Joyce offering a drink, the night he'd come to make a deal with Buffy, nodding in confused politeness when he'd told her she didn't have anything he fancied. And Joyce in the hospital bed, bandage on her temple, dark circles under her eyes. She and Spike talking - Spike fetching her ginger-ale and watching her fall into a restless sleep.

_Dawn's mum. Watching out for her_ Xander blinked - smiled suddenly, and Spike smiled back at the _Love you niiice vampire_

"Sod off, you," Spike muttered, and Xander laughed.

"How do you get in?" he asked softly, and Spike closed the book he had been reading and groped for a cigarette.

"Cousin'a Clem's. That guy - got more family than the Queen Mum."

"Ah - Toth!" Giles exclaimed, and everyone looked up enquiringly. "Toth. Last surviving member of the Tothric clan. A very old and sophisticated line of demons."

"So, what, I discuss the latest fashions from Milan before I chop its head off?" Buffy asked.
"No, no - it simply means it is a tool-using demon. It will use a weapon of some sort instead of brute force." Giles shifted the book, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "Also, very focused. And, well - its focus is obviously -"

"Buffy. So, where does it hang out and how hard can I kill it?" Riley asked, standing up. Spike rolled his eyes and got up as well, heading over to the balcony stairs and settling half-way up, trailing smoke. Willow made exaggerated fanning motions with her hand, frowning.

"It doesn’t posit any particular lair, but I think that, considering its very strong olfactory presence, we'll have little trouble finding it."

"Huh?" Riley asked.

"It stunk," Giles said, and put his book down. "In a 'piles of refuse' sort of way."

Fuck. Trip to the city dump Xander looked mournfully down at this work boots. "I just got these, you know," he said, stretching his feet out towards Willow and Tara.

"Well, maybe you could - could tie plastic bags over your feet? Or - I could do a spell -" Willow rapidly ran through a number of possible spells under her breath as they got ready to go. Xander tried to ignore her, not particularly wanting his new work-boots to be turned into turtles or
something. Tara, Willow and Anya were staying behind - they had volunteered to help get the shop ready for the Grand Opening if Giles would provide pizza and soda.

"Ah, a manly-man's outing!" Xander said, clapping his hands together. Buffy looked over at him, raising an eyebrow. "Well, ok, mostly manly with one very not-manly member."

"She's more manly than Captain Cardboard," Spike said, and Riley frowned at him.

"Look who's talking, fang-"

Buffy put her hand on his arm. "Let's just get going, ok, Riley? I need to get to the hospital before nine tonight."

Riley stared at her, then shrugged. "Sure, Buffy. Let's go." He took her hand and they walked out, Giles behind them.

Oz looked at Xander and Spike. *What?*

*Knows about the chip* from Spike, and a few images from that afternoon's discussion.

Oz nodded - grinned. "Hope he does something stupid," Oz said softly, and Spike laughed.
The dump did more than stink - it oozed - and Spike jumped over something gooey and greenish and pulled his duster a little tighter around his body.

"Fuck -" Xander did a little catch-step to avoid the same puddle and caught up, breathing through his mouth. Oz had morphed halfway to wolf then changed back, coughing.

"Think I'll just use my mostly-human senses this time," he wheezed. Buffy and Riley were disgusted as well, and Giles had put a handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

"What would make anybody, even a demon, hang out here?" Buffy kicked at an old paint-can and sent it hurtling over a drift of garbage bags. There was an "Ow!" and they all stared at one another.

"All right, come out come out, whatever you are, so I can -"

"Hey, Clem," Xander said to the shuffling figure that scooted out into plain sight. Buffy deflated a bit from her fighting stance, looking over at Xander quizzically.
"You *know* him?"

"Yeah - Clem did my satellite hook-up for the TV."

"Hey, Xander. And Spike! Wow, never thought I'd run into *you* here! And - and you must be Oz, got that whole 'wolf' aura' thing." The loose-skinned demon made little air-quotes, smiling at Oz. Oz nodded back. Spike snorted softly. "And - wow, could this be the Slayer? Wow - that's just amazing!" Buffy just stared, smiling feebly and doing a little wave.

"What're you doing out here, Clem?" Spike asked.

"Ah - finding some stuff, you know -" Clem rummaged in the shopping cart that was listing over beside him and pulled out a small lamp with glass-bead fringe. "I hope you don't mind, Spike, but your crypt's vacant again and, well, it's a prime piece of real estate so I kinda - I kinda moved in. Need to furnish it, you know?"

"Yeah? Bully for you, then. Have at it, with my blessing." Spike lit a cigarette and Xander moved into the smoke, looking slightly ill.

*Stinks home want you* Spike thought, and Xander moved a little closer, brush of warm hand on Spike's wrist.

*Soon promise*
"So - what brings you to the dump, Spike?"

"We're - we're looking for a demon. Tall, flowing robes, wielding a sort of stick-thing?" Giles said through the handkerchief.

"Oh? Oh! You mean - ah! Like that!" Clem ducked behind his shopping cart and as one the group whirled. Toth stood there, glowering. It raised its hand and bolt of energy crackled from the wand it was holding, exploding a bag of trash and pelting Clem with coffee grounds and potato peelings.

"Ah!" Clem grabbed his shopping cart and wrenched it upright - began to push it rapidly away.

"Jesus!" Xander was going into a crouch - Oz as well, eyes black, claws extending from the tips of his fingers. Spike tossed his cigarette aside and let the demon out. Toth raised its arm again, pointing the wand at Buffy. Spike grinned. *Maybe he'll actually hit her. Neat!* Giles was stumbling backwards, mouth open in shock. Riley was aiming his crossbow and Buffy was shifting into a fighting stance.

"Look out!" Riley, maybe? *Buffy* from Xander, and he moved - shoved Buffy to one side. The energy bolt lanced into Xander, knocking him backwards, to the ground, and
Spike roared, leaping at the demon. And - it was gone. Spike hit the ground and rolled upright, casting a wild look around.

"Xander!" Buffy recovered from the shove and scrambled towards Xander, Riley right behind her.

Love wake up XANDER Spike moved, fast - reached Xander just as Oz did. Spike stroked one hand down Xander's cheek, listening, scenting. Strong heartbeat, no blood, love, love wake up Gently, Spike shook Xander's shoulder. Buffy crowded in beside Oz, panting a little.

"Is he ok?" Spike snarled and Oz put his hand on Spike's shoulder, fear-scent and wolf-scent and pack safe Xander's eyes moved under their lids - fluttered open slowly. They flashed green - the hyena's eyes.

"Xander? Pet, you all right?" Xander blinked slowly - looked at Spike, at Oz - focused on Buffy.

NOT PACK slammed through the link so hard that Oz went halfway to wolf, growling, and Xander snarled and lunged at Buffy, knocking her back on her butt. Riley yelped and tried to catch her - went down on one knee behind her. Spike grabbed a handful of shirt and yanked, pulling Xander back a foot.

"What on earth -!" from Giles.
"Xander, what -" **Safe love calm safe safe**

*Not pack not pack RIVAL hurt mine KILL it* It was the hyena - purely the hyena - and Spike wrapped his arms around Xander's waist, hauling him back again as he made another attempt at Buffy and Riley.

"Xander, what is wrong with you!" Buffy scrambled to her feet, unconsciously shaking off Riley's helping hand. Oz moved fast, getting between her and Xander, who continued to struggle.

"That wand - it did something. He's not -" and **calm calm calm** from Oz.

*Not pack drive it off kill it*

"No, Xander, stop it." Spike yanked Xander back further - forced him around and held his head in his hands. The green-glimmering eyes were furious - eerie - and Spike brought the demon out.

**Pack leader STOP** Xander growled - literally growled - and Spike growled back, letting his hands slide down to Xander's shoulders - shaking him just a little.

"Stop it, Xander. No killing." Xander was shivering - panting a little - and he turned his head, his eyes
narrowing, as Buffy took a step towards them. *Not pack not pack not pack* in a furious, frantic monotone.

"Slayer - stop! Wolfling's right - something happened. That bloody wand - he's not right."

"What do you mean? What - what's *wrong*, exactly?" Giles advanced as well, and Xander twitched away from him. A tiny whine rose from his throat and Oz eyed the other three - crowded close against Xander's back, half wolf and just as panicky.

"I dunno, Watcher. It's - only the hyena in here. I think. I'm not getting - anything else."

*Xander, love - you there? Safe, you're safe, calm, calm, calm* Xander's hands had crept up and were on Spike's arms now, pulling him close. Spike went easily, arm around his shoulder, tucking Xander's head into his neck. Spike's hand on Xander's throat, just enough pressure, prick of fingernails. Showing dominance. Reassuring the hyena that he was safe, in the pack. Oz pushed close, and Xander reached out and ran his hand over Oz's hair - quick caress that seemed to reassure him further.

"It's that spell -" Riley said, and Spike snarled - tightened his arm around Xander as Xander made an effort to go for Riley.
"It's not the spell, you wanker, it's that Toth - that wand. What's the bloody wand do, Watcher!"

"I hadn't - hadn't found that out yet," Giles said, and Spike hissed in frustration. Xander was growling again, his gaze going from Buffy to Riley to Giles, his body tense and quivering with fight/flight. Putting that impulse out so strongly into the link that Oz was losing control - sliding further into the wolf. Spike was fighting as well - desperately trying to keep the demon from taking over and joining Xander in protecting the pack - defending their territory. Trying not to jump onto these invaders - these humans - and rip them to bloody shreds. Xander would never, never get over that.

_Calm calm safe now, pack is safe_ "Listen - Slayer - you get back, the three of you get back to the shop, find out what happened, what we have to do to fix it. I can't let him go - you're not part of the pack - none of you are - he's ready to attack you."

"What?" Buffy's voice was hard - furious, and she advanced three quick steps - froze when a sing-song wail quavered up from Oz, and the werewolf lost more humanity. Xander responded to that, letting loose the hunting shriek of the hyena and making Giles and Riley flinch.
"Watcher'll tell you - just go, before I lose control! We'll - fuck - we'll go find some fledges to kill; I'll see if we can wear him out and get him to the shop. Maybe he'll sleep. Just -" Xander lunged and Spike yanked him back, letting loose with a roar that froze all of them. He sank his fangs into Xander's throat and just held on, sending calm and safe and STOP as hard as he could, and finally he felt Xander's body relax under him - felt the incoherent muddle of rage and frustration and bloodlust that was coming from the hyena ease off into acceptance - into submission. He lifted his head, Xander's blood tingling through his mouth, and Buffy glared at him. Oz had wolfed out, and now stood stiff-legged, growling low in his throat, wolf's eyes flashing as green as Xander's, wolf fangs white and slavering in the faint light of the new moon. Giles looked grim - Riley mutinous, and Spike snarled silently at them.

"Fine, we'll go - why is Oz - we're going!" at Spike's warning hiss. "Come on guys, let's hurry." They jogged away, casting worried glances back over their shoulders, and Spike finally eased up - loosed his grip enough for Xander to step away, if he wanted to. He didn't. Oz came back to himself, shuddering. The full shift had shredded his clothes and he looked down ruefully at his naked self.

"Fuck Spike, he's - he's so strong, in the link, I couldn't..."
"S'okay, wolfling. Let's get out of here - place is gonna choke me. Let's go hunt vamps

"Yeah. Good idea. Damnit, I liked that shirt."

Hunt pack safe from Xander, and he bolted away, Spike and Oz on his heels.

Hours later and they were in the eastern-most cemetery in Sunnydale. They'd just ripped through a nest of five fledges - third nest of the night - and Xander seemed to be calm now. There was blood on his mouth - on his hands - and Spike had just barely kept him from trying to eat the last fledge, broken backed and gutted in the grass. Wouldn't like to remember THAT Spike thought, and they all sprawled down in the grass near the river, panting. There'd been various lone demons, as well - all in all, a good night for the pack, a bad one for Sunnydale's creatures of the night. Can only be good for the 'Master' reputation - a werewolf and a...werehyena? Something. They knew he wasn't all human. Oz went full wolf again and went to the water's edge, drinking, and Xander rose to follow. Spike grabbed him, pulling him back down.

"Maybe better not," he said, wondering if spell-bought longevity could keep Xander from a bout of Montezuma's Revenge. Who knew what got dumped into the river?
Xander fell back easily, happily rolling into Spike - rolling onto him, and the faint tingle of arousal that had sifted through the link all night suddenly kicked up sharply.

*Pack leader take* Xander pushed his face into Spike's neck - licked there, then nipped gently at the claim mark. Spike shivered - rolled them both over again, pinning Xander to the cool, damp grass.

"Wanna, pet? You need to, don't you," he whispered, and Xander's eyes were wide and glowing - inhuman, beautiful.

"Ssspike," he whispered, *want now me now*

"Anything, love." Spike bent to kiss him - made it a long, slow kiss, leisurely exploring every inch of Xander's mouth. Tasting the blood there and licking it away. He didn't stop to think about it - this was pack, this was *Xander*, and there was no way he would refuse him. Just about *couldn't*, at this point. Their rampage through Sunnydale tonight had been...like old times. Only better, because he loved his hunting partners - trusted them - and knew they felt the same way about him. Very nearly paradise. 'Cept it can't be anything good, this. *Damn Toth and damn the Watcher - you bloody well don't go on a hunt with only half the facts.* Xander's hands were under the duster, fumbling at Spike's shirt - tearing it up the
back. His fingers made fiery trails from shoulder blade to waist, nails scraping lightly.

Pack faintly, from Oz, and Spike lifted his head, a wave of extra arousal going through him as he caught site of Oz. The werewolf was crouched a foot away, naked, eyes wide and sheened silver in the moonlight. His mouth was wet - his hair - and he licked his lips, watching them.

"Wolfling - wanna...?" Oz ducked his head - leaned over, one hand flat on the grass. He kissed Spike - taste of almonds and rain, blood and magic. Beneath him, Xander squirmed, freeing a hand, and when Oz pulled back Xander's fingers were in his hair, tugging him down. Another kiss, equally long, and Spike couldn't help his hips moving, grinding down onto Xander; hard flesh and denim, friction making heat.

"Fuck, wolfling..." Spike whispered, and want mine pack from Xander. Oz pulled back, slowly.

"I gotta - this isn't for me, Spike. I'm gonna get some clothes, get to the Magic Box, see what they've found. You - come on in a bit? Gonna be light soon." Spike could smell the arousal coming off Oz - could scent something else, as well, and he caught Oz's hand, stopping him.
"What do you - don't understand, wolf." Oz licked his lips - glanced down at Xander, who was stroking Oz's thigh.

"What we did - it was good. It was..." Oz looked up, eyes searching for and finding the setting moon. *Want* "It helped. I feel - good, now. But I'm not part of this. It just - wouldn't work. Gonna find my own, you know? Gonna find somebody doesn't mind a little weirdness and bring him home to meet...my family." *Love you pack please* in the link, begging for understanding. And Spike *did* understand. Understood completely. He reached up and trailed his fingers gently through Oz's hair - the indigo a little faded now - and smiled. *Knew it would come to this. His choice. Doesn't change anything.*

"Yeah. *Love you* We'll be there in a while." Oz nodded - grinned suddenly, and then was the wolf, muzzle pointing to the moon and a howl wavering out. Xander joined him, raucous ululation, and Oz spun and was gone *love you love you* fading into silence. Spike looked after him for a moment - looked down at Xander. Hair ink-black in the moonlight, long strands webbed across his face and throat. Luminescent eyes, lips swollen. *Beautiful boy my own LOVE you* Spike bent down for another kiss, but after a moment Xander was wiggling out from beneath him, pushing the duster off Spike's shoulder and yanking at the shredded t-shirt.
"Yeah," Spike breathed, uncaring that someone - anyone - could see them. He got boots and jeans off, Xander's hands everywhere, and had to push him flat to the ground, straddling his hips to get Xander's work boots off. Xander's fingernails scratched up his back - sank into his hips, and Spike's hands were shaking. He swung off - pushed Xander down again and popped open the button on his jeans - got the zipper down and then Xander was pushing at jeans and underwear, wiggling out of them, pulling his shirt off and launching himself at Spike. Spike let himself fall flat in the grass, the cool stems tickling deliciously along his sides - between his thighs.

*Want want pack want mine* from Xander, without pause and without thought - the hyena at it's most basic. Xander *tasted*, every inch, licking in broad strokes and tiny dabs along hips and thighs, belly, ribs, chest. He sank his face into the crease of Spike's thigh - nuzzled further, and Spike hissed in delight as Xander took his cock in his mouth, licking slowly up and down the length, pulling the head in and sucking. Spike could feel the head of Xander's cock pushing into his thigh - felt the coolness from the moisture that trailed there, and he sat up - scooted out from under Xander and got behind him. Xander knelt there, his hands fisted in the grass, and
Spike got him up, hands and knees. Kissed and licked his way down Xander's back, feeling the quivering of tense muscles. He let his tongue trail down, between Xander's buttocks and Xander whimpered, thrusting back, spreading his legs wider. Spike teased his tongue along the warm, damp skin - sucked Xander's balls into his mouth for a moment and then moved back up, pressing in lightly, lightly. Xander leaned back, a breathy moan coming from him, and Spike pushed his tongue in hard, stabbing in as deep as he could. He gripped the heavy muscles of Xander's thighs in his hands, pulling his legs wider, pushing deeper, and Xander was panting now, making a growling encouraging noise, hips rolling and bucking under Spike's mouth.

Now now now in the link, flashing image of Spike, up on the balls of his feet and thrusting in, and Spike gasped.

"Fuck, yeah -" mine Spike crouched behind the mortal - made a small slit in his palm with a sharp nail. Blood wasn't the best lubricant, but it was better than nothing. They'd used up the small tube he'd had in the duster last week. He caressed himself, slicking the blood over his cock and then got up behind Xander - pushed in, quickly, before the drying blood got too tacky. Pushed into grasping heat, slick and tight. Xander moaned, arching into him, the rough, rapid pace exactly what the hyena
wanted. Spike balanced himself, his thighs on either side of Xander's hips and thrust hard, feeling that place in Xander's body rub over the tip of his cock - feeling Xander shudder around him, muscles quivering with strain and "Want hard want"

"Fuck...so hot, love..." Spike could smell the sharp green smell of grass as Xander's hands tore at the blades beneath them. The ground was damp - muddy - and the wet-earth smell was thickening as they both furrowed the ground. The summer air was like a warm blanket across his back, Xander like living fire, and Spike pounded harder, his right hand leaving bloody smears along Xander's ribs, both hands gripping tight enough to bruise. Xander pushed back, his legs going somehow wider, a whimper building in his throat, ratcheting up to gasping cries. 

Yours yours TAKE now and Spike brought one hand around to Xander's cock, stroking furiously, and he leaned over and morphed. 

MINE mine always and Xander arched his head to one side. Spike sank his fangs in, growling, and the scalding jet of semen across his hand was enough to bring Spike's own orgasm; they shuddered together, mindless rhythm. Xander howled, and Spike drank blood awash with love.
and *magic* and *pack*, tasting of salt and sweet and Xander. When it was over, they both sprawled in the grass, panting, and Xander rolled over and nuzzled in close, the link a warm, wordless haze of love and contentment.

*Love you* Spike stroked Xander's sweat-slippery back, breathing deeply of their mingled scents. Xander caught Spike's hand in his and slowly licked the still-bleeding cut on his palm - closed his eyes and made a sound almost like a purr, the blood bright on his lips. Away towards the river a bird called - insistent *cheetcheetcheet* of a goldfinch - and Spike sighed.

"C'mon, pet, time to head back. Sun's coming up."

*Love you sleep* from Xander, and Spike sat up - stood up - dislodging Xander and making him sound a half-hearted growl.

"Fuck." Spike looked down at himself - mud, grass, blood - and Xander wasn't any better. Spike looked out at the river - sighed again.

"C'mon." *Bath* He pulled Xander up by his arm and dragged him down to the river's edge. The water was frigid around his ankles and Spike hesitated for one second - plunged ahead, pulling Xander along behind.
They waded in, Xander struggling to escape, the current pushing strongly at their legs. When the water was up to Spike's thighs, he turned and let Xander go. Xander had been pulling back hard, growling, and when Spike let go he flailed for a moment then went down, going completely under.

_Cold_ COLD! and Xander surged up, straight into Spike, knocking him back. They both went under that time and Spike was glad he didn't need to breathe - he didn't think he could have, with the cold constricting his chest and making him shudder all over.

_Cold_ It sounded mournful this time, and when Spike got to his feet and pulled Xander up, the human's teeth were chattering and he was looking a bit blue around the edges.

"I know. M'sorry, pet, but we needed to clean up." Spike scrubbed at dried blood and mud - plucked leaves out of Xander's hair and then pushed him towards the shore. "Clean enough." _Clothes_

Xander waded ashore and stood shivering, his arms clenched tight around his ribs and his hair running little streams down his back and chest. He looked utterly miserable and Spike cast around for his ripped t-shirt.
"Come on now, love, let me fix you up." Spike used the t-shirt as a towel, rubbing briskly, and after a few minutes Xander was mostly dry and his shivering had eased up. Spike had him lean over so he could wring out his hair, and then he swept up Xander's clothes and pushed them into his arms.

"Get dressed, pet - gotta get going." Spike dried himself as best he could with the now wet t-shirt and then yanked on jeans and socks and boots. He picked up his duster and brushed grass off it.

*Home tired hungry* Xander was leaning against a tree, eyes shut, and Spike agreed with him completely.

"Me too, pet," *home soon love you* "C'mon, time to see if the Watcher can fix this. Let's run, Xander - warm us up." Xander pushed away from the tree - lifted his head as if scenting. *Not pack*

"That's most of the world, love." *Wolfling* he sent, and an image of the Magic Box, and Xander yipped quietly and trotted up the slope to the cemetery proper - broke into a run, and Spike ran with him, shoulder to shoulder. Above them, the sky was paling towards sunrise; frail green and gossamer yellow, streaked with wisps of clouds. The goldfinch called again, chasing them away.
They burst in through the doors of the Magic Box, panting a little, thoroughly warm - straight into a fight. The demon stood in the midst of the shop, grappling with Buffy. Tara and Willow were holding hands, chanting something, and there seemed to be a sort of cloud of pinpricks of light around the demon's head, distracting it. It was shaking its head, blinking - half blind from the spell. Oz was in the midst of a leap, landing squarely on the demon's back, claws shredding. Riley was on the floor, at an awkward angle against a bookshelf, and Giles was helping him up. Xander growled Pack and threw himself forward, crashing into the demon's legs. As they fell, Oz scrambled free and whirled around, ready to dive back in. Buffy kicked the demon in the throat, making it writhe and gag,

"Sword!" Anya yanked a sword down from a rack behind the counter and tossed it awkwardly to Buffy, who caught it and brought it down hard, through Toth's chest. An ear-piercing shriek reverberated out of the demon and it clawed at the sword - went limp, dead. Xander
sidled up close to Oz, leaning into him - put his face down into Oz's hair, scenting, reassuring himself.

*Wolf safe pack*

"Well, *that* was neat," Spike said, and pulled out a cigarette. Blood was pooling out from under the demon's body and Buffy wrinkled her nose, stepping away.

"Riley, you ok?" she asked, going over to where Giles had him propped up.

"Sure, Buff. Just - whacked my head a little. Mr. Giles says I'm fine." Giles nodded, a little smile on his face, and Buffy smiled back.

"Wow - ok. Great spell guys, by the way," Buffy said to Willow, hauling Riley to his feet and guiding him to a chair. He slumped there, holding his head.

"Yeah - that was cool, wasn't it? Like a swarm of bees!"

"Well, it is *called* 'Swarm of Bees'," Anya said, coming out from behind the counter. She eyed the various books, statues, and miscellaneous paraphernalia that had been strewn around in the fight and sighed. "And everything was perfect, too, before that jerk came in, wand all blasting."
"Speaking of wands -" Giles looked around, and Spike strode over - scooped the wand up from where it lay half under a display shelf.

"This thing? Think it only works for Toth?" Spike pointed it at Buffy, who flinched.

"Spike -"

"Ah, don't worry, Watcher - I won't fry your Slayer." Spike swung the wand casually, moving over to where Xander and Oz were still standing. Xander pressed up against him, looking distrustfully at the others.

"You figure out what this did to Xander?"

"Yes, actually, we did. It seems the wand is a 'ferula gemina'. It splits a person into two halves - separating various aspects of their personality. I think what Toth wanted to do was separate Buffy into a 'Slayer' Buffy and a - a 'Not-Slayer' Buffy. Then, he would kill the weaker of the two. If one dies, they both die." Spike raised his eyebrow - looked at the wand.

"What I wouldn't have given to have this little gimcrack," he murmured. "Catch." He tossed it towards Buffy, who snatched it out of the air and held it, frowning.
"You mean - you don't wanna - use it?" Buffy rolled her eyes. "What am I saying?" Spike shrugged - took a long drag and hugged Xander a little closer.

"Nah. I don’t need a magic wand to take you on, Slayer."

_Hungry tired go home_ Xander slumped against him, eyes half-shut.

"Soon, love," Spike said, smoothing his hand through Xander's still damp hair. "So - if this makes _two_ of someone - where's the other Xander?"

"Well - it didn't say, exactly, _how_ it makes two, so he could be - anywhere. We know he's not dead 'cause - this Xander is still here, but..." Willow looked anxious, and she and Tara sat down at the lighted table, shoving some books aside. "We were gonna do a locator spell, just before -" Willow gestured to the dead Toth, grimacing.

"Well, let's get on with it. Might be Xander - the other one - is in some kinda trouble or something." Spike pulled Xander close to him, doing his best to lock down the fear that threatened to swamp him. Xander - another one, some aspect of _this_ one, something - had been out on the damn Hellmouth all night, alone.

_Why can't I hear him? Why isn't he calling? Oh fuck, fuck..._
Calm safe from Oz, even though the werewolf looked a bit freaked, as well. Tara was gathering some herbs into a small bowl when suddenly the bell jangled and Dawn burst into the shop - towing a disheveled, frightened-looking Xander behind her.

"Dawn!" Buffy hurried forward, and Xander took one look at Spike and threw himself forward, arms going around the vampire's naked waist, head buried in Spike's neck.

"Xander, love -" Safe safe safe

"Oh god, Spike, god, I'm - I'm s-so glad you're here, I thought -" Xander gulped - coughed. His voice was thick with tears. "I can't hear you, I can't hear Oz, I thought you were - I thought you were all dead, I woke up in the dump and everybody was gone, I thought - Spike, Spike -"

"Shhh, love, shhh, I've got you now, you're safe - we're all safe, got you now..." Spike wrapped his arms around the new Xander, holding him tight, stroking his hands through the human's hair, trying to soothe the shivering body. Oz tugged the old Xander close, trying to distract him.

"I just woke up and somebody was knocking and I thought maybe you'd forgotten your key, Buffy, so I came downstairs and it was Xander. He was really freaked out - he kept babbling about everybody being dead, and -" Dawn took a shaky breath and Buffy put her arm around her sister's shoulders, hugging her close.

"Anyway, I tried to call his house and nobody answered, and then I called here and it was busy, and he was getting really - upset - so I thought we should just come down here." She leaned into Buffy - looked down at the floor. "Eewww!" Is that blood? Is it - dead?" Buffy's eyes went wide and she tugged Dawn away from the dead Toth. Spike heard what Dawn said, but concentrated on the Xander shuddering in his arms.

Love safe now safe love you Xander didn't respond, and Spike gently put his hand under his chin - lifted his head up and looked into bloodshot, teary eyes.

"You can't hear me at all - even now?"

"No! I can't hear - either of you. And I know you can't hear me or you would have - God, it's - I hate it, Spike."
Can you - can you fix it?" he whispered, and Spike hugged him close.

"Course I can, love. Well, I think the witches can, or the Watcher. They know what to do. Right?" Spike glared over at the group clustered around the table, and Giles took off his glasses, polishing them sketchily on his shirt-tail.

"Yes, we know what to do - it's a simple spell, really, to reunite them. We just need to make a circle - Riley, Buffy, help me clear a place, and Willow, you look up the proper sigil, will you please? In the 'Crawford's Demonica', I believe." As they swung into action, Spike gently tugged at Xander, and they sank to the floor. The new Xander didn't let go his death-grip on Spike, and the old one crouched down with Oz, studying his twin with a bewildered expression. He reached out and hesitantly touched the new Xander's cheek - ran grubby fingers through his hair. The Xander in Spike's arms shivered and looked up - smiled tremulously at his double.

"Wow. It's kinda - kinda weird, to see me like that. I look like that? It's - different than in a mirror."

"Yeah, you look like that, only usually much cleaner. He - you - were a bit...messy, tonight."
Mine pack me...pack? The old Xander seemed puzzled - a little afraid - and Oz settled down cross-legged, tugging him down with him, arm around his shoulder.

"Yeah, that's you, Xander. It's ok - we'll fix this soon." Oz rubbed the tense shoulder under his hand, trying to soothe the hyena. The old Xander leaned against him, sighing, struggling to keep his eyes open.

Love you Spike thought, directing it at Xander and Oz, and he pressed a soft kiss to his Xander's temple. "Love you. We'll get this fixed - get home soon. No work for you today, pet."

"Oh - it's ok. Before we left the house I called his boss. X-xander was all worried about missing work so I told him he was sick. He seemed really nice." Dawn came up the stairs, skirting widely around the demon corpse. She hesitated, then sat down across from the little group on the landing. The old Xander lifted his head marginally, scenting her, then relaxed.

Pack pretty he thought muzzily, and Oz laughed.

"What?" Dawn asked, looking a little upset.

"Nothing, Dawn - I'm sorry. Just - Xander said - this Xander - " Oz hugged his Xander a little. "He thinks of you as part of our pack. And - he said you were pretty."
"Oh. Oh?" Dawn looked confused for a minute and then grinned. "This is so cool! I never get to be around for the really interesting stuff! Now this! And a couple weeks ago I helped Buffy in a Slayer-related cover-up, when we didn't tell mom she got staked. I could so go on patrol!"

Oz grinned at her, and Spike rolled his eyes - looked around for someplace to put out his cigarette. He finally ground it out on the sole of his boot and shoved the butt into his pocket. *Gotta remember to get those things out of there. Pockets are gettin' gritty. Hurry up, Watcher - my boy needs to go home*

"Maybe you should learn some moves before you try patrolling, Bit," Spike said, and Dawn frowned at him.

"Moves?"

"Yeah - you know - some kicks and things. Don't want to go down to the first vamp that pops up."

"Oh." Dawn crossed her arms, looking disappointed. "Buffy'll never teach me anything. She says I should just stay home safe."

"She's your big sister, Dawn, that's her job, to thwart you." The new Xander smiled at Dawn and snuggled a little closer to Spike. "I'll teach you some stuff if you
want, though." Dawn brightened. "Really? You mean that?"

"Sure, Bit. We all can. After all, you saved the day here, bein' so quick to get my boy down here - takin' care of him an' all."

"He was just - you were so scared, is all," Dawn said softly, and the new Xander shivered a little.

"I'm - I'm alone in here." He pointed at his head. "I haven't been that way for - a long time. It's... scary. Scary not being able to hear S-spike, or Oz or...myself. I hate it." His voice cracked a little, and Spike hugged him close.

"It's all right love, nearly over," Spike whispered. Dawn reached out and patted the new Xander's knee, smiling gently at him. Over by the training-room door, Giles climbed to his feet, chalk in hand, and surveyed the large sigil he had sketched on the floor. Willow stood nearby with a book in her hands.

"Is that it?" Giles asked, and she looked down at the book.

"Yup - perfect. Time to do the spell. Guys? You ready?"
"Past ready," Spike said, and he got up, pulling the new Xander up with him, reaching down and catching the old Xander's hand and pulling him up as well.

"C'mon then, let's do this. You two - hold on to each other." Oz stood as well, and the new Xander took his double's hand - looked inquiringly at Willow.

"What - what do we have to do?"

"Just stand in the center, and I'll say the words. It's a really simple spell. You both want to be together, and all the energy from the wand is working to keep you apart. All I have to do is dispel it and you'll go back together naturally."

"You sure, Red?" Spike asked, following his Xanders over to the chalk design. Oz and Dawn stood on the steps, watching.

"I'm sure, Spike. Don't - don't worry about it. Wow. It's really amazing!" Willow was studying her friend closely, and Spike stifled a growl. The old Xander had no such inhibitions and he snarled at her, pulling his twin close.

"Why is he -"

"You're not pack, Red. He doesn't trust you. The hyena doesn't."
"Oh. He doesn't? But - but Xander and I are friends!"

"The hyena isn't Xander...not really." Spike said, watching the new Xander maneuver himself and his double into the center of the sigil. *Just Xander without a conscious. Xander - as a vampire, almost. Lovely boy* Spike grinned a little to himself, thinking of that.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Spike? I mean - look at them! Imagine the possibilities, two of them, in bed..." Anya trailed off thoughtfully, eyeing the two, and Spike raised a smirk for her, eyebrow going up.

"Well now, that is a very...attractive idea. Hadn't thought of that." He completely ignored the various groaning and/or disgusted noises coming from Buffy, Riley, and Giles. He grinned over at the two, then shook his head at the terrified look that was coming over the new Xander's face. "But I want my own back, all in working order. The hyena's too -wild - to be out without Xander keepin' him in check." The new Xander relaxed marginally, and Spike ground his teeth in frustration, hating that he couldn't reassure him through the link.

"It really is incredible," Riley said from his chair. "Don't you just want to lock them in separate rooms and do experiments?" The room was silent, everyone staring at
him, and Spike stalked over to the ex-soldier and let the
demon out to snarl straight into Riley's face.

"Don't even fuckin' think it, you bastard. Nobody touches
my boy." Riley flinched away - looked angry at himself.

"Just thinkin' out loud, there. Back off."

"Fuckin' tosser," Spike hissed, and shrugged away from
the restraining hand Buffy put on his arm. He marched
grimly over to Willow, fighting to get the demon under
control. He finally pushed it away, human again, and
Willow swallowed and shifted minutely away from him.

"C'mon and do it, Red - past time."

"R-right, ok. No problem." She cleared her throat
nervously - shut the book and concentrated briefly. "Let
the spell be ended." The Xanders shimmered, as if they
were under water, and Spike felt a moment of vertigo.
And then they were one, and Spike?

Love you love you safe now

Thank GOD love you Oz love you Spike took two long
strides and had Xander in his arms, the human holding
him so tight it was a good thing the vampire didn't need
to breathe.
"Shhh, love, it's all right now." *Safe safe got you love you* and *Love you* from Oz.

"Well. I, for one, am glad that this is over." Giles yawned, covering his mouth, and looked bleakly around the store. "I have to clean this up. I've put up flyers - the Grand Opening is today and really, I can't delay it any longer." The older man rubbed at his eyes under his glasses, and Dawn bounced down the steps.

"I can help you, Giles - I don't have to be to school for another hour, and my first period is study hall, anyway, I can miss it. Let me help, please?"

"Dawn -" Buffy said, then her shoulders slumped in defeat at the look of pleading Dawn turned on her. "Ok, just this once. You did really good with the - with Xander. I guess you can if you *promise* to go straight to school when it's time."

"Aren't you gonna be here?" Buffy yawned, covering her mouth.

"I'm gonna go see mom, and then...I've got some stuff I've got to do on campus. You'll be ok here with Giles."

"And me. I may as well stay - no clients today." Anya picked up a book with half the pages crushed and vainly
tried to smooth them flat. Spike looked over at Oz, running soothing hands up and down Xander's back.

*Love you love you never leave* in the link, insistent and heartbreaking, and he just wanted to be *home*.

"Ready to go, wolfling?"

"Yeah - I brought the van. I'll drive you guys home and then -" Oz looked around the shop. "I'm workin' today, so - I'll be home later."

"Sorry, Giles, but Tara and I both have classes this afternoon, so I think we're gonna go home and get a nap in before class. We'll be back over as soon as we're done - to help with the rush." Giles looked at her. "I'm sure there'll be a rush! Especially if you wear your wizard hat!" Buffy snickered and Giles looked affronted.

"I don't think -" Giles started, and Spike tugged gently at Xander - got him walking towards the door and Oz's van. As they went up the steps, there was a light touch at his arm. Spike looked over to see Tara, proffering his blanket.

"I thought you m-might need this," she said softly, and Spike smiled at her.
"Thanks, Glinda. And - tell Red thanks for me too, ok? For both of us."

"Sure, Spike." Tara handed over the blanket - gave Spike an enquiring look. "Uh, Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"What happened t-to your shirt?" Spike looked down at himself reflexively - grinned at her.

"Oh - that. You really wanna know?" He raised an eyebrow suggestively, doing his best come-hither look, and Tara blushed and backed up a step.

"Oh - uh, n-no, I guess I don't really wan-wanna know. Bye!" She turned and scurried back down the steps and Spike hugged Xander close, swinging the blanket around them both.

Love you always safe safe home he thought, including Oz, and the three of them walked out into the sunlight, going home.

22 Remembering

Spike stirred in his sleep - moved his head a little, rubbing his cheek against Xander's stomach, and Xander ran his fingers gently through tangled, white-blond hair. Spike
settled again, motionless, but Xander continued the gentle caress - meshed his fingers with Spike's where they lay on Xander's thigh. He was supposed to be asleep too, but he couldn't settle. So many things were running through his head - so many memories and moments. Oz had left a CD playing in the living room and the music came through to him softly. The ever-present sea-breeze blew through the window, puffing the curtains out, and the late-afternoon sun was dappled green and gold through the trees. Spike glowed, the diffused light making him otherworldly, all creamy-gold. The inhuman beauty that he wore so easily seemed out of place against the blue and green striped sheets, and Xander smiled fondly down at him from his half-sitting position - blinked at a sudden prickling in his eyes.

*No, don't do that. Think about - something good. Something...happy. Think about anything but...* Xander shut his eyes - pushed his mind away from the misery of the day and cast back. Back to the beginning of October, and that incident with Tara's family.

"...state of shock at flick of switch (mindless) into the cloudburst overhead
I wanna get my face wet
been buried in the sand for years (headlong) into the cloudburst naked
there's really no escaping it
there's gonna be a cloudburst here.."

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"But what kind of demon is she?" Anya asked, and Tara's dad looked at her with something like revulsion on his face.

"What kind? What does it matter? Evil is evil. She just has to come home, now, before things - get bad."

"No, I'd like to know what kind as well," Giles said, coming out from behind the counter and sending a rather Ripperish look at the other man. Tara stood miserably, her eyes brimmed with tears.

"There's lots of different kinds of demons," Anya went on, her voice slipping into lecture mode. "Some are evil and some are considered useful members of society." She glanced proudly at the others and continued. "Let's see, there's -" As Anya started rattling off various types of demons, Spike leaned in close to Xander, fingers rubbing in the small of his back.

*Human - all human*
Yeah Xander sent Spike a brief image from months' earlier - Tara's soul, gleaming gold and green and blue, and Spike nodded.

"Yeah - tell the Slayer," Spike murmured, then he sauntered over to where Tara and Willow were standing.

"I think I got your number, mate," he said, interrupting Anya and looking narrow-eyed at Mr. Maclay. "You just use this little 'demon' ploy to keep the women-folk in line, don't you? A little lie to make sure they stay where they belong, eh? She's no demon, and I can prove it." Tara and Willow were both staring at him now, and Giles had a gleam of something like amusement in his eyes. Xander touched Buffy's arm - drew her close with a jerk of his head.

"I've seen her - she's all human. Just play along, ok?" Buffy looked at him - opened her mouth - nodded.

"Prove it? There's nothing to prove, I know!" Tara's father sneered. Behind him, Tara's brother and cousin looked incredulous - furious. Spike tapped Tara on the shoulder.

"Sorry 'bout this, Glinda," he said, and drew back and punched her. Then he yelled and grabbed his head in his hands. "Bloody hell that hurts!"
"Ow!" Tara yelped - put her hand to her already-swelling lip. Willow gaped at Spike - blinked - then shot a triumphant look at the father.

"That hurt! Tara, it hurt!"

"Y-yeah it d-d-did! Oh!" Tara stared at Willow - was suddenly grinning, and Giles cleared his throat, fighting a smile himself. Spike moaned and rubbed at his head and Xander made 'awww' noises and pulled him into a one-armed hug.

Win an Oscar

Quiet, you

"That proves that you're lying. If there were any demon in Tara, it wouldn't have hurt Spike to do that. So I suggest that you leave." Mr. Maclay stared at Giles- at his daughter - and puffed himself up like a toad.

"She belongs with her family, at home and you bunch aren't gonna keep her from us."

"Family?" Buffy looked indignant. "You want to take her home, Mr. Maclay, you go right ahead." Buffy crossed her arms - took on an expression that had sent fledges and Fyarl demons running. "But you'll have to go through me to get her." Tara gasped, and Willow grinned, and
Dawn bounced up next to Buffy - copied the stance and the stare so well that Xander had to stifle a giggle.

"Me too."

"If you little girls think -" Mr. Maclay started, and Giles stepped up as well, glasses tucked into his pocket and his eyes absolutely Ripper.

"Not just little girls here, Mr. Maclay," he said, and the other man took a step back.

"We're with Buffy, too," Xander said, stepping up on the other side of Dawn. Spike was at his back - morphed into the demon and snarled - and Tara's brother and cousin jumped and huddled together, round-eyed. The street door opened behind them, the bell jangling.

"And me. Even though being a demon does have its perks," Anya said, hefting a suspiciously new-looking 'antique' dagger she had been marking down to half price.

"What is this!" Mr. Maclay barked, his voice a little strained, and he jumped at the quiet voice at his back.

"Whatever it is, I'm with them, too." Oz, standing in the door, wolf's eyes and a snarl lifting his lip, and Spike
laughed - cut it off abruptly as Xander elbowed him.

*Headache*

"This is family, Mr. Maclay, and Tara is part of it." Buffy narrowed her eyes. "So I suggest you leave. She's already home." Tara was weeping silently now, clinging to Willow who was stroking her hair and whispering to her. Oz skirted around the Maclays and joined the group, and finally the others broke - turned and began to shuffle out of the store. Tara's cousin turned back, a look of - regret? Or perhaps it was desire - desire to find the strength that Tara had found.

"Are you happy now?" she snapped, and Tara looked at her - looked at Willow, a smile of pure bliss on her face, making her glow. In that moment, despite the tears and the swollen lip, she was the most beautiful woman Xander had ever seen.

"Yes," she said.

Later, when Buffy had taken Dawn home, and Giles and Willow were in a heated discussion about a spell, and Oz - who'd been brought up to speed but was pretending nicely - was making Spike a cup of tea, Tara came over to where Xander and Spike were sitting on the wrought-iron staircase. Spike was leaning back between Xander's legs, getting his temples massaged, taking full advantage of
being the 'hurting hero'. Tara had smiled at them, taken the handkerchief full of ice off her lip, and leaned in and kissed Spike softly on the cheek.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Drama queen Xander thought, smiling down at Spike, tracing the scarred eyebrow with one finger. Spike's hand tightened on his for a moment - he burrowed a little closer, and one leg edged over Xander's knees. Xander sighed in contentment - listened to the distant rush of the sea and closed his eyes, remembering other things. Remembering the troll, and how it had come rampaging into the Bronze, shouting for ale and banging into Spike, making him scratch the cue ball. Spike had stood up fast, cursing, and glared up at the furious troll.

"Watch yourself, mate!"

"I must have ale! And babies!"

"For babies you need the hospital -" Spike started, and Xander, who had been wondering whether or not to try and get the troll out of the club, yanked on his arm.
"Stop that! No babies!"

"Weeell..." Spike rubbed his chin, tilted his head at the troll. "They do this onion thing here, s'brilliant -"

"You cannot appease me!" The troll shouted, and things went rapidly downhill from there. This time it was Willow and Anya to the rescue, except that they - or maybe Willow - had called the troll in the first place. While Giles gave Willow what Spike referred to as 'a proper dressing-down', Anya reluctantly told them the tale of Olaf, Aud, D'Hoffryn, and how to become a Vengeance Demon in one easy step.

Eyes still closed, Xander smiled, his fingers never leaving off their slow petting of Spike's hair. A ghost of sound - faint, faint purr - rumbled up from the vampire. The troll-incident had been...right after Riley left for good. That was not a happy memory, but mostly because of how much it had hurt Buffy. Xander and Oz had been happy to see the ex-soldier go. So had Spike. He had, in fact, made sure Riley would never come back. Xander frowned - sighed. No point in trying - like it or not, the memory spooled out in his mind, and he was obliged to re-live it. 

I don't want to think about this, but I don't want to think about...today, either. Fuck, I just want to forget...everything.
"Come out of your shell
and look at the sea
it may be just as well
you stayed here with me
private hell at turn of a key
(blindly) into the cloudburst overhead
I wanna get my face wet
been buried in these hands for years..."

*****************************************************************

Spike had been acting - odd - for two nights, and the third night, Saturday, Xander and Oz had decided to wait up for him - make him talk. Spike was a little better at manipulating the link then Xander, and much better than Oz, and he'd been hiding something. Xander was prepared to sit on him while Oz played Billy Ray Cyrus' Achy Breaky Heart on repeat until he cracked. Xander declined to ask why Oz had a Billy Ray Cyrus CD in his collection, and Oz just grinned and pretended it was Devon's. They sat up watching a frenetic Bollywood movie on TV - Indian woman and men in amazing costumes, leaping and singing and swooning to sitar and skin drums. Oz occasionally pointed out a religious reference that made the plot, to him at least, heretical,
and Xander just nodded wisely and watched cleavage and bare chests with equal appreciation. There was popcorn, a leftover mix of mini Halloween candy bars, and Spike's jealously guarded Jaffa Cakes spread out on the foot of the fold-out bed.

Around four a.m. Spike came home, announcing his presence a mile away with the grumbling roar of the DeSoto and something cacophonous and British on the stereo. The link had been full of bloodlust and anticipation and what Xander had come to recognize as satiation. Before-and-after-the-hunt feelings that he didn't think about too closely, most of the time. Tonight, as Spike parked the car and climbed out, aware of them, the link began to close down and Xander sent a Stop! before he even thought about it. Spike came in the front door and stood there, eyeing them.

_Tell_ Xander thought, watching him, and Spike hesitated - took off his duster and slung it across the back of the battered recliner they'd recently acquired. Flung himself down into the same chair and looked broodingly at the TV for a moment.

"Tell what, pet?"

"C'mon, Spike," Xander said softly.
No secrets from the soldier, and:

Pack from Oz. Spike scrubbed his hands through his hair, disordering it and making it stick up in all directions.

"Right. I - found out somethin' about G.I. Joe." Spike stopped, looking at them, so serious and sober that Xander felt a little lurch of fear.

Tell, love.

"Remember, Xander, I told you people pay to have vamps feed off 'em?"

"Yeah..." Xander said, frowning, and then he and Oz both froze as Spike sent them a flurry of images. A warehouse somewhere near the docks. A room; filthy, dark, crowded. Riley sprawled on a broken-legged couch, a half-dressed vampire woman feeding from his arm, a naked one astride him. Riley's jeans were around his thighs - his free hand was clutched so hard on the second vamps' hips that he had drawn blood. She was moving languidly, obviously impaled on Riley. His mouth was pressed to her breast, and blood was there, streaking down her belly, dripping from his chin. Xander shook his head, as much to purge the image as in disbelief.

"Oh my god. Spike -"
Sick from Oz, and Spike looked sharply at him. Oz looked back.

"He's playing a fucking stupid game."

"Got that right, wolf."

"So - how'd you find out?" Xander asked, and Spike looked - embarrassed?

"Well...been going 'round to the Slayer's house every night, haven't I? Her mum's worried, and the Bit's worried... So I go 'round, make sure everything's...ok there." Spike scrubbed at his hair again - made a half-hearted effort to get a cigarette out of the duster and gave up. "And - couple nights ago, I saw that bastard headin' down to the docks. He looked - nervous. So I followed him." They all sat in silence for a moment, then Xander connected the rather blank look on Spike's face with the near-silent link.

"What did you do, Spike?" he asked softly, and Spike was on his feet, snarling, the demon out in seconds and Rage hate kill it The demon in the link strong enough to make Oz flicker halfway to the wolf.

"I fixed it, Xander. He could've been turned, any time. And then just waltz in there, Joyce and the Niblet all unsuspecting - I fixed it. Fixed all those bastards." His
voice had started off loud but then had sunk away to almost nothing, to a hissing rasp that made the hair stand up on the back of Xander's neck. Beside him Oz shifted, snarling just a little. The link was heading towards incoherency - the images were bloodier and starting to become disconnected. Not Riley and vampire whores, anymore, but other soldiers - another place, and Xander shot to his feet and advanced on Spike - got his arms around him and held him, hard.

"Love, it's all right..." Safe safe always safe love you Spike was shivering - breathing hard - and Xander tugged him over to the bed - eased him down. Spike hunched there, leaning into Xander's embrace, one hand creeping out to Oz and clenching down when Oz slipped his now-human hand into Spike's.

"Just - tell us what happened, ok?" Xander smoothed the rumpled hair - kissed Spike's temple, and Spike heaved a sigh, eyes closed, fitting his head into crook of Xander's neck.

"Couple days ago, I found out. So I - went down there later, after he'd gone. Found out how long he'd been doing that. They'd been - givin' him a different one every time. Gettin' him addicted to it but not letting him - form any links. You know how bad he's been looking." Xander
nodded, looking over at Oz. Riley had looked bad, lately - a greyish pallor, darkly-ringed eyes - his hands always shaking and his gaze never quite meeting anyone else's. He said it was just nerves - pressure from school. Xander thought about what Spike had just said.

"Wait - explain that to me. What do you mean - a different one every time?"

"Different vamp every time. You know how we - made the link? Shared blood?" Spike rubbed his cheek just a little on Xander's shoulder. "They didn't let him take blood from the same vamp twice. That makes him want it, but he never gets what his body's craving. Just more want, never satisfaction. Worse than skag, that. He'd be desperate enough to be to be turned - or just drained dry. They knew who he was." Spike leaned into Xander a little more, and Xander hugged his arms around the vampire - fought a rising sense of horror.

"So he's - addicted. And - dangerous."

Sick hurt mine KILL it "Yeah."

Pack pack pack from Oz, softly, and his fingers were rubbing gently over Spike's, chaffing them in both of his hands as if the vampire were suffering from cold.
"What - what did you do tonight, Spike?" Spike sighed, and raised his head - looked at Xander for a long moment, and his eyes were ancient, and implacable, and utterly cold.

"Took the Slayer to see him there."

"Oh Christ -" Xander was on his feet before he'd even thought about moving, and Spike just watched him, silent even in the link. "Spike, why - god, why did you do that?"

"He - could've hurt you, love. Or the wolf. Any of you. He needed to be gone."

"But - why take Buffy there? You know how - fuck." Hurt her Xander paced to the door and back, scowling.

Mine protect mine love you MINE overwhelming and fierce and Xander and Oz both flinched a little.

"Damnit, Xander, you think I give a fuck if the Slayer gets her little heart all bruised over that bastard?" Spike was up as well - up and so close to Xander that they were almost touching the length of their bodies. The demon glared out at him, and Xander stood still, watching. Family in the link and not a clue where it was coming from.
"He hurt you - he helped hurt the wolfling, never mind he thought better of it later. He put the Bit and Joyce in danger. And he fuckin' put his hands on me, Xander - he - 
" Spike's voice choked into silence and the link - full of anger, of hate and of fear - suddenly shattered into jagged shards of pain as Spike flung something at them; something hideous and savage and bloody and Oz was the wolf, furious. Xander reeled back from that freeze-frame of memory, crying out - tried to shut out the rest of the memory that rose, prompted by that image. He felt it - before, after, during - and he knew Oz did too. Felt the backlash as the images -soldiers, doctors, blood, pain - hit the werewolf and Xander tried frantically to shut it down. Then it was gone - done - and Xander stood swaying, his head in his hands. He'd seen those memories before - in nightmares, right after the claim spell. He'd never wanted to see them again. He could hear Oz - a soft whimpering - and Spike panting raggedly somewhere. Xander opened his eyes - took a stumbling step forward and hauled Spike up from where he'd collapsed to his knees.

Sorry sorry love you sorry oh gods Spike was on his knees again, elbows on the bed and face buried in his hands. The full change had shredded the worn jeans Oz had been wearing and he fumbled at the sheet - pulled it
over himself, up to his waist and hunched there, miserable looking.

_Hurt hurt hurt_ from him, and Spike dragged in a hard, shaky breath.

"Wolf - Oz - _fuck_, I'm sorry, I - didn't want you to see that, I -" Spike's voice was ragged - teary - and Oz leaned forward and rested his forehead on Spike's temple.

_Safe._

_Sorry love you, Xander, love you so sorry_ Xander sagged down on the other side of Spike - reached and began a slow, gentle massage of Spike's neck. They simply rested there for long moments, the link thick with reassurance - with love. Finally Spike shifted - sat slowly back on his heels, taking one of Xander's hands in his, and one of Oz's in the other.

"All right, wolfling?" he asked softly, and Oz wiped at his eyes - nodded. Xander studied their hands, rubbing his thumb over and over Spike's knuckles.

_Spike's hands are so - elegant. Like a painter's hands. And Oz - he's got those calluses from the guitar and those long fingers... My hands look so - common._ Xander took a deep breath and Spike looked up at him, his eyes bluer for being awash in unshed tears, his mouth in a grim line.
"I don't - I don’t care about Riley, Spike. He deserves whatever he gets. But - Buffy..."

"I know it hurt her, pet. But what was I supposed to do? She wouldn't have just believed me if I'd told her."

"Maybe. Maybe not. What - what did she do?"

"Started knockin' hell outta the vamps there. Chased the customers off. When I left, her and the farmboy were havin' a knock-down drag-out. The Army wants him back, you know."

"They do?" Xander glanced over at Oz, who shrugged.

"Yeah. He said - they're in town, wantin' him back, an' tonight's the night. He stays or he goes."

"Guess he'll be going, then." Xander muttered. Beside him, Oz shifted a little bit - reached with his free hand and touched Spike's arm.

"What else, Spike? You said you fixed them all." Spike looked at Oz, head to one side a little, and the link was Not pack never touch you

"Yeah. I had - well, there's this bloke I know. Demon. And I had him do me up a little...time-bomb. Been waitin' to use it."
"Well...he made a fetch. Like a ghost. Of one of the soldier-boys." Dead boy and Xander shivered. It was Graham that was dead.

"It went to where they were waitin' for him tonight. It was - there's this spell..."

"Just the basics, ok?" Xander whispered, and Spike's hand clenched tight in his.

"It was infected. This spell - it's like a plague. The fetch went in with them - went through them. They've got it now, and they'll spread it. They'll take it back down to Brazil and it'll go through the bastards like wildfire." Glee and hatred and a vicious triumph surged through the link, the demon reveling in malignant satisfaction. Xander closed his eyes for a long moment. He could feel Oz - Pack and Protect and GOOD; the wolf heedless of anything but the enemy eliminated. The hyena howled in savage joy, and the soldier - was just quiet. Glad to have it done.

But me, what does it mean to ME? Killed them all - killed RILEY. Xander let what the wolf - the demon - were feeling wash through him. Sampled those emotions - sipped at the brimming cup of bloodlust the hyena was
ready to give him at a moment's notice. Waited for revulsion - for hatred - for guilt. Nothing.

"Xander - love -" please, please Spike's hands on either side of his face, thumbs slipping over his cheekbones, fingers delicately in his hair.

*Love you* from Oz, strong as he could, to *both* of them, and:

*Love you both, keep you safe, love you love you* from Spike, softly.

"I - I think... It's done now, right? Spike? Done now with them, with - all of that." Xander opened his eyes to Spike looking anxiously up at him, cool hands slipping down to settle lightly on his shoulders.

"Yeah. Done. Promise." Spike looked over at Oz, put out one hand to brush through darkly amber hair. "Sorry, wolfling. Shouldn't have done that - shouldn't have thrown that at you." Oz pushed into the vampire's touch.

*Pack* "It's ok. You - did what you had to. Had it worse than me. I'm not gonna - hold it against you." Spike smiled at the werewolf - real smile, and Oz ducked his head.

"Xan, love -"
"No, don't. It's like you're - apologizing - for being tortured. You - it's done, and I'm glad, and..." Xander looked at Spike - into eyes full of pain, now - of love and fear.

"I love you, Spike. love you always You said you were gonna take them out and you did. You did. I was just... I wish Buffy hadn't gotten hurt. I'm sorry -"

"No, love. You're laughter hearthfire white knight too good for this crap. I did - hurt her. And I liked it. But, it's done now, and I won't - won't make it worse. All right, love? I don't want to hurt you - I try not to hurt you -" Xander pulled him close - held him as tightly as he could, wishing he had vampire strength to make Spike feel - make him understand - that he'd never let him go, never give up on him. He could only send his love and his want and his promises through the link, over and over, sending it to Oz as well, doing his best to pull the raveled edges back together. To purge the fear and the sorrow and make them whole again, family again.

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Xander sighed - shifted just a little. The ghostly purr from Spike had stopped - Xander's hand had stopped stroking his hair. He resumed that caress, trying to force his mind into more pleasant channels - more specific memories, but his mind kept skittering away from those things - that person. Kept jumping to other days and events, leaving her a blur. He saw Dawn in his mind again, standing cold and pale and utterly lost, her arm bleeding, her voice deadly calm as she asked them all: "Is this blood? It can't be me...I'm not a key - not a thing." Her impotent rage at all of them - Buffy trying to explain - to soothe - and Dawn running away. Running out into the night and the frantic search for her that ended at the hospital and Glory, Glory there, tossing Buffy and Spike and all of them away from her as if they were made of straw. Only Tara and Willow could do anything, and the teleportation spell had drained Willow badly - hurt her. After that, Dawn had been sullen and weepy by turns, and they'd had several all-night Scooby sessions, trying their best to find something - anything - that would help them. Glory like a malignant shadow over all, her strength and seeming invulnerability making Buffy anxious and angry.

Even Christmas - Joyce and Buffy making pies, Giles going with Xander and Oz to collect a stately spruce, Dawn and Tara hanging tinsel and giggling as Willow lectured about
the blatant hypocrisy of the Religious Right co-opting a Pagan ritual for their own... Even that had seemed slightly frenetic. A put-on, as if they were scrambling for normalcy in the face of utter chaos. Which, Xander supposed, they were, in a way. But they'd tried. Dawn had nagged at the three of them to get with the season - to decorate and put up a tree. Had nagged incessantly, in fact, until Spike lost his patience and told her no.

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"Leave off, Bit! I haven't done Christmas since I was human, and I'm bloody well not going to start back now!"

"What?" Dawn had gaped at him, sitting on the couch with a manicure set spread out around her, diligently doing her nails and trying to talk Spike into letting her do his. "What do you mean - you went, like, a hundred years without a - a tree or presents or - anything?"

"Dru didn't like Christmas. It reminded her of the sisters. She was gonna be a nun right before Angel got to her, and Christmas made her... Well, let's just say it made her re-live some bad memories." Dawn frowned, carefully
laying down a perfect stripe of pale pink lacquer on her index finger.

"Ok, so - what was Christmas like when you were - were human? What did you do?"

"Fuck's sake -"

"Oh, c'mon Spike. Tell her." Xander grinned at him from the kitchen where he was making eggnog - *his* only concession to the season. Oz was out. Had, in fact, been spending more nights out than not. Spike and Xander suspected...someone.

"Christ! Fine. We didn't have a bloody huge tree like you lot have - we had a nice one that sat up on the table in the front parlor. Mother and I made decorations for it - paper chains and little paper figures - all kinds of things. And candles. And - we put garlands up everywhere, and had carolers at the house, and parties... Someone was always getting married, and there were all kinds of theatricals and things..." Dawn was staring openmouthed at Spike, and Xander just stood in the kitchen, his eyes closed, reliving those memories with Spike. Seeing *Mother Cousin Frieda Uncle Leonard...Father*... Spike stood up abruptly and went to the open window, lighting a cigarette and staring out into the night.
"What - what did you do at the parties?" Dawn asked, subdued, and Spike inhaled - exhaled - turned to look at her, his gaze softening a bit.

"Oh, we - we played Authors and Blind-man's Buff and The Ministers' Cat... and there were crackers to pull, and the Plum pudding, and dancing... And sometimes there were skating parties, and sleighing - when Father was alive." Spike fell silent again, smoking and looking at nothing, the link thick with nostalgia - with a deep, tearing ache whenever Spike though of his long-dead father.

*Love you, don't be sad, not alone* Xander sent softly, and Spike sent him a flashing smile.

*I know. Love you.*

"But - it sounds like - it was really cool. Why don't you want to do that stuff anymore?" Dawn was carefully capping her nail polish, fingers spread wide so she wouldn't smudge her still-wet nails. Spike snorted - pushed away from the wall and stalked back over to the couch, crushing out the cigarette.

"Not the same, is it? It's all so - plastic now. So loud. Everybody runnin' around, buyin' stuff, goin' crazy. And - it's too warm here. Can't have a proper Wassail in all this
heat - can't cut your own garlands or you'll get arrested. It's just - not the same." He slumped down in the chair again, looking dissatisfied and a little glum, and Dawn watched him for a minute before wandering into the kitchen.

"Did I make him mad?" she whispered to Xander, and Xander pulled her into a quick hug, stroking her hair.

"Nah. He's just - remembering, you know? All his family's gone, it's kinda...sad, sometimes."


Yeah. Always, love

"Oh." Dawn looked down at her nails - looked up at Xander, sudden excitement in her face. "I'm going to tell mom she has to invite him to Christmas dinner! She and Buffy were talking about having Mr. Giles over, but I'm going to tell her we have to have a real party - invite everybody! You guys'll come, won't you? Please? We can make Spike tell us how to play those games and - and it'll be great! Please say you'll come, Xander!" Xander looked at her wide, happy eyes - at the pleading expression in them. She wanted to be normal, so badly. To forget about being the Key - to forget about Glory. Xander knew that was why she'd badgered her mom into a huge tree -
into traditional cookies and tons of decorations. Knew that was why she was doing this, as well. Lived on the Hellmouth for four years, knows about demons and vamps and magic and things no little girl should know... But Christmas is still the biggest event of the year.

*Party with the Slayer* Xander thought, and grinned at the string of curses that came back. But a minute later Spike was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, smiling at Dawn.

"You ask your mum, Niblet, and if she says yes, then - we'll come. All right?" Dawn had shouted and hugged them both, and the party had gone rather well. Only one minor kitchen disaster (Buffy had dropped a pie), and Dawn had persuaded Spike to tell them how to play The Minister's Cat, and they'd all had fun, clapping in time and trying to come up with descriptive words for the minister's cat that started with 'A', then 'B', then 'C'; halfway through the alphabet before Joyce was declared the winner. Spike had actually spent most of his time in the living room corner, sitting cross-legged on the floor and watching the others, an odd little secret smile on his face when no one was looking. That night in bed, he'd hummed *Frosty the Snowman* under his breath while going down on Xander until Xander had gotten a stitch from laughing, and they'd curled happily around each
other in the twilight just before dawn, warm and content, at peace.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Xander smiled at that memory, but then slowly the smile faded to a frown, and he shook his head, feeling close to tears again. *Trying to remember...and all I can remember is Spike, and me...everybody but... Why can't I think about...her?* He twitched ever so slightly as the front door opened. He could hear Oz coming in - setting something down on the kitchen table, then a long silence.

*Bath?* and Xander sent an ok, watching the bedroom door open and Oz slide in. He looked worn out, and he stood there for a moment just looking at Xander.

"Tried to take a nap, but..." Xander shrugged, and Oz nodded - made a little gesture back towards the kitchen.

"I got those flowers Spike wanted."

"Thanks, Oz." Oz nodded again - smiled softly and ghosted across the room and into the bathroom, quietly shutting the door. Xander sighed - reached down and
began to stroke Spike's shoulder, shaking him ever so slightly.

"Spike. Hey, Spike - wake up, love."

"Mmmm?" Spike twitched - curled instinctively closer - and Xander slid down in the bed a bit, so he was even with the vampire. Spike's head ended up on his arm, and after a moment blue eyes opened sleepily, blinking at him.

"We need to get up, love. Get ready." Spike's hand reached out from under the covers and touched Xander's face - traced his eyebrow and cheek, combed back through his hair.

"All right, pet. Want to eat?" Xander grimaced - shook his head.

"I don't - think I could." Spike nodded - stretched upwards a little for a kiss and then pulled Xander close, hugging him.

"I don't want to go."

"I know, pet."

"You'll stay right there with me, right?"

"Course I will, pet. Right there."
"I've been trying to remember...but I just keep thinking about other things. I don't want to forget already - what's wrong with me?"

"Give it time, love. You won't forget, promise." Xander kissed him - wished fiercely that they could just stay home - make love and not think - but there wasn't anymore time. They had to get up, now. Get dressed. Go and meet everyone and spend the next few hours being strong. Being calm, and quietly willing to do anything, and...brave. Spend the next few hours looking at the shell-shocked faces of Buffy and Dawn, and watching Joyce be laid away into the uneasy rest of a Sunnydale cemetery.

"When I was small I was in love - in love with everything now there's only you..."

______________________

Thomas Dolby - Cloudburst at Shingle Street
Xander stood in the doorway to the bathroom, watching Spike in the tub. The setting sun was going down in a cloudless sky and the garnet light, filtered through sky-blue blinds, made the steamy air seem dyed a pale amber-violet. Several candles burned on the long shelf Xander had put up behind the tub, gilding every reflective surface and making Spike's skin seem the color of honeyed cream. His dark brows and lashes were almost startling - lupine and feral in contrast to the watered-silk skin.

*Beautiful vampire mine* Spike's eyes opened - in the tinted light, they seemed to glow - and he smiled, small and soft.

*Join me* Xander pushed away from the door-jamb and slowly undressed, watching Spike watch him, feeling languorous and half-asleep in the warmth and steam. He slid into the tub opposite Spike, settling his feet on either side of Spike's hips and pulling the vampire's feet into his lap. The old claw-foot tub was huge - big enough for Xander to stretch out comfortably, big enough for the two of them to curl together. The water shimmered with an iridescent sheen, and Xander felt the oil slicking his skin. A Christmas gift from Tara. She'd blended clove,
ginger, and eucalyptus oils for Spike, and it seemed to only intensify the already delicious natural scent that Xander loved. The water was steaming hot, and Xander leaned back and sighed deeply, relaxing completely for the first time all day. He held Spike's feet in his hands - began a lazy massage, thumbs rubbing and pressing in circles into the high arches. Spike slipped a little lower into the water, his eyes half-shut, the purr rumbling up softly out of his chest.

"Good day, love?"

"All right day. Just - nervous. Manny let me off early. He - knows about the Council."

"Mmmm? How's that?"

"Demon grapevine, he said." Xander pressed his fingers into the tops of Spike's feet - felt the thin bones there, and the strong tendons.

"That's all right, then," Spike murmured, *oh nice, love you pet just there*

In the kitchen, faintly, Xander could hear Oz saying something, and Derio saying something back. Derio was Oz's - well, boyfriend sounded stupid - Oz's new *friend*; the guy Oz had been not-at-home with for the past month or more. Xander smiled to himself. Derio was in a
band that seemed to mostly be known via the Internet, and they sold their CD's online, at a website one of the band-members had designed. His 'real world' job. They'd gotten the gig at the Bronze for a place to practice with audience feedback, and work out the kinks in their newest stuff before they made another CD. Spike and Xander had gone down to play pool and listen last Friday. The music was - odd. A collection of 'old-timey' songs from the Appalachian mountains and - according to Spike - the Highlands of Scotland, and a sort of 'island' music that was a mix of salsa and plena. New, different, and received fairly enthusiastically by most of the Bronze crowd. The last song of the night, and Derio quietly announcing into the microphone that it was 'in honor of new friends'. Then they tore into The Clash's London Calling, making Spike grin and let loose a piercing whistle at the end; high praise indeed, for Spike and the Bronze. Oz had come wandering down from the sound booth, and brought Derio over. About three inches taller then Oz, lean and brown with long, thin, dark-brown dreadlocks and a lilting accent. He was from Puerto Rico, and he knew what the Hellmouth was, and Xander and Spike had liked him almost immediately. Oz had just sat and smiled, back to his silent self more than ever, a quiet pulse of contentment and affection in the link.
"How'd you meet?" Glance between them, green eyes and black sharing amusement.

"I was leaving late, and this girl comes up all - sex-say, and suddenly -" another amused glance at Oz - "Suddenly she's all 'grrrr'." And he puts his fingers to his mouth, mock fangs, like the old madman in that Monty Python movie.

_Vampire_

"And I'm - terrified, naturally - and I don't have any kind of weapon except for my fiddle and I'm NOT smashing THAT over her head or, you know, whatever... Then all of a sudden there's Oz and he -" snort of laughter, "he has the bigger 'grrrr' and she's dust." Oz grins - shrugs.

"I lost it a little."

"You were stalking me!"

"Just wanted your autograph." And they're leaning together, laughing, and there's _good_ in the link and _happy_. Spike and Xander can't help but approve.

Now Derio was out in the kitchen, tuning his guitar while Oz made dinner, and after a moment he started to play and sing softly. Xander liked his voice - a rather hoarse baritone - and it floated in quietly to them, accompanied
by the cascading notes of the guitar. That sort of Spanish-sounding music that Xander had no name for but found he liked very much.

"So...'Derio'?"

"My mother named me Desiderio. 'Spike'?"

"Absolutely nothing to do with my mother."

"Ready to take on the Council, then?" Spike asked him, and Xander moved his hands up a little, to circle the slender ankles and dig in with his knuckles, Spike's feet pushing into his chest.

"Ready as I'll ever be. I wish they weren't coming here -" Xander was working slowly up Spike's calves, and Spike's purr echoed in the bath, rumbling undertone to the music - to Derio's lulling voice.

"We live in the hills and travel at night

Invisible lives in the visible light...

You might hear a sound with the fall of the sun

It's the beat of heart, the pound of a drum...

We are here, we are No Man

Disappeared, we are No Man..."
"Well, they won't stay long. We'll tell them what they want to hear, get them back where they belong. Don't need those wankers here, mucking about, poking into things. Dawn, Spike meant, and Xander nodded. They'd made a pact, all the Scoobies. Dawn was out of this - out of all of this. They knew nothing about a key, they knew nothing about what Glory wanted. They would not, ever, bring her to the attention of the Council. She's ours, Spike had said, scowling. They don't touch her. Buffy - who had become thinner, whose eyes had taken on a haunted look - had sat at the table at the Magic Box and cried for a moment, after their pact. Thin wrists gripped in white-knuckled hands, head bowed. Then she'd looked up at them and whispered thank you, and they had all seen the easing, just a little, of the terrible burden she had carried since Joyce had died.

"Turned away, in our own lands

We are here, we'll never go away...

Some men are kings, and some work the mines

A few have it all, getting' more all the time

They come with a gift, and then with a gun

You learn how to serve or you learn how to run..."
Spike gently pulled his feet away - tucked his legs under himself and then was gliding through the water, coming to rest on Xander's chest. His hip fitted into the curve of Xander's hip - his thigh between Xander's thighs.

*Love you safe here family*

*Safe here always* Xander pulled him close - arms around his ribs, cheek against wet hair, and they lay together; rumbling purr, slow heartbeat, Xander's fingers doing a slow glide up Spike's back, Spike's hand moving in small circles over Xander's ribs.

*"We are the shadows that won't go away  
Ghosts of the past the future someday..."

Derio had gone, right after dinner, giving Oz a slow kiss and a smoldering look that promised...all sorts of things.

*Want* in the link, and Spike smirking into his whiskey.

*Good?*

"The best," Oz said, and went to tidy away some things, so his 'personal stuff' wasn't on view for the Council toadies.

"We gotta get a bigger house," Xander muttered to himself, shoving an untidy stack of CD's up against the
bookshelf. "Manny's got a couple houses, 'bout a mile from here. We should go look at them."

"By the sea?" Spike asked, and Xander pulled a crumpled pack of smokes out of the couch - tossed them to the vampire.

"Yeah - just north of here a ways. Two storeys instead of one. Not a lot bigger as far as the rooms, but more of 'em."

"That'd be nice," Oz murmured, and then turned and pelted Spike with a handful of laundry as Spike sent a rather vivid image of Oz and Derio doing -

"Spike! Are you thinking about other men?"

"Just the one other," Spike leered at Xander, balling up Oz's jeans and t-shirts and hurling them through the bedroom door.

*Bad vampire.*

*Always.* A car was coming down the street, and Xander looked out the screen-door, frowning.

"I think that's them."
Protect pack OUTSIDERS from Spike, and Xander walked over to him, resting his hand gently on the small of Spike's back - scratching lightly.

"Let's be calm, yeah?" he said softly, and Spike snorted. It was kind of strange, the antagonism Spike felt towards the Council. He had taken Xander's worry over Dawn - over Giles and Buffy - to heart, and for the moment at least, the entire Scooby gang was his pack. And he was pissed. Oz kicked his duffle into the far corner and settled onto the couch, eyes darkening momentarily.

"Hope they don't get stupid," Oz muttered.

Calm, safe, pack is safe...love you

"We'll be all right, pet," Spike said, answering Xander's thoughts, and he leaned against the doorjamb to the kitchen, lighting a cigarette, serious now. The car stopped behind Oz's van and four people got out. Three men in dark suits and shiny shoes, one woman, also suited, her hair in a severe bun and clutching a clipboard. They looked curiously around them at the neighborhood; a few people on their porches, mostly TV's on behind the curtains. They walked up to the front door and peered inside. Xander knew the two lamps in the living room didn't provide much illumination - they were good mostly for reading - and he also knew that when the three of
them looked out at the group, their eyes sparked eldritch fire in the low light. There were gasps and a moment of whispered conversation, and then one of the men - dark-haired and frowning - knocked on the screen door.

"Alexander Harris?" he asked, squinting in at them, and Xander went reluctantly to unhook the door. He rather pointedly didn't ask them in, and they sidled inside, looking disapprovingly at the candles lit in the kitchen; the incense smoking before the small stone Buddha and other items Oz had gathered on one shelf. Two of the men brandished loaded crossbows, concentrating nervously on Spike. The other had a cross, and the woman fiddled with the clipboard, sending odd looks toward the vampire.

*What the fuck?*

*No idea, pet. Fucking WEAPONS!*

"You're - Alexander?" the woman asked, looking at her papers.

"Harris, yeah." Xander said, standing with arms crossed in the middle of the living room.

"And - this is...Daniel Osbourne?" A short nod from Oz. "And...a-and William the Bloody." The woman sounded a little breathless and suddenly the link was flooded with
laughter and Spike tipped his head to one side, looking at the Watcher through a thin ribbon of smoke.

"Heard of me then, have you?" The woman gulped - smiled.

"I - I did my thesis on you Wi - uh, Mr..."

"Spike'll do, pet. Your thesis. Isn't that neat." Got a fan. Spike took a long pull on his cigarette - stalked forward, doing that head down, pantherish glide that made Xander's stomach tighten in arousal and want. He bent down a little and stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the end table - leaned on the back of the couch. Xander knew - flash through the link - that the tips of Spike's fingers had brushed across Oz's neck.

Pack pack pack from Oz, the wolf unsettled and as pissed as Spike's demon.

Outsiders from the hyena, and Xander moved around the coffee table - settled on the couch next to Oz.

MINE protect mine from Spike, fierce and furious.

"I can't - can't believe that you, S-spike, are actually helping the Slayer. I had rather thought you'd be trying to kill her."
Spike shrugged, watching the woman. Xander - the hyena - could smell their nerves and fear - could smell something suspiciously like arousal coming off the woman.

"Not your business, really, what I'm doing." Spike pulled another cigarette out of the pack in his pocket - lit it and blew smoke at the huddled group of Watchers.

"I don't like you coming into my house with weapons," Xander said, and the woman's eyes darted over to him. "So hurry up and ask your questions - I'm not gonna wait around all night."

"You won't be doing your friend any favors, with an attitude like that," one of the men snapped, and Spike snorted. But it was Oz that answered, his eyes gone black.

"I can't imagine any attitude that would help Buffy, when it comes to you and your questions," he said softly, and the woman looked over her clipboard.

"That's the werewolf," she whispered, and KILL IT from the hyena.

MINE from Spike, who snarled at the group. They flinched, and one of the crossbows creaked as the man holding it tightened his grip convulsively.
"You'd better watch yourself," Xander snapped. "Ask your questions."

"So - a werewolf, the Slayer of Slayers, and a...carpenter. Just how do you help the Slayer, Mr. Harris?" The dark-haired man's lip curled in a sneer as he looked at Xander - looked and dismissed. A growl was ratcheting up in Spike's chest and Xander grinned coldly at the man and let the hyena out a bit more, knowing his eyes flared green in the dimness.

*Calm love calm, calm* "I whittle a mean stake," he said softly, and the man stared at him, unable to look away from Xander's flat, inhuman gaze.

"Exactly what - do you *do*, to help the Slayer?" The woman Watcher, nervous behind her clipboard and sensible glasses.

"Whatever needs doing. It's the bloody Hellmouth - every soddin' demon with half a plan and half a brain thinks they can come in here and open it up. There's practically a queue, some nights. We just keep the riff-raff to a minimum." *Bloody stupid bastards* The imagery Spike sent with that was...vivid, and Xander clamped down hard on a surge of bloodlust from the hyena. Oz was rigid beside him, his eyes black and the link thrumming with anger. It was getting a bit -
"Not calm, oh fuck. CALM, Spike, stop that, safe, we're safe, Oz, calm Xander took a deep breath - looked blandly up at the Council members.

"Listen - I don't know what you think you're going to find out here. A lot of demons are attracted to the Hellmouth and we help Buffy take care of it. That's all. Oz and I grew up here - we lost friends here. We'll do whatever it takes to make it safe. And Spike...has his own reasons for being here. He doesn't want the Hellmouth open any more than we do."

"I find that hard to believe." That watcher again - the dark-haired man with the sneer in his voice - and Spike grinned at him, his eyes golden and narrow.

"Gotta keep the humans fat an' happy, don't I? Demon blood...isn't to my liking." Spike ground out his second cigarette, eyeing the Watchers thoughtfully. The man stared for a moment - blanched absolutely white.

"We were led to believe that...the Initiative had...leashed you."

Oh shit. Spike was on the man before Xander could get to his feet - hand knocking aside the crossbow and grabbing the man around the neck. His other hand darted out and snatched the second crossbow out of the other
Watcher's hand. He flung it away from him, and it crashed to the floor and slid, into the kitchen. The second watcher leaped back, gasping. The one wielding the cross was frozen, mouth working in a soundless 'oh', and the woman looked as if she might be ill. Spike shook the Watcher in his grip, lifting him off his feet, and the man writhed, gagging.

"Guess you were led wrong, you fuck." Spike hissed, fangs bared.

Spike - don't, calm, CALM love, can't kill him Oz was grinning, showing the wolf's long teeth and curling tongue, and the hyena yipped in excitement, wanting blood.

"You'd better go now. I don't think we want to answer any more questions," Xander said softly. Please love put him down Spike growled into the man's face - gave him a final shake and dropped him. The man whooped in a rasping breath - coughed painfully, rubbing his throat. There were livid marks coming up already, and the woman clucked sympathetically over them, wide-eyed.

"Right. Get the fuck out of Xander's house, now, and I'll try to remember not to pull your spines out through your fuckin' stomachs next time I see you." Spike's fierce gaze raked over them all and he retreated slowly, kicking the
other crossbow after the first and coming to rest at the back of the couch again. This time he made no bones about reaching out and running his fingers through Xander's hair - letting his other hand rest on Oz's shoulder. The Watchers stared and shuffled, murmuring.

"We really do need to ask -" the woman started, and Xander interrupted her, scowling.

"You don't need to ask anything. We told you what we do - we help. There isn't any more to it. I don't know what the hell you people think you're doing - this Glory is a major bad-ass and you're playing Twenty Questions! Just tell Buffy what she needs to know so we can kill her! It's like you want her to fail! She's all that stands between you and the damn Hellmouth and you're playing games!" Xander ground his teeth in frustration, wishing he hadn't yelled, but these people were so damn stupid and so damn arrogant and self-righteous he wanted to crack their heads together. Spike was growling, the demon still foremost, and Oz had gone a bit wolfier - claws extending blackly from his fingertips. He was growling, too, and the link was rage and mine and pack, awash with bloodlust and the instinct to drive the invaders away - or kill them. The Watchers huddle had tightened a bit, and they were staring at Spike - at Oz - at him, and he knew his eyes were the hyena's still. He
wondered if anything else changed, when he was that pissed.

"If the Slayer isn't up to the task of -"

"Damnit! She died once, defending this place! She's survived because she's not afraid to ask for help - because Giles is smart enough to know when one person alone is just suicide! It's his job to keep her alive, and it's her job to kick ass, and I don't know what you think has suddenly changed, but if you people don't stop screwing around you're gonna get us all killed! Just get out of here - go back to Travers and tell him whatever the hell you want but tell Giles and Buffy what they need to know!"

"That's up to Mr. Travers." The woman looked at Xander for a long moment - gave a small nod and capped her pen. "Nigel - I think it best that we go." The man Spike had half-strangled gave his throat a last rub and straightened his tie.

"Lydia -"

"My discretion, Nigel, and I don't think we have any more questions that will get us useful answers." Lydia tucked her clipboard under her arm - gave Spike one last, lingering look. "Spike - may I - may I ask just one question? May I ask - your Sire -" A surge of rage through
the link, and Xander stood up fast, as did Oz. Calm calm, almost done, CALM.

"No more questions. Get out." Lydia bit her lip, her eyes pleading with Xander - then she sagged, defeated, and the Watchers shuffled out. Xander crossed the living room and latched the screen-door; closed and locked the inner door and then turned around and leaned there, shutting his eyes for just a moment. Feeling Spike as the vampire crossed the room to him.

"Bloody fools," Spike grumbled, human again, slipping his arms around Xander and tugging him into a hard embrace. After a moment they went back over to the couch and Xander flopped down next to Oz - huffed out a breath as Spike sprawled across his lap; head on Oz's thigh and grabbing Xander's hand, lacing their fingers together and resting them on his chest.

"That could have gone better," Xander said, and Oz leaned into his shoulder, human now as well.

"No it couldn't. They aren't here to help, they're here to judge," Oz murmured, pack and protect, and Xander sighed.

"Yeah, I guess so. I just don't wanna - screw Buffy up."
"They can't just - get rid of her. And even if they decide to bring some other Slayer in here, it's not like the Watcher or Red - any of you - would switch sides."

Spike's eyes were still demon-gold, and the rage was still in the link, but pack was there, too, encompassing Dawn and Tara, Willow and Giles...including Buffy, and for the second time since the Watchers had arrived, Xander contemplated this new development with awe.

"Spike - why...why this, now?" Mirroring the vampire's emotions back to him through the link - to Oz as well, including him in the question. Spike looked - troubled. He rubbed his head a little on Oz's thigh - squeezed Xander's fingers a little tighter.

"They're your family, pet. They're yours. Even if Red scares you a bit and the Slayer pisses you off - you love 'em, and you...want to protect them. I can't..." Spike was silent for a moment, thinking, then he sighed. "I hated Darla. Miserable bitch. But I couldn't...hurt her. Couldn't have left her to be hurt. It's just... It's family, it's - " Pack nest always blood and need and yours mine yours the same the same. Xander and Oz contemplated that, silent, while the gold slowly faded from Spike's eyes and the link subsided to a low hum of contentment.
"But Angel's out of that, now." Xander said softly. Spike bared his teeth, silent snarl, and the demon gleefully sent out an image of a hot poker connecting with Angel's ribs.

"Oh, back in the day I felt the same, but he cut himself out. And that soul of his - won't let him back in." Not family

"Ok. I get that. I'm...thanks."

"Doesn't mean I won't knock the Slayer on her ass if she gets uppity," Spike said, but Xander just smiled, because it was hard to take that threat to heart when the vampire making it was snuggling into his lap, a rusty purr underscoring every word.

Two nerve-wracking days later, and most of them were at the Magic Box, waiting for the Council members to arrive - waiting for Buffy. Dawn was safely tucked away with Clem down in Spike's old crypt, enjoying what Clem had called 'Movie and Chip Taste-Test Night'. Clem looked as floppy and harmless as a basset-hound, but Spike had taken him and Buffy aside and told Clem to take a few swings at the Slayer. And Buffy had been surprised and impressed by the strength under the harmless-looking exterior.
Now they waited for the 'final review' or whatever it was, and Spike thought that one more session with the dried-up Watchers would send him screaming into the night - or into them. A little bloody mayhem would settle him nicely. Or... Spike dropped his cigarette in a half-empty cup of cold tea and sidled over to where Xander was leaning on the table, talking softly to Willow and Tara. Blue jeans and an old green thermal shirt that fit snugly across his broad, muscled back, and Spike couldn't resist. He got up close behind Xander - slid his fingers around Xander's waist and up under the shirt. Xander shivered in surprise and glanced back at him, laughter in his eyes.

*Love you better stop that.*

*Wanna fight - wanna fuck. Got time...* Brief flash of the workout room - Xander up against the wall and jeans open - and Xander stood up fast. Spike grinned and took advantage, slipping his hands further up under the shirt to Xander's chest - pulling him back so that they were pressed together.

*Want you*

*Oh...fuck...Spike!* Xander jumped at the delicate prickly of fangs over the claim mark, and Spike almost moaned aloud at the rush of arousal and *want* - the heady scent
of clean sweat and clean wood and sweet, hot...mmmmm Willow was staring, open-mouthed, and Spike grinned at her - winked. She started - flushed bright red and turned away, bending busily over a pile of ratty parchment. Beside her, Tara was equally flushed, but she had a small smile on her face and mischief in her eyes. Spike saw her hand slip under the table, towards Willow, and almost laughed when Willow jumped again and stared at the blonde witch. Spike rubbed his fingertips gently across one of Xander's nipples - let his other hand slide lower, dipping just below the waist of his jeans. Xander made a tiny whimpering sound, his head falling back onto Spike's shoulder. Spike pressed his lips to the hinge of Xander's jaw - nibbled there. Smell so good, so hot, WANT -

"Spike! Xander! I really don't think that we need this sort of - display - when the Council arrive." The Watcher was striding out of the back room, frowning, hand going automatically to his glasses, and Xander twitched in Spike's arms - pulled feebly at the hem of his shirt, which had ridden half up his rib-cage. Anya trailed unhappily behind the Watcher. The Council made her nervous.

"Spike, c'mon, we gotta -" Love you want you not NOW and a brief image of the Watchers, gaping and scribbling notes. Spike took a last, lingering taste of the skin on
Xander's neck - slid his hands free and turned the human around.

"Sure? We could slip downstairs..." Spike nuzzled his cheek into Xander's - caught the open mouth with his own and spent a leisurely minute or so just kissing his boy. Xander's hands clutched at his t-shirt and Spike pulled their hips together, slow pressure and grind, ignoring the Watcher, ignoring the Witches, catching a very soft beautiful from Oz, who was sitting up in the loft, feet dangling. Taste of sweet tea, of chocolate, of blood, when Spike let the demon emerge for a moment. Then the bell over the door jangled, and the Watchers were crowding in, and Spike pulled slowly away, eyes on Xander. His boy was a little dazed - a lot aroused - and the dark eyes stared into his, promising...

*Bad vampire. Gonna get you.*

*Promise?*

*Oh yeah.*

"Rupert! You intimated that - that this *vampire* had allied himself with your group, but you never said - " The head Watcher - Travers - spluttered in offended outrage and Spike smirked at him and caught Xander's hand - hauled him up the wrought-iron stairs to sit by Oz. Oz grinned
and passed a crossbow over to Spike - another to Xander and resettled his on his hip. Two of them were the crossbows the Watchers had left behind at Xander's house. They'd decided to take no chances with this crowd, especially after their own pet Watcher had suggested that one of them might be a magic-user of some sort. Down at the table, Willow and Tara casually linked hands - put certain books and papers at the ready. They were armed, as well. Anya leaned beside the display of swords behind the counter, glaring at the cross-wielding Watcher who tried to join her.

"Employees only, buddy," she snapped. Giles watched the Council members spread out over the shop - frowned when Travers looked at a book and shook his head.

"There have been a number of developments just recently, Travers, that I did not think -"

"Rupert -" Travers held up his hand, looking disappointed and a little indulgent. "I understand that the Hellmouth is a - different - sort of place, and that your Slayer is not as disciplined or as - steady - as we could hope, but really. Something like this?" Travers gestured upwards towards them and Spike felt the snarl lift his lip - growled very low. Xander was looking narrow-eyed at the man as he
continued his pontifical and condescending speech, fingers tight on the stock of his crossbow.

*Bastard*

*Kill him?* Xander snorted and he finally looked away - pushed his thigh up tight against Spike's, heat soaking into Spike's leg through two layers of denim.

"Maybe my finger can just slip a little." Xander whispered.

"Look funny if we all three slipped," Oz whispered from Spike's other side, and Spike had to chuckle softly.

*GOOD boys, mine, get 'em* Spike urged, knowing it wouldn't happen but wishing, nonetheless. Xander sighed and leaned into him a little more, propping his crossbow against his shoulder. Travers had settled like a toad into a chair across from the witches, and Giles stood by the display counter, nervously polishing his glasses. The other Watchers were standing about in various poses of supercilious detachment. Lydia was once again engrossed in her clipboard, but she continuously cast sly glances towards Spike. He caught her eye once and winked, demon-gold and grinning, and she gasped and hastily turned her back. Spike laughed in the link, and Xander poked him.
Don't scare 'em.

Wankers.

"Your Slayer is twenty minutes late, Rupert. Is this review actually important to her, or is she indulging in some sort of -" Travers was interrupted by the jangle of the door bell and everyone looked up to see Buffy, sword in hand, walk slowly into the shop.

"Buffy! Was there trouble?" Giles hurried forward and Buffy gave him a calm, almost dazed look.

"Oh, yeah. Trouble. A knight, if you can believe it. Armor and everything." Buffy looked down at the sword in her hand - hefted it - turning it so the light ran down its polished length. Spike scented no blood on her or the sword - just sweat and fatigue and fading fear - growing anger.

"Well, since you seem unhurt, we may begin the review - " Travers jumped as Buffy brought the sword down hard on the table. The other Watchers stiffened in surprise. Spike grinned.

Slayer's pissed.

"No. No review. No questions I can't answer and no hoops I can't jump through. And no interruptions." Buffy
added, glaring at the Watcher Spike had half-strangled. He subsided unhappily, closing his mouth. Buffy paced away from the table. "Did you know, Glory came to my house today?" An electric current seemed to run through the Scoobies at that - Spike growled again, remembering the blonde cow who had smelled wrong and felt wrong and had tossed him aside with a strength he'd never encountered.

"Buffy! What -"

"It's all right, Giles. She just wanted to talk. Kinda like the Council, here. Wanted to tell me that I was a - bug. Insignificant. Kinda like that Knight, too - Knight of Byzantium. He wanted to tell me I was powerless against his Order. Everybody telling me I'm nothing, but yet, here you all are. Waiting on me. That's when I figured it out." Buffy pulled the knitted cap off her head - tossed it down and ran her fingers back through her hair. "It's about power. I've got it." Buffy paused, then strode up to the table - leaned into Travers space, making him flinch back. "And you don't."

"This is beyond insolent -" In one movement, Buffy snatched up the Knight's sword, turned, and threw. The sword slammed into the wall by Nigel's head, point first,
spronging faintly. Nigel looked as if he'd swallowed his tongue.

"I'm certain I said 'no interruptions'."

"Oh, well done, Slayer." Spike couldn't keep himself from that, and Buffy sent him a flashing, triumphant glance, then her attention was back on the Watchers.

Xander reached over and squeezed his knee. Damn. Pissed Slayer is right. She's scary when she's mad. Spike leaned into Xander's shoulder, wishing he could just lay him back and kiss him - finish what he's started. He let that want into the link, and Xander made a throaty little sound, almost a purr. Spike focused on the Watchers again, letting his fingers burrow under the hem of Xander's shirt, stroking his spine. The Slayer talked on - pointing out the inherent worthlessness of Slayer-less Watchers, and then suddenly she was setting out her demands: all information on Glory - Giles to get his salary back, retroactive, and Spike grinned at Giles' little coughing hint. And her friends to help, no questions asked. Nigel stared around the room, obviously bewildered.

"Not - to get any more weapons thrown at me, but... Aside from Spike - why would you want to drag civilians -
"children - into this?" Buffy stopped pacing and looked at the man - slowly scanned the room.

"They're not children. They haven't been children for a long time. I've got two powerful witches, a thousand year old Vengeance demon and a werewolf backing me up."

"And Mr. Harris? No special abilities there." Buffy laughed and Spike glared at Lydia.

*Bitch*

"Mr. Harris? He's a better soldier - patroller - *killer* - than any one of you. He's been in the field and fighting alongside me for four years. He brought me back to life once. He's just chock full of special abilities, the least being he brought William the Bloody into our group." Buffy shot a hard look at Spike, as if daring him to contradict her, and Spike touched two fingers to his brow, tiny salute.

*Guess the Slayer wants my help.*

*Course she does. Wanna?*

*For you...anything.*

"I need an answer from you right now, Quentin. Yes or no?" Buffy leaned on the table, her eyes fierce and
unwavering, staring at the older man. Who looked around the room and sighed, and sagged in his chair.

"We have an agreement, Ms. Summers. Everything - whatever you want."

"Yes!" Willow pumped a fist in the air - grinned at Buffy and hugged Tara closer to her. Anya clapped her hands, grinning.

"Ex-demon, by the way people. Ex. One hundred percent human, here. No more excruciating vengeance visited upon totally deserving men." The cross-wielding Watcher edged away from her, looking pale. Beside him, Oz was smiling happily, setting the crossbow down so he, too, could clap. Xander whooped, and Spike slid his hand around, sliding it up Xander's ribs.

"Good on you, Slayer," Spike said, loud enough for Slayer ears to hear, and she grinned, looking at Giles who was solicitously offering Travers a drink.

"Hang on, Giles - we can do that in a minute. First I wanna know...what we're up against. What kind of demon Glory is, and how we're going to take her down." The sounds of celebration faded and everyone turned expectant eyes on Travers. He shifted uneasily in his chair - looked at Giles and then Buffy.
"She's not a demon, Ms. Summers. Glory is - a god."

"Oh," Buffy whispered. Spike looked down at the Watcher, who was silent and frozen. At the Slayer, who had blanched and sat heavily down; at the rest of the Council members, who looked as if they'd rather be anywhere else. Anya was open-mouthed in shock, and the witches were staring at each other, wide-eyed.

_Fear_ and _Fuck_ in the link, which just about summed it up.

"I think I'll join our Mr. Travers in that drink," Spike muttered.

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Hours past midnight, and Oz off with Derio somewhere. The sea booming like a heartbeat, wind driving the tree-limbs against the house. Storm coming, and Spike could smell ozone and rain, a day off at least. But closer, and more immediate, he could smell the balsam-scented candles, and cinnamon oil, and _blood oh gods his blood is like cream...Xander...love...pleeease_ Spike's hands flexed on the headboard, making it creak.
"Don't let go, Spike, don't let go," Xander's voice murmured from behind him, soft and steady. And then ice - a pinprick, and then a pulling, aching line of it, and Spike arched, gasping. Xander leaned into him, his cock just pushing into that place, deep as he could get and Spike's straight-razor in his hand, cutting shallow and sharp. Pain that flared to pleasure as Xander's hot mouth followed the blade, licking the blood, teasing the sensitive edges of the cut, and Spike arched again, head down and his legs spread wide, trembling.

"Love please -" His voice was ragged - half gone - and Xander shifted, thrusting once and then twice and then stopping again, his fingers hot and hard around Spike's cock, keeping him from orgasm.

"You were sooo bad, love. Gotta take just a little more..." Beautiful fuck want you forever taste so good Xander leaned up, covering Spike with his body, his heat and sweat a stinging wash of ecstasy, his cock like a brand inside, every movement flaring fire as the oil warmed and burned. Hours of this and Spike was shuddering, growling; he could barely think, could barely see, only knew Xander over him and inside him, the ice and fire, pricking sting and steady burn, the rush of pins and needles every time Xander moved in him, pushing at him. Waves of sensation and scent that were so strong - so
heady and so delicious. He wanted to thrust back and force Xander to pound into him - he wanted to sink his fangs into the sweet-salt flesh and drink his boy down - he wanted to come, oh fuck yeah, and it was gonna hurt and it was gonna feel so good...

"There - there...mmmmmm." Xander's forearm against his mouth, ladder of slashes up his arm and Spike lapped like a cat, groaning in need and delight. Another cut, spine to lats, another slow lap of tongue - and Spike heard the straight-razor hit the floor - felt Xander's hands on his hips, slippery with blood, hard and tight.

"You ready now? Gonna fuck you..." Xander drew back and slammed in, and Spike screamed, something guttural and hoarse.

\textit{Yes please please now love in me, MAKE me, love love you oh fuckfuckfuck!} Spike couldn't have spoken if he'd tried. His body moved on instinct alone as he writhed and thrust back, wanting more and deeper and crying out when Xander's nails raked his raw back. The pain was white-hot, dizzying, utter rapture and the demon was howling its pleasure even as Spike's throat caught and worked and sent blood-taste to his mouth. Xander's hand on his cock now, pumping ruthlessly, the oil stinging and lashing him on. Xander's other hand in his hair - pulling
his head up and back, twisting and then Xander's throat was against his mouth - awkward as fuck but Spike didn't care - couldn't have stopped himself if he'd wanted to. And Xander whimpering, gasping, and:

*Take it take me Spike fuck love you NOW love now Spike* bit, savage - feeling the pain flare in the link; flare white and then fade to red, seething delight as Spike drank the honey-salt of Xander's blood. His body locked into an arched, shuddering bow and finally, finally, *coming*, and *gods* it was like nothing he'd felt before, nothing. Distantly, he heard the headboard crack in his fingers and heard Xander cry out - felt the wash of heat in him as Xander came.

Abruptly, his legs gave out, and he lay gasping on the bloody sheets, Xander heavy and hot and wonderful on him - in him still. Spike lay and panted, his body throbbing with aftershocks like pulses of heat and cold, over and over. Xander gasped into his hair, and his hands wormed underneath, holding Spike, turning them both onto their sides.

*My boy lovely boy fuck that was...*

"That was fucking incredible," Xander whispered, and Spike used every last bit of strength he had to turn over, moaning softly at the sudden emptiness when Xander
slipped out. Xander lay with his eyes closed, still panting - his mouth and chest and thighs streaked with blood, drying in rusty smears on the sun-gold skin. The bite Spike had made was ragged - sore looking - and Spike leaned in and kissed it, lapping delicately at the blood that still welled there. Xander shivered and moaned.

"Oh god, *fuck*, Spike..."

"That was amazing, pet, that was...where'd you learn that, eh?" Spike's voice like sand in his throat and Xander cracked one eye open - grinned tiredly.

"From you, of course. Variation on a theme." His eye fell shut, and Spike nuzzled back in - sighed happily into the heat and damp and scent - pulled Xander closer yet, holding him tight.

*Mine always never let you go love you love you.*

*Mmmmm...always...my vampire MY Spike...love you.*

Outside, the wind dropped and then picked up again, lonely keening across the bluff, and Spike let the purr rumble to life in his chest - let it take them both down into dreamless sleep.
Three days of stormy weather - low, scudding clouds, wind, drizzle on and off. *Not* like SoCal at all, but still, Xander didn't think that was the reason Spike was so...restless. The vampire paced around the house - snapped at everyone when they had a Scooby meeting (pointless and fairly depressing, but Buffy insisted) - and generally made a pest of himself. Even the link - that was still changing, evolving, growing stronger all the time - was unsettled; streaming emotion and images that made no sense until Oz was shoving Spike into the wall and snarling at him.

"What *is* it," he snapped, and Spike scrubbed fretfully at this head, rumpling up his hair and thudding his head back into the wall once, demon-eyed.
"I don't know, I don't - there's something..." coming waiting wanting Spike slid down the wall, crouching there with his hands still in his hair, eyes squeezed shut. Xander dried his hands off from washing the dishes and came over - went down on one knee, rubbing a slow hand up and down Spike's arm. Oz crouched there too, eyes black, Pack and love you in the link. Comforting Spike, and trying to calm his own jangled nerves.

"Don't block us out, love. Maybe we can help," Xander said softly, and Spike nodded and reached out blindly - took Oz's wrist in his hand. It was like the completion of a circuit and whatever was bothering him jumped through Xander - through Oz - and they both flinched away. A sort of - gnawing. A seething. As if something was hovering, just out of sight. Something that jangled along their nerves and set Xander's teeth on edge. Like being too close to a transformer, or touching a live wire. Fight or flight so strong the hyena howled. Abruptly, the link shut down, and Xander and Oz both shivered, glancing at each other.

"What the hell-. I've never felt anything like that." Xander rubbed his temples, trying to get the lingering buzzing to go. Oz was rubbing his hands up and down his arms, watching Spike.
"Voices. What were they saying?"

"What?" Spike finally opened his eyes and Oz shook his head, as if throwing off water.

"I could hear - voices - like...singing, or...moaning." His eyes were troubled, still the wolf's. Xander looked at Spike - shook his head.

"I just felt - like something was going to...jump on me, or...come up out of the ground. This kind of - wanting." Xander shivereded again, and Spike looked between the two of them, his eyes gold.

"I'm - getting both. Why don't you two get both? Fuck, what is it? It's drivin' me 'round the twist." He slumped to the floor, looking angry and helpless at the same time. Xander leaned over and kissed his cheek - rested forehead to forehead for a moment, then got up and went to the kitchen cabinet and pulled out Spike's whiskey. He came back over and sat down, and Oz grinned and settled cross-legged with him.

"Here - maybe you can drown it out for a while," Xander said, and Spike sighed - raised a smile.

"Cheers, love. Maybe I can."
The man on the screen slashes with a knife, wildly, and the second man recoils - holds up a cut and bleeding hand.

"Remember this? You smell it. Scent always jogs the memory, don't you think? You remember the energy? The potency of someone else coursing through your veins...someone brave." The first man is mesmerized - staring at the blood - breathing in one shaky breath after another. The second man is - calm. Intent. Tempting.

"You know the disappointment as it dissipates...the strength slipping from your grasp, the growing, killing need to replenish..." The bloody hand is so close, and the first man is leaning into it - in another moment he'll taste the blood...

"Ah, kiss him for fuck's sake and get on with it," Spike muttered, and Xander giggled helplessly into Spike's thigh.

"Only you, vampire-mine, would see the romantic side of cannibals."

"Look at 'em! They both want to - just a matter of lettin' go -" Spike took a long swallow of whiskey and petted Xander's hair, and Xander sighed happily. Whiskey, gore, and Jaffa Cakes had mellowed the vampire a bit, and the
three of them were sprawled comfortably on the sofa-bed. The bad feeling, whatever it was, seemed to have eased off, or been tuned out, and Spike was finally relaxed for the first time in days. The stormy weather still held; the stars were hidden behind low, heavy clouds, and a constant, rain-scented wind gusted in from the sea, pushing the curtains out and fluttering the candle-flames in the kitchen.

This is good Xander thought. On the screen the 'villain' of the piece had just played a strange, seductive little scene - licking the blood of his 'prisoner' off his own fingers in such a way that Xander was starting to agree with Spike's assessment that the two men should just kiss and 'get on with it'. Xander opened his mouth to tell Spike he was right when the relaxed leg under his cheek suddenly went rigid, and a moment later Spike was scrambling to his feet, demon out and growling. That feeling - seething, gnawing - was back, hideously strong, and Xander felt the hyena rise to the surface - saw Oz shift half to the wolf, growling along with Spike. As one, the three of them turned to the door, and someone was there, just beyond the light. Spike was crouched to leap - Xander was shivering with reaction, baring his teeth - and Oz was shifting further to the wolf, a sing-song wail threading up out of his throat. A pale hand tipped with long, red-
lacquered nails coalesced out of the darkness and scratched at the screen door.

"Ssspike..." a voice sighed - sang - and Spike was at the door before Xander saw him begin to move.

"Drusilla?"

The nails scratched again - the hand flattened on the screen, pressing at the barrier that kept her out, and Dru stepped up to the doorway. Xander felt a peculiar wrench, somewhere in his heart. Dru. Spike's memories rose like a swarm of wasps, shuttling rapidly from Dru as seen through William's human eyes to the first night the vampire saw her; to China, to Berlin - to Prague and a frenzied mob. Dru pulling Spike himself out of the rubble of the organ and Dru writhing in the grip of visions - of prophecy. Dru and Angelus... The link was thick with longing and love and fear, and Xander didn't think he could move from the couch. And the hyena howled.

MINE!
Spike stood at the screen door, staring out. *This isn't real, what the FUCK, oh gods...*

"Dru, what is - what are you *doing*? You're makin' me feel all - wrong, pet. Can't you make it stop?" Drusilla smiled at him, head to one side, her nails scratching slowly down the screen. She was wearing something low-cut and black, and there were half-healed burns on her chest and neck.

"It's a spell, my beautiful boy. To keep the Slayer away..."

*K*eep her away? *Make her come hot on the trail, more like. Dru, pet, what are you DOING...* "It works a treat, Dru. But it's - it's hurting me, pet. Can't you make it stop now?" Drusilla frowned at him, then she dipped her fingers into the bodice of her dress and pulled out a red glass bead.

"Wouldn't hurt you, my sweet Spike," she whispered, and crushed the bead in her fingers. The creeping *wrongness* shattered as the bead did, and Spike breathed a sigh of relief - heard Xander and Oz do the same. *Thank god. Spike...*

*All right, love, all right. Safe.* He could feel *Drusilla* now - his Sire, his *goddess*. The steady pulse of her that was fire-fly flicker and heat lightning and a skirling keen that
was almost like static. The voices she lived with - prayed to - scolded and begged and sang to. Familiar and almost comforting. The link - that silver chain of agony and rapture, blood and lust and need that had tied him to her for so long. His Sire, fucking Christ, and he could already feel tension from Xander.

Mine mine MINE from the hyena, unconscious and implacable.

"What are you doing here, Dru?"

"I've come to coax you, Spike. To woo and win you. To show you...such things, such lovely things..." Drusilla swept her nails over the screen, her voice a crooning murmur, and Spike reached up - put his hand flat on the screen. He could only feel the pressure, as she leaned into the barrier.

"Ask me in, sweet? Ask your darling girl in?" Spike stared at her - shook himself, pulling his hand back.

"Can't, love. Not my house, is it? It's Xander's house." Dru looked past him and her eyes went wide, and then she smiled again, fluttering her lashes.

"Oh, we remember him - yes, we do. Sweet boy, lovely boy, a poem of a boy... Do you remember that, boy? That you are a poem?"
Spike? What -

It's all right. Safe. Love you.

"I - remember, Drusilla." Xander slithered off the couch and took a hesitant step closer to the door - another, and then stopped. Dru watched him, switching her skirts a little from side to side.

"Did I ever tell you your poem, sweet? I see you, you know - I see the tin-toy soldier and the beast, the ravening beast. It rends the air - it worries at your heart, sweet..." Drusilla put both palms flat on the screen and leaned in close, her eyes on Xander, and Spike felt the unease through the link - sent reassurance, sent love. She couldn't get past him, and Xander had nothing to fear.

"...Come near me now...Dear dying fall of wings...as birds complain against the gathering dark...

exaggerate the scarlet blood in grass... the music of leaves scraping space...all that is rare grows in common beauty, to rest with my mouth on your mouth...as somewhere a star falls....and the earth takes it softly...exactly as we take each other... and go to sleep...oh sleep..." Her eyes had slowly closed, her voice
had dropped to a whisper, and Spike felt Xander come up close behind him.

Beautiful. Scares me.

Scares me too, sometimes. Keep you safe.

I know. Spike reached back and took Xander's hand in his, the warm fingers interlacing with his own. Anchoring him there, against the moon-drunk tidal pull that was Drusilla.

"You should keep your face to the light, sweet beast. You'll draw moths." Drusilla looked down at their entwined hands - looked up at Spike from beneath her lashes, her nails scratching at the screen again, metallic scrape that shivered over his nerves. The sycamores in the yard creaked gently, pushed by the wind, and a fine mist seemed to be coalescing out of the air, silvering every surface and haloing the sodium glare of the streetlights.

"You took him, didn't you." Not a question, and for a moment her demon was there; golden eyes like lamps and her mouth twisting in a snarl, showing fangs. Then it was gone, and she was herself again - cat-eyed and slyly smiling, scrape scrape at the screen. "Oh, I see what you did, my Spike - I see. Drank him down without even
thinking to ask me, without even...a word to the wise...
She frowned, and shivered a little, looking over her shoulder. "There's more to you than him, though. More to you... " She looked beyond them both at Oz, who was standing by the couch still, just watching her.

"Collecting your pets, Spike? Making the little dogs dance to your tune?"

"Family, Dru. Don't mistake me." Spike watched her as she frowned again - lifted her head and scented the air, watching Oz.

"And he's no simple song, is he, Spike? He's no...sheep in wolf's clothing. Wears his rue with a difference... Who taught him to sing the moon to sleep?"

"He went to Tibet, Dru. To the monks. He learned how to - control it."

"Ohhh...control. It's a tricky thing, that. You never know when it's going to snap." Dru clapped her hands together sharply, grinning, and Oz flinched just a little.

Pack

Pack. Safe, wolfling, safe.
"Oh...I've poetry for you too, wolfling, quisling, changeling-boy. They tried to break you, oh, bleed you, but my boy, my Spike..." She leaned her forehead into the screen, shuddering. "The moon, the moon, a circle of smudged bone in a charcoaled sky, scratched clean of stars...And the moon followed me through the skeleton branches and leaves of the winter trees...And the moon followed me down the dry, salt-dusted roads...And the moon danced, drunk on air as clear and sharp as bootleg whiskey...And the moon was in love with me, and I was in love with the moon..." She took in a sharp breath, head still bowed, and Spike frowned.

"Drusilla....what are you doing up here? You were - I thought you were happy, down in Brazil." Drusilla lifted her head, smiling now - that dreamy smile that meant she was seeing things - hearing the songs of the stars, the voices of the stones.

"Oh, Spike, I heard, I heard, they told me - told us, Miss Edith and I... Told us about electricity, and how it lies. Told us you were caught and kenneled and bad dog, Spike!" She made a little dog-growl, baring her teeth. "But we knew, oh, we knew... It was all a lie. And those soldiers - not like the soldiers when I was a girl, no; no plumes and swords and white gloves for them... They just wanted a whipping-boy, Spike, they just wanted... "
Drusilla grinned suddenly, and her eyes rolled back in her head, sliver of white under fluttering lashes, her nails suddenly rending the screen, leaden *riiiip*. "Plague-rat, Judas goat, *golem*, Spike - coming in among them and they *burned*, sweet boy, oh, they *burned* and they shrieked and they clawed and they *died*, and I knew it was you, knew it was *you*, my Spike, my own - clever, clever boy...." She twisted her head, snapping at the air, and Xander's hand tightened down sharply on Spike's.

*Safe love. Safe pack always.* Reassuring *both* of them. But feeling a tide of unholy glee rising up in him, as well.

"Dru pet, are you saying - the Initiative - the soldiers down there in Brazil... They died? Did they die, dolly?" Dru snapped her teeth again - yanked once on the screen, tearing it a little more, grinning at Spike with the demon gleaming out of her eyes.

"Oh yes, love, yes yes yes, they died and died and *died*, and I could *smell* you all in it, Spike, could *see* you. Like the angel Michael coming down with his sword; Dragon of *God*, Spike, but no god would have you, would he, no god would have *us*..." Drusilla's voice choked off and she put her hands over her face, panting a little, and Spike wanted to reach and touch her - soothe her, as he'd always done.
"Pet - Dru, don't cry, darling -"

"Oh Spike - Spike - he hurt us, he burned us! Why doesn't he love us anymore, why?" Dru lifted her head, wide-eyed, and Spike shook his head in confusion.

"Who doesn't love you, Drusilla? Who burned you?"

"Daddy did it," she snarled, and the demon was suddenly there and Drusilla roared, pure fury, and Xander took a step back.

Fuck!

All right, it's all right.

"Angel burned you, pet? What do you mean?"

"He killed her, Spike! Killed our grand-mummy. But they brought her back - magicked her back but she was all wrong, she was all - bleeding and breathing and dying - so I fixed it, Spike, I fixed her and made her cold again, made her right."

"You mean - Darla?" Spike asked, utterly bewildered, and Drusilla nodded happily.

"And then we went to daddy, and we told him...we sang to him, oh, we whispered to him, come back, come home, come be family..." Dru swayed, her hands clasped
to her breast, the demon fading away and her eyes closing in remembered bliss.

"But he wouldn't! He burned us, and he... He wasn't right." She opened her eyes - looked at Spike, and there were tears there, welling but not falling, making her eyes huge and luminous.

"Won't you come back with me, Spike?" she whispered. "Won't you come and help me - won't you come and help grand-mummy? We can be a family again, sweet, my sweet Spike. Family, just like before, all like before..."

Spike felt the leaden fear coming from Xander and he shook his head, fighting that siren song, that seductive-sweet lure that was Dru at her very best - her very worst.

"Dru - pet - I can't. Angel - he's gone over - he left us, and he's tried to kill us - he's just...not ours anymore, dolly. Not ours anymore."

"No, no!" Dru seized the door-frame - shook it a little, making the wood creak. "Spike - he could be! If we do it just right, you and me - he loved you and me, he did, sweet, he did! We could bring him back, we could skin that soul out of him like a fish-bone, Spike, just a little cut, a little tug and he'd be ours again!"
"No, Dru. I've got my family here, now. I can't - I won't." Drusilla stared at him, eyes wide, then her mouth trembled and she crumpled down onto the porch, her fingers buried in her hair and twisting, pulling. A keening wail rose up out of her and Spike felt it go through him like a knife. He watched her, trembling with the effort of not moving - not reaching out for her.

*Love - go to her.* Spike looked at Xander in utter shock and met dark, anxious eyes - reached to touch the grimly set mouth.

"Xander, love -"

"It's all right, Spike. She needs you - she won't - it'll be ok, right?" *Love you love you MINE* Oz came up beside Xander - nodded once, eyes flicking from him to Dru and back.

*Safe. Love you.*

*Family mine always* Spike pressed a quick kiss to Xander's mouth and then slipped out the door. He sat down beside Drusilla - pulled her gently into his arms and rocked her, crooning softly. She clawed at his shirt - pushed at him - but ultimately slumped into his embrace, wetting his shirt with tears, clutching at him and moaning. Spike smoothed her hair - breathed deeply of
her scent; of musk and incense and licorice, of blood. It whispered *home* to him, somewhere down in the pit of his heart. But Xander and Oz, casting love and worry and *want* through the link drowned it out - silenced it.

"Doesn't love us, doesn't love us, oh Spike, Spike what did - what did I do, was I bad? Was I *bad*, Spike?" Little girl begging forgiveness, and Spike felt the twist of love and pity and rage he always felt, when Dru was driven to this by *him*, by Angel. Always Angel, twitching her strings and making her dance to this miserable tune.

"Hush, pet, hush now - it's not him, is it? It's not Angelus down there, it's something else and we don't want him, darling, we don't need him. *You* don’t need him."

"But it *hurts*, Spike. It huuuurts...oh... Let me be with *you*, Spike! Let me -" Drusilla pushed herself upright - wiped her face with her hands and smiled at him, looked in at Xander and Oz with a sly, sidelong glance.

"They'd be so *good*, love, they'd be - like new wine and cakes, oh, sweet and *sharp*, the serpent's tooth..." Her voice was a conspiratorial whisper "Let me, Spike - for you I'll do it gentle as frost, love, gentle as the hangman's noose... Beat time for the Tyburn jig..." She gazed up, wide-eyed and hopeful, and Spike put one hand gently to her cheek. She leaned into the caress - took his hand in
hers and kissed it - palm, fingers, thumb. Then she bit, hard, and Spike jerked away in startlement, blood spattering to the porch floor from the base of his thumb. Drusilla yanked his hand back and licked - cleaned his palm and sucked lightly on the bite, sending shudders through Spike's body.

*Love, what -

*All right. Just...learning.*

Suddenly Drusilla jerked away - shot to her feet and backed away from him. Her tongue darted out to a drop of blood in the corner of her mouth and she licked it - stared at him.

"Spike, *Spike*, oh, what have you done, *what* have you done? I can *taste* him, Spike! Oh, the others, the olders, the *hidden* ones, Spike, Spike..." Drusilla put her fists to her temples and swayed, moaning, and Spike stood up and slowly approached her.

"What do you mean, pet?"

"*Jack*, that's what he calls himself, Jack the Lad, Jack in the Green, but he's *not*, Spike! No cup of wonder, no twining vine for you, not from him, not from *him.*"
"He helped me, Dru." Spike stroked her wrists - gently pulled her hands down from her head and she blinked up at him, bewildered. "He fixed that - that thing, in my head. Took the pain away."

"But Spike - you know you can't trust them! Now he's in you -" Dru looked utterly shocked - terrified - and Spike pushed away his own faint feelings of dread.

"No, pet - he owed Xander, that's how he paid his debt. I tasted his truth, dolly. No harm. And it got my bite back. Fuckin' soldiers." Dru blinked and then grinned, giggling.

"You made them pay, Spike, oh yes... made them pay." She looked at him - head to one side, her hands making strange, dancing motions in the air. "You're not going to come with me, are you Spike? And...I can't be your darling anymore, can I? Can't be your one and only, can't be...your girl." Still now, so very still, and Spike looked back into the house, at Xander and Oz standing and watching. At candle-light and the rumpled sofa-bed, the TV mute and flickering. Human things. And not. Things he wanted - things he needed - so desperately. Xander smiled at him.

Love you Spike He stepped up close to Drusilla and stroked her cheek - gently kissed her forehead. The mist had settled in miniscule silver beads along her lashes - on
the tendrils of black hair that coiled about her face. She looked like a water-nymph, or drowned Ophelia; hurt and betrayal held forever in those fathomless eyes.

"I'm so sorry, pet," he whispered. "You - told me to go, Dru. You sent me away... I've what I need here - I've family, now. One that won't ever -"

"Won't ever cut you, lover, won't ever twist your heart and scratch your soul..." Dru whispered back and Spike stared at her in shock.

"Dru?"

"Oh, I know, love - I've always known. It's what made you so...bright. So very special and sweet. Effulgent, dearest William, sweet boy...my boy, remember?" Dru's voice, whispering soft and low, her eyes like stars shining up at him, and he did remember, in a rush of bittersweet images and emotions. Being seen - at long, long last. Desired and...wanted. What he was, laid out like pictures in a scrap-book, and Drusilla touching each one - loving each one. Wanting them for her own - wanting him. Spike shivered, remembering, and Dru leaned up and gently, lightly, kissed him.

"There you are, Spike. Shining fire-bright and burning to your marrow but you'll come 'round right, Spike, my
Spike. You'll slip the leash again, oh yes. Never fear." She touched Spike's chest, over his heart, and she was the child again - the lost little girl that Angelus had ripped to shreds and sewn back up all wrong - patchwork doll in a tattered dress. "Not mine anymore are you, Spike? Not mine, not his. Your own. Lucifer after the Fall and no one to tell you what you shan't do, anymore." A hesitation, and then she stretched up again, to kiss again; this time lingeringly and Spike felt her to his core - to the root of his being, he felt her madness and her loneliness and her need, but then she pulled away and the others were there. Xander was an ache in the link - a need as strong as Dru's, a want as selfish and fierce. But he was warmth, as well - hearthfire and sunlight, laughter and desire and love. And Oz was pack, stronger than even the demon - family and safety and trust, unquestioning and unflinching. Dru was standing at the door again, and Xander moved closer - Oz with him - and they both stood there, looking out at her.

"An angel falling like a star from heaven. But that's what angels do best, you know - and falling, sometimes...they can find their way home. Don't be sorry for that golden angel. Good beast, sweet beast...let me - " The demon, scenting the air and holding out one hand, wanting and Xander turned to Spike, confusion in his eyes.
What does she want?

*Taste of you. Only...if YOU want. No harm.* Xander gazed at him, then a small smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

*Trust you. Love you.* Xander put his hand on the screen - eased his fingers out through the rip Dru had made, touching fingertip to fingertip with her. Dru leaned down and rested her fanged mouth lightly on his hand - turned it palm up and kissed a fingertip, and her mouth came away bloody. She closed her eyes with a shiver, her tongue-tip chasing every drop. Then she sighed, and cast a mournful, longing look at Spike.

"Oh, *Spike*... That's why..." Blindly, she turned and groped at the screen, and Oz glanced at Spike - put his hand out, as well, and suffered the same nip in turn. "Ooh..." Drusilla shuddered, fingers to her mouth, and then opened her eyes wide, startling them all with a pealing, genuinely happy laugh.

"Beat him, didn't you sweet? *He* wanted a family, one that was all his; Daddy and little children, his to tell and make... But you *have* it. Acid, don't you think? Salt." Dru giggled again, and put her palm to Spike's cheek - held his gaze, in that way that had tricked the Watcher and killed the dark Slayer. "*I* gave you the gift, gave you the *will*. You...made your path like fire in the night. Like a rain
of stars." She backed away from him, slowly, and Spike felt her go - felt her slipping free of his soul and of his heart and cutting the ties of blood and love and need - silver knife twisting across his ribs. Oh Dru, my girl... But then, warmth, and Xander leaning in the doorway, smiling at him, Oz's hand lightly on his shoulder.

Love you love you always, always mine, my own MY vampire.

Family love you.

Spike hugged his arms around himself - cocked his head to listen, a fragment of something floating to him from the dark.

"Jesus he was a handsome man and what I want to know is how do you like your blueeyed boy Mister Death."

The clouds, that had lain low and heavy all night suddenly opened, and it began to rain.

The movie quoted is Ravenous
Drusilla is quoting, and changing, Kenneth Patchen's Fall of the Evening Star
In Love with the Moon is an original poem by myself 'Tyburn Jig' refers to being hung at Tyburn, a place of public execution in London
Drusilla also obliquely references Jethro Tull (cup of
wonder), Shakespeare (wear your rue with a difference) and quotes a fragment of e.e. cummings Buffalo Bill

25 Encounter

Slow, slow push - pause - slow pull out. And again, and again. Xander tightened his calves around Spike's ribs - ran shaking hands over neck and shoulders and tense, quivering biceps.

Spike...love you...love you, ohhh Above him, golden sparks drifted; demon's eyes, watching him as unwaveringly as he watched back.

So fucking perfect, pet...love you, Xander, love you so much

Oh god... Xander raised his hips a little higher, trembling. His whole body felt as if it were being shot through with an electrical pulse, over and over. A tingling, warming judder every time Spike moved - pressed there. His legs ached - his throat was dry from panting. But he didn't want it to end; he didn't want Spike to stop moving, stop touching, stop being right there, so close he barely knew which was his own body and which was Spike's. A delicious fusion - the link open wide and ghost-sensation of fucking while he was being fucked making him bite his lip bloody - making him clench inner muscles down tight.
The feeling was almost more than he could bear, but he loved it. Loved having Spike there in his head. All the lonely years of his childhood sloughing from him like snakeskin - being replaced with this new thing - this Spikeskin of utter want and need and love - blood and sweetness in equal measure. He pulled at the back of Spike's neck, wanting him closer, and Spike obliged; dipping down to kiss him as slowly as he was fucking him - making minute punctures along his neck, just teasing the claim-scar. Xander bit back, not even breaking the skin, hissing in pleasure as Spike's measured thrusts begin to get a little ragged - hurried. Xander mouthed Spike's mark - let his teeth sink in just a bit. Spike's face was pressed tight into him now and Xander felt the change as Spike let the demon all the way out. He ran his hands up over Spike's neck and head and lifted the vampire's face just a little - let his fingertips caress the demon visage, finding the places that make Spike mewl in pleasure. Shuddered a little at the echo that came back to him. His own face tingling in pleasure, his own body arching up and taking Spike further in.

Mine mine always mine... Hypnotic murmur from the demon and Xander tipped his head back and urged forward with his hands and the link and Spike claimed him again, bone-deep spasm of pure bliss. His orgasm
was almost painful - almost too much. Spike was gasping now, thrusting into him hard enough to shake the bed, and Xander did his own reclaiming, groaning in pleasure as the blood sparked over his tongue and rushed through him like pins and needles - little jolts of lightning.

Afterwards Spike just collapsed on him, rumbling purr like an engine vibrating through them both, and Xander had to laugh at what *that* felt like; feeling it in his own chest and half-convinced he could do it too, if Spike just kept at it long enough - let him learn it from the inside out.

*Keep you here all night, all day - forever. Don't need to get up. Wolfling can feed us...* Xander laughed aloud, trying to hug Spike closer.

"Fuck, I could do that. Does that mean I'm some sort of...weirdo, that I could do that?"

"Means you're smart," Spike mumbled, licking like a cat at the beads of blood and sweat on Xander's neck - kneading his fingers into Xander's back and making him laugh *again*.

*You're so sweet...big fluffy kitty-pire...still need to get you that collar.* And *that* little surge of *oh fuck yeah* made him catch his breath and groan. Xander entertained
himself for a few minutes showing Spike exactly what sort of collar - what sort of game - and Spike whimpered into his neck, writhing against him and getting hard again - getting Xander hard with him, sharing his arousal.

*Want you IN me, Xander - fuck*... Spike moved - rolled them over, his thighs fanning wide and taking Xander in - pulling him in. Second time they've done this tonight and Xander pushed forward into still-slick flesh. Spike arched up hard - groaned - urged Xander on with sharp nails and a progression of that little kitty fantasy that left Xander gasping - pounding in. This time, when it was over, Xander was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to move for hours.

*Thank god it's the weekend, Spike, love, can't move, ooohh*... Xander kissed what he could reach - shoulder, collarbone - and just panted, his heart pounding. Demon-blood had changed him, but he still had his limits, even if the limits were a lot further out then they used to be. Spike ran his fingers slowly back through Xander's hair, half asleep himself and the purr cutting in and out. Xander giggled softly.

"You're gonna get a spankin' if you don't quit that," Spike muttered and Xander gave a half-hearted wiggle, feeling the tug of drying semen on their bellies.
"Oooh, promise?"

"Mmmm..." Spike brought one hand down on Xander's buttock, barely enough force to make a sound and Xander snuggled in a little closer.

_Gonna be gross in the morning._

_Don't care. Love you love you love...wolfing._

"What?" Xander raised his head and looked at Spike, who lifted up an inch and kissed him.

"Wolfling's coming down the street. Guess we play possum?"

"Oh. Guess so. Don't wanna embarrass Derio." Xander caught it now, the pulse of _frost night moon_ that whispered Oz.

"Huh. Don't think we could."

"Oh, _sure_ we could," Xander said, and sent an image - Spike, handcuffs, whipped cream, the kitchen table - that made Spike shake with laughter.

Well, okay, yeah. That might well do it, pet." Spike sighed and settled Xander over him again, shifting a little so Xander could get his hands under his shoulders.
Like him. He's good for the wolfling.

Yeah. "He told me his grandma is a - lyalochas? A priestess, back in Puerto Rico."

"Lyalochas - Santeria. Huh."

"You know what that is?" Xander lifted his head from Spike's shoulder and looked at him, utterly unable to keep from grinning into the sleepy blue eyes and contented smile that greeted him.

"Oh, a little bit. It's - one a those religions that started in the islands somewhere when the bloody Catholics tried to convert their slaves. Old religion with a Christian cover so they wouldn't be found out."

"Oh." Xander leaned down to kiss - shifted a little and then froze at the sound of a van door being slammed. "He said that's why he knows about the Hellmouth - she told him about it."

"Huh." Spike kissed him back and then heaved a deep sigh, closing his eyes. "Gotta patrol tomorrow, gotta take care of the Bit..."

"Yeah," Xander shut his own eyes, feeling that drifting feeling of almost-asleep coming over him fast. The front door creaked a bit, opening, and there were a few
moments of scuffling and stifled laughter as Oz and Derio got the sofa-bed unfolded. Faint pulse through the link; Oz just content - happy to be home and happy to be with Derio and Xander smiled into Spike's chest and slept.

*

Patrol was - weird. There was just a strange sort of vibe in the air, and Spike wondered if it was because of Glory or something else. The Slayer and her Watcher had gone out of town on some sort of vision quest, and Spike had been hoping they'd get to do some real damage on patrol - maybe even find some of Glory's scabby little minions and see how much pain they could endure. But there wasn't anything around - everything seemed to be gone or in hiding and Xander and Oz both commented on it, uneasy.

"Doubt it's anything but this bloody Glory. She's got everybody spooked. She's been tryin' to recruit - doin' a sort of 'you're with me or you're dying a slow painful death' kind of thing." Spike couldn't keep a bit of admiration out of the link - that was the proper way to do things, after all - and Xander poked him in the ribs.
"Supposed to be on our side, evil undead," he said, and Spike poked him back, grinning.

"Can't help it if I think she's got the right idea. Won't help her, though. She's still gonna be dead as soon as we figure out how. I still think if me and the Slayer -"

"No, no, and no, Spike!" Xander was frowning now, and Spike cocked an eyebrow at him, patting the duster pockets for his cigarettes. "We talked about that - you and Buffy aren't going to do anything as crazy as taking her on alone. Especially now that we know she does that ...mind suck thing." Xander shuddered and Spike shrugged, lighting up.

"She wouldn't know what hit her," he mumbled.

"Wonder if you could drain her? I mean - god blood. Gotta be good stuff," Oz mused, and Xander poked him.

"Stop that! Don't give him any ideas, Oz!" Oz just grinned, and Spike winked at him behind Xander's back.

Know you did that! in the link and Spike laughed out loud.

"Oh, pet, don't -" Spike stopped abruptly, listening, and they shared a look between them - as one began to trot through the cemetery. There was a fight going on
somewhere up ahead. They dove through a stand of trees and stopped in consternation. Two vamps, circling - one limping. And Buffy, stake at the ready. One vamp lunged forward and Buffy whirled and kicked and pounced, dusting him. The limping vamp looked as if he wanted to run away but a moment later Buffy flattened him and then she was standing up, dusting off her hands. She glanced over at them and stared for a minute, then walked over.

"Hey Buff, I thought you were out of town - doin' that dreamy visiony questy thing with Giles?"

"Xander. You build things," Buffy said, and Spike snorted, flicking his cigarette butt away.

"No points for statin' the obvious, Slayer," he said, and Buffy turned to look at him.

"Spike. You're a vampire," she said - and launched herself at him, her hand and her stake going up and coming down with deadly intent. Spike dodged, astonished, and kicked her in the back of the knee, making her reel. Xander and Oz were both frozen for one long moment and then they tackled her, pinning her to the ground. She fought back, almost heaving the both of them off, and Oz wolfed a little, growling. Spike stomped on her wrist and
snatched the stake away - kneeled over her legs and
snarled at her, demon-faced and furious.

"Slayer, what the fuck are you doing!"

"Buffy! Spike's not the enemy anymore!" mine mine
MINE! from the hyena and

Not pack! from the wolf, anger and bewilderment in
equal measure. Buffy stared at them - abruptly stopped
struggling.

"Of course he's not. I knew that." She blinked and smiled,
and Xander recoiled just a bit. The smile was - strange.

What in hell -

Think she's...under a spell or something?

Smells wrong from Oz, and Spike took in a deep breath -
realized it was so.

"Let me up, please," Buffy said, and they exchanged
glances.

"You gonna behave, Slayer?"

"Of course I am." That weird smile again, and they slowly
got off her. She sat up and brushed her hair back,
frowning at the dirt on her hands. Spike crouched by her feet, watching her.

"Slayer, that - vision quest thing - it didn't involve...peyote or some such, did it?" Buffy blinked at him - frowned.

"Of course not! Drugs are for losers." She stood up and brushed off the seat of her pants. "Now I have to go patrol some more. Good night." She strode away, looking determined, and the three of them slowly got to their feet.

"Okay. That was -"

"Weird," Xander finished, and Oz nodded. "Do you think the vision quest thing screwed her up?"

"Dunno. She smelled like..." Spike paused, thinking over the sense-memory in his head.

"Chemicals. Or..." Xander shrugged, looking puzzled. "Like plastic. Like she had a new raincoat on or something. But she didn't."

"Weird," Oz said, and Spike lit another cigarette.

"Let's go to the Slayer's house. See if maybe the witches know something," he said finally, and Xander and Oz
agreed. Oz was thinking Derio in the link - thinking he needed to call him, tell him not to wait up, and Xander and Spike both felt guilt over that. But Oz just shook his head at them, grinning a little. Derio knew - and understood, and he'd asked, not long after meeting them, just what Spike was.

"Get these...feelings, sometimes. From my abuela, from my granny." A shrug. "Mom says."

"Feeling - what?" Spike asked, for once utterly serious, and Derio had looked at him across the table at the Bronze, his eyes a little distant, his fingers absently finding and turning a green glass bead threaded on a dreadlock.

"Feeling...heat. And - movement? Like you're flame. Always something...bright, in the corner of my eye. Something that makes me feel...safe." Spike hadn't said anything, then, and Xander had wanted very much to use the seeing, and know what Derio looked like. But he hadn't, and Oz had touched Derio's hand and nodded at Spike.

"Vampire, Derio. An old one." Derio had looked at Spike - nodded once, like that explained everything.
Later, Spike had sat staring blankly at the pages of a book until Xander had nudged him, and then Spike had looked quizzically over at him, head to one side.

"You think he can see me...us?" Spike had asked, and Xander had thought about that.

"I think he can see...what you are."

"What am I, then?"

"Special. Mine. Best beloved."

At the Summer's house, the witches, Dawn, and Anya were playing Monopoly, all of them wearing pyjamas. Spike leered appreciatively at Tara and Willow and Anya - chucked Dawn under the chin.

"Havin' a sleepover then? Gonna braid your hair and talk about that - Timberlot fellow?"

"Timberlake, Spike, and I am so not into him. Anymore." Dawn blushed and Spike laughed - threw himself down on the couch next to her.

"Spike, you're wearing eye liner." Anya observed. Spike shrugged, sending a quick, laughing glance towards Xander.
"Thought I'd give the bad guys a thrill." Anya shook her head, but she was smiling.

"So - how'd the vision quest thing go for Buffy?" Xander asked, settling on the floor between Willow and Tara. Oz sprawled down next to Anya and admired her piles of play money.

"Oh, well, see, we don't know about the vision quest thing 'cause - she's not back from the vision quest thing. They'll be back tomorrow." Willow tugged at her robe nervously and Spike grinned at her.

"No - I mean - we just saw her. Out patrolling." Willow looked at Tara - at Anya - and there was a sudden frission in the air. Fear, maybe. Spike felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and he sat up, growling just a little.

"She's not come home early, then? Are you sure?"

"Well, of course we're sure; she'd have come straight here, wouldn't she? I mean - she would, right?" Willow looked at Tara again, anxiously, and Tara took her hand.

"Sure she would, sweetie."

"Or maybe she had to de-brief. You know - put down her experiences or something so she went to Mr. Giles house
instead," Anya said. She straightened a stack of blue money and smiled. "I like this game."

"Yeah - maybe that's what she did. I think I'll call Giles, just to be sure." Xander got up and went into the kitchen for the 'phone, unease in the link. Spike exchanged glances with Oz - settled back down on the sofa.

"So - what do you mean you just saw her? Where were you?" Dawn asked, looking worried.

"Sunnydale Memorial.," Oz said. "She dusted a couple vamps and..." He stopped, frowning, and Spike picked up where he's left off.

"And had a little chat with us." He glanced up at Xander who was coming back into the living room. He was frowning as well. "No joy then, pet?"

"Huh? No. I mean, no answer at Giles place. I think... I think we'll go by there, see if he's home and just - in the shower or something. Oz -" Watch Dawn?"

Yeah. Careful

Safe as houses, wolf.

"Think I'll stay and try to buy Anya out," Oz said, sitting up and scooting closer to the coffee table.
"In your dreams, Mowgli," Anya chuckled, cracking her knuckles. They stared at her. Anya stared back. "Hey, I like Disney, too."

"Oh! We have double-fudge almond ice cream, Oz, want some?" Willow bounced to her feet and Oz smiled up at her.

"Sure Willow." Willow bustled off and Spike stood up, ruffling Dawn's hair.

"You stay in now, hear me, Bit?" Dawn stuck out her tongue.

"Duh. I'm in my pj's already, Spike!"

"Just sayin', Bit." Let's go

"Okay, we'll swing by later, after we check Giles' place." Xander waved and Tara stood up, walking them to the door.

"Do you think it's okay?" she asked softly, and Spike looked over her shoulder at Dawn and Anya, who were squabbling over whether or not to start fresh or just let Oz start in the middle.
"It'll be fine, Glinda. Just a little mix up or something." Spike held her gaze for a moment and Tara finally nodded.

"Okay - you guys be careful."

"Ta, pet." Spike and Xander slipped out the door and down the walk, and by the time they'd reached the end of the block they were running.

Giles' place was dark and locked - he wasn't home, his car wasn't there. They decided to go by the Magic Box, just in case, and Xander fretted as they jogged down side streets.

Be all right, love.

Yeah...but... He couldn't shrug off his feeling of wrongness, and it only got worse when they found the Magic Box as deserted as Giles' apartment. They swung back through the cemetery but if Buffy was still around, they didn't find her. Then they went by the Bronze - Willy's - anyplace they could think of. They even roamed over the UCS campus, but everything was quiet.

Too quiet Spike thought, and Xander snorted in amusement - looked over at Spike who was grinning around a cigarette, walking along the top of the wall outside of yet another cemetery - Peaceful Rest or
something. At the moment, Xander couldn't even remember.

"Who *names* cemeteries, anyway? They all have these terrible, cheesy names."

"Well, most humans would be upset if they called 'em 'Worm Buffet' or 'Last Stop before Hell Gardens'," Spike said, doing a jump-step over a decorative piece of wrought iron. Xander rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I guess. Makes more sense, though."

*Everybody wants to hide from death* the soldier mumbled, and Xander winced a little. The soldier had been down, lately. Xander had no idea why, unless it was because he repeatedly squashed the soldier's more fanciful solutions to the Glory problem. Hijacking nuclear waste being the latest.

*He's right, though.* Spike thought, and Xander rolled his eyes.

*See! I'm right. Bunch'a pansies pretendin' that there's no death, no pain, no Grim Reaper waitin' for them*...

"Jeez, don't encourage him. He's so...moody, lately."
"He just needs to work out some frustrations," Spike said, jumping down and pinning Xander against the wall. Several minutes of intense 'snogging' at least made the soldier shut up, and they made their way in a convolute fashion back to the Summer's house, arms around each other's waists. Oz was out front, swinging slowly in the porch swing, looking more like a fox than a wolf at the moment. He'd re-dyed his hair the dark henna-red but tipped it with gold and bronze, so that the pale, spiked ends made a sort of glowing halo against the porch light. The house was dark and quiet - the girls all in bed.

*Pack safe* softly, and Xander and Spike joined him, Spike pulling out his flask and having a little sip.

"So, no Buffy?" Xander asked.

"No Buffy. No Giles?"

"Nope." They sat in silence for a long moment, and then Oz sighed.

"I think we should stay here tonight. It feels..." *Wrong. Bad.*

"Yeah. Think you're right, wolf." They sat out a while longer, but it was nearly four a.m. and Xander and Oz were yawning. Spike said he'd make one more quick patrol - he was hungry - and Xander and Oz went inside
to light-proof the living room. They made a pallet on the floor, moving quietly, and Xander felt his heart almost stop when he saw a figure on the stairs.

"Christ, Dawn! What are you doing up!" he said in a harsh whisper.

"I was hungry," Dawn said, crossing her arms over her chest and scowling. "Can't I get a snack in my own house?" Xander went over to her - put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her.

"Sure you can, Dawnster. You just startled me is all."

"Your eyes were all - green," Dawn said, looking uncertainly up at him, and Xander grinned at her, urging her off the last step and into the kitchen.

"Yeah. Just the hyena, you know? It can't hurt you."

"Oh. Yeah. I'm not afraid of him - he thinks I'm part of your - your pack." Dawn climbed up on a stool at the island and Xander opened the 'fridge.

"Yeah, that's right. It - he - does. So, what's it gonna be? Pizza, fried chicken, or... ummm....gah." Xander held a Tupperware at arms length, eyeing the greenish contents with trepidation.
"I think that's the leftover beef stew Buffy made. She's discovered the crock pot."

"It's turned, then."

"No, that's what it was like when she made it." They giggled together, and Dawn settled for a slice of cold pizza and a glass of milk. Oz wandered in and dug out crackers and cheese, and Xander made a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich. They ate in companionable silence, and all three of them jumped when the back door creaked open.

"Everybody havin' a snack, then? Dawn! You should be in bed." Spike stood in the doorway, faintly outlined by the paling sky, and Dawn frowned at him.

"Sheesh! My house! Late night snack! Over the age of six! Get over it, guys." Dawn chugged her milk and Spike grinned and shut the door - snagged a cheese-and-cracker sandwich from Oz.

All quiet?"

Sunnydale is dead, pet. Xander chuckled and reached for the peanut butter - flinched and almost dropped it when Dawn squealed.
"Spike! You - there's blood! Are you hurt?" She jumped off her stool and darted over to him - reached with her napkin to dab at a streak of blood on Spike's jaw.

"Is there? No, I'm not hurt, Niblet."

"But - where did..." Dawn stared up at him and then a huge grin threatened to crack her face in two. "I knew it! I talked to Anya about it and she said she thought so, and now I know!"

"Know what, Bit?" *What the hell?*

*No idea.* Dawn glanced around - leaned in close to Spike.

"You got the chip out, didn't you." They all three stared at her in shock, and Dawn cackled and bounced in place like a demented old crone. "I knew it!"

"Uh, Dawnie -" *Fuck, Spike, what -*

"Don't worry, Xander, I won't tell anybody. I mean, Spike's good now, so I know he's only eating people that are, you know, murderers and child molesters and stuff. Anya said 'once a demon always a demon' but I know you wouldn't kill innocent people, Spike."

*Good grief.*
Can't hide anything from the Bit. Spike looked smug, but also a bit anxious.

"Listen, Niblet...you're right. It's - gone. But let's just keep it quiet, ok? Red - doesn't need to know."

Spike!

Be all right. Niblet's all right.

Yeah, but...sheesh. Xander, Spike and Oz exchanged glances - looked at Dawn.

"Does Buffy know?"

"Yeah, an' the Watcher. I just think Red might - hold a grudge, you know?"

"'Cause you tried to bite her that one time? Buffy told me all about it. I don't think she'd mind."

"Oh, I think she'd mind, Dawn. Let's just keep it our secret, ok?" Xander didn't like that - lying to Dawn - but he wasn't about to tell her about Spike's drunken threats to Willow, either, ages ago when Dru had first left him. The three of them had discussed it, and they just didn't feel...right...telling Willow. She made the wolf and the hyena nervous as hell and the soldier didn't trust her. The demon hated all things magical, oddly enough, and
all of that just made Xander second-guess himself. *He* trusted Willow, but he couldn't put aside the others' feelings, and had reluctantly agreed not to tell her. She didn't really *need* to know, Spike had said, and if she doesn't ask, there's no need to bring it up. They had no idea if Buffy or Giles had ever spoken about it - it tended not to come up.

Oz thought Tara probably knew, because her abilities to see below the surface were far stronger than she let on. But she'd never mentioned it, and they knew if they told her, they'd have to tell Willow. So for now, the witches were being kept in the dark. Xander didn't like it, but he didn't feel like he had a choice. He glanced unhappily at Spike, then back to Dawn.

"You're right Dawn. Spike *is* good now, so we don't need to make Willow worry." Xander tried to keep a straight face at the mental barrage of curses and threats that Spike was sending him - Oz didn't even try but laughed helplessly over the cheese. Spike glared at them and stalked into the living room, and Dawn took her glass over to the sink.

"I can tell Anya I'm right though, can't I? She promised she'd buy me anything I wanted off of eBay if I was right." Oz snorted and began wrapping up the cheese
and crackers, and Xander got the dishcloth to wipe the island down.

"Oh, why not. Just tell her not to babble it to Tara and Willow, ok? Spike won't hurt them - any of us - so..."

"Okay Xander. We'll keep it our little secret."

"How - what made you think it was gone, anyway?" Xander asked, curious. Dawn looked thoughtful for minute.

"Anya was talking about it. She said - Spike acted different. And then, she saw him down at the Bronze one night and some guy was hassling him over a pool game and he punched him and Anya said it didn't hurt him. I thought maybe the guy was another demon but... she was right. He does act different. More like when he first came here. For a while he was just...angry all the time." Dawn looked seriously over at Xander. "He is good now, right?"

"As good as he'll ever be, Dawn. You don't have to be scared of him, though. He'd never hurt you."

"I know." Dawn grinned up at Xander and bounced into the living room and a moment later the curses started through the link again as Dawn started asking Spike
rapid-fire questions about the chip, who he hunted, how it had happened...

*Xander! Get in here! Get her off me!*

*Big Bad needs some help, huh?* Xander tossed the dishcloth down and he and Oz went into the living room. Spike was on the pallet on his back, a pillow over his head, and Dawn was sitting on his stomach pummeling the pillow and whisper-shouting *Talk! Talk! Talk!*

"C'mon, Dawn, don't torment the poor vampire." Dawn pouted but rolled off Spike - snuggled down on the pallet.

"I wanna sleep down here." She saw the look Xander and Oz shared and sniffed a little. "I'm scared upstairs by myself, with Buffy not here and everything... She's okay, isn't she?" This time the sniff sounded genuine, and Spike came out from under the pillow, shoving it under his head.

"She's fine, Bit. I think her - quest thing - must have been pretty intense, is all, and she just wanted some privacy to work it all out."

"Yeah?"
"Sure, poppet." Dawn smiled tremulously at Spike and Spike reached out and gently petted her hair. Xander sat down heavily and took off his boots - tossed them into the corner with Oz's and then started on Spike's laces.

*And I thought my childhood was weird. Vampires and werewolves and Hellgods -*

*Oh my* double chorus from Spike and Oz at the same moment and Xander grinned down at Spike's boot-laces, wrenching a knot free.

"You can sleep on the couch, Dawn. It's softer then the floor."

"No, wanna stay down here with you guys," Dawn mumbled, and Xander could see her eyes were closed.

*Oh man, she's out. Think it'd be okay...?*

*It'll be fine. We'll tuck her up all warm.* Spike sat up carefully and pulled off his duster - grabbed a blanket from the stack by the couch and draped it over Dawn. Oz padded into the downstairs bathroom, and after a couple of minutes the wolf trotted out. He stood on Spike's legs, bumping his nose into Spike's chest, then Xander's, *Pack love you.*
Love you too, wolf. Oz yipped very softly and then curled up on the other side of Dawn, nose on paws. Xander got Spike's boots off then grabbed another blanket and lay down next to Spike - sighed happily when Spike spooned up behind him, holding him close.

Love you Oz. Love you, Spike, my Spike. Be all right, huh?

Love you too pet. It'll be fine.

26 Hurt

Xander woke when Buffy shrieked his name, and he groaned and tried to sit up. Spike seemed dead to the world - fast asleep - and Xander tried to squirm free of his hold.

"Xander! What is going on! Why are you - why is Dawn sleeping with Spike!"

Oh fuck "Buffy -"
"She's not sleepin' with me, Slayer, she's sleepin' with the wolfling," Spike growled.

*Spike! Let me go!*

*Don't wanna. Warm.*

*Well fuck... If you let me go I can make her stop shouting.* Spike sighed heavily and let Xander go, and he scrambled out from under the blanket and got up. Spike immediately moved into his spot and pulled the blanket over his head, and Xander surreptitiously kicked him.

*Bastard. I'm still tiired.*

*Make it go 'way.* Spike thought, and Xander ran his hands back through his hair, wincing at tangles. Buffy stood in the doorway of the living room, hands on hips, an outraged expression on her face. Giles stood behind her, a hold-all over his shoulder. They both looked tired and a little sunburned.

"Care to explain, Xander?"

"Maybe keep your voice down, Buffy, Dawn's -" "Wide awake. Thanks a lot, Buff." Dawn sat up, scowling, and then smiled when she saw the wolf. She hugged him around the neck and started scratching behind his ears and *Likes me best,* smugly from Oz.
Oh good god. Xander shook his head in disbelief. "Lemme just get in the bathroom real quick and then we'll talk, okay? Maybe have some coffee?" Xander couldn't keep the plaintive note out of his voice and Buffy finally relaxed a little - let the frown subside. Giles shook his head and moved past her, heading for the kitchen.

"Right. Fine. Dawn, go get dressed. You're in your pyjamas at two in the afternoon with three men!"

"A wolf, a vampire, and Xander, Buffy. None of them count."

"Oh, thanks for that, Dawn," Xander snapped, stumbling towards the bathroom. Two? It's two?

"You know what I mean, Xander! Good grief." Dawn jumped up and ran upstairs, slamming her door, and Spike groaned.

"Shut the bloody hell up, people! Creature of the night here, tryin' to get in a decent kip!"

"Shut up, Spike," Buffy said, and stomped into the kitchen. Xander went in the bathroom - winced away from his reflection in the mirror and washed his face, used the toilet. He found himself zoning out on the mutant fish design on Oz's t-shirt that was on the toilet
tank and finally nerved himself to leave. Oz trotted in and began a rapid change, reaching for his clothes.

"I'm supposed to be at the Magic Box," he said, and Xander shrugged.

"Anya'll probably understand." Xander said. Anya had hired herself at the Magic Box as 'Head of Acquisitions' and she frowned upon any other employees not being properly punctual. Oz looked at him.

"No she won't," they both said simultaneously, and Xander grinned and went into the kitchen. Giles was slumped on a stool at the island, looking half asleep, and Buffy was making coffee. There was a piece of paper in the middle of the island that said, in Willow's precise script: 'Gone to class, back around three-thirty, don't touch the green stuff in the Tupperware!' Xander sniggered half-heartedly at that.

"So, care to explain - this?" Buffy asked, gesturing towards the living room with the coffee pot. A little water slopped on the floor and she frowned at it.

"If you'll explain what the hell you were doing last night, attacking Spike."

"What?"
"She did what?"

"Giles! You know I didn't attack Spike last night!" Buffy glared at her Watcher and went to pour the water into the coffee maker. Giles ran his hand back over his hair and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes.

"Perhaps you'd better explain, Xander?" Xander climbed up onto a stool of his own and told the story, Oz coming in halfway through and confirming it. When he was done, Buffy and Giles stared at each other.

"Could it - Giles, if I was in a - trance, or something, could I have done some sort of...freaky out-of-body thing?"

"Buffy, I really don't think so." Giles looked baffled, frowning down at the sunflower placemat on the worktop.

"But you - it - whatever, was real. I mean - solid. You know?" Xander said, and Oz nodded.

"Real, but - you smelled off."

"I what?"

"This thing - whatever it was - smelled odd. Like...plastic. Or chemicals. It was weird." Oz wrinkled his nose at the scent-memory.
"Yeah. But - it sounded just like you, mostly. And looked just like you. You - it - dusted a couple of vamps, no problem." Buffy looked from Xander to Giles and then slowly got up and took some cups out of the cupboard.

"I don’t like the sound of this," she said, and Giles sighed.

"Nor do I. Perhaps we'd better do some research - see if there's anything about...golems or...simulacrum...something." Buffy poured the coffee and passed mugs out and they drank in silence until Dawn came into the kitchen, dressed and looking irritated.

"So why didn't you come home last night, Buffy? We were all really worried."

"I was in the desert last night, Dawn, talking to the first Slayer. Well, talking at the first Slayer. She just spouted all this mystical cryptic kind of stuff and ignored everything I said."

"But Spike and everybody saw you!"

"It wasn't me." Buffy said, and got up and got a box of cereal out of the cupboard - got a bowl.

"Oh." Dawn stared for a moment then shrugged, obviously happy to let it go. "Well - I called Janice while I
was upstairs and she said if I come over right now I can go to the mall with her and her mom. So can I go?" Buffy stared into the 'fridge and Xander saw how tired she looked. How drawn.

*She's...so worn out.* he thought at Oz, and Oz nodded silently.

"Buffy!"

"Huh? Oh - yeah, sure. Mall. Back before dark, okay?"

"Thanks," Dawn said, smiling for the first time, and darted out of the kitchen to the front door. It slammed behind her and a loud groan came from the living room. A moment later Spike shuffled in, the blanket around his shoulders and his eyes squinted half shut. He had his flask in his hand and he opened it and poured a huge measure of whiskey into Xander's coffee - picked up the cup and drained it.

"Christ, do you people never shut up?" He leaned heavily on Xander, eyes closed, and Oz smirked into his cup. Giles did the glasses-polishing thing, which Xander had decided was an attempt to pretend he couldn't see what was right in front of him. Buffy just stared.

"Spike, is that *eye-liner*?" Xander suppressed a laugh.
"Poor vampire. You wanna go down the basement?"
Xander moved Spike between his thighs and pulled him close, arms under the blanket.

"Damp down there." Spike nuzzled his face into Xander's neck, kissing, and Buffy rolled her eyes, pouring milk into her bowl.

"You guys are worse than Willow and Tara. And way worse than Oz and Derio."

"You haven't seen those two backstage at the Bronze," Xander said, and Buffy held up her hand.

"And I don't want to. Single girl here, don't need to be hit over the head with it." There was a small silence after that and Xander felt a little guilty.

*Not your fault, pet.*

"Buffy, I -"

"Xander, please. Don't... Just don't, okay? I'm - fine." She concentrated on pouring out some cereal, and Giles looked sadly at her for a moment before climbing wearily to his feet.
"I really must get home and get cleaned up - get some books. Buffy, you should rest and come down to the Magic Box after closing, see if we've found anything."

"Can I bum a ride, Giles? I’m supposed to be at the shop," Oz said, and Giles nodded.

"Of course, Oz. Gladly. We'll see all of you later." They left, and Buffy stirred her spoon around and around in the cereal then sighed and put the spoon down - leaned her head on her hands.

"So - what did the first Slayer tell you, Buffy? Anything - good?" Xander was slowly working his hands in under Spike's t-shirt.

"Huh." Buffy sat up, making a face. "Mostly just with the mumbo-jumbo. And then she told me..." Buffy trailed off and Spike shifted a little - sighed into Xander's neck.

"What'd she say, Slayer?"

"She said...death is my gift. What the hell is that supposed to mean? I mean, it can't be that I'm the Slayer, 'cause, news flash! I already know that. Stupid mystical guides. Never any help when you really need 'em." Buffy looked down at her bowl - grimaced and got up and dumped her untouched breakfast into the sink.
"I need to get a shower and change. I guess - you guys can hang out here until it's dark." She started to walk out of the kitchen - paused at the door.

"Thanks for taking care of Dawn, guys. And - I - I wouldn't try to kill Spike, Xander. Not anymore." Buffy's gaze was tired - earnest - so lonely, and Xander smiled gently at her.

"Sure Buff. I know. We know. We'll figure this out. No sweat."

"Yeah." Buffy smiled wanly at him and went away upstairs, and Spike finally lifted his head from Xander's shoulder and looked at him.

*Love you love you.*

"Yeah. Let's go get a couple more hours, huh?" Spike smiled at him.

"Brilliant."

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*
By sunset, Spike was more than ready to go patrolling, and he, Xander and Buffy headed towards Sunnydale Memorial in the hopes of finding the other Buffy. Once again the cemetery was eerily deserted, and their Buffy finally gave up in frustration.

"I'm gonna head over to the Magic Box, guys, see if Giles has come up with anything."

"Okay Buff. We'll do one more round, see you there."

"Sure, Xander." Buffy strode off, and Spike sat down on a tombstone, his hands in the pockets of his duster.

"What a bloody boring night."

"Hey, no killing, running, screaming, or bleeding. Pretty good night to me." Xander leaned into Spike and started to kiss his neck, alternating with little bites. "And it's gonna get better," Xander murmured. Spike shivered, taking in a sharp breath and bringing his hands up, pulling Xander closer. Just sinking into the kiss. Warm, wet, tasting of gas-station lemonade and cheap, sweet chocolate. Something rustled in the grass behind him and Spike pulled away - started to turn. A fist rocked his head sideways and Spike snarled, leaping up and pushing Xander back.
Enemy! Xander stumbled a step and then went into a fight stance and Spike spun and went for the creature behind him.

Glory's little trolls! from Xander, and Spike focused long enough to see their brown robes and scabby, squinty little faces. Then he was fighting; a whirling, kicking dance that was second nature. But there were dozens, as well as some vamps and an assorted demon or two. Glory's recruits. Spike felt a chill come over him - this was wrong, it felt all wrong. Xander was holding his own, but they didn't seem to be attacking so much as -.

Ambush, pet. Too many. Let's - And then the other Buffy was there and suddenly Spike was fighting for his freedom if not his life as the other Buffy rained blows down on him and two other vamps and a handful of the little troll-acolytes jumped him at once. Too many, throwing a rope around his neck, one lucky shot around a wrist, a Nyrn latching onto the tail of his duster and pulling him off balance. Xander yelled - dove for him.

Spike! Get out of here, we've gotta - And fell.

Xander! Fuck, XANDER! The vamp who'd hit him threw the branch he'd swung away and Spike roared, having the satisfaction of seeing utter terror cross the vamp's face as he tried to lunge for him. But there were too
many, too much weight, and the rope on his throat was pulling him down, and then another on the other wrist and suddenly he was on his knees - on his back - and the other Buffy swung her fist once, twice - *Third time's the charm.* muzzily, and everything went black.

*Xander tasted...blood. And grass. And his head throbbed, like a dull-bladed knife that stabbed deep with every heartbeat. He tried to lift his head - groaned, and felt something on his back - on his neck.*

*Spike! What-*

*Pack. Safe.* It was Oz, warm hands gentle on his shoulders - helping him roll over - and Xander groaned again. The streetlight he could see from his position seemed unnaturally bright and made a sharp spike of pain jab into his eyeballs. He closed his eyes tight.

*Spike! "Oz - fuck - where's Spike? It was Glory's goons..."

"He's not here, Xander. I can't - feel him. Can you -?"

Xander lay very still - reached out in the link, searching.
Another stabbing pain made him gasp sharply and stop altogether.

"Damnit, my head, it's...it's messing with the link, I can't - push out very far. Oz - they got Spike, they - there were a bunch of 'em and - some vamps - and that other Buffy -"

"What? The other Buffy?" Buffy's voice and Xander let his eyes come open a tiny bit - saw her and Oz, blurry figures hovering over him.

"Yeah, she - they wanted him, they weren't trying to kill us, they - fuck, help me, Oz." Xander held out his hands and Oz took them - eased him upright. Xander's head seemed to explode with pain, and his stomach roiled - lurched - and he leaned to one side and was sick, clutching his head and gasping for breath afterwards.

"He's got a concussion, he's gotta get to the hospital -" Buffy's voice again, and Xander spat and spat - sat gingerly upright.

"No, Buffy - we gotta find Spike. I dunno why they took him but it can't be good. And I can't - he's alive but I can't - reach him. We've gotta go - get him." His stomach lurched again and he clamped his teeth shut.

"Xander -"
"Please Buffy - I'll be okay."

Sick from Oz, but he felt the werewolf's hands under his arms, gently lifting him to his feet. Xander struggled upright, gritting his teeth against the pain and the nausea. Buffy was on his other side in a moment, and he stood swaying between them.

"Let's get to the Magic Box, get you some aspirin at least - something. See what Giles says. He is the in-house expert on head trauma." Xander swallowed - opened his eyes all the way, finally, and took a deep breath - tried a weak smile in Buffy's direction.

"Okay. We'll do that. If it - stops hurting so much I know I can - hear him."

Heard you. Came fast. Oz was looking a bit shaky and Xander put his arm over the shorter man's shoulders, leaning on him a bit.

"Thanks Oz." Oz just nodded and they walked slowly out of the cemetery.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*
Xander! Fuck - pet - ANSWER me! Wolf - wolfling! Spike struggled, cursing, but the chains around his wrists were spelled - weren't ordinary - because he couldn't break them. He could feel Xander - knew he wasn't dead. But he couldn’t hear him. Nothing. And Oz - Oz wasn't that strong, in the link, and probably he wouldn't have been able to hear him, anyway. Spike's throat was on fire - the damn rope had been pulled punishingly tight - and it felt like a couple of ribs were badly bruised, maybe broken. *Little bastards got in some licks while I was down. They'll regret that.* He twisted in the chains, looking around him. He was in a posh flat; huge, with heavy draperies, plush sofas and chairs. Clothing, cosmetics, candy boxes and knick-knacks were strewn all over the place, and there was one of the little acolytes - bloody and grinning - hovering in a doorway.

"Ah. You're awake. Now you shall meet Glorificus!" The acolyte scuttled away and Spike wrenched at the chains again - hissed in anger and pain as his sore ribs protested and the chains didn't budge. There was a noise - something hitting a wall? - and the acolyte stumbled back in, more demons coming behind it and - her. Blonde, skinny, haughty; wearing a bored expression and a shimmery red dress. Spike revved up some mental gears and smirked at her.
"If it isn't Glory, goddess of - wait. Goddess of nothing much, right?"

"What is this?" Glory asked, staring at Spike. One of the acolytes bowed low, spreading its hands wide.

"Oh, your most magnificent Magnificence! It's the Key!" Glory stared at the demon and a frown slowly screwed up her features.

"The Key. My Key? You're telling me this is the Key."

"Oh yes, your Deliciousness! We -"

"It's not the Key." Spike jerked ever so slightly in startlement as a dark-haired boy stepped out of the room behind Glory. He was pale and broad, and the other Buffy trailed behind him. He shot Spike a look of loathing and turned to Glory.

"It's not the Key. It's a vampire. It hangs with the Slayer and her gang." Glory looked at the boy - reached out and dug her fingers into his hair, yanking him over so she could talk right into his ear.

"And what do I want with a vampire, Warren! I just want. My. Key!" She shouted the last, and Warren flinched and cringed, trying to pull away.
"Hey, hey! I told them to get it because it is a vampire! Just a soulless, inhuman monster! Do you really think it'd be *loyal* to the *Slayer*?" Glory stared at Spike, and he resisted the urge to laugh at her.

*And what's with this 'it' business? Boy's got a problem...*

"Oooh. Good thinking, Warren." Glory let him go - pushed him - and he slammed back into the wall, paler then before. He caught himself and straightened - brushed his shirt down and shot a glare at Spike. Glory walked up closer - walked around Spike once, and he felt her nails on the back of his neck - felt them dig in and tear *down*, opening his shirt and his skin in five blazing lines of pain that only stopped at his jeans.

"Ow! Stupid bint! Leave off!" Glory came around in front of him - idly licked one bloody nail.

"Hmmmm...you taste funny." Glory looked at him - reached up and did the same thing in the front, shredding his shirt and opening his chest and stomach. Spike reacted on pure instinct. His hands knotted in the chains, his legs came up and he *kicked*, both feet, as hard as he could. Glory stumbled back, looking stunned and then furious.
"Hey! You don't kick me, you stupid vampire! Those boots are muddy!" and she punched, right into his ribs. He felt those go for sure, breaking like sticks, and he yelled in pain. "And this is a Versace!" Another punch, the other side, and more ribs gone. Spike groaned, coughed - spat, and foamy blood spattered across Glory's dress.

"It's a fuckin' rag now, you cunt." Glory looked down in disgust at her stained dress and then back up at Spike. She put her hands on either side of his face and pulled it down, so they were inches apart.

"You're really, really gonna wish you hadn't done that, vampire." She stared at him - let one hand trail down his chest, digging a little at the deep scratches there. Spike hissed at her, and Glory blinked. "Nothing to see out here... I wonder if there's something interesting inside?" She grinned and dug her nails in, and Spike felt the blood running down his belly and under his jeans.

Fuck fuck FUCK this is gonna be bad. At least Xander can't feel this...please don't be able to feel this...

It took far too long before the blackness came back.
Oooh god it hurts...hurts...please please...help me...
Xander writhed on the couch in the back of the shop, barely aware of Oz's hands on him, holding him down. His head was splitting, and the nausea wouldn't go, and now the link flared and burned with agony. He tried to shield Oz, tried to shut the link down without losing touch with Spike altogether, but the pain was making it hard to think straight and Oz's hands were trembling. There was a white-hot sort of crunch through the link and then nothing at all, and Xander went limp. Out, he's out...not gone...Spike? No, just... He carefully opened his eyes - shut them again hard at the dazzle of light from the overhead fixtures.

"Oh - ow -god -"

"Is it Spike? Is something happening?" Giles, his voice sounding strained.

"Yeah, it's -" Oz stopped and rested his head on Xander's shoulder for a moment. You there?

Here...Spike?
"Glory is - was - torturing Spike," Oz said, and his voice was hoarse. "Xander can...feel it and...I can feel him..." Another pause and then Oz drew away slowly. Xander grabbed blindly at him, catching the werewolf's hand in his and clinging tight.

Don't leave! I'm... Oz, I...can't...

Pack... Won't leave. Oz squeezed back, his hand warm and solid in Xander's grip, and Xander relaxed just a little. His head was so muzzy - still ringing from the blow, and from the overload of pain. Why couldn't he talk to Spike?

"Oz? Why can't I...I can't talk to Spike, why - is it that...that Toth again? I'm..." He felt the couch move as someone sat on the edge.

"Xander - can you open your eyes? I need to look at your eyes." Giles again, and Xander cracked his lids open the tiniest bit - shut them immediately.

"Hurts, Giles. Too bright."

"Oh - wait. Anya? Would you turn off the lights back here please?" Oz shifted - it felt like he was crouching down at the head of the couch, and Xander felt his own fingers tighten in panic.

Don't! Oz!
Here, I'm here, safe.

Harris, get a grip! Gotta stay cool. Let me...

"Xander, open your eyes now - the light is off." Xander took a deep breath and slowly opened them. He blinked a few times and his eyes gradually focused. Giles was next to him on the edge of the couch, and Oz hunched over near his head, just out of sight. The light from the front of the shop was enough to illuminate them and Giles had a small penlight in his hand.

"I need to look at your eyes, Xander," he said, clicking it on. Even pointing away from him it was too bright and Xander flinched.

"No - don't Giles, don't! It hurts..." Xander struggled against the vertigo that threatened to make him throw up again.

Can't do this...oh, fuck...

Just let ME do it. Harris - LET me... The soldier, dead calm and collected. Able to think past the pain and Xander just let go and let the soldier take over.

Oz, listen, he'll know - he can do it...
"We need something for the pain, Watcher. Something strong."

"What? We? I don't -"

"It's the soldier, Giles. Just - listen to him." Oz's hand a warm weight, and Xander let that hold him there, floating in the red-shot darkness. The concussion was like a jackhammer in his skull, and the back of his head, where he'd been hit felt swollen to twice normal size.

"What do you mean? They're not - separate..."

"Sometimes we are. Just help us. We only need it for a little while. If we can use the link right we'll be able to find him easy. We just need -"

"No! I can't just dose you with any sort of - of drug, Xander! That could be fatal, in your condition. You have to...to rest and Oz -"

"I can't find him, Giles. I'm not strong enough." Oz sounded - so sad, and Xander squeezed his hand hard.

_ Oz, it's all right, don't -_

_ I know. Love you._
What if she...if she does that mind-thing, FUCK - Xander felt his heart pounding and the soldier moved restlessly in him - pushing for control.

No time for histrionic, Harris! We need logical steps, here. We need to think clearly. He was icy calm - very quiet - and Xander took a deep breath, and then another. Forced himself to relax.

"I know the situation is - is bad, Xander, but you must - " Giles stopped and patted his hand. "You must try to stay calm, and let us do what we can. We won't let him die."

"No. We won't. But you have to give us something. We can't function like this. Wolf, help me." Xander, or the soldier - he wasn't even sure now - tried to sit up. Sent the impulse through the link and he felt Oz's hands under his shoulders, very slowly pushing him. As his head got higher then his stomach the nausea swelled up alarmingly and Xander gagged and swallowed several times, trying to force it back.

"Giles, he's gonna be sick, get a -"

"Here, this -" Giles snatched something from the floor and held it up and Xander forced himself upright - leaned forward and frantically grabbed the trash-can Giles was
holding, leaning over it. His stomach spasmed and sent up bile, and then nothing at all as he dry-heaved.

*Better out than in,* the soldier muttered, and he moved, dislodging Giles from his perch so Xander could get his feet on the floor. Oz sat next to him, arm over his shoulders, and Xander leaned into him just a bit, taking comfort from the quiet *pack* that Oz constantly sent. Giles crouched helplessly on the other side, face slightly averted.

*Oh god this is...just...I can't.*

*I CAN! Let me, Harris!* Xander wavered but finally gave way - retreated into that odd, still darkness that had taken him when the soldier first appeared. He'd watched the soldier shoot the transformed trick-or-treaters from that darkness. Watched him take down demons on patrol, sometimes. If he said he could do it, said he could function through the pain, then he could. Xander wondered just how much crazier he could get. The soldier lifted his head - looked squarely at Giles who seemed to see the difference and pulled back, just a little.

"*We have* to have something, Watcher. There's no other way. We're the only ones who can find him. Harris can't take much more of this." Giles looked at him for a long
moment and Xander hoped, rather distantly, that the man could just take this in stride; treat it like just another Hellmouth oddity and help him - them. Giles sighed, finally, and lowered his head, and Xander knew they'd won.

"I - I don't like this, Xander. But - I don’t see any other choice. Willow and Tara already tried a locator spell and Glory's - aura, or wards - something - disrupted it. We didn't get anything at all."

*He's not dead, doesn't mean he's dead, FUCK this damn headache -*

*Safe, pack safe, calm.* Oz squeezed his shoulders a little, willing him to calm down.

*He's fine, Harris. We can still feel him - just concentrate. Soon as we get the pain under control, you'll see.*

"Appreciated, Watcher. We - Xander can find him, if we knock the pain out. This will work. We're not human, Watcher. *Giles.* Not anymore. Not...completely. It won't hurt us as much as you think. She's asking about the key, Giles." Giles looked at him, his expression strained and sad, and Oz's arm over Xander's shoulders tightened for a moment.
"None of us are just plain...normal anymore, Giles. It'll be ok," Oz said softly, and Giles straightened slowly from his crouching position.

"You're right, Oz. You - we - are not. I'll... I'll go and get Tara and get started. It'll take a little time. Xander should try to rest. Just don't let him go to sleep."

"Sure, Giles." Giles walked away, slowly at first and then more briskly, his head coming up determinedly as he visibly set his misgivings aside, and Xander sighed in relief.

_You rest, Harris. I'll keep watch. We'll have him back before dawn._

_Yeah. Ok. Oz...thanks._ Oz just hugged him a little closer, scent of almonds and wolf, and Xander let himself drift. _Back before dawn._

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

His second coming-to wasn't nearly so nice. The broken ribs grated, and one eye was swollen, his lips split. He
thought maybe even his jaw might be cracked, and the ear-drum on the left felt as if it had burst - it hurt with a steady, piercing pain, and sound was muffled on that side. His wrists were raw - one felt broken or dislocated - and he felt the blood down his chest and belly, soaking his jeans. He didn't really want to see what she'd done - glanced down, anyway, to make sure nothing was...exposed. Blood, and the white glint of bone, but -.

_Bloody hell. Gotta learn to keep my mouth shut. At least my innards aren't strung across the room._ Spike intentionally kept still - reached out with the link, feeling for Xander. After a long moment, Xander was suddenly _there_, his presence a swelling wave of warmth and comfort.

_Xander! Hear me? Love, can you hear me?_ Nothing coherent came back, just the steady _sun warm life_ that meant he was alive. It seemed to - flicker - for a moment, and then was steady again. _Okay. He can hear me, I bet, but can't answer. Took a damn hard hit to the head, maybe he's just - woozy, or somethin'. Gotta - gotta tell him where I am - show him, somehow._ Spike carefully opened his eyes to slits so he could covertly study the room. He sent the images as clearly as he could - the acolytes milling around; a few cleaning, the others looking through books. That Warren bloke sitting sullenly
at a desk, a miniature tool-set spread out before him. And the other Buffy, who was bolt upright in a straight-backed chair, her shirt unbuttoned and a lacy black bra exposed. As Spike watched, Warren reached out and did - something - to the other Buffy's midsection. It swung open and Spike saw wires - cables - parts.

A fuckin' ROBOT? What the hell! Oh, fuck. He'd involuntarily made some noise, and one of the acolytes had heard - had got up from scrubbing at a stain on the carpet and scurried into the other room. Spike sighed - winced - and then noticed a curtain was drawn partially back. He stared out the window, trying to see something, anything, that would help Xander find him. He could see - there - the ruins of the old high-school. Just part of them. It looked like maybe the very back part of the old campus. Spike stared harder, frantically sending image and observation as clearly and quickly as he could, feeling that little flicker in the Xander-ness that he was sure meant Xander was hearing him.

"So, back among the living, are we? Well - in a manner of speaking." Glory was suddenly there, in a new dress, her hair combed and her make-up freshened. She smiled at Spike and reached out - patted his head.
"Now listen up, vampire. If you be real, real good, we're gonna give you a treat. Warren says he knows just what you want to give up the Key to me." Warren had gotten up and was standing behind Glory, a weird little smile on his face.

"Warren says you've got a little problem - he says you can't bite people any more." Spike stared at her - choked back his first incredulous instinct to laugh and instead scowled, looking angrily at Warren.

"What does that little bastard know about it?" he spat, and Warren smirked.

"Oh, I know more than most people think. I know all about the Initiative and their little - experiments. I even got a hold of another vamp they implanted. I dug out the chip and figured out how it worked. And I figured out how to modify it - or turn it off." Spike struggled to make his expression believable - he could smell arousal coming off this Warren, and he had a pretty good idea what sort of modifications the little bastard had tried.

*How can he not know...? Fuck it. Idiot.* "What - what happened to that other vamp, then?" Spike asked, making his voice sound hopeful and sneering at once, and Warren smiled.
"Oh, getting the chip out kind of - messed up its head. I used it to test my - work - and then I had to dust it. It was insane." He smirked again, and a fresh wave of pheromones bombarded Spike.

"Fuck that -"

"Now, just hold on. The modifications worked. And so did turning it off. I can do the same to your chip without taking it out. All you have to do -"

"All you have to do is tell me where my Key is, and Warren here fixes you right up." Glory was smiling perkily at him and Warren was smirking, and Spike knew for a fact that if he still had the chip in his head, old Warren would have done something to it, but not turned it off. He stared at the both of them - let himself smile. Pushed it all through the link; any little thing might help.

"Okay - you got me. Fuckin' chip. I'd do anything to get rid of it - get it turned off, whatever. Anything. You let me down, huh? Let me down and get me some blood and I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Promise." Spike looked anxiously back and forth between them and silently vowed to take this Warren kid out, first chance he got. He was creepy.
"Oh, no - that's not how it works. First you tell, then he fixes, then you get loose. Right, Warren?"

"Exactly right, my queen." Warren murmured silkily, and Glory preened.

"Oi! That's a load 'a bollocks, that is! How do I know you'll do anything at all? You let me down - my fuckin' arms are killin' me! You let me down and I'll tell you everything. Fuckin' Slayer - what do I care about her and her stupid Key?"

"No - that's not the deal." Glory stepped up close to Spike - put her fingers lightly on Spike's temples. He snarled silently at her, and she grinned.

"Jinx! Are you sure I can't eat a vampire?"

"Oh yes, your most high Altitudinousness. You really can't," twittered one of the acolytes.

"But I've never tried," Glory said, and pushed a little with her fingertips. Warren was frowning. *Fuck - is this that mind-suck thing? Can't do it to a vampire why? Oh shit -*

"Maybe that isn't the best idea -" Warren started to say, and then Glory really *pushed* and the pain was incandescent - blinding - a hundred times worse then the
chip had ever been and Spike felt his throat tearing as he screamed.

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"Oh - noo! Oz!" Xander pushed his fists hard into his temples as a jolt of agony blazed through him from the link. Xander felt his knees buckling - felt Oz's hands grabbing at his arms, holding him upright. As soon as it had started it was over, and then the link was quiet, just that faint pulse of Spike - olderthan chaos malice love the same thing he'd felt in the aftermath of the SuperSlayer spell.

"Xander?" Oz's voice was shaky - he'd felt that too, even though Xander had tried hard to keep it out of the link. Even the soldier was momentarily jolted by the intensity of that pain, and Xander took up the slack.

"Fuck - she did something - we've got to get going." Xander leaned on the display counter, trying to ignore Willow and Tara's fussing. From Oz there was carefully restrained fury and terror, and the werewolf's hands
shook where they rested on Xander's shoulders. *Spike, Spike, oh god, oh PLEASE be all right, Spike, love you -*

*No TIME for this, Harris! He gave us what he could - gave us a good look out the window - we've got to USE it now.* Back in command, and Xander straightened under the soldiers whip-crack voice - strode over to the table where Giles was spreading out a map of Sunnydale. He'd had a mouthful of vile-tasting tea - some concoction of Giles and Tara's - and the pain had receded to a low throbbing. But his heart was pounding like a trip-hammer, he was sweating and shaking, and he knew he couldn't hit a barn with an elephant or write his own name legibly just now.

*Wonder what they gave me. Christ...* The edges of things were vibrating and he thought his head might just float off his shoulders. But the pain was gone, and Spike was alive, and he could find him now. He *knew* he could. He took a deep breath - leaned over the map and let the soldier take over again.

*Spike - we're coming.*

"Right. He showed us the view out the window. We could see a section of the old high-school - this part here." Xander-soldier pointed, and Giles nodded. "We could only see a very *small* section, however, and the angle was very high - at least six storeys. So - she has to be
here, somewhere." Xander fanned his hand over a pricey, residential section of Sunnydale, and Anya pushed in next to him, looking at the map.

"Oh! I'll bet she's right here -" Anya put her finger on the map and tapped. "This building is at least that tall. It's also very pricey. I was looking at a two bedroom there, but it was out of my price range - for now."

"What's the name of the place, Anya?" Buffy asked, and Xander rubbed at his chest, wishing his heart wasn't pounding so hard. It was hard to hear.

"It's called Parkview Place. Not very original, but it does have a pool and -"

"Right, okay. So we know where to look. That's great." The soldier cut in brusquely and Anya frowned a little. "Oz - we need the van. Spike's hurt, we'll need to be able to lay him down. Take Giles' keys and get your van and get it back here. Giles can collect his car later. And he's gonna need blood. Willow, can you give us the phone? You and Tara are going to go to Willy's for us, get him a bunch of blood. Anya - show us what the building looks like inside - where the front doors are, where the elevators and stairs are, is there a guard or a doorman, whatever you can remember. Thanks, Willow." Xander took the phone - looked at the faces that were staring at
him in varying degrees of astonishment (Buffy and the witches) satisfaction (Giles and Anya) and pride (Oz).

"C'mon people, move! We're on a deadline!" Everyone stared a moment longer and then they moved, and Xander - the soldier - grinned humorlessly as he dialed Willy's bar.

"What do I do, Xander?" Buffy asked, softly, and Xander smiled a warmer smile at her.

"We need weapons, Buffy, and a First-Aid kit. It's gonna be us, you and Giles. Oz has his own weapons." Oz, who was striding past with Giles' keys in his hand stopped - pivoted on his heel - and came back to Xander. He leaned in and gave him a fast, hard kiss and then was gone, sprinting out the door, love you love Spike fast PACK in his wake. Xander closed his eyes for a moment love you love you and then lifted the phone to his ear. The soldier hovered, waiting to jump out again when he was needed.

"Willy! This is Xander. You know me... Right, Spike's Xander. Yeah. I need a favor from you..."
Third time's the charm...oh wait...deja vu... Spike could tell he was lying down now - lying on something rather hard - Floor? No - table and his arms were being held down. He slowly opened his eyes - stared straight into Warren's smirking face. He looked left, then right. Vamp on the left, gripping his bicep hard enough to bruise. That's the bastard that done for Xander. Gonna get him. Acolyte on the right, holding a little more gingerly. As if afraid it'd hah hurt him. His head was utter agony - as if his skull was filled with razor-sharp rocks, and his right leg felt like it was on fire. He hissed in pain as Warren bumped it.

"Oh - yeah. You had a little - I dunno - seizure when she did that. Guess they were a little over-zealous when they restrained you. You've been out a while." Warren grinned, and fiddled with something - a bulky hand-held device. Spike looked at it with what he hoped was interest. He was on a coffee table, he realized.

"That gonna - fix me up?" he rasped. His voice was gone - his throat felt like he'd swallowed ground glass. Xander...still here...love you, pet, please hurry...

On our way, on our way, almost there Spike HANG ON! Xander, back in the link finally, thank fuck and on his way. The relief was dizzying, and Spike started planning
how to get the hell out of there. He didn't want Xander or Oz anywhere near Glory.

"Ooooh yeah, fix you right up." Warren said, and started pushing buttons. The thing gave off a low hum, and after a few minutes Warren tossed it aside, seemingly satisfied. He had something else in his hand, though - a smaller device that he held and stroked in such a way that made Spike want to rip his head right off.

"Now you're all - good to go. Shall we try it out?" Warren held up the device - pressed a button. Spike had been waiting for this. As soon as he did Spike moved, sitting up so fast he tumbled the acolyte to the floor and dragged the vamp halfway across his lap. The vamp squeaked, startled, and Warren recoiled, tripping over his feet and falling on his butt. The pain in Spike's head flared to incandescence and he hung grimly onto consciousness, his vision going black and then clearing unevenly, full of spots.

"Hey! That's - that's not supposed to - oh fuck."

"Oh fuck is right, you wanker. And you -" Spike glared down at the vamp that was writhing in his grip. "You hurt Xander. So now - you're gonna pay." Spike changed - lunged - and drank the vamp down. The blood was cool and a little thick but it crackled with magical energy and
he felt it roar through him like a train; healing minor injuries, dialing the pain of broken bones and his headache down to acceptable levels. Drained, the vamp abruptly went to dust and Spike flung himself off the table at Warren, catching the boy's ankles and yanking him backwards furiously.

"C'mon, fucker, I need another snack."

"Warren!" It was the Buffy robot, running towards them, and Spike hesitated one moment and then rolled aside, letting Warren go and narrowly missing being kicked in the head. The 'bot launched another attack and he scrabbled away - got between sofa and coffee table and levered himself to his feet. His broken leg wouldn't hold him and he staggered badly - took a hard blow to the ribs and howled in agony and fury.

"Fuck am I tired of being hurt today!" He picked up a table-lamp and swung it with all his might - connected sharply with the 'bot's head. She stumbled - blinked at him - and tiny blue lightning began to flicker over her.

"Wa-ar-arrren," the bot slurred, jerking, and Spike stumbled away from it - was brought up short by Glory.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't our little traitor. Where the hell do you think you're going, vampire?"
GOD DAMNIT. Just gotta wait - pet, you close?

Close, close -

HERE from Oz, and Spike almost laughed, despite the grinding of bones in his chest - the slick-sticky blood that was gluing the rags of his t-shirt to his skin.

"I'm goin' home, you daft cow. I haven't had that chip in my head for months, and your boy should have known that if he's half as smart as he thinks he is." Spike looked Glory up and down, letting a sneer curl his lip. "And to think we've all been so bloody worried about you. Fuckin' brain-dead fashion victim is what you are. Get your lopsided arse and your Lee Press-Ons outta' my fuckin' way." Glory's eyes were wide as saucers and she surreptitiously ran her hands over her butt, checking it. Then fury sparked in her eyes, and Spike braced himself.

Here it fuckin' comes - gonna hurt -

Spike! We're here, hold on!

XANDER - pet, thank god - ! And then Glory kicked him, and he flew backwards, plowing into the door to the hall and crashing out in a hail of splinters and bits of laminate. He thumped painfully into the elevator doors and lay there for a moment, stunned.
Xander! Comin' down -

Inside - we've got you - another minute!

Pack safe HURRY from Oz and Spike laughed weakly - a laugh that turned into a cough. It felt like he was coughing splinters and he reached up and slapped at the call button. The acolytes were streaming out of Glory's apartment as the elevator doors opened and Spike fell backwards - dragged himself by his elbows inside and groaned as his broken leg twisted painfully. He hit the lobby button and slumped against the wall, and the last thing he saw was Warren dragging the 'bot by the arm, heading for the fire stairs, and Glory shrieking and shoving acolytes pell-mell.

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Xander he was on his way down they fell back gratefully into the lobby, where Xander could swing the sword and not accidentally hit anybody. The tea had worn off enough for him to focus, and he focused *hard*. He methodically swung at two, three, four acolytes, decapitating them neatly. Buffy was holding her own - Giles was getting in hit after hit with the crossbow, as precise and efficient as always. Oz - was creating bloody mayhem, but it felt *good*, in the link, to let some rage out, and the acolytes were starting to waver. Xander *felt* Spike behind him - slightly above him - and he turned as the elevator doors opened.

*Spike, love, oh FUCK - safe now safe now*

*Safe.* and Spike slumped sideways, out cold. Xander found Buffy in the melee - yelled to get her attention and tossed the sword to her. She caught it neatly and swung it in a wide arc.

"Get him and get out, Xander! We'll hold them here!"

Xander was already folding Spike into his arms - picking him up and cradling him close. He could *feel* the broken bones shifting, and his arms and chest were damp with blood in minutes.

*Oz - let's go, gotta hurry!* Oz whirled - snapped - broke out of the mob and bounded across the lobby, shedding
the wolf as he went. He opened the door and Xander edged out carefully. At the van, Oz opened the back door and climbed inside - carefully took Spike's shoulders and helped to maneuver the limp form onto the pallet they'd made in the back. Xander pulled the door half shut behind him - crawled up next to Spike and touched the battered face.

"Fuckin' bitch. Let's go, Oz." Oz nodded - scrambled out the front door and ran back to the building. A moment later the back door opened again and Buffy climbed in, yanking the 'bot along behind her. Xander stared for a long moment - turned to see Giles and Oz in the front and then the van was moving, speeding away, and Xander felt, finally, that he could breathe. Felt the soldier fade back, flushed with success. Everyone was spattered with blood or some other fluid, and Xander wondered a bit hysterically what they would say if the police stopped them.

"Is - is he okay?" Buffy whispered, and Xander ran his fingers gently through the tangled, bloody hair - touched Spike's cheek.

"He's - here. He'll be okay, once he gets some blood. Fucking bitch. If I could just -" Xander felt his throat
closing up - clamped his mouth shut and just leaned there, not daring to touch Spike - *desperate* to touch him.

*Oh love you, love you, got you back, MINE, never let you go, Spike, Spike...*

*Be okay,* from Oz, and Xander took a deep breath.

"Yeah. He's gonna be - gonna be fine." He leaned down and gently kissed Spike's mouth.

"Ewww. That's gross." Xander's head snapped up, and he glared. The bot was looking at him with a strangely blank expression, and Xander looked over at Buffy, who looked mortified.

"Why'd you grab - it?"

"Just thought; the enemy shouldn't have...me. You know? That guy - whoever - he was trying to get out the service entrance and I was gonna grab him but she - it -" Buffy looked momentarily confused, glancing at the 'bot and then back to Xander. "It attacked. Trying to defend him, I guess. But it's kinda screwed up. I hit it and it fell down and he took off." Buffy looked upset and Xander swallowed his anger - nodded.
"Warren says two men -" Buffy reached over and smacked the 'bot and it made a sizzling sound and shut up.

"Yeah. Good thing you grabbed it. It's better if we - dismantle it or - whatever. That guy - what a creep." Xander had related what Warren? had said to Spike as they'd driven over, and they'd all agreed to grab him if they saw him. But the 'bots creator, it seemed, had escaped, and Xander just hoped his pack could find him out and about one night. He wasn't as important as Spike, though.

_Fucking sicko._

_Safe now. Pack._

"Safe." Xander touched Spike's bloodied cheek - looked up at Giles. "You guys - did really great, back there. I just - " Xander paused to gulp a little more air. The pain-killing effects of the drug were almost all gone now and his heart was thudding slower and slower - his head felt full of cotton-wool. The pain was coming back, too - licks of fire that got a little higher with every _thump thump thump_, and Xander swallowed heavily and tried not to think about being sick.
"Xander? You ok?" Buffy's face swam out of the gloom, and Xander blinked at her.

*Xander. Sick?*

"Yeah, I'm - I'm kinda - oh man, that drug is wearing off fast, Giles. Uuhhh....fuck..." Xander heard a peculiar sort of buzzing in his ears - tried to ignore it but it got louder and louder until it was *drilling* into his head, and he was clutching his skull and panting - collapsing back onto the pallet next to Spike and desperate to be home. The journey passed in a miserable, nauseating haze, and he was barely aware of Buffy doing what she could with the First-Aid kit.

*Home now.* Oz's hand on his wrist, on his head - pine and earth and wolf-smell, *love you* coming unbelievably from *Spike*, and then Xander slipped gratefully into unconsciousness. They'd made it home, and he was content.
Spike dreamed. Or, he hoped he dreamed. Angelus was there, doing something to Dru and making her scream, and he couldn't get loose - couldn't get to her. And soldiers - soldiers were there, looming over him, discussing... A white-coated doctor pushed through them and nodded, listening to their murmurs and when she turned to face him her features rippled - the Mad Professor, Buffy - Darla. Spike struggled to get free - what the hell was holding him? - and Xander was there, whispering to him. Vampire Xander, with Dru's thin hand in his hair and he felt cold seeing that. No no NO, why did she do that - when - XANDER! Oz there too, half wolf and a thick collar around his neck, chain snaking away to Angelus' hand and Spike roared, launching himself at the bastard. Something struck his face - hurt - and he recoiled, staring. Xander - the real Xander - pale and wild-eyed, holding his shoulders in a crushing grip. His body ached - his head was splitting, and Spike moaned, writhing.

Spike, Spike - you're safe now, Spike - love you - please, you're safe, please calm down, you're safe, safe.

Home safe pack. Oz on his other side, his Oz, green eyes so tired.
"C'mon Spike - here - drink. You'll get better faster. Please." Xander's arm against his mouth, scent of blood and he *bites* and drinks and drinks; blood sweet and hot, full of love, of *need*... He snarls when Xander is wrenched away from him.

"Oz, damnit -"

"You think I'm going to let him hurt you? What the fuck do you think he'd do if I *did*? It's enough, Xander." Oz does something, his eyes flaring black, and then it's *his* arm, his blood; earth and almonds and Spike drinks that too - falls back on the bed and just breathes - pulling unneeded air into his lungs as the nauseating pain slowly ebbs from his skull.

*All right love? Spike, please - you all right?*

*Hurts...Xander, hurts...* Warmth all along his right side - his left - two heartbeats lulling him, and Spike sinks back and the dreams are there, waiting for him.
Xander stood by the bed, watching Spike. The vampire turned restlessly, his eyes moving beneath closed lids. His wounds - the broken bones - were healed. There were only a few faint scars to show where Glory had split skin and muscle with sharp nails and punishing blows. Spike could just be asleep, except for the link. Worse than Dru's spell, the link roiled with nightmares - with pain - and it was like a lure, like a siren-song. Xander wanted to crawl into the bed beside Spike and hold him, soothe him - sink into the dreams with him until they were both dust, or Spike woke.

"Xander."

But he couldn't. Or, rather - he wasn't *allowed* - and for a moment Xander felt a flare of resentment, almost anger. Spike *needed* him; he should be there with him, in whatever twilight he lingered in.

*Shouldn't be in there alone.* Xander waivered - reached out his hand, leaning forward. He could just sit here, on the edge of the bed -

"Xander!" He flinched, startled, and looked over at the door. Oz stood there, watching him. Jerked his head once, summons, and Xander reluctantly pulled back and stepped away from the bed. The link was an *ache* - a droning, mind-numbing buzz like a giant hive. The
nightmares shot through and through it, crackles of pain and images Xander tried to forget as soon as he saw them. The first day, he'd tried to block it out - shut the link down - but he'd felt so lost, then. Felt as if he'd deliberately deafened and blinded himself, and he couldn't do it. After that he'd spent - two days? - in bed with Spike. Holding him, and trying to calm him, trying to wake him. Getting blood into him, but not enough. Oz had hauled him out and forced him to eat - made him go outside and sit on the porch in the sun for an hour. Oz almost invisible in the link, closing it down so completely Xander wasn't always sure he was even there. Shutting it down so he could function, so he could force Xander to, and it was taking its toll. They were both pale - they both had dark shadows under their eyes, and were thinner then they had been. Oz was edgy - twitchy - and except for Xander's name he'd stopped talking altogether. Xander had lost all track of time, had no idea what day it was - just barely knew it was twilight by the low, violet light that glowed around the blinds. He thought it had been a week, since Glory. He felt like he'd been beaten, too. Everything *hurt*, and he couldn't tell if that was Spike or him, anymore. Couldn't tell if the nightmares where Spike's or his own. *God, has to stop, has to STOP* - Spike, *wake up, wake up, wake up*...
A rumbling growl, full of frustration and pain, and Oz's hand on his arm, wrenching him up from where he'd gone to his knees by the bed. Dragging him out of the room and all but hurling him into a chair in the kitchen. Oz slammed cupboard doors and drawers - put a bowl of soup on the table in front of Xander and a spoon. Xander looked at it and sighed - turned his head away and Oz snarled; slammed his fist down on the table hard enough to make the spoon jump - to spill a little soup over. His message clear. Eat. Xander wanted to cry, wanted to scream, but he picked up the spoon instead - ate a mouthful. Quick stroke of Oz's fingers through his hair and the werewolf went back to what he did most of the day: pacing. He looked ragged - as ragged as Xander felt - and Xander tried to send some comfort, something. But the link was closed to that too, and Oz just paced, biting his lip. Stalking between Xander and the bedroom because he wasn't letting Xander back in there until the soup was gone. Didn't need words to make that obvious, and Xander bent to the task of eating.

Rustle of pencil on paper and Xander glanced over at Derio, sitting opposite him. He was the only person Xander would let into the house. Because Oz needs him. He had a sheaf of papers spread out before him; notes on a song he was writing. He picked his fiddle up out of
its case and tuned it for a moment - stroked the bow over the strings and began to play. It was low and slow and soft - it was nearly a lullaby - and it washed over Xander like warm water. It calmed Oz enough for him to sit down finally, one knee pressed tight into Derio's thigh, head bowed. Xander wondered, fleetingly, how it was Derio fit, so well. At the house every day, playing his fiddle or Oz's guitar. Singing softly in that hoarse voice. Or turning on the radio, helping to cook. Talking for Oz and talking for Xander, even - talking or singing or making a clatter with pots and dishes. Making a cocoon of sound to drown out the pained silence that had fallen over the house. It helped, more than Xander could say.

Xander ate, head bowed. Finished the soup and pushed the bowl away and just lay his head down on the table. He was so tired - and it wasn't just his body, but his head. Numb and confused and aching for Spike, and he didn't know how much longer he could do this. The fiddle-music washed in and out of him, low and steady as the sea, and Xander drifted.

"Ey Vato," someone said, soft voice rusty from dis-use, and Xander sat bolt upright, startled out of a half doze. "That's nice."

*Spike*
Xan love... Xander stood up slowly, feeling like a clock-work toy whose gears had had sand thrown in them. Spike was in the doorway to the bedroom, leaning on the doorjamb. He'd put on his brocade robe and tied it, and he was...

Thin, love, you're so thin...god, Spike...love you love you love you
Xander finally felt something like mobility return to him and he was across the kitchen floor and his arms around Spike, holding the too-thin body close to him, putting his face into Spike's hair and neck and just breathing, just feeling him. That hideous pain finally gone. Spike hugged him back hard - not as hard as he should be able to, but just to have him there was enough and the rest could be fixed.

Derio was still playing, and Oz was motionless beside him, but he was smiling - blinking hard. Xander kissed Spike's neck and jaw - kissed his mouth, slow and gentle until Spike finally pulled away and looked at him, a little bewildered.

"I'm not gonna break, pet. Why all the -" He touched Xander's cheek, and Xander realized he'd been crying.

"Days, Spike, it's been - I don't even know..." Xander coughed, his voice rough. "You - it's been days since Glory and - and you were -" He couldn't finish that -
pulled Spike into another hug, holding him tight. *Never leave me.*

"Eight days," quietly, from Derio, and Xander pulled back and sent a quick smile over his shoulder to the other man.

"Eight *days*?" Spike leaned his head on Xander's shoulder, arms loosely around his waist. "No bloody wonder I feel like I could eat half the Bronze." He shifted and looked at Xander again, his eyes anxious.

"What happened? Did that bitch catch me again? I thought - we got out..." He trailed off uncertainly and Xander turned them both - tugged at him a little and led him over to the table. Spike sank down into Xander's chair and Xander pulled the last chair over close - sat down as well and put his arm over Spike's shoulders. Spike leaned into him and sighed. Derio let the music fade softly to silence and started putting his fiddle away, looking serious.

"Real nice, Derio."

"Thanks Spike." Spike looked over at Oz, who was sitting with his head buried in his hands, his shoulders hunched.

"You okay, wolfling?" Oz's head came up and he shot a wild look at Spike - eyes red-rimmed and wet. He was up
and around the table in a heartbeat, crouching down beside the chair and putting his hands on Spike's thigh. They were trembling, just a little, and Spike leaned down and kissed the top of his head.

"Jesus, Spike..." Oz whispered, and his voice was a cracked thread of sound.

*God, Oz, are you back? Oz* - And Oz just *there* in the link, like a light coming on - like something breaking but it wasn't pain, it was the sweet flood that comes with the bite into an apple.

*Pack pack Spike love you both.* He put his head down on Spike's thigh and for a few minutes they all were just silent, the link thick with happiness, contentment - love. Spike ran his fingers gently through and through Oz's hair. Oz wiped his eyes and leaned back, finally - went back to his chair. Derio reached out and took his hand and twined their fingers together, smiling softly.

"Tell me what's been goin' on, Xander."

"Well - we came and got you - you remember that?" *Love you love you love you.*

*Love you.* "Yeah... I was in the elevator and - you were there and the Slayer...wolfling... The Watcher was there?"
"Yup. He's a damn good shot with that crossbow. We got you out. Oz brought the van and we got you here. I - I sent Willow and Tara down to Willy's to get you blood." Spike goggled at him, and then he laughed a little breathlessly.

"You what? Red an' - an' Glinda down at Willy's? Getting blood?"

"Oh yeah," Xander grinned at Spike - at the familiar expression of amusement and love - and his heart felt like it might just pound right out of his chest. "Willy knows about them, you know. You really think he's gonna refuse two powerful witches? Especially when I called him and told him to expect them."

"You're barmy, pet." Spike said, but there was obvious pride in his voice, and he leaned over and kissed Xander for a moment, then snuggled back into him again, sighing happily. Love you pet, smart boy, my boy. "So - what? I've been just layin' there for a week?"

"You don't remember?" Xander's could feel Spike stiffen under his arm, and he hugged him closer.

"I - I was...havin' really bad dreams. I thought - it was just the one night. Eight days. I reckon it was that mind-suck thing."
"What?" Xander couldn't help it, he jerked sharply and Spike sat up, frowning a little.

*Pack safe now,* from Oz, even though he looked as disturbed as Xander felt. Derio was frowning, too.

"Mind...oh fuck. She *did.* I - kinda forgot. It hurt so much when she did that I kinda..." Xander shook his head.

"Yeah, she did that - or, she tried to. One of those little goons of hers, it told her she couldn't do that to a vampire but she tried anyway. It fuckin' hurt. Hurt her too, I guess - I remember her screaming..." Spike shuddered and pushed his hand back through his hair - grimaced at the feel of it, the tangles.

"Christ, pet, I need a bath." Xander laughed - he couldn't help it - and he couldn't help that he sounded a little hysterical, and he couldn't help that he couldn't stop right away. Manny had let him off work, and Oz had stayed home so they could sit what felt like a death-watch over Spike. Derio had been there so much Xander was wondering if he actually *had* a job. And Oz had stopped talking and Xander had just...*stopped.* And Spike wanted a bath. Suddenly the world was right again - was solidly back on its axis and spinning at the right speed, instead of careening wildly through darkness and cold. Xander hugged Spike hard and kissed him again.
"Course you do. C'mon and have your bath and we'll go and - you can get fed." Spike looked at him at that, surprise in the link, surprise and puzzlement.

*Love? You know -*

*I know. Don't care anymore. Can't be without you, won't leave you for a minute, don't CARE anymore, my Spike, my VAMPIRE, fuckin' Big Bad and love you love you love you* Spike's robe soaked up tears pretty well, and Derio and Oz found something interesting on the TV. Xander just *sobbed* - release of unbearable tensions and fear, and Spike held him hard - whispered to him, kissed his hair and his temples and rocked him slowly, slowly. After that, Xander was ready for a bath, too.

They got back in just past midnight, and Xander was feeling - pretty strange. He really *hadn't* let Spike out of his sight, and he'd never seen Spike hunt before, or feed. And Spike was right - it didn't hurt, and he'd only killed one. Sick old man whose heart couldn't take it and who wanted it, anyway, or so Spike said and so the link said, too. Vampire senses reading illness and despair and Spike the lion in the field, culling. Xander felt -

*Jealous? You're jealous, pet.*
I'm not! Fuck, AM, course I am. You... Xander paused at the front door, looking at Spike who was on the top step of the porch. A Spike who looked as if he hadn't spent a day in bed, much less eight. He was sleek and practically glowing with blood and health and Xander reveled in it. "I didn't realize it was so...intimate, I guess. I thought - hunt - you know? More 'grrrr' and less..."

"'Allo ducks, wot 'ave we 'ere'?' Spike said, accent like some old movie and Xander grinned for moment.

"Yeah. Better this way. I mean, no trail of bodies or anything but..." MINE, you're mine, always mine, ONLY mine, beautiful, fuckin' beautiful. Spike laughed softly, moving up close to him, slipping his hands around Xander's waist and up under his t-shirt, tugging him close.

"Course I am, love. All yours. Wanna claim me? Wanna bite me, love, wanna fuck me and take me and make me scream your name, love? Wanna...?" Spike nibbled along his neck and jaw - reached his mouth and settled in for a long kiss, his tongue strong and cool and demanding - devouring. Blood and lemon drops and cigarettes. His hands pulled Xander close - pressed them together all along their length and held Xander immobile and helpless and Xander was trembling - gasping. He clawed
Spike's t-shirt free of his jeans and ran his hands up and down Spike's back, relearning and rediscovering the silken skin, the sharp curve of muscle, the ridge of bone. The screen door groaned alarmingly as Xander fell back against it, bringing Spike with him and he didn't care if they woke Oz up, or Derio. Didn't care if the neighbors were watching. He just wanted in, wanted Spike, wanted to prove to himself - to all his selves - that Spike was alive and whole and his, oh his.

_Fuck, Spike, want you, want you, NEED you, Spike - love you oh god Spike never leave me..._ Spike pulled back half an inch, his eyes golden and gleaming.

"Inside," he grated, and Xander fumbled with the screen door - fumbled with his key - pushed the door open and glanced around. A lamp was on, but the rest of the house was dark, and as Spike turned the lock Xander saw a piece of paper taped to the TV screen. In Oz's slanting writing it said _W/D - with Derio_ - and Xander grinned.

"Thank bloody gods. Gonna make you scream, pet." Spike flung his duster over the couch - reached out and grabbed Xander's face and dove back into kissing him, walking him backwards. As they walked Xander fought to get their shirts off - finally just shredded them, lust and need making him frantic. In the bedroom Spike pushed
him back until he felt the bed against his legs and then abruptly let him go - turned him.

Want you want you... Spike undid button and zipper - pushed Xander's jeans down and then did the same to his own. He leaned and wrenched open the bedside table and snatched the lube out. Xander leaned his knees into the bed - put his hands on the mattress and braced himself, panting already, so hard it hurt and pre-come leaking cool and steady from his cock.

"Hurry, Spike, don't need it -"

"Shhh, love. Almost there..." Spike's hands were cool and deft, the preparation cursory. A moment later he was positioning himself - pushing in with one hard thrust that went to the hilt and Xander didn't so much scream as howl, the hyena roaring to the surface and wanting. Wanting proof of life - proof of existence and of Spike; same old fear, same old pain. Spike knew it was there, lurking, and he knew how to let it out - like drawing a splinter, only he used his body; used his teeth and his nails and his cock to open old wounds and make them bleed - make them heal. Xander loved each stinging scratch and throbbing bite because it meant he was there and Spike was and Glory didn't win and the Initiative didn't and his fucking parents didn't... Spike came too
soon for Xander, and they took a minute to wrench off boots and jeans and then Xander was pressing Spike down hard into the mattress - pushing his legs up and leaning in and slamming in, more proof in the arch of Spike's throat and the clutch of his body - in the blood that Xander drew with hard, nipping bites and the growling sounds of pure pleasure that Xander pounded out of him. Letting that week of ache and helplessness spill through the link, letting it go in an overload of scent, touch, taste, feel - Spike was there, and Xander was giddy with it.

In the aftermath Xander felt utterly spent - wrung out and weak as a newborn, but light, too. Like a feather, lying on the bed, anchored by Spike's arms around him - by Spike's mouth on his.

*Love you love you love you* whispered with each heartbeat; the link so open they might as well be one person.

"You think I'm some kind of...? Is it normal, to want somebody this much?" Xander asked, more to himself than Spike.

"Normal for me," Spike said, hand lazily stroking the small of Xander's back.
"Normal 'cause...the demon is like that, or 'cause you are like that?" Xander wiggled around until he could prop his chin on Spike's chest and Spike put his arm behind his head, looking down at Xander.

"Don't know. The demon just wants, and it takes and haves until...until it doesn't want, anymore." Always want you. "I - we..." Spike stopped, and Xander could see something in his eyes, flickering. Flash of something, a long-buried memory, and Xander closed his own eyes for a moment - relived a party, and a girl, and a moment of indescribable pain and loss.

"Guess it's me, too," Spike said softly, and Xander reached up and ran gentle fingers over his face.

"So - it's okay, for me to want you this much? 'Cause sometimes..." Xander's turn to be quiet, to remember wanting so much and so desperately. Wanting love and family and somebody to know him, to want him. "I mean - seems like...I should be..."

"What, tougher? A manly man who never needs nothin' and nobody?" Spike sounded disgusted - very possibly hurt - and Xander shook his head, looking at him.

"No. Just - I wonder if..."
"What, love?" Spike's fingers combed back through Xander's hair, and Xander nuzzled into that most-loved touch.

"Just - if it's too much, sometimes. I fell apart when that Toth - when I couldn't hear the...voices in my head for god's sake... Fell apart this week, too. Am I just...too...needy?" Too broken. Spike startled Xander by laughing - bouncing his chin off Spike's chest with the force of his mirth.

"Christ, love - I'd chain you to the bed if I could - I'd take you away and lock you in a tower if I had one! Never let you out of my sight. I never spent a day apart from Dru for a hundred years, love, or near enough - that needy enough for you?" Spike turned them suddenly - flipped Xander on his back and held him close - put his forehead to Xander's and kissed his face with tiny, fluttering kisses.

"You can't want me too much Xander - can't need me too much. I'll take everything you've got and beg for more, love. Can't break me with need, love - can't wear me out with want. Everything you do - everything you say - it just feeds my addiction, love. Feeds me. I only want all of you and everything and what you are forever and a day, love." Not broken. Different. Strong. Perfect match - just what I need, MY boy, my own, always. Xander just stared
up at him, and felt the truth of it through the link; Spike inside him and around him, sweet as honey, soft as down. Felt the truth of it in the touches Spike lay gently on him - in the love that made Spike's eyes like stars.

*Oh god.*

"Some of it was the link, you know. Making it...worse." Spike gazed down at him, his fingers in Xander's hair and his eyes so serious. *Better now, love? My poor boy, so tired...*

"Yeah... I didn't know it'd be so..." Xander stopped - pushed it *away*. He didn't want to dwell on that pain that still echoed, just a little. "So if I tell you that's your lot in life now, to have me on your shoulder at every possible moment, you're not gonna wig, huh?"

"Can you quit your job? Stay home all day?" Xander laughed this time, and then Spike did, and they lay in comfortable silence after that, basking in the nearness of the other - the scent and taste and feel.

*Mine, saved you - did it just right.* That made Spike lift his head again and look down at Xander, puzzled.

"Who's that, then?"
'That's...me, but mostly it's the soldier. He's - feeling better, now. He got to take control for a while there - figured out where you were.'

"Knew you could," Spike said, in the link and aloud and the unwavering strength of his belief was heady, heady stuff. Xander reveled in it, even as his breathing slowed, and Spike's eyes fluttered shut, and they slept.

Something different, the next day - something... Spike felt it in Xander's touch - in him, in the link. Belief, maybe. Rest. Xander knew, finally, down in his soul. Knew it was real, and for always. Dru's visit had done most of it. Chose me in the link but so soft Spike was sure Xander had never meant for him to hear. Can't do without you there as well - such profound relief when he'd stood in the bedroom doorway and Xander had turned to see him. Spike wasn't hurt by this - didn't mind that it had taken such extreme things - such pain - for Xander to finally let go his deepest fears. It was a good feeling, this. Xander utterly his now in a way that he hadn't quite been before. And this knowledge - not new, just finally, finally cemented - put a shine in his eyes and a quiet confidence in his movements. Wholly Spike's, now, and wholly his own, and even Oz noticed it, coming in that afternoon from work; watching Xander who was
cutting up tomatoes for dinner and singing quietly along with the radio.

"Something's different," Oz said, looking at Spike. Spike nodded - wondered what to say.

_Knows_, Oz thought, conveying more than just that word in the link, and Spike could only look at him - look and smile a little, at the things the wolfling saw.

_Owe you. You kept him - here... You were so strong..._ Oz shook his head, frowning just a little.

_Pack. Always._ After a moment Oz smiled back - got up to help and trailed his fingers along Spike's shoulders - bumped Xander a little with his hip, getting out another knife and reaching for his own tomato. Xander grinned over at him, still singing, and Oz joined him a moment later. Spike smoked and watched them and hummed to himself.

"Money, get back. I'm all right Jack,

Get your hands off my stack.

Money, it's a hit. Don't give me that

_Do goody good bullshit._

_I'm in the high-fidelity first-class traveling set_
And I think I need a Lear jet...

"Talked with Derio last night," Oz said suddenly, and Xander looked over at him - dumped a cut-up tomato into a bowl for salad - Oz's influence, all the veggies. Spike wasn't sure about them, even if it was fun to embarrass Xander in the grocery by making suggestive remarks about cucumbers and squash.

"Yeah?" Trouble?

"Nah. He was just a little...freaked out. The link - we'd talked about it some, but..." Oz stopped and pondered, and Spike felt a little tension coiling up in him. "This whole week - he was kinda scared. Didn't really understand why -" Oz stopped again, and the link was flooded with a little hurt, a little fear. With images, and Derio's serious face. "Had to tell him - everything. About the Initiative and about... what happened. Us." Oz picked up a piece of tomato and ate it - looked over at Xander and then at Spike, who were both tense.


Love you, Oz. Tell us. Oz smiled a little - a private, a secret sort of smile. Let one tiny image slip through the link, and Spike blinked at the jolt of arousal that hit him - his own, and Xander's, and Oz.
"He's all right. We are. He - understood." Knows everything. Love you both.

"Thank god." Xander grinned at Oz - nudged him with an elbow, and Oz just ducked his head and grinned down at the tomatoes - reached for a pepper and started chopping it. "Tell him how much he helped, okay, Oz? Tell him I said thanks." Oz nodded, and Xander went back to his vegetables.

The phone rang and Xander and Oz both held up knives and vegetable-smeared hands and Spike grimaced and got up. He hated phones - noisy, intrusive things always interrupting at the wrong soddin' moment, always bringing bad news or trouble or some bloody fool selling something and he'd managed to talk Xander out of a cell phone twice.

Didn't actually talk. Just distracted him with my mouth until he forgot he wanted one. Spike smirked to himself and picked up the phone as if it were a poisonous snake.

"Lo?" he asked cautiously, and frowned at Anya's rapid, panicky question. Trouble, always trouble.

"Nope - sorry. Haven't heard from Glinda all day. Why - What?" All chopping ceased, and Spike felt Xander and Oz looking at him.
"Fuck - yeah - right there." He slammed the phone down - shot information through the link rapid-fire as he strode into the bedroom for his boots.

Glory acolyte, shop, Glory thinks Glinda is the Key - Red and Slayer looking - Xander was right behind him, shoving bare feet into his work-boots and grabbing one of the axes they'd brought home from the shop.

"Why would she think Tara -?"

"Who fuckin' knows? One'a those little trolls of hers is at the shop - Watcher got it to talk but I'll bet it'll talk more." Spike didn't even bother to keep the demon at bay and he snatched his duster and a blanket and all but ran for the door, the others behind him. Late afternoon sunlight slanting blood-red across the yard, almost intolerably bright to demon eyes, and he ran for the DeSoto, blanket in place, not noticing the slight burn he got on his wrist. Xander and Oz crowded into the front seat and he turned the key - engine revving and Motorhead blasting out at them, Lemmy advising him to 'put the bite on the son of a bitch' - a sentiment Spike wholly agreed with but he snapped the stereo off as he reversed out of the driveway. Not the time.
Driving, pushing the DeSoto to top speed where he could, the pounding human heartbeats next to him injecting a further note of urgency that made Spike snarl.

"Red and her were gonna do this fair thing, this -"

"Yeah - near the river - west of campus," Oz said, and Spike nodded.

"She went to look." Wanna-?

Drop us, yeah. "You'll -"

"Magic Box." Spike glanced over at Xander - felt a warm hand on his thigh. Love you CAREFUL be careful, damnit, wolphling be CAREFUL. Glinda...

"Yeah," Oz said, Protect pack, and Spike took a hard right and saw people - booths - World's Culture Fair banner and he hit the brakes.

"Right. Go. Love you! Get her and get out!" Quick, hot brush of lips along his cheekbone and they were gone and he was gunning the engine again, making a u-turn and speeding back towards the Magic Box; four minutes and he'd be there.
Sick of this, sick of this bitch fuckin' with Xan's - with MY - family. Better not have killed that little bastard, Watcher, I wanna make it SCREAM.

Through the front windows of the Magic Box, Anya was pacing fretfully, eyeing with loathing the scabby acolyte tied to a chair. The Watcher was leaning on the display counter, looking more Ripper than usual. As Spike pelted in under the blanket they both jumped, and Spike smelled the little jolt of fear from them when they saw his face.

"Spike! Where are -"

"Xander an' the wolf are at the fair-thing, helping Red. They'll find her if she's there. Where's the Slayer? And Niblet?"

"Buffy went to check on campus - Dawn is with Clem." Giles' voice was thick with tension. Spike tossed the blanket down on the lighted table - circled the acolyte who cringed, wild-eyed.

"I serve G-Glorificus and any harm you do to me will be v-v-v-visited upon you ten-fold!"

"You think?" Spike asked, leaning down into the acolyte's face, baring his fangs. "I think that if she can't actually find enough of you to figure out if you're one of hers or
the dog's fuckin' dinner, there won't be much bloody retribution happening. What'd it tell you, Watcher?" Giles looked at the acolyte, his eyes steely behind his glasses.

"Only that Glory thought Tara was the key. Because she's the newest one among us."

"Huh. That's not much." Spike took his duster off and folded it - draped it carefully over a chair-back. Making a bit of a show. He looked around the room - flexed his hands, making the knuckles crack.

"Be a shame to get - bits - all over the things in here. An' - blood's hard to get out, no matter what you do. Wha'dya think, Watcher?"

"I think I have a spell. A variant on a containment spell. Should work a treat." The acolyte looked wildly from Spike to Giles and back - looked at Anya, who was all cool interest.

"You will l-learn nothing! Glorificus -" Spike backhanded him, and the acolyte had blood down its chin - tongue bitten badly.

"I don't wanna hear that name right now. Ready with the spell, Watcher?" Spike grabbed the back of the chair and tipped it - dragged the acolyte back to the training room.
Giles followed, hastily grabbing chalk and some herbs. Anya stood in the doorway, arms crossed.

"I'll just stay here. I've got a good view and I can hear the phone. Do you need any knives, or pliers, or matches?"

"Think we're well set up, ducks, thanks." Spike drew his knife from his boot - tapped it against his lower lip thoughtfully and circled the acolyte as Giles did the spell.

"That's all right then," he said softly as Giles finished, and bent to his work.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

**Running**, trying very, very hard not to knock people aside. The hyena pushing his senses to the limit and the soldier quartering and dismissing sections of the grounds with swift, hard glances. Oz beside him, eyes black, trying to keep the wolf at bay. Scenting for Willow and Tara and following the scent through the crowd like a rope of twisted green and red. Fury pounding through the link from Spike, and abruptly something else - gleeful satisfaction and an almost mindless bloodlust. Xander knew the acolyte was getting something very nasty done
to it, and he hoped it had something more to tell them than what they already knew. Oz growled, swinging his head abruptly over to the left and then he darted away, follow follow follow in the link. Xander ran after him - dodged a juggler and nearly tripped over a baby-stroller and then he saw them. Willow and Tara, cuddling close on a park bench. Willow had Tara's head on her shoulder, and Tara was holding her hand awkwardly - bleeding.

*Light witch HURT.*

*She found her she found her thank god,* as they ran up to the bench - skidded to a stop, panting. Willow looked up at them, her eyes streaming tears, her mouth working in silent, anguished sobs. Tara didn't move, and then she did - looked at Oz and at Xander, utterly blank.

"There's no way out, when you're blind," Tara said solemnly, and Willow shook, gasping.

"Wills? Oh fuck, Wills, what - what happened?" Xander crouched down by Willow's knees, grabbing her wrist and squeezing. Willow took in a hard, moaning kind of breath.

"I was too late! I was t-too late, Xander I was - I was too laa-aaate." She started to sob brokenly, curling into Tara who looked serenely out at the crowds. Oz sat heavily on
the bench beside Tara, biting his lip, and Xander bowed his head for a moment, fighting rage - fighting tears. Tara moved in Willow's tight grip - flinched and made a gasping sound of pain when her bloody hand bumped Willow's arm.

"Wills? What happened to her hand? We - she needs to go to the hospital, Willow."

_Spike! Have to go to the hospital. Tara - she got Tara..._ 
_Rage, from Spike, strong enough to make he and Oz both flinch, and then silence as Spike abruptly shut the link down to almost nothing. Xander was pretty sure the acolyte was dead. And Spike was on his way._

"Willow - Spike's coming. He's gonna bring the car and we'll get Tara to the hospital. Willow? You've got to - get it together, Willow. Tara needs you to be calm, okay? You have to talk to the doctors for her." Xander put his hand on Willow's shoulder - shook her, just a little, and Willow gasped and coughed. Sat up finally, and wiped at her face, sniffing. Oz stood up and darted off, coming back a minute later with a stack of paper napkins. Willow took them gratefully and blew her nose - wiped her eyes again.
"Okay. Okay, Xander, okay. I'm - I'll be okay. Thanks, Oz. Oh god, Xander -" Willow closed her eyes - groped blindly and gripped Xander's hand tightly for a moment.

"It'll be okay, Willow, it will." Xander stood up, looking around warily at the fair grounds. The sun was mostly down - lights were coming on all over the booths and exhibits, but it was still dark - still shadowy and full of places to lurk - to hide.

Gotta get out of here, Harris. She might come back -

Yeah. Right. Gotta go.

"Willow, come on, we're gonna walk back up to the street so we can meet Spike, okay?" Willow looked at him for a moment then nodded - wiped her eyes one more time and put on a variant of her 'resolve' face that looked like it might crack at any moment.

Trying so hard, from Oz, full of grief, and Xander pushed himself to his feet - held his hand out. "C'mon, Wills." Willow took his hand - stood up and then helped Tara up, being careful of her hand. Tara flinched anyway and ducked her head - twisted her good hand in the hem of her shirt and shuffled obediently along beside Willow as they started to walk towards the street. Oz hovered at Tara's side, not quite touching her.
"Pack, soft and so sad in the link.

"What - what happened, Wills?" Xander asked quietly, and Willow sniffed ferociously and gave a sort of barking laugh.

"We - we had a fight. I was feeling all - second-best and I said - I said some s-stuff, and she - she left, said she'd just come down here... And then, that little demon, at the shop - it said it was there to watch us while Glory got her key..." Willow hugged Tara a little closer, guiding her around a knot of boisterous students and Tara smiled at her - looked up at the sky.

"Too late now, cat's out of the box. Should have killed it," Tara said, and Willow gulped.

"She - Glory did that - that thing to her - took her mind... Xander, what am I gonna do?" Willow's voice cracked on the last and Xander put his arm around her shoulder.

"We'll fix it Willow - we will. We'll figure it out. Tara's going to be okay. She'll be okay." He thought for a moment about mentioning Spike - that she'd done that to him, too, but -

\textit{Don't} and he looked over at Oz - nodded. It really wasn't the same. They were at the street now, and Xander could hear the DeSoto roaring towards them, and they kept
walking, trying to cut the distance. The car skidded around a corner and came to a screeching halt, and Spike was half out of the door, looking at them across the roof.

"C'mon - get in!" he called, and Oz trotted forward to open the back door for Willow and Tara. As they approached, Tara recoiled, looking into the dark interior with trepidation.

"Oh no, no, no - too dark. They can find you in the dark," she whimpered, and Spike did something - made the dome light come on. Xander hadn't even realized it worked.

"It's all right, pet. Not dark now. Bundle her in Red, that hand looks like it hurts." *Fuckin' bitch is gonna PAY...Glinda*...

Willow shot a grateful look at Spike and coaxed Tara into the back seat. Oz climbed in after her and pulled the door shut as Xander got into the front.

*Not too fast - don't scare her*, Xander thought, and Spike looked over his shoulder at the girls.

"Ready then?"
"We're ready, Spike. I guess you're - all right now, huh?" Willow was holding Tara close and Tara had closed her eyes.

"Right as rain, witchling." Spike put the DeSoto into gear and they drove to the hospital at an amazingly sedate pace - but still faster than Xander would have dared drive. Giles and Anya were waiting at the desk, Giles with a clipboard half filled out, Anya looking grim. Willow gulped and steeled herself, and led Tara down the white, antiseptic corridor to the waiting doctor.

It turned out Glinda-witch's hand was broken - six bones - and Spike watched Xander and Oz try to keep Willow calm - try to comfort her. Hovering over Tara as much as Willow did.

*Pack pack pack*, in the link, the wolf and the hyena both angry and hyper-protective. Red was over her first shock, and Spike could see the fury building in her - fury that threatened to spill over onto a hapless orderly who told her that Tara had to spend the night in a ward - 'observation, just a precaution'. But the scent of anger and magic rose around Willow like a hot, stinging cloud and Spike wondered what she was gonna *do* with all that. He wanted to get Xander and Oz *away* - that much thwarted fury was never a safe thing - but he knew
they'd be there as long as Willow was. And Tara - huddled on the gurney, smelling of fear and her eyes looking into some dark place only she could see. The demon wanted to get her away, only seeing the threat of out-of-control magics, uncaring of the link between the two witches. Buffy arrived, hollow-eyed and grim, out of breath. Giles tried to distract himself by asking Spike how he was - what had happened exactly, over the past week, but Spike wasn't in the mood to share. He growled and lit a cigarette, ignoring the baleful looks Giles shot him, ignoring the tentative 'excuse me' some little nothing of a nurse aimed at him. A bigger, less tentative orderly curtly told him there was 'no smoking' in the hospital and Spike snarled and flicked his cigarette into the man's chest, at the end of his patience. Before the orderly could quite recover from his shock Xander was there, apologizing, telling him that Spike's 'sister' was hurt and Spike was just a little out of it and he was so sorry. Spike just turned and put his boot through the cinderblock wall and then stood there, shivering, as Xander leaned into him, blanketing him and putting his arms around him, holding him close.

What is it? What's wrong?

Red's gonna fuckin' blow - gotta get out of here - Glinda's makin' me - Spike could barely form a coherent thought.
Every time Tara said something - whimpered in fear - some part of his week's worth of nightmares would come back to him. Glory's voice in his head 'small and scared and dirty and when it finds you it's gonna PUNISH you and you can't get OUT' and even though he knew it was just - echoes, bad dreams - it twisted at something in him and he was pretty sure he couldn't stand to be there and hear Tara go through it much longer.

*Love, it's all right, you're safe, safe...Spike, I'm here* - Spike turned around and pulled Xander to him - breathed deeply of his scent and felt his solid muscle and heat like a balm.

*All right. Love you. We should go - get the Bit.*

"Yeah -" Xander jerked around in startlement at voices raised in argument - Willow and Buffy, face to face, both furious.

"When will it be the right time, Buffy? When *you* say so? I can't just -"

"You *have* to Willow! We can't go running over there, we can't just take her on like this!"

"I didn't ask you to come along!"
"Stop it!" Oz stood between them, looking as if he was going to wolf out at any moment. Not pack making his rigid posture and clenched fists more a warning then any sign of restraint. Spike glanced at Xander, whose shocked expression was rapidly changing to one of worry. Anya, coming back from a vending-machine run, stood frozen in the doorway, her arms full of chips and soda, her expression one of annoyed bafflement. Spike hoped she wouldn't say anything just then - Red was at the limit of her control.

"You aren't going anywhere, Willow. You can't. It doesn't matter how angry you are - if you had the power to kill Glory we'd have asked you to do it months ago." Oz's voice was low and measured but it shook with emotion. "Tara needs you - she needs you alive and not in the same fuckin' mental ward and not in the morgue!" Willow gaped at Oz and Buffy scowled, opening her mouth and the werewolf shot her a look, silent snarl, and she snapped her mouth shut.

"Sometimes they let people spend the night, Willow - let's go find out if you can stay with Tara, okay? Getting killed by Glory isn't going to help Tara, and it isn't going to help us." Willow just stared at Oz - stared and blinked and then suddenly she broke down, whooping sobs that violently shook her whole frame and Oz was holding her,
shushing her, and Buffy turned away, shoulders slumped. Anya smiled at her and held out a soda, and Buffy waved it away.

"I had no idea Oz could actually talk that much," Giles murmured. Spike shot him a withering look.

"Me and Xander are gonna go get the Niblet - keep her safe. All right?" Out of here - need us, wolf?

Safe. Dawn. Love you

Big bad wolf. with a mental snicker, and Oz bared his teeth in a mock growl at Spike, rubbing Willow's back.

"C'mon love, let's go get the Niblet - Clem's probably got her so stuffed with chips she can't move."

"Okay. Yeah, okay, Spike." Xander stood for another minute, just watching Willow and Oz, then he turned away and smiled a little at Buffy.

"We'll keep Dawn tonight, Buffy. Willow might - might want you to stay here."

"Thanks, Xander. I'm gonna - help Giles. Do some research. There has to be a way - some way to get Tara back."
"Sure." Xander hugged her briefly - sketched a brief wave at Giles, who nodded in return.

"Soda, Xander?" Anya asked brightly, sidling up to him. When she was close, she lowered her voice. "Is there going to be a fight? Is Oz going to bite someone?"

"No, they're okay now, Anya. It's just stress, you know? Thanks." Xander, for lack of anything better to do, took a soda and Anya grinned at him - turned and marched towards Giles with a determined look on her face, chip-bags rustling.

Spike slung his arm around Xander's waist and got him going down the corridor, hugging him close.

"She'll be all right, love."

"You're all right, aren't you? What - happened back there?" Spike shook his head, not wanting to think about it.

"I dunno. Just - an echo, I guess. Still kinda...remembering the dreams, you know? It's nothing."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." Safe love. No harm. Love you.
Love you.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

It was late - past three - and Xander was trying to sleep, but he was restless, and Spike wasn't in the bed.

*Spike?*

*Dawn*

Xander got up and pulled on his robe - padded softly into the kitchen and leaned in the doorway. Dawn was in the fold-out bed, sitting hunched against Spike, the covers pulled up to her chin. Spike had his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle, his robe snugged tight. His arm was around Dawn's shoulders - her head on his chest. She was crying - talking - and Xander closed his eyes and listened - felt her tears and how her body trembled through the link.

"What *am* I, Spike? Everyone around me is being - being h-hurt and dying because of *me*. I must be this h-horrible, evil *thing*, just a *thing* -" Her voice caught and broke and
Spike hugged her close, smoothing his hand over and over her hair.

"No, no. You're not a bloody thing, you're Dawn Summers, you're the Slayer's little sister. There's not a drop of evil in you, pet." Dawn took in a hard, shuddering breath, wiping her eyes.

"How do you know, S-spike? How can anybody n-know? If Glory gets her hands on me - I'll kill everything - I'll kill everyone -"

"That's utter nonsense, poppet. I know 'cause I'm evil." Dawn jerked, and Spike patted her arm. "All right, all right, used to be evil, all right?" I can be good for the Niblet.

Course you can. Bad for ME.

"And Xander's seen you, Bit - he knows what you are." Dawn sat up - sniffed, and pushed her hair back.

"What do you mean?"

"You know Xander can see - things. See your soul, Bit. He can see mine - he saw yours."
"He did? I - I have a soul?" Spike hugged Dawn *hard*, and Xander felt that lance of pity and sorrow and fierce protectiveness.

"Of *course* you do. He saw it, pet. Told me all about it - told me how beautiful it is - *you* are. How much love there is in you, and goodness. Doesn't matter what Glory wants to do with you - you *are* good." Spike caught Dawn's chin in his fingers - turned her face up, so she could see him. *See the truth.* "You are good, and sweet and beautiful, and none of this - *none* of this is your fault. Blame the bloody monks if you have to blame anybody, but don't you ever think it's your fault, Bit, and don't you *ever* think any of us think that, either." Xander saw Dawn through the link - her eyes huge and wet and hopeful, her chin trembling in Spike's gentle grip and her hands clenched tight on the edge of the sheet.

"I want it to be over, Spike! I just want it to be ooover." She broke down into harsh, gasping sobs and Spike just pulled her close - held her and rocked her and told her it was all right, *'going to be all right'.* There was nothing else to do. Xander stood in the doorway until she fell asleep, and watched the faint, frail green of the false dawn slowly illuminate the two figures on the bed. He quietly closed the curtains, and went to sleep himself.
"Oohh." Anya shuddered, and Xander bumped her with his shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"Draft of paralyzing fear." Anya squinted down the street, looking unhappy. "I think the whole 'Run away! Run away!' thing is a good idea but..."

"But it's a little creepy, yeah. I kinda feel like a sitting duck." Xander put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a brief hug, and she sighed and hugged him back.

"It's too bad you're gay."

"I don't have a problem with it," Xander said, and Anya giggled.

"Everything will be fine, really." Giles got up from his perch on a stack of milk crates and shouldered his backpack, looking oddly out of place in the littered back street. He was in 'stiff upper lip' mode.
Think he'll crack? From his place beside Tara, Oz looked up and studied Giles for a moment.

Take something crazy.

"As soon as Buffy and - and Spike arrive, we'll all feel..." Giles stopped as a huge, battered, and rusting Winnebago screeched to a halt before the group. A cloud of dust rose up from around it and they all coughed.

"Feel...oddly worse," Giles said, and Xander had to nod slowly in agreement.

"You know, I kinda feel the same way," Xander said. Spike? This is the plan?

Blame the Slayer. Xander hoisted a bag of weapons and yanked the door open. A smell - a sort of thick, dusty, musty smell - rolled out and Xander groaned.

"Should'a nabbed that Porsche I had my eye on - just enough room for us and the Bit," Spike grumbled. Xander stared for one incredulous moment at him - the vampire was sitting behind the wheel with a
pair of enormous black goggles on. Spike grinned jauntily and Xander had to grin back - turned to help Anya up the steps.

"And what, Oz in the trunk?"

"Room for the wolf if he got all...wolfy."

"Oh good Lord." Giles stopped for a moment at the top of the steps - moved hastily when Dawn poked him. "Spike, you look like a demented Flying Ace." Spike thought about that for a moment.

"Just call me the Red Baron,"

"Oh good Lord," Giles groaned again, and looked around for somewhere to drop his backpack. Xander grabbed it and stowed it in an empty kitchen cabinet - shoved his own pack next to it and pushed the duffle of weapons up under the sink, out of the way. There was barely enough room for two people to pass side by side.

"Everybody sit down, we've got to get going." Buffy came out of the back of the vehicle from what was presumably a bedroom. She had a map in her hand and waved it vaguely in the air.
"Where are we going?" Willow asked. She settled Tara into the booth seat opposite the kitchenette and slung her backpack down on the table.

"Away from Glory, although I would think that the airport would be a better place to start from." Anya grumbled, settling next to Tara and looking disgustedly at the dusty curtains that had brushed her hair. Dawn slipped in next to her, looking nervous.

"Loaded," Oz said, bounding up the steps and tossing a last duffle to the floor. He slammed the door and Spike clapped his hands together loudly, startling Giles.

"Right. Everybody hold on." The gears made an ominous grinding noise as Spike put the Winnebago into drive and revved the engine. The heap roared away from the curb and everyone grabbed onto whatever they could, fighting for balance. Xander lurched sideways into Oz and closed his eyes for a moment.

*Oh fuck, this is gonna be bad...*

*Pet?*
I don't travel well. Xander slid down the wall and put his arms on his knees, willing the tiny little bud of nausea blooming in his belly to wither and die. The girls swayed together around the table and Giles moved hesitantly up to the front passenger seat and sat down. The windows were covered in foil, except for a square right over the steering wheel. That had some sort of dark plastic film taped over it.

Why the goggles?

Just in case, pet.

"Where are we going?" Oz asked, and Buffy rattled her map irritably, clinging to the kitchen counter.

"We're just - going. We'll figure it out when we get there." Oz raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything, and Buffy scowled at him. "We're going East right now - towards Lancaster."

"Lancaster?" Xander pushed himself up and staggered over to Buffy - took the map out of her hand. "Huh. Edwards Air Force Base is right here -" he touched the map. "Maybe we could use that..."
"Use it how?" Buffy grabbed at the sink edge as Spike took a hard left.

"I dunno, just - they've got a lot of stuff there." Xander looked inward for a moment, thinking, but the soldier didn't know any specifics and muttered something nasty about the Air Force. "I'll think about it, okay?"

"Sure." Buffy sighed and let go of the sink. "Everybody just...rest, okay? We're safe while we're moving, and we should just try to..."

"Rest, yeah." Willow looked nervously at Buffy, her arm around Tara, holding her against the motion of the vehicle.

"I'm doing the best I can," Buffy said softly, and Willow's eyes went wide.

"I know, Buffy! Don't you think I know that? I saw what she did at the dorm. This is the right thing. We can't - can't let her near anybody. She's just - like you said - she's too strong." Buffy looked away, biting her lip, and Xander reached out and touched her hand.

"It's okay, Buff. I think - we all think - this is the best
choice." Buffy looked at him, her eyes dark and liquid - troubled, and too tired. *So tired.*

*Do what we can, pet.*

"I'm supposed to slay. I am supposed to be the - the Big Bad." A soft chuckle from Spike, and Buffy pushed her hands back through her hair. "I'm the one they run in terror from! Not the other way around! This is just -"

"This is the smartest thing to do, Buffy. She has a deadline - we're gonna make her miss it, and then - she's screwed. Nothing she can do after that."

"Except kill us all," Anya said flatly, and Dawn looked at her, wide-eyed.

"There is that," Spike said, and put his palm flat on the horn, blaring it at some unseen fellow driver. "Wrong side of the road, you git!"

"Actually, you are on the wrong side of the road," Giles said, peering through a tiny rip in the foil.

"I'm bigger than him!"
"That's not how it works, Spike. For heaven's sake, you've been in this country long enough -" Xander tuned Giles out, smiling, and looked back at Buffy who was staring sightlessly at the map.

"Buffy - it's gonna be okay. Really. Between you and Spike, and Oz too, probably, she won't get near Dawn. And Willow can always send her to - to Hollywood or somewhere. East L.A. We're gonna win this."

"How do you know that, Xander? Some special power you haven't told us about?" Buffy's voice was sharp-edged, almost sarcastic, but her eyes were full of a desperate longing.

"No. I know 'cause - we're the good guys, Buffy. The good guys always win."

"Oi! I'm not good!"

"You're our - Doc Holiday. You might not be good but you'll fight for the good guys." Oz said.

*Doc Holiday?*

*Gunfight at the OK Corral.*
A *cowboy?* Spike's mental image was Clint Eastwood and Oz helpfully supplied Val Kilmer, as well. Spike made a pleased sort of noise.

"Gunslinger - I like that," he mused.

"Right - if everyone has decided what movie character they are? I’m gonna...go in the back." Buffy folded the map sloppily and tossed it down - turned and went into the back bedroom. Everyone sat for a moment in silence.

"I think maybe resting is a good idea," Xander said, and joined Oz where he was sitting against the wall, halfway between the kitchenette and the driver's seat.

"I don't think I could rest if I tried," Dawn muttered, and Anya brightened.

"Oh! I brought drugs. And also - Uno. One of those will make you fall asleep. And the drugs are legal - we Just Say No, right Dawn? Most of the time." She began rooting through her carry-all and Dawn smiled at her, shaking her head. Tara was swaying with the motion of the vehicle, looking blankly at the far wall.
"Soon, soon, soon," she murmured, and Willow touched her cheek.

"What's that, baby? What'd you say?"

"Soon-soon. Stairway to doorway to far away, and it's not like we didn't see that coming. Not like we didn't see how dirty it all was." She brushed absently at her shirt and Willow closed her eyes for a moment, her lip trembling.

*Think that means - anything?*

*Dunno, pet. Sounds a bit like Dru... She KNEW sometimes...even when she didn't...* Xander sighed and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. He was still feeling nauseated, and the poor condition of the Winnebago's shocks was doing nothing for his head - every jounce and shimmy made the sickness-induced headache he was getting ratchet up another notch. Oz leaned into his shoulder, comforting warmth.

*Pack. Be all right.*

*Yeah. Good guys always win.*
Close to three hours later, and they were in the desert somewhere. Spike had decided around Simi Valley that going to Las Vegas beat Lancaster any day, and had changed routes accordingly. Now he was curled under his duster next to Xander, sleeping fitfully. He sighed and shifted - sat up and rubbed his hands over his face back through his hair. It was useless - he just couldn't sleep. He glanced around the vehicle, checking. Everyone had settled into a sort of trance, battered into numbness by the jouncing of the Winnebago. Giles was driving and Anya and Dawn were both making intermittent pleas for a rest-stop. Tara was asleep on Willow's shoulder. Oz was listening to a CD player - some instrumental tracks Derio had made - and the music filtered faintly through the link. Spike nudged Xander with his elbow.

"We there yet?" Xander blinked and looked over at him.

"Huh? Uh - we're just coming up on Barstow." Winnebago-head.
Stop that. "Barstow? Christ - we should be over the line by now! If a certain Grandfather would just bloody well step on it!" Giles sent an irritated glance back over his shoulder.

"Step on what? I've driven tricycles with more power!"

"Christ." Spike lurched upright and pulled out cigarette and lighter - lit up and inhaled deeply.

He was stiff, and the stale air inside the Winnebago was unpleasant.

"Do you have to do that here?" Willow snapped, flapping her hand in front of her face. Tara woke up with a jerk and looked around.

"Can't do it outside, Red." Spike inhaled again and blew the smoke towards Giles, who muttered something under his breath.

Be nice love, please? Xander stood up and stroked one hand down Spike's arm, and the vampire smiled at him over his shoulder.

What'll you give me?
Anything you want. Spike's smile morphed into something predatory and he turned half way towards Xander, running a contemplative eye over him from head to toe. Xander rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. Tara wiggled free of Willow's grip and got up on her knees - pushed her good hand through the blinds and pried them open. A shaft of late-afternoon sun lanced in and fell on Spike's right hand. He yelped at the sudden, searing pain and jerked away, smoke rising from his skin, and Willow pulled Tara down abruptly.

"Tara! No, you can't do that!" Tara's eyes were wide and she looked from Willow's frustrated face to Spike's grimace of pain and started to cry.

"Dark, it's all dark, it's daa-aark..."

"Oh, honey!" Willow reached for her and Tara flinched away.

"Spike, I'm sorry, she - she didn't know -"

"S'alright Red, I know." Spike shook his burned hand and tossed his cigarette into the sink - leaned over the table and touched Tara's face gently.
"Glinda, don't cry - it's all better now, see? Not smokin' or anything. Go ahead and look out the window all you want, sweet - I'll be fine." Spike wiped tears off her cheek with his thumb - pushed a lock of hair back behind her ear. Tara sniffled and looked at him - looked at his hand, touching it lightly with her fingertips.

"There isn't any reason for it, you know - the pain and the screaming. It's just part of being here," she whispered.

"That so? Have to go someplace else then," Spike replied softly, and Tara looked back up at him - nodded her head slightly.

"She - did she understand you? Did she - ?" Willow looked incredulous and Spike shrugged, pulling back to lean on the kitchen counter. Xander leaned next to him, lacing his fingers with Spike's unburnt hand.

"Dunno. Maybe." Anya had pulled a juice box out of her carry-all and was getting the straw in. Some of the juice squirted on the table and Tara bent over it, watching the reddish-purple beads quiver on the worn Formica.
"Why do you - Spike, why do you care about Tara at all?" Willow was looking at Spike as if she thought he might yell at her, and Xander squeezed his hand a little. Spike looked back at Willow for a moment, and then Tara, and shrugged again.

"She's -" He stopped then, uncertain of what to say.

"She's pack, Willow," Oz said softly, standing up and turning off the CD player, pulling the headphones down.

"What does that mean, though?" Oz looked over at Spike and Xander.

You mind?

Go ahead, wolf. Xander nodded silently, and Oz stepped over to the table, repeating Spike's gesture and tucking a strand of hair back behind Tara's ear.

"It means...she fits, Willow. She..." Oz stopped. The link was a moil of confused thoughts. Spikes own thoughts were muddled. It was almost impossible to really define why Tara was pack and Willow was not. She simply was. She fit, as Oz had said. She was - easy with them. Accepted them. She accepted him. She'd made
Spike feel a part of the group even when the rest of the Scoobies hadn't - and when he hadn't cared to feel that way. She'd kept silent about him and Xander, and she hadn't felt any animosity towards Oz, when most would have resented or feared an ex-boyfriend, especially one that had meant so much. She had the ability to make things seem - safe. Calm.

"She's the earth, Red, she's..."

"Mother," Oz murmured.

"She accepts us," Xander said softly, his hand tight around Spike's, and Spike caught the flash in the red witch's eyes when he said that. Willow was still uncomfortable around Spike, and lately she'd begun to make pointed comments about how little time Xander spent with the other Scoobies. The underlying theme being it was Spike who was keeping him away.

_I DID threaten to put a bottle through her brain, but...I was drunk. Wouldn't do that now unless she really pissed me off._

"I accept you, Xander."
"I know you do, Wills. I'm - I can't explain it. It's just - the way it is." Willow looked unhappy with that - opened her mouth to say something when Buffy came out of the back room where she'd been - sleeping? Brooding? A look of anger on her face.

"Giles! Look behind us." Giles, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, looked into his side mirror and cursed softly.

"What is it?" Xander asked.

"The Knights of Byzantium."

"Bloody hell - how'd they find us?"

"I don't know, but they just put an arrow through the back wall. Dawn, get down under the table. Willow, you better get Tara down there too." Xander moved to the front and tore the foil away from the passenger window and peered out.

_How many?

_Too many. _Fuck._
We might be faster -

I doubt it. Duck!  Spike ducked, instinctive, and saw sunlight cut through the dimness again as Tara pulled the blinds apart.

"Horsies!" she shouted gleefully.  Willow grabbed her and pulled her down.  Arrows thudded through the walls in rapid succession and Spike threw himself flat, cursing.  Useless in the damn day - FUCK!

Not useless - sun's almost down anyway -  Xander crawled back to Spike and pushed his duster over to him and Spike wiggled around getting it on, another layer between his skin and the sun.  Buffy darted up to the front of the vehicle, crouching down next to Giles.

"Weapons!"  Giles shouted, gunning the engine.  It made an unpleasant sort of whining noise.

"We're bloody well in one!"  Spike shouted back, even as Xander rolled over and yanked open the cabinet, dragging the weapon-duffle out from under the sink.

"Oh, don't hit the horsies!"  Willow called from under the table.  Spike shook his head.
"We won't!" Buffy called back. Then she leaned in close to Giles and Spike heard her whisper: "Aim for the horsies." Giles nodded grimly and sent the Winnebago careening to the right. Oz cursed, wedging himself between Spike and the girls, who had all managed to cram themselves under the table. Tara was humming to herself, looking at Dawn.

"Pretty pretty pretty," she sing-songed, and Dawn looked away. There was a cry of "Come on, men!" from outside, and then a thud, and Spike looked up.

"They're on the bloody roof, Slayer!" Buffy looked up as well - jumped up and came back to them.

"Xander - the hatch! Help me -" Xander stood up, making a stirrup from his hands for Buffy to step into and then dropped to his knees as a sword plunged through the roof half a foot from his head.

"Damnit - Xander, come on -" Buffy looked furious, and Spike figured a little bloody mayhem would go a long way towards settling her nerves. He only wished he could indulge in some as well.
Fucking sun - CAREFUL, pet! Spike stood up next to Xander as he once again bent to hoist Buffy up. He cocked his head, straining all his senses. There was Knight, just there - and now there was -

"Watch it!" Spike moved on pure instinct - grabbed the blade that punched down through the roof and held on with all his might, ignoring the fiery shock of the steel slicing into his palms and fingers. Buffy ducked away from the blade, wide-eyed, and threw the hatch open.

"Hurry up Slayer!" The Knight was yanking furiously on his trapped weapon and Spike felt it grate along bone. Then Buffy was up and out and the pressure suddenly eased off altogether as she did something to the Knight.

"Got 'im Spike, let go!" she yelled, and Spike let loose of the blade with a gasp of pain, dropping to his knees. He held his hands cupped over his thighs and his palms began to pool with blood.

Spike! Fuck -

"Help the Slayer, pet, I'll be fine -" Spike jerked his head upwards and Xander hesitated one moment - jumped up
onto the table and then swung himself out through the hatch. The sword was yanked back up out of the roof. *Careful! Don't be a bloody hero, love.*

*Careful,* Xander agreed, and Spike got a brief glimpse of Buffy doing a high kick and sending a Knight flying off the roof. The bloody sword was clenched in her fist. Another Knight was clinging to the Winnebago rails, and a third was flinging a grappling hook, preparing to leap from his horse and climb up. At least two dozen - more - were ranged behind and beside the vehicle, weapons drawn, riding hard.

"Here, Spike -" Dawn was wiggling out from behind Oz, some sort of towel in her hands. She yanked at one edge, ripping a long piece free and Spike hesitated for one long moment and then bent to his hands, rapidly drinking the blood that had pooled there. *No point in wasting it.* If Dawn noticed she didn't make any sign and she edged closer and held the make-shift bandage out. Spike held his hand up and let her get to work, keeping an ear cocked to the action outside.

Giles was weaving the Winnebago back and forth over the road, and through the link Spike saw Buffy take a kick to the head and go over the side - catch herself at the
last minute. Xander scooped up a dropped sword and aimed a sweeping cut at the Knight who had hit Buffy, sending the blade deep into the man's shin. The Knight screamed and reeled backwards, and Xander rushed forward and hit him again, sending him off the roof in a flurry of limbs and cloak. He hit and rolled in the dust and the pursuing Knights frantically tried to avoid the body of their comrade. Xander dropped to one knee, panting, and Spike saw his bloody hand, scraped raw on chain armor.

Dead?

As a doornail, love, Spike agreed.

Good. Protect pack. Oz glanced up towards the roof, wolf-eyed, and they both jumped when the window over the table shattered and a Knight fell through, axe waving wildly and chipping a huge splinter out of the Formica top. Oz leaped, half-way to the wolf and a moment later there was a spattering of blood across the wall and the Knight fell back, throat gone. Oz dropped back down, snarling, and Anya opened her carry-all and pulled out a dispenser of Wet-Wipes. She waved them at Oz.

"Want one?"
"Jus' ge' messy again," Oz growled, and Anya nodded in agreement and put the wipes away. Dawn finished tying the bandage on Spike's left hand and looked at Oz, her eyes wide.

"Doesn't that taste gross?" she whispered.

"No' rea'y," Oz replied. They all looked up as Xander dropped back through the hatch onto the table, cursing as he slipped in the blood.

"I think they've given up. They lost about six Knights - maybe they'll drop back, try to regroup, and we can outrun them."

"Is Buffy alright?" Giles called, looking in the rearview mirror at Xander as he clambered down from the table.

"She's fine, Giles, just keeping an eye out. I think maybe -" There was crash from the front of the Winnebago and Giles cried out. Spike smelled blood, suddenly - blood he recognized from numerous incidents on patrol and looked up to see the Watcher slumping sideways in his seat. The front window was shattered and the haft of a spear bobbed through the hole. The head seemed to be
"Hold on!" Spike roared, even as Xander flung himself towards Dawn and Oz grabbed Willow and Tara. Spike tried to spread himself over everyone as Anya braced against the underside of the table and then the world was falling, spinning. The Winnebago slewed sideways - lost momentum but gained a ferocious wobble - and heeled over into the sand. Everything slid to a halt with a grinding jerk and Giles made an inarticulate sound of agony. Spike could hear hoof beats, rapidly retreating, and then running footsteps. There was a crunch and Giles' door opened and Buffy was peering in, haloed in a dusty shaft of sunlight, her face pale.

"Giles!"

"I - I'm...all right..." Buffy dropped down beside him, her hands going out hesitantly but not quite touching.

"Not bloody likely," Spike muttered. He staggered to his feet, dropping down from the cabinet door to stand on the backsplash behind the sink. Oz grabbed his forearm and hoisted himself up - went rapidly up to the front of the bus.
Keep them away, in the link and then the wolf was there, leaping up through the open door and out. Brief image of the sun, a hand-span above the horizon, veiled in hazy clouds. Then Oz was streaking away, to hary any lingering Knights away from their position.

"Xander - help me. Is everyone all right?" Buffy called.

"They're all fine, Slayer." Spike let Xander use his arm for a brace and climb out from the heap of bodies between table and cabinets. He made his way up the Winnebago toward Buffy as Anya slung her carry-all over her shoulder and shoved Dawn upright.

"Let's go out the hatch," she said, and Dawn looked anxiously at Spike.

"It'll be all right, Niblet, wolfling is out there. Go ahead. Here -" He gingerly handed her a backpack and then watched Anya climb out the hatch. Dawn followed a moment later, and then Willow got Tara on her feet, taking another backpack along with her own. Spike slung the weapons duffle over by the hatch, wincing as he flexed his hands.

"Anything in the back we need, Slayer?" Buffy looked up
distractedly from her crouch over the Watcher, a smear of blood on her cheek.

"What? Uh - no, it was all - all up here." Spike grabbed a last pack and tossed it after the duffle -edged forwards, keeping clear of the still-lethal sunlight that was fading through the broken windshield.

*What's the damage?*

"I think - you'd know better than me, Spike," Xander said softly, and scooted away a little. Giles was pale - sweating - and his breathing was shallow. The spear had come out - fortunately the Knights used a smooth, leaf-shaped blade rather than a gut-destroying barbed one - and the wound was bleeding freely. Spike leaned in and took a long sniff. Buffy made a small sound, and Giles hands fluttered at his sides, as if to push him away.

"Spike, what -"

"Just - checking. I don't smell any...well, there's no bowel-smell. So he probably won't get peritonitis. Looks like he lucked out."

"You call this lucky?" Buffy looked incredulously at Spike,
and he frowned at her.

"Damn lucky, considering he could have taken that spear in his heart, Slayer - or his throat. He'll survive this - he'd already be dead, otherwise." Buffy's lower lip trembled, just a little, and she jerked angrily as Xander tried to put his hand on her shoulder.

"Buffy -"

"I - I know, Xander, I..." Buffy closed her eyes for a brief moment - shook her head. "There's a First-Aid kit under the seat there. Would you two - do what you can for Giles? I'm going to check on everybody - see if there's... if there's anyplace to go - some sort of shelter. We can't stay in here."

"Sure Buff, we can do that." Xander's voice was soft and Buffy took a long, long breath.

She's losin' it.

No. She'll be okay. We just have to - be there for her. Okay, Spike?

For you, love... Whatever you ask. Spike couldn't help a
slow caress of Xander's wind-knotted hair, and Buffy looked hastily away - stood up and jumped onto the drivers seat and started lifting herself out of the Winnebago.

"I'll be right back, guys. Giles - you'll be okay." Then she was gone, and Xander was rooting out the kit. Giles blinked slowly, shivering a little.

*He's going into shock, Xan. We gotta get him out of here.*

*Yeah. Help me* - Xander dug through the First-Aid kit and Spike started helping him pick out the biggest gauze pads, Betadine scrub, rolls of Ace bandages. It would be makeshift, but if they did it right the Watcher's innards wouldn't be strung over the desert, and the bleeding would be controlled. As they worked Oz sent images periodically, and Spike watched with impatience as the sun slowly sank. Once it was safe, he thought he might go hunting. Xander glanced at him, catching that thought.

*You and me both, love.* Outside, Oz howled, and Spike didn't bother to keep the demon at bay anymore. The Knights were in for a very bad time.
It took the combined efforts of Xander, Spike and Buffy to get Giles out of the Winnebago. Spike had wrenched the bedroom door off its hinges and tossed it out through the broken windshield and they lashed Giles to it with spare blankets. Buffy had found an abandoned gas station about a mile away, and they went for it as rapidly as possible. The Knights were already re-grouping and Oz was circling in closer and closer, unable to keep that many armed horsemen at bay. Spike had wrapped himself in the last blanket and sprinted for the gas-station and was waiting inside as they arrived. The building was barely standing, the warped wooden walls and boarded up windows letting in too much sun, and Xander cast around in desperation for a dark corner for Spike, his arms aching from helping Buffy carry Giles.

Oz darted in, the last of them, panting and they're coming! in the link. Hoof beats - the jingle and creak of armor - and the Knights were upon them. Several burning arrows managed to smash through the poorly-boarded windows and imbed themselves in the walls. Xander and Anya worked to snatch them down
and stomp them out, and Willow grabbed Tara and Dawn and shoved them both back into the corner behind the counter they'd laid Giles on.

"Willow! Can you do - anything?" Buffy shouted, struggling with a defunct coffee machine.

"Almost there!" Willow shouted back, paging desperately through a book. Spike jumped up from his crouch behind a rusting heater and helped Buffy shove the machine over onto its side, blocking the door they'd come in. Xander could feel through the link the burning pin-points of pain as sun found exposed skin on Spike. More Knights arrived, pounding on the windows with axes and swords, and Oz leaped and growled, managing to drive them back momentarily. But the building was soon surrounded.

Suddenly glass shattered, and one of the windows was gone, the remaining shards of glass showering down on Dawn and Tara, the boards snapping under the pressure of armored hands and shoulders. Dawn screamed, covering her head, flailing at a groping arm and Spike was across the room with a roar, snatching Dawn and Tara and pulling them away. Turning, he shoved them into Anya and Xander's arms and pounced with a snarl on the
Knight that had fallen half into the room. Spike wrenched off the soldiers' helmet and coif and struck, morphing into the demon and sinking fangs into the exposed throat.

Dawn made a sound - a sort of moan - and Anya pulled her away. Xander watched for one long moment, the absolute hate and bloodlust in the link almost overwhelming. Then he turned away, snatching an axe from the open weapons-duffle and smashing it into the boards. The Knight on the other side jumped back with a curse and then suddenly they all backed off, and Xander looked around in trepidation. A Knight - helmet-less, in a rich red tunic - stepped into the room.

"I demand the Key. Surrender it now and we will let you live."

"Not bloody likely," Spike snarled, and lunged for the man at the same moment that Buffy did. Xander grabbed Spike and held him.

*Wait - wait, love.*

*KILL IT* from so many sides Xander flinched. The hyena was as ready to rend and destroy as the demon and the
wolf were, but Xander was sure this guy was someone important.

*Might be someone we could negotiate with!*

*Listen to Harris!* Spike subsided, growling, and Buffy stopped several feet from the Knight, staring at him.

"We won't turn the Key over to you. We're both trying to defeat Glory - why won't you help us!"

"The Key must be destroyed - there is no other way." The Knight raised his sword and took a step forward, going straight for Buffy, and she whirled and kicked, sending him staggering back. He recovered - lurched forward - and Buffy kicked again, this time hard enough to spin him around. He stumbled into a steel support pillar, his skull thwacking hollowly. He fell straight down onto the gritty, oily floor and lay still.

"Enemies, fly and fall - circling arms, raise a wall!" Light exploded out from Willow - rushed away from her in an expanding ring. It rushed through Xander like a wash of heat and pressure and was gone, through the walls and beyond. There were cries of anger and surprise from the Knights outside, and Anya peered through a hole in a
"That knocked them down and - it's keeping them back. What is it?"

"It's kind of - kind of a force field." Willow's voice was hoarse and she moved shakily over to Tara, who was huddled next to Dawn.

"How long will it hold, Willow?"

"Half a day, probably." Willow sat down heavily next to Tara, and Oz trotted over, letting Tara pet him. Dawn looked over at the dead Knight, and then at the unconscious one, and put her head down in her hands.

"Okay - okay..." Buffy ran her hands back through her hair - looked around her with a bewildered air. "We need - we need to - make sure Giles is okay, and..." She stopped, and took a couple of steps towards Dawn, looking down at her.

"Dawn, are you all right?" Dawn looked up, her eyes red, tears tracking down her face.

"I - I'm okay, Buffy -" Buffy hurried forward and knelt
down next to her, hugging her close, and Xander glanced over at Spike, who nodded.

"Hey Buff, why don't you take a break for a minute and let me and Spike and Oz take care of stuff, okay? I'll have Spike check on Giles." Buffy glanced up at him - nodded distractedly - and Xander nodded back.

**Clothes.** Oz pulled gently away from Tara and started looking around the room. Spike bent to the dead Knight and carried him to the door - tossed his body out onto the ground. Xander spotted the various backpacks where they'd been piled and found Oz's. He glanced around and saw that there was a second room in the back; no doorway, but it was big enough for a little privacy.

**Oz, here-** He walked back into the room - put the backpack down and went back out, running one hand down Oz's back as they passed each other.

**Thanks. Okay?**

**Yeah - you?**

**Yeah.** Spike was hauling the unconscious Knight up and
dragging him to the post he'd brained himself on. He sat him down and pushed his back against the post, then looked at Xander over his shoulder.

"Find something to tie him with, love? I don't fancy him bein' free."

"Yeah." Xander cast around - finally came up with a length of greasy chain that appeared to have been part of a chain-fall for hoisting engine blocks. He brought it over and changed places with Spike, holding the Knight's shoulders against the post while Spike knotted the chains around his wrists, opening links and re-attaching them so it was impossible for the Knight to escape. Xander could feel the pain through the link from Spike's hands, and Spike cursed steadily under his breath. Finished, they stood up and moved over to Giles, who nodded weakly at them and closed his eyes. Xander took Spike's hands in his, looking at the creased, blood-stained bandages and streaks of oil and dirt.

_You need more blood._

_Sun's down - I could go get a couple more Knights._

_No._ Oz walked out from the back room, human again,
and dropped his pack, and Spike and Xander both looked over at him.

"Why not, wolfling?" Oz glanced around at Willow, who was opening a bottle of water for Tara, and Buffy and Dawn, who were whispering together. Anya had gathered up a spare blanket and was curling herself into a corner. It looked like she was going to take a nap, and Xander envied her her calm.

"I think - the more warm bodies between us and Glory the better," Oz said softly. Xander and Spike looked at each other, and Xander slowly nodded.

"I think you're right." Spike sighed and leaned into Xander, closing his eyes. Xander pulled him closer - reached out to Oz and rubbed his hand slowly across the werewolf's back, the pack feeling thrumming through the link, calming them all, settling them. It was warmth and safety, and Xander felt the tension of the last few hours ease just a bit.

"Spike still needs blood, though," Xander said, and Oz nodded - made a motion of his head towards the back. 

*We can do that,* in the link, and Xander nodded
back. Buffy stood up suddenly, and Dawn anxiously watched her stride over to them.

"Okay - what the hell happened, Spike?"

"Hmmm?" Spike looked up at her, eyes half-shut, barely moving from his relaxed pose. Oz moved in a little closer, protection-impulse in the link. Spike was injured, and shouldn't be exposed to any threats.

"You killed that Knight."

"He was goin' for the Bit. 'Course I bloody well killed him." There was a startled gasp from Willow, and Xander saw her struggle to her feet behind Buffy.

"He was a human, Spike! We're not supposed to kill humans!"

"Spike killed him? But - but how?" Willow asked, breathless and flushed, coming up next to Buffy, and Spike glanced over at her, impatience in the link.

"The usual fuckin' way, Red. He'd have killed her if he could, Slayer - I didn't give him the chance. And I didn't see you askin' the Knights out on the road any questions
about their intentions."

"That was different - I didn't have any choice - I couldn't let them stop us!" Spike straightened, anger building, and the hyena grumbled restlessly. Always excuses

*Protect pack, get it away -*

*Hush, love.* "Listen, Slayer - these guys may look like the worst sort of Ren-faire wannabe's but they're playin' for keeps. We're just in the way of their ultimate soddin' goal. I, for one, don't give a flying fuck about their status as a species."

"You can't kill them, Spike. They're human. If we - if we talk to them -"

"Forget it, Slayer." Spike held his hands up, palm out, and Willow looked hastily away from the gory sight. "I'm not playing white-hat here. Anybody that threatens the Niblet is dead. Simple as that."

*Spike, back off - please love, she's -*

*Gonna get us all killed, thinkin' like that.*
*Not pack not pack,* in a grumbling monotone from the hyena and the wolf both, and Xander felt the tension flood back in, tightening a gut already sore from a day's worth of nerves.

"Buffy - listen -"

"How did you kill him, Spike?" Willow interrupted. "Is - is the chip not working? Buffy?"

"No, Willow. It's not. Not - for a long time," Buffy said slowly, and Willow gaped at her - looked wide-eyed at Spike.

"How long?"

"Since we got the wolfling out, Red. Since then." Willow just stared at him - shook her head slowly.

"Buffy, how can you - how can you trust him? I mean - Xander, you can't - that spell is - but Buffy, you knew-?" Buffy sighed, and her shoulders sagged, and suddenly she looked completely defeated - exhausted - barely able to stay upright.

"Wills - it's not important. Just - leave it alone, okay?"
Xander said softly, and Willow turned a furious glare on him. Spike and Oz both shifted to get between them. Xander took a step forward and then stopped and whirled around as he felt a hand on his back. Giles' eyes were open - he was, in fact, trying to sit up, and Xander immediately moved to his side and pushed lightly on his shoulder.

"Lay back Giles, please? You'll make it bleed again." Giles slumped back and Buffy was on his other side, Willow beside her.

"You mustn't - mustn't bicker like this. You need to - to concentrate on...on a plan, on -" Giles took a shaky breath and coughed, grimacing, and a bead of blood welled at the corner of this mouth.

"Fuck -" Xander looked up at Spike, who shook his head slowly.

"He needs a doctor, Slayer - we need to get the fuck out of here."

"I don't think that's gonna happen." Buffy bit her lip - looked up, as if contemplating the gathered Knights outside the walls. "If I could get someone to come
here... Do you think they'd let him in?" Xander glanced at Spike again, who shrugged.

"They're pretty 'Knights of the Round Table', in a totally...lame way," Xander said. He noticed something over Buffy's shoulder, and an idea formed. "But I'll bet they're just full of rules and regulations when it comes to war. Why don't we ask cool guy over there?" Buffy and Willow both turned to look at the captive Knight, who was awake and glaring at them.

"So, here goes nothing," Buffy mumbled, steeling herself, and she and Spike heaved the coffee machine away from the door - opened it. As night had fallen the assembled Knights had lit a couple of fires and driven tall torches into the ground at intervals along the edge of the protective bubble. As Spike and Buffy stepped outside they closed ranks, hefting weapons and grouping opposite them. Two older men in long robes - clerics - chanted softly, hands out to the barrier. Xander watched nervously from the doorway, Willow beside him. Oz was back with the girls and Giles. Anya was, unbelievably, still asleep and snoring ever so slightly. Buffy skirted around the dead Knight Spike had killed - put a hand out and stopped him as Spike made a move to kick the body out of his way. Spike snarled, but stepped over the
corpse instead.

"Xander - why didn't you tell me? About Spike." Willow's voice was low and soft and full of hurt, and Xander sighed and looked over at her.

"I'm sorry, Willow. I wanted to, but..."

"But what, Xander? We're - we're still friends, aren't we? I mean - I know we've had our differences, but I thought - after you told us about you and Spike, that we - that we were gonna be back to normal!" Willow's eyes were wide and wet - her lip trembled - and Xander was once again reminded of a rabbit. *Happy little rabbit...oh, I wish you could just hop back to your rabbit home and not have to live out here in the world, Willow... We're never going to be 'normal'...* Xander put his hand lightly on Willow's shoulder, rubbing.

"I was just...afraid to tell you, Wills. I know Spike really scared you, in the past. I wasn't sure if you'd - if you could trust him. It just seemed like - the best thing to do would be to wait. And you'd see - how much he helps us - how much he loves me... I figured you'd trust him, and then when we told you it - it wouldn't make a difference." Willow jerked away at that, and Xander let
his hand fall to his side. Her eyes were hard now - narrowing in anger.

"Of course it makes a difference, Xander!" she hissed. "I mean - he killed that Knight! Is he killing other humans, too? I know you don't - you don't buy blood anymore. Willy said something when Tara and I went down there that time. It didn't make any sense then, but now -" She stopped and shook her head - looked over her shoulder at Giles.

"I guess Giles knows, too?"

"Yeah - he and Buffy found out at the same time. Willow - he's not gonna hurt us. And he doesn't kill anybody."

"Yes he does, Xander. He killed that man - who else, that maybe you don't know about?" Willow looked truly furious now - was shaking just a little, and Xander took a step back from her, Not pack not pack howling out from the hyena, abrupt fear. "I mean - you say he's got a soul, Xander -"

"Say he's got one? Do you think I lied to you about that?" Xander felt a sudden surge of anger - all of his selves reacting to that with outrage.
"Xander - we both know how much your family hurt you. And how much you wanted a family of your own that would... Don't you think that your - your pack is just kinda - convenient?" Willow glanced over at Oz, something going across her face - jealousy? Hurt? Xander couldn't catalogue it and then it was gone. "I think you put too much trust in Spike, Xander. If he's had a soul all this time, why did he keep killing people? Why didn't he help Angel, fight for the good guys?" Xander stared at Willow, at an utter loss.

Not pack!

She's not one of US Harris. She doesn't trust us. We can't rely on her anymore to be on our side.

Stop it! Yes we can. Guys, that's WILLOW - she's my...best friend... That stopped Xander cold. Was she his best friend anymore? A moment's inner examination and Xander knew she wasn't. Spike - and Oz - had taken over that role. Filled the hole in his heart that even Willow had never quite fit into, all the way. And the others' instincts - insistence - that Willow was not pack... It was true. He'd tried to ignore it but she wasn't, and never would be, and he didn't know if it was
her magic or her stubborn need to see the world just one way, but she was slipping away from him. Xander felt as if he'd been punched - for a moment he couldn't catch his breath. He struggled to find something to say that wouldn't come out sounding mean.

Protect pack, and Oz was there, silent.

"Willow - you really need to back off," he said, and Willow rounded on him, furious.

"Stay out of it, Oz! You're as bad as Xander, trusting a demon - trusting Spike! He almost killed me! And Cordy almost died because of him! Whatever he's doing -"

"He's helping us, Willow - why can't you see that? Glory tortured him, and he didn't say a word - didn't tell her anything -"

Calm, love. Not the time. Xander took a hard breath - looked over at Oz, who was struggling for control. All of the reactions to Willow that had got him grabbed by the Initiative in the first place were there, right there, drawing the wolf up and out. Oz turned abruptly away, and Xander caught a glimpse of black eyes - of Oz's mouth in a silent snarl.
Wolf - calm, love - pack is safe, just get away from her. Spike was as agitated as Oz, and Xander glanced over at him. He was watching the Knight that had stepped up to talked to Buffy, but his senses were all trained on them, and what was going on behind him.

Calm, yeah. Calm. Safe. Xander took a hard breath, and looked at Willow, who was staring at him.

"What are you doing, Xander? I'm trying to - to talk to you and you're all - in outer space."

"I'm listening to the voices in my head, Willow. The ones that tell me they love me, and trust me, and wouldn't hurt me for the world." Xander moved away from the door, seeing Buffy and Spike coming towards them, negotiations over. "Now is not the time for this, Willow. We have more important things to worry about."

Willow looked at him - slowly shook her head. "Not the time. You know, people keep telling me that. I'm getting kind of sick of hearing it." She turned sharply away and went back to Tara and Dawn, and Xander shuddered all over - closed his eyes for a moment in relief as Spike's
arm slipped around his waist.

*Love you, pet. Let it go.*

*Not pack. Never will be,* sad and soft from Oz, and Xander shook his head.

*I don't want it to be like this. I love her...*

"They'll let me bring help, if I can reach him." Buffy came up to them, looking happier than before. "That guy - Dante - he gave me his 'oath'. Hopefully we can trust him."

"His kind usually keep to the letter of the law, Slayer. Just play by their rules and you can trust them. Wankers."

"I just need to call him - I wonder if that pay-phone works?" Buffy mused.

"Oh - wait," Oz held up a hand - went over to the heap of packs and picked his up - extracted a cellphone from the depths of it.

"Derio made me bring his. Said if I didn't check in once a
day he'd have his gran curse me." Oz smiled a small, crooked smile, *Miss him* softly in the link. He handed the phone to Buffy and leaned into Spike as the vampire reached out and put an arm around his shoulders.

*Be back to him in no time.*

*Yeah...I know.* The three of them stood there, pack, watching as Buffy dialed a number. She looked nervous and shifted from foot to foot as she waited through the ringing.

"Hello - Ben? It's - it's Buffy..."

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"He's coming." Buffy held the cell phone out to Oz and the werewolf took it, tucking it away into the pocket of his baggy cargo pants. "He was - on the highway, going down to L.A. He lost his job..." Buffy looked at the three impatient faces looking back at her and shook her
head. "He can probably get here in a couple of hours -
his car is faster than the Winnebago, anyway. Can - can
Giles hold on that long?" Buffy looked at Spike as she
asked, and the vampire nodded slowly, glancing over his
shoulder at the still form.

"He'll be all right, Slayer. We got a little water into him -
he's asleep."

"Okay..." Buffy rubbed her hands tiredly over her
face. "Thanks, Spike," she said, voice very low, and Spike
shrugged. "No problem." Buffy nodded and wandered away,
heading for Dawn, and Xander put his hand gently on
Spike's back - rubbed there for a minute.

"You're being so nice." Thank you love you.

"Family, pet. I'm not happy with some of them...but I
won't let them come to harm." Spike looked worn out
and Xander slid his arm around his waist and pulled him
gently over to the far side of the room - faint impulse in
the link and Oz followed them into the shadows. The sun
had been down an hour now or more, and the desert
chill was creeping into the place. The only light came
from the torches and fires the Knights had lit beyond the
barrier and in the flickering dimness Xander was sure no one would see them. He put his back into the corner and pulled Spike close, one hand curled around his back, the other cupping the back of Spike's neck.

*Drink a little, love. You need it.*

*Pet -*

"Spike - c'mon. Just a little. That...Knight wasn't enough. And you know my blood - works better." Pain, from Spike's hands and from numerous tiny burns shivered in the link, just below conscious thought but maddening as a buzzing fly. Xander stroked his thumb over Spike's cheekbone - leaned down and kissed him softly. Spike shifted a little closer and sighed in pleasure - let his mouth slip down from lips to jaw to throat. Muscle and bone rearranged themselves and his fangs pierced easily. Xander leaned his head back against the worn boards behind him and surrendered to the waves of shivery heat that washed over him, arousing and comforting at the same time. After a minute or so Spike pulled away and kissed him - fleeting warmth from the blood, taste of metal and lemon and smoke. Of vampire blood, like sparks of darkness - Spike had bit his own lip. Taste of Spike, cloves and sweet, and
magic, thick in the back of his throat.

.dequeue="true"

Magic in the blood. In all of us now. Xander let the rest of the room - the rest of the night - fade away for one long, blissful moment. Then they both slowly let go - backed off - and Xander took Oz's place on watch as Oz offered his throat and Spike pulled him close, taking. The need, the lust, the love, shivered through the link, heady and distracting. Xander blinked slowly - felt through the link Spike pulling back - felt the near-pain the withdrawal caused. Oz's hands tightened reflexively across Spike's back for a moment, then he was letting go and Spike was taking deep, long breaths, eyes closed. Euphoria, in the link, and possessiveness. There was much more to this than Spike feeding - it was reaffirmation. Comfort from the stress of the past few days, and a strengthening of their link - of their family. Oz's eyes were glowing witchfire-green in the dimness, and Xander knew his own were - could almost feel the hyena right there behind his eyes, wanting. From outside came the acrid stink of unwashed men and metal - horses and blood and burning wood, dung and something cooking. Smells that recalled other fights - other enemies - and the soldier moved restlessly.

Wanna go out there and -
Fuck something up. The demon gazed at them both, malice and chaos, a hair's breadth from release and Xander took a hard, deep breath - pushed the others down and away, taking control again.

"Can't. You know we can't. Can't open the barrier, can't - kill them."

"Can and will, the minute I get the chance." Spike shook the demon away - squinted out through a crack in the boards. "Not that many of 'em. We could take 'em on - they wouldn't stand a chance." Image in the link, the three of them like Hell's own angels, and Xander took a sharp breath.

No...

Blood and bones, from Oz, and he turned away abruptly, going over to Giles and tucking the blanket up around the man a little more securely.

Wolfling?

Don't. Don't want... Oz turned back to them, his eyes wide and his hands shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders
hunching. "I don't want to lose it. I don't want the wolf to take over, Spike. I can't. Willow is..." Oz stopped, and they all felt the unease - the frustrated desire - in the wolf. He had his pack, but he needed mate, and Willow had been that - was still that, in a purely physical sense that the wolf couldn't resist or deny. His heart wanted them - wanted Derio. Something deep in the wolf wanted the age-old magic of the female. Children - a pack of his own making.

"She's so close... I'm afraid..."

Safe - safe, wolf. Xander and Spike moved at the same moment - surrounded Oz and held him close.

"We wouldn't let you hurt her, Oz. It's okay."

"Soon be out of here, wolfling." They stayed huddled for a long moment, reluctantly separating only when Anya walked over.

"Everybody's hungry. Can one of you make a fire?" Anya opened her carry-all. "I brought snacks - tinned meat products! I can cook if somebody makes a fire." She brandished a can of Spam and a can of corned beef,
smiling, and Oz smiled back at her.

*Keep me busy.* "I cooked over open fires all through Mexico. We've got plenty of wood - where do you want your kitchen?" They walked off together, and Xander sighed.

"That's -"

"Biology, love. As ingrained as fight or flight."

"He'll be okay, though?" Xander looked anxiously at Spike, who looked back, faint glimmer of gold.

"We'll see that he is. What was Red telling you, before?" Xander shook his head, propping one elbow on the counter just above where Giles' head was pillowed.

"She was pissed at me, about the whole chip thing. She... Fuck, Spike, she acted like she didn't think I was right, about your soul - about anything! Like I was being conned." A week ago and Xander might have silently begged for reassurance. He didn't need to, anymore, and Willow's mistrust just made his own resolve stronger.
"I thought we were over all that. I don't...want to lose her friendship, Spike. She's the only one who was there for me. For years. You know?"

"I know, love." Spike looked briefly up at him, serious for once. He was unpicking the knots on the bloody bandages, and slowly unwinding the one on his right hand. His palms and fingers had deep score-marks across them, but they were closed over, merely sunken places rather than open wounds. His left hand was the same - nearly healed. He flexed his hands, smiling, then looked back up at Xander.

"I can't tell you what to do about her, love. I don't trust her magic - I didn't before, and I trust it less now that I've....seen it. Through you. She wants, love - wants so much and so hard. I don't know if she really understands how her wanting...can hurt."

_thinks she knows what's best._

_I know... I hate that I don't trust her..._ Xander took Spike's hands in his - studied the fading wounds and lifted each to his mouth, kissing Spike's palms.

"I just - I don't want to cut her out of my life. I want her
to understand - to accept. I don't know what to do."

"Leave it be for now, pet - nothing to be done. And until Glory is gone, we have other things to worry about."

"Yeah." Xander smiled faintly at Spike - looked over at Giles as the man moved on his pallet - opened his eyes.

"Hey, Giles. You awake?"

"Hard not to be when you two are prattling on practically in my ear." Giles' voice was rough and thready, and he grimaced in pain.

_Needs a drink._

_I'll find something._ Spike wandered off, and Xander moved so that he was down by Giles' waist, making it easier for the man to see him without having to turn his head or strain himself in any way.

"Spike's going to get you a drink, G-man. Just relax. Does it - hurt a lot?"

"Only when I'm forced to answer annoying questions like that." Giles let a faint smile curl up the corners of his
mouth and Xander smiled back.

"You must be feeling better then, if you can be sarcastic." Giles raised his eyebrows - squinted at Xander.

"Where are my glasses?"

"Huh? Oh - here." Xander picked them up from the counter and eased them onto Giles' face, and the Watcher carefully adjusted them with a shaky hand. He looked at the blood smeared on his fingers and let his hand fall back to the blankets, grimacing.

"How bad is it, then?"

"Spike says not so bad. Says you'd already be dead if you were gonna die. Apparently, it takes a long time to die from a belly wound."

"I see... Xander, what - your neck!" Xander's hand went automatically to the fresh marks there and he shivered a little, touching them. Shrugged at Giles' weak glare.

"He needed blood, Giles. He needs to be at full strength if we're gonna beat Glory. It didn't hurt me, didn't hurt
"Xander, I don't understand. You - the last thing I would ever imagine you doing is voluntarily giving your blood to a vampire." Xander shrugged again, silently willing Giles to calm down. A fine dew of sweat stood on the older man's face, and Xander hoped he wouldn't move around much and make the wound bleed again.

"I wouldn't give any to Angel. This is different, Giles. I'm giving it, for one thing - it's not being taken. And... I love him. He loves me... There isn't anything I wouldn't do for him." Xander glanced over at a sharp crack to see Spike breaking boards into manageable pieces for Oz, who was crouched down over the beginnings of a small fire. The girls were circled around, watching, Willow holding Tara's hands back from the flames.

"You loved before, Giles - I know you did. I saw it. Wouldn't you have done anything, anything at all, for -"

"Ethan..." Giles sighed, and he closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, I would have, Xander. Long ago... But Ethan - betrayed us all. Did so many things..." Giles stopped for a long moment, and then took a shaky
breath. "I have never regretted Ethan, Xander, but I have regretted some of the things he - persuaded me to. I don't want you to have regrets." He looked sad - infinitely tired, and Xander smoothed the edge of the blanket, not daring to put his hand on Giles' shoulder.

"I don't have any regrets, Giles. I haven't - I haven't turned my back on what you and Buffy do - I haven't given up being one of the good guys. But the world isn't so...clear-cut anymore. I've lived Spike's life too, since the claim spell. I've been inside his memories and seen the what and the why. There's so much more...to everything. More sides than two. It's hard, sometimes. But I don't think I've - betrayed myself. Or you."

"You are my only concern, Xander. My feelings on the matter are -"

"They're important to me, Giles." Xander couldn't keep the slight tremor out of his voice.

All right, love?

All right. "I meant what I said before - about you being like a father. I don't want to - disappoint you, Giles."
"Xander -" Giles held his hand out and Xander took it, squeezing as hard as he dared. Giles squeezed back, and after a moment they let go.

"I am - honored - that you see me in that - that light, Xander. I can only hope that I'm able to...to be what you need me to be."

"Already are," Xander said softly. He took in a hard breath, closing his eyes for a moment. "You'll have to trust me on the rest, all right, Giles? Trust that I'm not some - poor deluded fool?"

"I -" Giles stopped, and he looked at Xander for a long moment. "I do trust you Xander. I really do. My background - my training - tells me otherwise, but I've realized, since coming to Sunnydale, that things are not always what they seem. And one of those things is that my training....isn't bulletproof, as they say." Giles coughed, and Xander looked back over to Spike.

_Drink?_

_You done?_
Yeah. Thanks. Love you.

Anything, pet. Spike came back over, one of Anya's juice boxes in his hand, and he gave it to Xander - carefully slid his hands up under Giles' shoulders and lifted him a few inches so he could drink without choking. Xander held the straw to his lips and Giles drank slowly, coughing only once. Then Spike lay him back down and he sighed - winced.

"I hope you're correct in your assessment of my physical well-being, Spike."

"Don't fret about that, Watcher - I've seen plenty of belly wounds last for a week or more. And they were men who didn't start out near as healthy as you. You'll be fine." Giles stared at the vampire - raised his eyebrows.

"Do I want to know where you've seen these wounds?" Spike answering smile was wolfish. "I thought not. What, exactly, are we doing?"

"Demon-girl's making Spam. Everyone else is waiting for Spam. That Ben - that nurse bloke from the hospital? Slayer called him - he's comin' out here to have a look at you."
"Good Lord. How did she...? No - I don't want to know. The Knights are going along with this?" Spike dug out a cigarette and lit it - blew the smoke over his shoulder towards the fire.

"Yeah - honorable warriors that they are, they decided not to deny you medical treatment. And we got General Forehead over there, so they're playing nice." Giles raised his head a little and looked over to where the captive Knight - General Gregor - was still tied to the pole, looking furious.

"That's their General? Oh I say - good on us. Has he told us anything useful?"

"No," Xander frowned over at the Knight. "He only confirmed what you found out - that using the Key will mean the end of the universe as we know it. All he wants to do is destroy the Key - he doesn't care about trying to fight Glory or coming up with any other solutions."

"He is a Knight sworn to his Cause. I'm surprised he even spoke to you."
"He seems to like the sound of his own voice." Buffy emerged from the shadows and Giles looked up at her, a smile of welcome creasing his face. "He told me all kinds of stuff, but nothing we didn't already know. How are you, Giles?" Buffy put her hand lightly in his shoulder and Giles lifted his own hand to hers.

"I'm all right, Buffy. At least, according to Dr. the Bloody." The look Giles sent Spike's way was sardonic and amused, and Spike casually waved two fingers at him - took Xander's hand in his.

"We'll just be having our dinner then, Slayer." Buffy actually smiled, and Xander and Spike walked away - went to sit on the floor near the fire, propping each other up.

*Spam* Xander thought, *actually smells kind of...appealing...when cooked over an open fire.*

*So does rat but you won't catch me eatin' it.* Spike's hand crept up Xander's back - began a slow pet of his hair. It was tangled and knotted from the day's activities and his fingers gently tugged and smoothed. It was soporific - infinitely calming - and Xander just closed his eyes and leaned into it. Somewhere off to his right he
could hear Oz dialing a number on Derio's cell phone. It only rang once.

"Oz."

"Yeah." Long sigh, and then:

"Everything - good?"

"Everything...just is. Score one for the bad guys."

"Who?" Derio's voice was tense, even through the phone.

"Mr. Giles. But Spike says no worries." There was a long pause, and then:

"Miss you. Don't -. Fuck it. Be careful, amante..."

"Yeah..."

"Don't take it off, okay, mi dulce? Don't." Oz shifted, and Xander could hear something - a soft clicking.

"Won't. Derio..."
"Yeah. Te amo, mi amante, mi dulce..."

"Love you too," Oz whispered, and then the phone beeped, turning off. Xander kept his eyes closed, but through the link he could see what Spike saw. He saw Anya, spooning corned beef out of the can and into the iron skillet she'd brought, a spare t-shirt wrapped around the pan-handle like a pot holder. He saw Willow cutting off small pieces of cooked Spam and trying to get Tara to eat it, and he saw Dawn slowly eating canned peaches. And he saw Oz pulling a string of black and green beads out of his shirt, letting them slide through his fingers for a moment before tucking them away again. He looked tired, and so lonely. The fire sparked gold from the tips of his hair, but made the darker parts seem an almost bloody red.

*Wolfling...* Oz looked up - got up and walked over. Sat down with a small sigh in front of them, cross-legged, head down.

*Pack, wolf. Love you.*

*Love you, Oz. Be home soon.* Oz nodded, not looking up, and Spike reached out and took his hand.
Sleep a little, wolf - we'll need you soon.

You too, Oz thought, looking up at Spike. Xander opened his eyes finally - smiled over at Oz and then scooted a foot or so back, so he could lean against the wall.

"C'mon, Spike - take a nap." Spike was stroking his fingers over Oz's knuckles - let his hand go, finally, and wormed around, head on Xander's thigh, curled under his duster. Oz did the same, curling up against Spike's back, the top of his head pressed into Xander's knee. The link quieted slowly, finally just a low, steady pack that was more feeling than actual thought. Xander felt his own eyes fluttering shut. He looked around the room one last time - saw Buffy standing by the door, looking out - saw Giles with his eyes closed, resting if not asleep. He slid his hand under the edge of the duster and found Spike's hand, and fell asleep tracing his fingertips over and over the fading cuts.

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"That's him - he's here, Buffy," Anya said softly, and Buffy pushed herself upright from where she'd been dozing restlessly against the wall. The sound of car wheels
crunching over gravel, and a dazzling sweep of headlights showed Ben had arrived. Buffy brushed at the seat of her pants - pushed her hands back through her hair.

"Have you fixed up in no time, Giles," she said softly, and the Watcher nodded slightly at her, closing his eyes again as Buffy moved away.

"Willow? You ready to make me a doorway?" Willow touched Tara's cheek and stood up as well - went to stand next to Buffy.

"Ready when you are," Willow said quietly, and Buffy nodded. Xander touched Spike's shoulder - shook him gently.

"Love -"

"The medic here, then?" Spike murmured.

"Yeah. Willow's gonna open a door." Spike rolled onto his back and stretched hard, arching up and closing his eyes. The pleasure of it rippled through the link and Oz stirred, lifting his head. Xander leaned down and kissed Spike's mouth softly - grinned as the vampire uncoiled and sprang to his feet, lithe as a cat. He stalked over to
the General, looking down at him with gold-glittering eyes, and then went past him to the door, standing behind Buffy and Willow.

Xander got up more slowly, stiff, and stretched himself, working his shoulders and neck. Oz did the same, yawning, and went over to the 'supply' corner. He got a bottle of water and opened it, taking a long drink. He handed the bottle off to Xander, who finished it and walked with the werewolf over towards the door. The Knights were standing warily around Ben's car - a dusty sedan. Ben was inside, looking out the window with a look of astonishment and fear. Willow chanted something under her breath and part of the barrier shivered. Buffy took a deep breath and marched out, back straight. Ben saw her and got hastily out of his car, looking warily at the Knights as he hurried over, a bulky gym bag in one hand.

"Hey, Buffy -" he said softly, and Buffy smiled at him.

"Ben. I really -"

"Slayer." The second-in-command, Dante, stepped up to the doorway and Buffy hastily got between him and the building, pushing Ben gently to one side.
"What is it?"

"We wish to give our fallen brother a proper burial. May we collect his body?" Dante gestured towards the dead Knight that lay crumpled to one side, and Buffy blanched a little - opened her mouth to speak.

"Don't, Slayer." Spike pushed past Willow and strode out the door, and Buffy shot an annoyed look at him over her shoulder.

*Spike?*

*They don't get inside the barrier.* Spike moved swiftly, picking the corpse up under its arms and hoisting it effortlessly. It was rigid with death, arms bent awkwardly, but Spike paid no mind - strode over to the doorway and pushed the corpse onto the startled Dante.

"There's your brother. Now back off." Dante sagged under the dead weight and metal - half turned to give the body over to two other Knights who hurried to his side.

"What of General Gregor?"
"He's fine, he's -"

"Staying with us. Oi! Red! Close the door."

"Spike!" Buffy looked furiously at Spike, and Dante made a move, as if to push past him.

"Willow! Close it! We can't let any of them in here." Oz's voice was low and urgent and Willow looked askance at him - nodded finally and took a breath - repeated her chant. The barrier snapped back into place, knocking Dante back a few steps, and Spike stood there for a long moment, watching them. Buffy shook her head but turned to Ben, giving him a weak smile.

"This is all kinda - Outer Limits stuff for you I guess."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Ben murmured, looking at Spike, a puzzled expression on his face. He turned with Buffy and they both came back to the building; Xander, Oz and Willow hastily making way for them. He went straight to Giles - unzipped his bag and fished out a stethoscope and began his examination.

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"He got lucky. The - the spear missed any vital organs," Ben said, peeling off bloodied Latex gloves and dropping them to the ground.

"Told you so," Spike muttered, and Buffy shot him a mean look.

"But, there's a lot of damage. It broke a couple of ribs and the splinters -" Ben took in the rather sick looks on Buffy and Willow's faces - the lazy interest on Spike's, and stopped. "But you don't need to know the details. He's lost a lot of blood. I brought some Ringer's solution, and that'll help until we can get some whole blood into him. I'm going to set up an IV, and give him something for the pain as well." Giles put his hand up then, touching Ben's sleeve, and Ben looked down at him.

"I don't - want to be all...muzzy," Giles said, and Ben frowned in concern.

"Mr. Giles, you really would be more comfortable if -" 

"He knows what he wants, Ben. Just - can you give him enough to -"
"Just take the edge off," Giles finished, and coughed, and Ben shook his head slowly.

"Look, I'll - I'll do it, but it's better for your body if you can rest for a while. It can start healing. Constant pain - just drags you down."

"I understand that, Ben. But for now - I need to - to be aware." Ben nodded - looked up at Buffy.

"I'll do what I can. But you need to get him out of here, and soon."

"We're trying," Buffy said, and she and Willow moved away, talking softly. Xander touched Spike's shoulder - indicated with a jerk of his head that they should leave, as well. Oz was off to one side with Tara, Anya and Dawn, trying to keep a restless Tara occupied. He was letting her listen to his cd player, but she didn't seem to like the headphones and kept fidgeting with them.

"We've got to get some sort of - of plan together. We can't just sit here and let Giles die," Xander said softly, and Spike looked over Xander's shoulder at the Watcher, his eyes flat and cold.
"Ben's got a car, big enough for us. I say we take the Niblet and go. The Knights won't have any reason to hang around once their Key is gone, and -"

"Why can't you just hand over the Key and be done?" Xander and Spike both jerked around, startled, at the voice. General Gregor had somehow managed to struggle to his feet despite his bound hands and was looking at them with a patronizing air.

"You ally yourself with the Beast - you defy our Holy Mission - you will bring about the destruction of the world with this foolish behavior!" Spike snarled and strode forward, getting up close to the Knight, who flinched slightly back and then steeled himself.

"If you lot had any balls at all, you'd be on our side, tryin' to take Glory out, instead of hunting down a defenseless girl." Spike's demon was to the fore and his fangs were inches from the Knight's face.

"'Our' side, demon? You have no side. You are unclean, unholy, and will only bring despair to all around you." The General had the wild glint of the fanatic in his eye, and Xander figured that was the only thing that kept
the man from gibbering in utter terror.

"You're mistaken, General," Spike said, softly. His hand was in his duster pocket, and then lost in the shadows between their bodies. Suddenly the General stiffened - made a nasty, wheezing sort of screech. Xander heard the pop of electricity.

*What the hell?*

*Commando toy, remember?* Spike stepped away from the General, who sagged against the post, panting. Spike held the stolen taser in his hand. "Forgot all about it, really." Spike looked at the General, who was obviously in pain, and grinned. The hyena grinned right along with him.

"Guys - we really don't have time for this." Buffy strode over, an unreadable expression on her face, Willow hovering a few steps behind her. "Just put it away, Spike. He can't tell us anything we don't already know."

"But it would be awfully fun making sure," Spike said silkily, and the General seemed to get for the first time that he might be in trouble. He looked at Spike uneasily.
"Xander, rein him in or I will," Buffy snapped, looking ready to do a little damage herself. Spike hissed at her, and Xander moved hastily between them.

_Calm please love._

"I think the best thing to do is - is have Ben drive one of us to Barstow - it's only about twenty miles from here and we can rent a car big enough for - well, for most of us. I'm going to send Giles back with Ben - he has to get to a hospital - and, and Anya can go with him -"

"Split us up? Do you think - do you think that's a good idea, Buffy? Giles won't be able to fight off Glory if she comes calling - or Anya either." Xander stepped a little closer to Buffy as he spoke, keeping his voice low.

"Do you have any ideas, Xander? I'm about out here, and I don't need arguments unless you've got something better to offer!"

"Back off, Slayer." Spike stepped up close as well, still game-faced, and Buffy recoiled. "Yeah, I got a better offer, Slayer. Let me and mine take those damn Knights out and let us go. We'll get the Niblet somewhere safe and you can deal with the hell-bitch. Her time is
short. When the glory-hour is gone - who knows? Maybe she goes up in a puff of smoke, or maybe - she loses her powers. Whatever happens, Dawn's safe."

"Or maybe she just kills everything in her path," Buffy snapped, and Spike cocked his head a little to one side - looked over her shoulder at Dawn, who had got up and was talking to Ben.

"Maybe so. But she doesn't end the world, and Little Bit...is out of her reach." Xander watched Buffy - watched her mull that over, watched her flick her eyes around the room, taking in who would go and probably live - and who would die. He watched her, and knew she was going to make some sort of decision. And whatever it was - it would break her. Anything she chose lead to someone's death, and Xander couldn't let her take on that burden, as well.

_We can't - SHE can't. Spike - we have to find another way._

_Want you SAFE, want the wolfling safe - want our FAMILY, damnit, don't give a fuck about the rest._
Xander put his hand on the vampire's shoulder and squeezed gently. "I know. But I do. And we can't, Spike. We can't leave anyone behind. We have to find some other way."

He looked at Buffy, who looked grateful, for a moment. And then alarmed, as Tara suddenly leaped to her feet.

"NO, oh no, you don't bring that here! Little filthy beasts - out, get out!" Tara pushed Anya aside - evaded Oz's grasp and ran towards the door, clawing furiously at it.

"Tara!" Willow ran for her, but a second yell made her jerk around in startlement, and they all stared at Ben, who was clutching his head in the middle of the room.

"Let me out! Open the door - let me out of here!"

"What the fuck -" Spike started a slow stalk towards Ben, and Buffy looked at Xander in bewilderment.

"He just started freaking out! I didn't do anything!" Dawn edged nervously towards Buffy, trying to keep away from Ben, and Tara screamed again.

"Time, time time, it's time and Leviathan rises!" Her
voice broke on the last, sending her into a fit of coughing, and she scrabbled madly at the door. Willow reached her and tried to stop her - tried to pull her away and Tara turned and opened her mouth in a hideous, ear-piercing wail of utter terror.

"Let me oooout!" Ben tore at his hair - pulled it - and Xander felt his mouth dropping open as his hair seemed to stretch. It was stretching - it was growing longer and lightening and suddenly it wasn't Ben standing there anymore, it was Glory doing a little cat-stretch, yawning. She glanced down at herself and grimaced - flicked her fingers and Ben's khakis and pullover became a skimpy red dress.

"My boy Ben - he sure gets around." Glory looked coolly around her, and her gaze fell on the General. "Oh look! It's Gregor!"

"Your time is almost over, Beast, we will crush you, we will -" Glory's eyes narrowed and she reached out absently - plucked a rusting hub-cap that was hanging off a support beam and threw it like a Frisbee. It sliced through the air and into the General's throat and he gagged mid-word, choking - dying.
"Now it's not." Glory giggled and brushed at her fingers. With a roar, Spike threw himself forward, leaping on Glory's back. Oz was in motion as well, the wolf surfacing as he leapt. Spike locked his arms around her neck, attempting to snap it and Glory reached up and clawed at him - pulled him over and off and into the wall, cracking boards. Oz was backhanded away and then Buffy was there, piling into her and being kicked sprawling to the ground.

*Spike!* *Fuck, Oz* - Xander darted around the Hellgod, heading for Spike, knowing he was no match for her.

"Now now, children, I'm not in the mood." Glory grinned over at Dawn and in a movement almost too fast to track she pounced, grabbing Dawn's arm and spinning them both towards the door.

"Let's go, pumpkin! Things to do!" She raced out the door, dragging Dawn, who clawed at the red-nailed hand locked around her wrist.

"Buffy!" Dawn shrieked. Buffy climbed unsteadily to her feet - took off after her sister as Spike rolled and got up, shaking his head. Anya was yanking Oz upright and they all pelted after Buffy, hearing screams from outside.
"Willow! The barrier!" Buffy was yelling - pounding her fists on the barrier, and Xander heard Willow chanting as they ran up behind Buffy. Abruptly the barrier dropped, and they moved forward. But after a half-dozen steps Xander stopped, dazed. It was hard to see in the uncertain light of the fires and flickering torches, but there were bodies - everywhere. Xander looked around him in growing horror and stumbled when his foot hit something. He looked down and recoiled from the Knight who was lying there, throat torn out.

"Oh, fuck -"

"She got 'em all," Spike murmured, and took off in the direction that Glory had gone. They all heard his roar of frustration and fury.

She's fuckin' GONE, how did she do it, damnit!

"Oh my god -" Willow staggered to a stop near Buffy, her eyes wide and horrified. "Buffy, we have to - have to hurry!" She turned to Buffy, and Xander watched in confusion as Buffy's legs seemed to give out. She sat down hard in the blood-soaked dirt, her eyes huge and vacant.
"Buffy?" Willow went down on her knees beside her, clutching her shoulder. "Buffy? Come on, we have to - we have to get Dawnie back! Buffy!" Willow looked up as Xander came closer, tears standing in her eyes.

"Xander, what's wrong with her!"

"I don't -" Xander crouched down as well - touched Buffy's cheek. Her skin was cold, and Xander could see faint tremors going through her. Her hands were clasped loosely, and she blinked once, slow. "I don't know, Wills."

"Oh dear god -" Xander looked up fast at that and saw Giles in the doorway, swaying, shirtless and pale.

"Giles! You shouldn't -"

"Oh dear god," Giles whispered again, looking around him, fear and anger and horror all crossing his face. Anya stood near him, surveying the scene with a critical eye. Oz trotted up from somewhere, scenting the air and snarling softly, fighting the wolf with every step.

Too much blood. Spike?
Here, wolf. They're all dead. A sensation in the link, a flicker of an image, and Xander knew Spike was draining a Knight - knew the man was gutted and dying in the sand and Spike wanted his blood. Wanted him as dead as the rest. It sent a shudder through him and Spike abruptly shut the link down.

"Oz, get Giles back inside, he can't -"

"What's wrong with Buffy?" Giles snapped, struggling to walk forward, and Oz growled at him, darting to his side.

"Inside, Giles. Now." Oz forcibly turned Giles - made a gesture of his head and Anya hurried over, slipping through the door as Oz half dragged the older man inside.

"Willow - let's get Buffy inside. Come on." Xander stood up - put his hands under Buffy's arms and hauled her upright, and Willow rose with her, taking one hand in hers and guiding Buffy back into the building. Spike came loping in out of the darkness, shaking the demon off as he came.

Gotta get a move on, love, he thought, and Xander eased Buffy down onto the floor by Giles, who was sitting on
the edge of the counter, looking ill. Anya was putting the IV tube back onto the needle in the back of his hand. Tara was huddled in the corner made by the counter and the wall, and Oz had moved to sit next to her, trying to coax her around. His eyes were black and furious, but the wolf was mostly gone.

"Move where, Spike? What - what the hell happened? Ben - became Glory!"

"He did what?" Giles said sharply, and Xander turned an incredulous look on him.

"He was right here, Giles! He was - himself, and the next minute he was Glory!" Giles exchanged a puzzled look with Anya, who shrugged.

"Ben and Glory - they are - connected somehow?"

*What in hell!*

"It's mojo, pet. I think... Wolfling, did you see what happened?" Oz nodded.

"Ben freaked - right when Tara did - and then, Glory. Like the fuckin' robot in Terminator." Xander couldn't
suppress a snort of hysterical laughter and Willow looked up from where she was kneeling beside Buffy, frowning.

"Xander! It's not - there's nothing funny here! I don't know how Glory got here, but she's got Dawn and - and Buffy's -"

"She's broken," Anya said. She leaned down into Buffy's face - snapped her fingers a couple of times. "Helloooo! Buffy! Little sister in mortal danger! World about to end!" Buffy didn't so much as blink, and Anya stood back up. "See? Broken."

"No, no, she's not - she's not broken, Anya, she's just -"

"She's off in her own little happy-land, is what she is. Or unhappy-land, as the case may be." Spike was searching for a cigarette - snarled furiously at the empty, crumpled pack he finally retrieved from a pocket.

_Why did I see Ben and Glory and not Willow? Why you, and Oz?_

_We're not exactly human, are we pet? Think it only works on humans._ "Buffy's not gonna be helping us anytime soon."
"But there's gotta be something -" Xander crouched down by Willow and reached out - popped his fingers lightly against Buffy's face. "C'mon Buffy - come back! You're needed out here!"

"Xander - leave her." Spike's eyes were demon-gold, and the link was thrumming with pack pack pack, the demon frantic with the need to get out. "We need to get back to Sunnydale." Xander stared at him for a long moment - nodded finally and stood up.

"Yeah - okay - how do we do that? Giles has to lay down, and we can't all fit in Ben's car if he does."

"I'm takin' Ben's car. You're coming with me to Barstow. We'll get another car, or truck - something - and get back here. It'll be light in six or so hours - we can be back in Sunnydale by then."

"And then what?" Oz asked softly, and Spike laughed a short, humorless laugh.

"And then I'm outta ideas, wolf. But we've got hours to think of something. Sound worthy, then?" He looked around at Xander - at Giles, who was slumping further
down, and at Anya who looked back wide-eyed and shrugged.

"It's more then I've got, Spike."

"Willow - can you do anything for Buffy? Can you help her?" Willow stood shakily and pushed her hair back out of her face. Oz had managed to get Tara to turn around and now he urged her to her feet. Her hands were scratched and a little bloody - her face streaked with tears - and she keened softly and held her arms out, reaching for Willow. Willow pulled her close, stroking her hair.

"Shhh, baby, it's all right."

"No windows, no doors, no light, no light..." Tara whispered brokenly, and Willow hugged her hard.

"I'll figure out something - I can do something but yeah, we have to get back to Sunnydale. I need - need to look at some b-books -" Willow buried her face in Tara's hair and shuddered, crying now, and Xander reached and squeezed her shoulder lightly.

"Okay, it's okay Willow. We'll figure this out." He looked
over at Spike. **Love you love you this is so fucked up LOVE you, Spike, my own...**

*Your own.* **Love you, pet, love you... Wolf, you all right?**

**Fine. Hurry back - be careful!**

"Yeah. We'll hurry. Think Ben left the keys in the car?" Spike stalked out the door, and Xander hesitated one long moment, looking around at the group.

"Everyone be careful - stay alert. We'll be back as soon as we can. Giles - please lay back down."

"Go, Xander," Giles rasped, and Xander saw that *darkman* other face there; a face that was furious and ready to take vengeance on anything in reach.

"We'll get her back, Giles." The darkman - Ripper - only stared back, a cold and ancient knowledge shadowing his gaze, and Xander turned and strode after Spike, feeling a shiver come over him.

*If Buffy doesn't get Glory - Giles will.*

*We better be standing pretty far back if that happens,*
pet. Spike was doing something under the dash of Ben's car - made a small sound of triumph as the engine suddenly roared to life.

"Let's go, love," he called, slamming the door and putting the car in gear, and Xander hurried around to the passenger side and got in. They drove off, dust pluming from under the tires, pack hurry hurry fading out behind them.

______________

amante - lover

te amo - I love you

mi dulce - my sweet

Thank you, Canadian Snoopy, for the 'terms of endearment'
Barstow had been crawling with soldiers - Army, Marines, and geek-types from some NASA project, and Spike had had a hard time keeping himself inconspicuously human while looking for a car. They found one vehicle easily, but in the end he'd quietly snapped the neck of a belligerent Marine and he and Xander had driven back to the others in two SUV things, leaving Ben's hot-wired sedan in a back alley. Big enough, once you laid the seats down, to construct a pallet for the Watcher and to hold everyone else. The killing was a steady ache in the link that Spike chose to ignore. Too little time and his nerves so close to the breaking point he simply couldn't deal with the White Knight. Xander touched his cheek - looked at him, wide eyed, as they loaded the Watcher and got the rest settled, and if it wasn't forgiveness it was something like acceptance. Acknowledgment of the situation, and a resolve to deal with it later.

Xander drove the Watcher, the Slayer and demon-girl in his vehicle, and Spike got the witches and the wolf and the baggage. They drove hard, into the west, and Red managed a sort of 'don't notice me' spell on them, so
that any lurking Highway Patrol would ignore them.

Sunnydale was locked down - seemingly dead - and they got Giles to the hospital fast, Spike and Xander carrying him in and surrendering him to bustling nurses and one tired-looking doctor. While Xander filled out paperwork with Willow's help, Spike called Clem and got a cousin to come get the SUVs. It wouldn't do anyone any good to have the stolen vehicle of a dead soldier sitting outside their house. Giles, it seemed, would be at the hospital for several hours - probably past dawn. Xander brought the news out to the others with a worried frown drawing his brows together.

"We can't just sit out here," Willow said, her arm tight around Tara's shoulders. "I have to get a book - I have to be someplace quiet so I can - can help Buffy - so we can get Dawnie back." Xander crouched down by them, drawing the rest in close. The rest minus the Slayer, who simply stared, unmoving.

"Listen - why not just go to Buffy's house? Everybody has extra clothes in their packs, right? We can all get cleaned up and get something to eat while you do your witchy thing. Sound all right?"
"I'm all for a shower and a meal," Anya said, nodding, and Willow drew in a deep breath - nodded as well.

"All right, Xander. That sounds - sounds like a plan." She raised a faint smile, and Xander smiled back.

"Wolf, you can drive 'em, right?" Spike asked, and Oz looked up at him, concern in his eyes.

"Yeah." Where -?

"I know a bloke - bookish - I think he might know a thing or two about our little problem. Me an' Xan, we'll go suss him out, yeah?" Keep Glinda safe. Oz nodded slowly - took a hard breath and reached out to run his hand down Spike's arm - touch Xander's shoulder.

Careful. Love you.

Love you, from himself and Xander, no separating the thoughts, and Oz collected the girls, shepherding them out the ER doors and into the loaner. Xander watched them go - watched Spike slip something into his pocket from a cart and then they were out the door, walking down the sidewalk.
Love -

"I know." Xander sighed - reached to lace his fingers with Spike's, the warm and callused hand feeling so good in his own - solid and right.

"Nature of the beast, love," Spike said softly, and Xander squeezed his hand just a little.

"I know that too. I'm - can't I just be...unhappy with it?"

"Not if it means you're unhappy with me." Xander nodded - walked on for a minute in silence, eluding Spike even in the link. Spike groped for cigarettes - remembered he had none and cursed softly. Lights up ahead showed a Quickie-Mart, and he headed towards it gratefully. They went inside and Spike told the clerk what brand, and Xander leaned on him and sighed.

**Tired.**

*I know, love. All over soon.*

*That sounds so final.*

*Final for HER. We'll come out all right.*
"How do you know that?" Xander whispered, his mouth against Spike's neck, and Spike shivered - snatched the cigarettes from the gawping clerk and tossed a twenty at him.

"Mind on your work, git," he snapped, and the clerk glared at him. "I know that 'cause you're the good guys, love. White Hats n'all. Good guys always win. Said it yourself."

"Do we?" Xander asked, and Spike knew it was exhaustion, worry - the long, strange day and night, that made Xander sound so...small.

*Always, love.* Spike caught Xander's chin in his fingers - gave him a slow and gentle kiss. Something tight in his belly unwound as Xander leaned into him - slid hot hands under the duster and around his waist. The clerk made a squeaking sort of noise and Spike ended the kiss with a delicate nibble on Xander's lower lip - turned to the clerk with his best 'Why don't I just kill you now?' look.

"Where's my change, you tosser?" he growled, and the clerk shoved some money across the counter - mumbled something under his breath.
"I heard that, you fuck -" Spike was ready to snap another neck but Xander grabbed the bills and coins and him and yanked him away, glaring daggers over his shoulder at the clerk, who winced away.

"Not now, not him, not here, okay? Better things - well, more important things to do. Okay?" Xander hustled him out onto the sidewalk and Spike abruptly shoved him into a wall - full-body contact and delicious grind of hips and Xander lost his breath for a minute. Coins hit the ground and rolled away, unnoticed.

"Always something better to do, yeah," Spike breathed, and Xander melted into him, fingers digging into Spike's back and his teeth meeting with a jolt of delicious pain through the skin of Spike's throat.

*Stop it Spike,* and a warning shake of the head, and Spike breathed in sharply - thrust hard into Xander's hip, feeling rigid flesh digging into his own thigh.

*Oh but you want it...* and Xander bit again, tongue lapping at blood that was welling up, nails making trails of fire down Spike's back. Spike had his own hands on Xander's buttocks, pulling him closer, kneading taut flesh.
Don't have - fuck - time - Spike! Xander arched fiercely against him as he twisted his own head around and sank fangs into Xander's throat, high up. They were both making inarticulate noises around the flesh in their mouths - they were both thrusting and writhing against each other in a sort of mindless frenzy, nerves stretched to the breaking point and this, this closeness the only cure Spike could think of.

Suddenly Xander was fumbling urgently at his jeans - at Spike's - and Spike was pushing Xander's t-shirt up out of the way - wrenching at his own and then Xander's hand was on him, hot and tight, his cock right there, slick glide of pre-come, burning like a brand. Spike added his own hand - felt the link open wide and felt the double sensation of warm and cool all down the length of his body. He sank his fangs a little deeper - pulled against Xander's hold on him and felt the blunt human teeth tear his flesh a little, exquisite torture.

They came together, gasping, and Xander finally opened his jaws - sucked gently on the wound he'd made before letting his head fall back with a little thump on the bricks behind him. Spike did the same; gently disengaging his fangs and cleaning the wound - letting his human self slip back.
Suprisingly, the mess was minimal and Spike very deliberately pulled their hands up to his lips - took wet, fragrant flesh into his mouth and sucked. Xander watched him, his mouth red and slightly open, his eyes half-shut but shining green in the sodium glare of the Quickie-Mart signs.

Fuckin' hot, you make me crazy, LOVE you, and Spike grinned at him.

"Yeah. Forgive me, love?"

"Nature of the beast, Spike, like you said." Love the beast, AM the beast, want this OVER, Spike.

"Me too. Let's go." They tidied themselves away, and Spike opened a pack and took out a cigarette - lit it and deliberately blew the smoke at the plate-glass window three feet away, and the astonished, beet-red face of the Quickie-Mart clerk.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Xander hadn't heard of this 'Doc' before, but Spike
seemed to think he'd be of some help. Their more-than-make-out session up against the wall outside the Mart had left him feeling oddly energized, and he bounced down the sidewalk next to Spike, pushing all thoughts of apocalypses, Hellgods, and a dead soldier out of his head.

*Deal or lose*, his soldier had muttered. The hyena was utterly uncaring *kill or be killed* and all of them had taken comfort in the blood that sparked on his tongue - sent a surge of fire through his body. *I'm in love with William the Bloody*, an odd little refrain in his mind.

"Post-orgasmic endorphins," Spike muttered, pulling him down off the bumper of a parked car, and Xander laughed out loud.

"Probably. But I'm tired of being scared. This is almost over, and we're gonna win. I say so." Xander knew it sounded childish but he was tired of being scared - was tired of feeling like he was in perpetual flight mode, and now was time for fight. Spike just grinned at him, demon's eyes and smoke curling up from between his lips, and when they arrived at Doc's small house, Spike knocked sharply.
"It's always open!" a voice called. They went inside, to a room lined with books and what was obviously magical paraphernalia. There was a fire burning in a fireplace and the room was oppressively hot. A small, grey-haired man sat at a table, a thick book open before him, a spiral notebook and pen under his hand. He barely glanced up.

"Can I get you boys some cocoa?"

"Maybe some other time, mate," Spike said, and Doc looked up sharply.

"Oh! It's you! Time-bomb go well, then?" Spike smiled a tight and malicious smile at the man.

"Worked a treat."

"Oh, good, good." The little man got up and came out from behind his desk. He was wrapped in a thread-bare old robe, and had worn slippers on his feet and gold-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. "A tricky spell, that. Very inventive. I'm only glad it worked out to your satisfaction." He stood there, beaming, and Spike ground his cigarette out on his boot-heel. Xander just looked around, taking in all the oddments and curios.
Giles would love this place.

Doubt it. "Yeah, it was fuckin' brilliant, Doc, but we're here on other business tonight."

"Yes? Well, always happy to help - what can I do for you boys?" Spike drew his flask out from an inner pocket - took a long swig and offered it to Doc, who made a prissy little move of his hand in rejection.

"There's a Hellgod loose in Sunnydale just lately. Sucks out your mind if you get too close - wants to get a Key and get home. You know anything?"

"Hellgod! Oh my. Oh, my...you can only be asking about Glorificus. She's - she's big time, fellas. Real big time. I'm only a small-time guy, myself." The man moved nervously around the room, touching a book here, a statuette there, and Xander watched him, ready for...anything, really.

"Small-time, maybe, but I know you've got your fingers in all sorts of pies." Spike drew slowly on a fresh smoke, watching the man through half-shut eyes.

"Oh, me? No, no... Glorificus is - bad, fellas. She's real
bad. Best advice? Get out of town - just as far as you can. That's what I'd do if - if I had anything to do with her." He ended his jittery wanderings near a small table, and his hand went out to stroke a small, lacquered box.

"Doc - she's found her Key. She'll use it and she'll tear the universe apart when she does. Everybody go poof, you savvy?" The man gave a nervous little smile - touched the box again and then jumped slightly when he noticed Xander staring at him. Spike was getting angry - a twitchy, vicious feeling in the link, and Xander wondered what the old guy was up to. He was acting...odd.

"Oh, well... In that case, maybe you should..." Doc tapped his mouth with a finger - looked up at Spike with a small smirk. "I know a fella, who knows a fella in China - you could go there -"

"China?" Xander turned to Spike, shaking his head. "Is he kidding? We don't have time for China!"  

*Spike, what the hell?*

*Patience, pet,* in the link but the surge of cold rage was anything but.
"You're lying, Doc," Spike said softly, and Doc shot a startled look at him - narrowed his eyes and smiled a tight little smile.

"You think so, vampire?" Xander felt his heart start to pound at the sly, malevolent look on the old man's face. Then Doc moved - was across the room and picking up a sword - lunging at Spike's throat with it. Spike dodged - spun - kicked the sword out of Doc's hands and aimed a ferocious punch at him. Doc evaded, barely, and Xander went for the sword, grabbing it up and turning in time to see Doc snatching the lacquer box and throwing it into his fireplace.

"Her day is coming, boys!" he shouted, and Spike leaped at him - backhanded him away from the fireplace and dragged the box out of the flames, cursing. Xander raised the sword and Doc opened his mouth. A thick, black length shot out - That's his tongue? Oh fuck, his tongue! and slapped wetly into Xander's chest, slamming him back into the wall.

"Oh, are you gonna see something when she rises!" Doc chortled. Spike dove for Doc's legs and brought him down hard, pinning him.
Sword! Xander turned the sword and brought it down, hard and fast, straight through Doc's chest. Bluish-black blood shot up, spattering his jeans, and Xander backed off, a disgusted look on his face.

"Fuck, Spike. What in hell -"

"I guess this Hellgod's got followers all over. Least we got what he was trying to destroy." Spike stood up slowly and retrieved the box. It was slightly scorched but otherwise fine.

"What is it?"

"Something worth dying for, I guess. Let's get outta here, yeah?"

"Yeah."

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The house on Revello drive was dark when they got back, and Xander had a strange sense of déjà vu as they came up the walk. Oz was sitting in the porch swing again, waiting for them, broadcasting pack in a low monotone
that drew them in as surely as a hook and line. They settled on either side of the werewolf, Xander letting out a great sigh of relief and Spike dropping his arm around Oz's thin shoulders. The sky was lightening along the horizon, and the waking-up noises of birds and households seemed out of place - too normal.

"All in bed then, wolf?" Spike asked softly, and Oz nodded and leaned into him. Xander scooted a little closer and Oz twisted slightly, putting his calves across Xander's thighs. Xander rested his hands on Oz's shins, unconsciously rubbing up and down.

"Willow - did this spell. Went into Buffy's head with her."

*In the Slayer's head. Christ.*

"Did it work?" Xander asked. Oz nodded again, eyes fluttering closed and then open as he fought to stay awake.

"Yeah. Buffy woke up finally and they all cried on each other and then they went to bed. Buffy wanted -" Oz broke off in a huge yawn and Xander yawned right along with him. "Man! Tired. Buffy wanted to go to the hospital but we talked her out of it. I called - Giles is
going to leave in the morning." Oz yawned again and closed his eyes - snuggled a little into Spike's shoulder.

Another sleep-over at the Slayer's house. My reputation is dirt. Xander laughed at Spike softly.

What other vamp in history has been invited into the Slayer's house? Spike seemed to consider that - caught himself in a long blink.

"Bed, loves, don't you think? You talk to Derio, wolfling?"

"Mmmm? Yeah. He's all right. Gonna see me tomorrow." Oz made a half-hearted effort to sit up and Spike pushed him a little. Xander got his arm around Oz's waist and all three staggered upright and made their way into the house. Blankets and pillows had been stacked on the couch and they made a haphazard pallet on the floor. Spike made a last prowl of the house while Xander and Oz used the bathroom, then he slung his duster over a chair and they curled up in the blankets.

Nest, very faintly from the demon, and the wolf had never stopped his pack, and Xander spared a last thought
towards the coming fight, and then let it all go. Family, and for the moment they were all safe.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Exhaustion kept everyone asleep until past noon, and only Giles coming quietly into the house woke Xander and Oz. Spike opened one eye and looked blearily at the Watcher, then rolled over and was asleep again. Xander kissed him swiftly on the temple and then got to his feet, stretching and yawning, feeling Oz do the same. Giles stood looking at them for a moment, then shook his head, a small smile on his face.

"What's up, Giles?"

"Oh, well, nothing much except that you three resemble a heap of puppies. Or perhaps - kindergarteners." Giles' smile was a little wider, and Xander had to grin back.

"Didn't go to kindergarten," Spike mumbled.

"Poor you. No eating of paste and no nap-time."

"Never getting to be milk monitor!" Oz said, wide-eyed,
and Spike finally lifted his head, looking like a dazed lion with his hair every which way and his eyes golden in the dimness of the living room.

"What in bloody hell are you talking about?" he grumbled, and Oz laughed and stumbled off to the bathroom, scrubbing his hands through his hair and wincing at tangles.

"Just reliving the golden days of our youth," Xander said, and followed Giles into the kitchen, where the older man sat heavily on a stool. "How did you get here? You should have called -"

"I took a taxi, and that's all right. I knew that all of you needed to rest." Giles leaned his elbows on the countertop and Xander had never seen him look so old - so worn.

"Giles? How - are you okay?"

"Not according to the doctor, who wanted me to stay for a few more days. But I'm - all right. Willow did a small spell last night, to help slow the bleeding and it seems to have - acted as a catalyst. I'm healing much faster than I would have thought."
"Not that bloody fast, though." Spike shuffled into the kitchen in socked feet and looked blearily around. "Don't they have a bloody kettle?"

"Please god, I really would like some tea," Giles muttered, and Xander looked around.

"Guess not. Pot'll do, though." He got one down out of a cabinet and filled it with water - got it on the stove and heating. Oz came into the kitchen just then, and Xander hurried to the bathroom. He could faintly hear noise from upstairs and guessed that one if not all of the girls were up. When he got back to the kitchen Spike and Giles were arguing about whether or not Spike could smoke in the house. Spike ended the argument by lighting up and pointedly blowing smoke at the older man and Xander moved hastily to intervene.

"Here - Spike - just stay over here where the fan is, okay?" Please, love. Xander turned the vent fan on under the hood of the stove and Spike settled with ill grace against the counter there, flicking ash irritably into the sink.

"We got something last night, Giles - might
help." Xander retrieved Doc's box from the living room and handed it to Giles, who gingerly opened it. They all leaned in for a closer look. A collection of scrolls were packed into the box, and Giles unrolled one carefully and studied it for a moment.

"This is...this is incredible, this is some sort of...prophecy or - or bible of Glorificus... Oh yes, this should tell us exactly when she will make her move - it may even tell us how to stop her!" Giles bent over the scrolls, muttering to himself, patting at his pockets and coming up with a pen but no paper. Oz handed him the notepad that was by the phone and they all watched in silence for a long moment as Giles slipped into 'Watcher' mode and began to scribble notes.

The water finally boiled and Spike made tea, shoving a cup at Giles and drinking his own in a few gulps, grumbling under his breath about having to drink Lipton tea-bag tea. Xander made coffee and Oz scrounged out frozen waffles, bacon, and bread, and by the time Willow and Tara joined them they had breakfast well under way.

"Giles!" Willow cried happily, and bounced over the older man. She hugged him, knocking his glasses a little askew and Giles rescued them, a bemused but pleased
expression on his face.

"Are you all right? How do you feel? I can't believe the doctors let you go - you must be all right if they let you go - oh, Giles, I'm so happy to see you!" Willow hugged him again and Tara gave her an odd look - moved over to where Oz was sitting at the counter and began to brush her hand down his arm, where glittery paint made a faded design down the long sleeve of his t-shirt.

"Sparkly spark, dancing in the dark..." she whispered, smiling.

"Thank you, Willow, yes - uh - I am happy to be here as well. I'm fine, really. That spell you did yesterday - helped very much." Giles set Willow back half a step and gathered up pen and notes again, a flimsy shield against emotion. Spike snorted softly, making a second cup of tea.

"Oh, I'm so glad! So - what's that? Did you find something? Is it about Glory?" Willow leaned on the island next to Giles, taking up a scroll and studying it, and Giles took it gently out of her hand.

"Yes, it's about Glory. Spike and Xander got it last
night. And as soon as I can get to the Magic Box and get - oh - Watson's 'Languages of the Nether Plains', and perhaps... Barlowe's 'Guide', we'll know much more about her." At the mention of Spike's name, Willow grimaced, glancing at him, and the vampire shot her a hard look.

"That's wonderful! And - I've been doing some research into - into the mind thing. I think - I think I found something that can bring T-tara back." They all looked at her in pleased surprise, and Oz smiled when Tara took the offered piece of bacon from him and began to slowly eat it.

"That's wonderful, Willow. I knew you could find a way." Giles smiled over at her and she smiled back - sent another look of distaste at Spike, who was spreading a large dollop of jelly on a piece of toast and cursing when some of it dripped on his hand. Xander caught the look - moved to distract her.

"Willow - we heard you went into Buffy's head last night - got her to...come back. What happened?"

"Yeah, please tell us what it's like in there, Red. Great echoing rooms full of not much, or is it more like a really
bad episode of 'Dark Shadows'?

*Spike*

"NO! It wasn't like that at all! It was like - it was - was none of your business, Spike! I'm not going to tell you anything about Buffy's -"  

"About my self-pity?" Buffy stood at the kitchen doorway, looking fragile and still tired, her eyes dark-circled.

"Buffy! There wasn't any self-pity -"

"Sure there was, Willow. 'Boo hoo, my life is hard'." Buffy mocked herself softly, and Spike snorted, making a clattering with his knife as he dropped it into the sink and rinsed the jelly off his hand.

"Figured as much," he muttered, and Xander grabbed his arm suddenly and pulled him bodily out of the kitchen, aware that Oz was coming after them, aware that Buffy had sat down across from Giles, smiling softly at the older man - aware that Tara was cringing away from the ill-will that was almost palpable between Willow and the vampire. He got Spike out into the living room and got
up right in his face, feeling an unexpected surge of anger.

"Spike, what the fuck! The last thing we need right now is - is -"

"What you're doing." Oz perched on the arm of the couch, looking at Spike with a small frown, and Spike bared his teeth in a strange sort of half snarl. There wasn't any threat to it; it seemed more like a nervous tic. *Protect*, in the link, insistent and frantic.

"I want us out of here," Spike said, his voice low and harsh and biting, and Xander flinched back just a little.

"We talked about this, Spike. We can't leave. We can't - abandon them. I thought you...agreed."

"Agreed to what? To letting you die? Letting the wolfling die? I won't, Xander, I won't -" Spike turned abruptly away from him and pushed his fist hard into the wall. Leaned his forehead against it and stood there, rigid and trembling and breathing in jerky pants and Xander shared a look of mingled fear and confusion with Oz. He moved slowly over to Spike.

"Love -" *Tell tell TELL* "Please talk to me, love, please
tell me what's wrong. You can try to hide things from me but I won't let you, Spike." Oz was on his feet now, moving slowly closer, and Xander reached out and put his hand on Spike's back - slid it around and tugged gently, turning him. Spike sighed hugely and let himself be moved - let Xander gather him close and hold him.

"Just tell me - tell us."

*Pack tell pack love you.*

"It's...love, I -" There was fear in the link, and Xander was confused - was almost afraid himself.

"When Glory - showed up...when Glinda-witch lost it... I could...feel something. Xander, I -" Spike finally let go - let his rigid and expert control over the link go, and Xander felt what he'd been hiding - what had strung his nerves so tight and made him lash out. Flashes, little flashes of darkness, of things, scuttling in the shadows, of despair and terror and the greedy, devouring want that had been Glory when she'd pushed her fingers - her powers - into his head. Disconnection - hopelessness - being lost, and knowing you'd never find your way back... Xander shivered and pulled Spike closer - felt Oz come up close and add his heat and strength to the
embrace.

"What is that? Is that what Tara -" Oz whispered, horror in his voice, and Spike clutched tight at them, shuddering.

"When she tried to take my mind - she left something, or she - she broke something - I don't know! But I feel - I'm afraid I'm gonna lose it around her - around Glinda. I can't - control it and I'm -"  

Scared, scared - gonna hurt somebody, won't hurt YOU, won't let it be you, pet...wolf...help me -  

Spike's fingers were like iron, digging into Xander's back - Oz's shoulder - and Xander ran his own hands up and down Spike's back, pressing and kneading and making him feel, making him know he was there, and not lost, and that they weren't letting go. Pushing everything he had into the link, forcing it open wide and feeling Oz do the same. Feeling the fierce protective urge of the hyena and the wolf both surge up and make them all huddle closer.

"Spike - you should have said - you don't have to do this stuff by yourself, Spike!"

Pack leader - keep you safe.  

Spike thought, and Oz made wolfish growl down in chest.
"Not by yourself, Spike, damnit." Oz gave Spike a little shake and the vampire pulled back from the both of them a little, demon's eyes, and frustration in the link.

"If I can't keep it together around her - or around Glinda for fuck's sake, how much help am I going to be? I can take anything she can throw at us but I can't - " Can't take that, can't stand that - That had a different sort of feel to it, and Xander closed his eyes and turned that over and over for a moment. It was - the human part of Spike, that was so profoundly afraid. The demon only wanted to kill Glory - kill anything that threatened its family - and it had no fear except the fear of not winning. But the human part... The human part remembered. Remembered the utter confusion and helplessness of the first weeks of the demon's possession. Remembered Drusilla, and how very badly her madness could take her, sometimes.

"You're not - you're not going crazy, Spike. You're not. It's just - an echo, like you said. You're just remembering. We'll talk to Giles -"

"NO." Spike pulled away for one moment and Oz yanked him closer - Xander did - keeping him right there.
"We need to talk about it, Spike! Whatever she did to Tara she did to you too. She didn't finish with you - she couldn't - but she tried. And if Willow can figure out something to - to get Tara back, then maybe we can use it on you. There's a fix and we'll find it and don't you dare try to tell me no!" Xander was aware of his voice rising and he hastily brought it under control but he really was angry. Angry that Spike had tried to hide this - had tried to keep it from them.

LOVE YOU, love you - don't you believe me? Trust me, love, please -

"Xan -" Always trust you! Spike hung his head for a moment, and then looked up at Xander - at Oz - his expression troubled. "I'm supposed to take care of you, love. Not supposed to fall apart 'cause some fuckin' hell-spawned bint took a poke at my head. A hundred years with Dru should'a made me...used to it, at least." Cascade of images, of Drusilla, who had powers that Spike did not have - who could charm a Slayer to her death and make Giles see the murdered woman he had loved, and Xander shivered. There was more than one way to force obedience. Darla had used her razor tongue and her cold hearted-ness, and Angelus his vicious rages
and mind games. But Dru had used silken threads of misdirection and fancy, confusion and forgetfulness, and even though Spike had loved her hopelessly he had resented her ability to make him act against his will - to make him forget his will altogether.

"You don't get used to being - coerced, Spike. You're not crazy. You kept it together fine when Glory grabbed Dawn - I mean, you were trying to tear her head off! We'll figure it out - we'll fix it. Promise, okay?"  *Promise love, promise - take care of you, love you...*

*Protect pack always.*  Spike looked at them both, gold-glimmering eyes finally fading to blue, and he nodded slowly.

"Just - keep an eye out on me, right? Just to - Xander, please."  Spike held up a hand, stopping Xander's immediate protest. "Just watch me, okay? I - have to know I can trust you to notice if I'm - not all there."  Xander rubbed his eyes - looked over at Oz who was looking serious and troubled.  Oz nodded, and Xander sighed.

"Okay. Yeah. We can do that. You just make sure you
stop trying to hide things, okay? That doesn't help. Okay? Don't shut us out."

"Promise." *Promise you...love you both.*

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

"Is everything - all right?" Giles stood in the kitchen doorway, the singed lacquered box under his arm, his notes in his hand.

"Yeah - it's all good, Giles. We just - well, we need to talk about something." Giles looked concerned - came over to where they stood, and regarded them.

"In all the excitement, I never got a chance to - to thank you all for helping me. For - getting me out of the caravan and - well, everything, really." Xander felt a quick, astonished wave of laughter through the link, and then nothing, and he hugged Spike a little tighter.

"No problem, Giles. Anytime you get speared by a knight on horseback - we're there for you." Xander couldn't help but grin at Giles look of exasperation, and then Spike did laugh aloud, suddenly and completely relaxing
under Xander's arm.

"Bet that hurt to say," Spike said, but he was smiling, and Giles shook his head ruefully.

"Well, it is something I never thought I'd be saying to a vampire - and certainly not William the Bloody. But that aside - I am grateful. I also need a lift to the Magic Box. My car is still there."

"Oh - hey, I've still got the loaner -" Oz motioned towards the street and the battered LTD Clem's cousin had found for them, and Giles nodded.

"We really should all go - there's a lot of work to be done with these scrolls, and I would feel safer there, where we have more weapons and more - resources."

"My - my mom's car is still here, Giles. We can all fit that way. Are you up to driving, or -?" Buffy and Willow had come out of the kitchen in time to hear, and Giles nodded gratefully.

"How about I drive one car and Oz takes the other? G-man probably shouldn't be doing that just yet," Xander said, and Giles sighed.
"As much as I hate to admit it, you're right, Xander. Driving would be very uncomfortable."

"Okay - so - let's get our stuff together." Xander looked around the room - looked up at the ceiling. "Maybe somebody should wake up Anya?"

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Spike paced the length of the training room for what seemed like the millionth time. All day, they'd been at the Magic Box. Researching. Fretting. Getting on each other's nerves. Wolfling had taken a break a few hours earlier and gone across town to see Derio. The slow welling of grief and fear and love in the link had driven Xander and Spike into a dark corner themselves, and they'd simply stood there, arms around each other and eyes closed, trying to find a little peace. All the waiting - was driving Spike crazy. Finally he gave up and took off his duster - squared up in front of the heavy bag and began to pummel it into submission. He could hear the conversation in the other room; Watcher going on about the scrolls they'd found, demon-girl trying to rally everyone, Xander and the wolf taking turns looking up
stuff and keeping Glinda occupied, and Red talking about a spell she was sure would bring her girl's mind back. Spike listened to Xander creep up on that topic - broach the problem with the Watcher and Red and deliberately tuned out when the conversation got heated.

*Don't care what he says, Red isn't happy to help at all... In fact, I think she'd like to see me out of the picture altogether, even knowing what she knows about the claim... Wonder what makes her so...angry? Can't be the whole kidnap thing still - that's ages ago...* Spike stopped punching for a minute, thinking about that, but it seemed like a dream, that time, and he couldn't imagine the witch still being that upset over it. *Got her wolf away from the soldier-boys, even if he's not hers anymore... Did our best to help Glinda-witch...* Spike did a spinning kick, sending the heavy bag flying back, the chain creaking ominously. *Don't care what she thinks. So long as she doesn’t make my boy upset, she can hate me all she likes.* Spike landed another series of rapid blows and spun around, tense, when the back door creaked open. Buffy stood there, staring at him.

"Slayer - out for a little stroll?"
"Yeah. Just trying to - clear my head. Staked a vamp back there -" she gestured towards the alley behind her and let the door slam shut. "Just like the old days - stupid fledge, screaming victim..."

"Huh. You'd think they'd know here, of all places, was off limits. Guess I need to teach a few more lessons to the locals."

"That how it works?" Buffy didn't seem to want an answer - she drifted over to the weights and touched them lightly - looked over at Spike.

"Usually... What's up, Slayer?"

"Oh, I -" Buffy stopped - looked down and brushed dust off her shirt, frowning. "I'm just wishing...things were that simple again." Spike laughed, shaking his head.

"Simple? When was this gig ever simple for you? You died, girl, and came back not a vamp - I'd say that should've been your first indication that things were never gonna be simple, here." Buffy had automatically scowled at him when he laughed, but by the time he was done her expression had lightened and she walked over to him, tossing the stake she carried down on the mats.
"You're right. It never has been simple. Not really. But I could really use some simple, you know?" Buffy planted her feet wide - put up her hands in a stance and Spike felt his eyes go wide for a moment, and then he was grinning - moving fluidly into position in front of her.

"You want simple, Slayer - you got it."

"Spike, why -" Buffy pushed her hands back through her hair, looking for one moment like she just might fly apart. "I'm just a person - just a girl. Trying to save my sister's life. Can you for once - just once - call me by my name?" Spike stared at her, momentarily coming out of his own stance. Saw her exhaustion, and her barely-leashed despair, and her fear. Saw it all crushing down on her like granite blocks. And for one moment, he wavered.

"No, Slayer," he said softly, and Buffy flinched. "That's what you are. However hard it is - it's you. Now isn't the time to forget that. Or to try and hide from it." They stared at each other for a long moment, and Spike saw with satisfaction that Buffy lifted her chin - gave him a look of pure, deadly intent. Then she launched herself at him, punch and kick and leap and turn, and Spike
laughed aloud. He hadn't fought anything - anyone - as strong or as fast as the Slayer in a good long while, and it felt wonderful to really stretch - to use all his agility and cunning, all his strength and speed.

They fought back and forth over the training room floor, neither giving an inch, forcing the other to push and push and push some more. After a good twenty minutes they were both sporting bruises - both blooded - and they'd drawn an audience. Xander and Oz stood in the doorway watching them, grinning like fools. In all that time, Spike had only pulled one move - Buffy had hit a slick spot on the board floor and wobbled, and Spike had come as close as a heartbeat to slicing his nails - and the next two inches of his fingers - straight into her throat. He'd managed to pull back at the last second, and then Buffy had launched herself again. He didn't know how long it would have gone on, but suddenly Anya was there with Giles - and the 'bot - and they both stopped in sheer surprise.

"Giles! What in the world -" Buffy stood there, panting, staring at the 'bot, and Spike wandered over to his duster for a smoke. Xander slipped further into the room, coming around to meet him, his eyes shining.
"You guys were great - that was really cool," he said, leaning on the horse, and *Fuckin' sexy, you know that? When you do that...* in the link, scattered images and a wave of pure need that made Spike take in a hard, sharp breath.

"Anya actually had a - a rather clever idea, Buffy. She went down to the basement to find the Dagon Sphere - you remember? And the 'bot was down there. I think she's really hit on something -" Buffy sent a grin over her shoulder at Spike and walked over to Giles, listening, wiping her hand back through her hair.

"So what's demon-girl thinking?"

"Oh - using the 'bot for bait. Willow spent some time while we were - while you were hurt taking out a lot of Warren's programming and putting in her own. And that Dagon Sphere may well drain Glory of a lot of her power. Plus, don't forget, the hammer of Olaf the Troll. That should dent her a little." Spike raised an eyebrow, impressed.

"Probably should - demon-girl's outdone herself."

"Oh, there's more," Oz said, getting a soda out of the
'fridge in the kitchenette. He held one up, an eyebrow cocked, and Spike nodded. Oz tossed him one - got another for himself. Xander shook his head no.

"Yeah - Giles found out a couple of things. He wanted us all to hear."

"Right, then." Spike opened the soda - some sort of off-brand, green can and greenish drink - and downed about half of it, grimacing. They all walked up to the front and settled around the table. Giles was looking through his notes, and when they sat down he cleared his throat and stood, looking very much the librarian.

*Loves to lecture, don't he?*

*Hush and listen or you'll get in trouble.* Spike leered over at Xander and made an exaggerated 'ow' face when Xander kicked at him under the table. Giles cleared his throat.

"If we're all focusing, then? Right. Looking through the scrolls, I've pinpointed the exact time that Glory has to open the portal in order to return home. She must do the - the ritual at the precise moment that Pluto -"
"Giles - please, just - go with the basics, okay?" Buffy asked, and Giles blinked - took his glasses off and swiped at them, and then settled them back on his face.

"Yes, yes of course. At five-forty a.m. - this morning - is when she must open the portal."

"Fuck. That's dawn," Spike said, thinking furiously, and Giles nodded.

"Yes, it is, so you particularly, Spike, are going to have to keep an eye on the sun and - and have some sort of backup plan. Now. The ritual itself entails...well... The ritual is -"

"It's fatal, isn't it. Fatal to Dawn."

Buffy's voice was far away - cold - and everyone looked at her for a long moment. Spike couldn't detect fear in her scent - could read almost nothing but the clean sweat smell from their sparring, and her soap and shampoo.

Hope she's not fadin' out again... The Watcher shuffled his notes - finally leaned his hands on the table, his head hanging down between his shoulders.

"Yes, Buffy - the ritual is fatal. It says 'The blood flows -"
the gates will open. The gates close when it flows no more.' Essentially, the ritual is over when Dawn...dies."

"Fuck," softly from the wolf, and beside him Xander tiredly rubbed his eyes.

"Why does it always have to be blood?" he murmured, and Spike reached out and took his hand and held it tightly in his own.

"It's always blood, love. It's why we need it... It - makes you warm. Makes you hard. Makes you other than dead." *The blood is the life is the magic, pet. Always.* "Of course it's her blood."

"Okay, so - all we have to do is just - just keep Glory from doing the ritual, right?" Buffy sent a pleading look at Giles. "We keep her from getting any - any blood, and then - it's over and -"

"There is - another way of interpreting that passage," Giles said softly, and Buffy stopped, staring at him.

"Don't, Giles." The Watcher looked up at her, his hands in fists, now, on the table, and his eyes had a hard, desperate light in them. Xander's hand clenched down
tight in Spike's.

"I - Buffy, I must. 'It flows no more' also means -"

"Giles, we are not talking about this!"

"Yes we bloody well are!" They all jumped in startlement as Giles' voice was raised in a shout - as he pushed away from the table and thumped it, once, with a closed fist. Darkman shivered through the link. Something in the air around the Watcher - nearly invisible wisps of power, and Spike fought the demon's automatic snarl. "If she starts the ritual - if we're too late - we must -"

"Don't tell me to kill my sister, Giles." Buffy's voice was like ice, and Giles flinched from that, but his mouth was set, and he walked around the table - stood there next to Buffy and looked at her, forcing her to meet his eyes.

Watcher's got the right of it. Fuck.

NO! No way can we - we can't do that, Spike.

"It may be the only way, Buffy."
"NO. I will not kill Dawn, Giles. But I will kill anyone who tries to hurt her. The monks made her from me, Giles - I can feel it, when I hold her...she's part of me, and I won't - I can't let anything happen to her."

"Buffy - if Glory begins the ritual we will all die. Even Dawn."

"I know, Giles. But the last thing she'll see is me protecting her. Not - not killing her. I mean it, Giles. Don't - don't make me have to stop you."  Giles' shoulders slumped, and he nodded finally, and walked back to his place at the table.

"The only other thing we know is that Glory was put into a human - an infant boy - in an attempt to contain her. Obviously, that isn't working anymore -"

"But she was Ben...at least for a little while. Giles, what happens to Glory if Ben - dies?"  Xander's fingers were like steel bands around Spike's as he asked his question, and the vampire felt the tremors running through Xander.

Love - what...?
"If the vessel dies, then - then Glory...dies as well." Giles looked hard at Xander, his eyebrows drawn down in speculation. "Xander, what are you -"

"If we kill Ben, it's over. That's - that would work, right, Giles?" Oh fuck. I just - said we should kill a man... Xander shivered all over, and Spike edged closer to him, shoulder to shoulder.

"But Ben's human, Xander. And he - he was so nice to - to all of us. We can't kill him." Willow stroked Tara's arm as she spoke, and Tara twisted fretfully away from her.

"I have places to be! Places to be..." She subsided, shivering, and Spike took a deep breath.

"What's the chances of takin' Ben out then, Watcher?"

"Spike! We don't kill humans!" Spike shot Buffy a look, that made her take a step back

"You don't, but I do. And I'd take him out in a heartbeat, Slayer."

"It's the logical thing to do," Anya said from her perch on the staircase. Oz was nodding slowly, but he looked...
Can't let them think about this. THEY can't do it - but I bloody well can.

"But he's innocent! He - he didn't choose to have Glory put inside him -" Spike bent that same look on Willow and she quailed - groped for Tara's hand.

"Who's more innocent, eh Red? Ben or Dawn? If savin' the world - savin' the Bit - means takin' him out, I'll do it. Wouldn't hesitate for a second." Willow's look was fierce and hateful, and Spike grinned at her, fangs showing. "You think I'd stop at takin' out a thousand humans - let alone one - to keep my family safe? Think again."

"I really don't believe that - that Ben will be allowed to surface again, this close to the ritual. I'm sure that this is all academic." Giles rubbed his forehead and looked at his watch. "We have - six hours. I suggest in that time that we - try to rest, try to eat. Prepare ourselves. Willow, there are a few things I want to go over with you about that spell you're going to use for - for Tara." Willow nodded and got up, shooting a last angry look at Spike. She moved with Giles over to the display counter. The 'bot was behind the counter,
standing in something that looked like parade rest, and Giles looked at it distastefully before bending over a sheaf of papers with Willow. Anya came slowly down the stairs and stopped next to Oz.

"Anybody hungry? Is that - is that a proper response to all this - terror?" Anya was white, and Oz stood up and put his arm around her, hugging her gently.

"It's as 'proper' a response as any other, Anya. You wanna go see if Giles has anything in the back?" Anya nodded, hugging Oz back, and they walked away, *love you* like a whisper in the air. Xander watched them go - leaned hard into Spike and put his head down on Spike's shoulder.

"I don't think I can just kill somebody - just, in cold blood like that...somebody that I know..." he murmured. Spike shifted and got his arm around Xander's shoulders - curved his other hand up and around and began to slowly stroke Xander's hair, slipping his fingers through and through the rough silk of it.

"You don't have to, love. I'll do it, no worries. I won't - "  *Won't let you do that, love. Won't. You OR the wolf - you won't go near him.*
"Does that make me a coward, Spike?" Xander whispered, and Spike hugged him hard.

"No love - makes you you. White Knight, always and forever."

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Spike spun on one foot - lashed out with a clawed hand and his straight-razor, and an acolyte went down, gagging on its own blood. Something plowed into his back and he shook it off and turned - punched the snarling fledge so hard its forehead dented in. Glory had recruited a lot of demons for her final hurrah, and the space around the jury-rigged tower where the ritual was to take place boiled with whirling, flailing bodies. Oz was in the thick of it with Spike, half wolf, drenched in gore. Xander was taking out the crazies - all the people Glory had mind-sucked over the months she'd been in Sunnydale. He was coshing them on the head, one after another, trying for unconscious instead of dead. There was a faint hope that they'd return to normal once Glory was out of the picture. The 'bot and Buffy were prowling together, trying to find Glory in the mess. Willow and
Tara were with them, waiting to use the witch's spell.

"You stay close to them, Spike. If Willow can touch them - she can get Tara back. If you're there - maybe you can...get in on it, you know? Or Willow can do it twice - " Xander had been so anxious - so earnest - but Spike knew Willow wouldn't do the spell for him. He had decided that he wouldn't worry about it. If she got Glinda back, and they killed Glory, he was pretty sure everything would go back to normal. Or close enough as made no difference. If neither of those things happened...it wouldn't matter. So Spike lost himself in the fight - in the dance - and barely noticed when a flash of light, sparking between Willow, Tara, and Glory signaled the spell going into effect. Then the Slayer and the 'bot were on Glory, beating her back, making her bleed, and Spike gave a roar of triumph.

*That took somethin' outta the bitch!*

*Go Wills! Fuck - there's so M ANY.* Xander knocked another crazy to the ground - ducked a pouncing fledge and brought his stake down into its back. He grinned over at Spike through a momentary window of calm and then darted away, back to his task. The Watcher and Anya were up on top of a pile of construction materials
with crossbows, sending bolt after bolt into the massed ranks at the foot of the tower stairs. Spike leaped on the back of an acolyte - slit its throat and scrambled forward, gaining the stairs and heaving bodies over the side. He lost the straight-razor in the thick folds of skin on a Nyrn and resorted to simply shredding whatever flesh he encountered. A few crazies fell to his methodical attack, but he ignored them. Finally, he was free - moving - going up, heading to the top of the tower and the Bit. He could see her vaguely, a shape against the dark navy of the pre-dawn sky. He had caught her voice once or twice, screaming for Buffy. Now he ran, bounding up tilting stairs and hastily rigged ramps, skidding on warped boards and almost tripping over a chain-fall that was lying across the path.

_Pet - almost to the top - almost have her!_ Spike glanced behind him once - saw the 'bot flying apart, smashed, and Glory running towards the tower, Buffy hard on her heels.

_Fuck - bitch knows it's almost time..._ An inarticulate surge of bloodlust through the link and Spike knew Oz was launching himself at Glory - felt the werewolf's teeth meet in divine flesh and actually do damage. And then pain as Glory kicked him away.
Wolf!

All right! She's coming! Spike redoubled his efforts - gained the top and stopped short. Dawn was there, tied at the end of a platform like a pier, jutting out into nothingness. And standing before her - standing much, much too close -.

"Should'a stayed dead, mate," Spike snarled, advancing on Doc. Doc turned from Dawn and there was a knife in his hand, streaked red. Blood! Oh FUCK there's blood, he cut her - Spike roared, and leapt, crashing into Doc, ignoring the knife driving into him, ignoring Dawn's shriek of terror. They fell to the metal grating of the platform, and Spike dug his knees into Doc's stomach.

"You're on the wrong side, vampire!" Doc wheezed, writhing like a snake, and Spike dug his fingers into muscle and bone - ripped - and Doc's collarbones came out through his skin. Spike dug in again, crack of bone, wrenching Doc's ribcage open. The old demon's face was an agonized mask, and Spike reached into his chest and tore out his heart in a gout of blood.

"Stay dead this time, fucker," he growled, and hurled the
heart away from him. Doc's body convulsed in its death-throes, and Spike staggered to his feet and kicked it away, over the edge. He didn't even bother to watch it fall. He stumbled along the platform to Dawn, ignoring the burn of his own wounds. Dawn was hanging from twists of steel cable, crying, bleeding, dressed in a ridiculous gown of velvet and gold tissue. Spike scrubbed his hands on his thighs in an effort to get some of Doc's blood off them and then he attacked the cables, twisting and yanking until the strands frayed and parted and finally fell away.

Dawn collapsed on him, grabbing tight, and he hissed in pain and made his way to the back of the platform, away from the edge.

_Got her - got the Bit - she's safe!_

_Glory's down - Buffy's on her way up to you - Oh, god, Giles - _Xander cut himself off and Spike looked over the edge, searching vainly. He couldn't see anything - anyone - and he slowly sank down to his knees, cradling Dawn close.

"Shhh, poppet, shhhhh, I've got you - I've got you. You're safe, Bit, you're safe, and big sis is on her way, and the_
hell bitch is gone, little one, she's gone and it's all over...shhhh..." Spike rocked the hysterical girl, smoothing her hair over and over. He could still feel Xander - shock rapidly subsiding, exhaustion taking over. Nothing coherent from the wolf - he was taking out the last of Glory's recruits, who seemed to be doing their best to flee now that their leader was gone. He could hear, faintly, the ring of metal underfoot as Buffy *please let that be the Slayer!* raced upwards towards him. He lifted one hand to wipe his face and saw the blood - smelled it - and knew it was Dawn's.

*Still bleeding - damn - don't have any bandages, need to - get her down*... He pulled Dawn closer, steeling himself to rise. Doc had gotten in a number of hits - four or five, he couldn't tell. Deep punctures that went through his vitals and seemed to have severed - something. He felt weak, and cursed silently. *Damn it - Xan, love - need help up here*...

*Coming* - from Xander, and something from Oz - acknowledgement and agreement. He flinched when Buffy's hand came down on his shoulder.

"Dawn! Oh - Dawn -" Buffy fell to her knees beside them and Dawn flung herself on her sister, hiccupping
sobs and babbling something, her hand pressed tight to her belly. Blood seeped through her fingers, and Spike reached out and touched Buffy's shoulder.

"Slayer - we gotta get her down. She's still - " Spike stopped talking, his eye caught by something, and Buffy turned her head, following his gaze. Light, out beyond the edge of the platform. Light that was moving - seething - and Spike felt a clutch of unaccustomed fear as he realized what it was.

"Oh fuck. That's the portal, Slayer - we've got to move - now! Got to get her fixed up - stop the -the blood..." Spike lurched to his feet, swaying, and Buffy rose also, pulling Dawn up with her.

"Doc - demon - he got up here - we have to go, Slayer!" Spike patted at himself helplessly, cursing. He'd left his duster behind, with its many pockets and useful detritus, and now he didn't even have a rag he could use to bandage Dawn. His own shirt was a total loss, shredded in the fighting, wet with gore, and he stared at Buffy as she smoothed back Dawn's hair - wiped the tears off her sister's cheeks with shaking, bloodied hands.

"I - I know what to do, Spike. Dawn - listen to me -"
"Buffy leaned close, whispering, and Spike caught some of what she was saying, even though there was a peculiar roaring in his ears. He was feeling a bit - cold - and he hugged himself, wincing, willing Xander and Oz to get up to the top.

*Spike - you all right?* Xander, somewhere below, running up towards him, and Spike could feel the frantic pound of his heart - the pain in his legs and side as he pushed himself faster. Prickles of pain over his body, where he'd been hurt. The same for Oz, who was bounding upwards a minute below Xander, growling, still mostly the wolf.

*All right. Tired. The portal's...*

"Buffy - no!" Spike's head jerked up at Dawn's cry of agonized denial, and he saw her hanging onto Buffy's arms, crying again or still crying, still bleeding.

"Dawn - the hardest thing in this world is to live in it. Be brave, Dawnie. Live." Buffy was crying too, but smiling, and Spike just looked at her - looked over at the portal which had stretched wider, lightning arcing out from it and slamming to the ground somewhere. Something - winged - soared out and darted away, and Spike took a staggering step towards the girls.
"Slayer - we've got to go -"

"Spike - listen to me. You'll take care of Dawn still, right? You'll protect her no matter what?" Spike squinted at Buffy - realized with a sudden twist of fear that the light from the portal was there but that the light there, on Buffy's face was the sun, glowing through the haze of early-morning clouds. Coming up, and he had no shelter in sight.

Fucking idiot.

"Spike! You'll keep her safe - promise me you'll keep her safe!" Buffy had grabbed his shoulder - was shaking him - and Spike reached out and took her arm.

"Yeah, I'll - I'll do it, Slayer. I'll keep her safe as houses." Buffy's face twisted in anguish - cleared as she lifted her gory hand from Dawn's belly - shoved it in Spike's face suddenly, smearing the blood over his lips. Spike licked them automatically, not even thinking about it. And gasped as Dawn's blood shot through him like acid and fire - like arsenic sugar. He recoiled, shocked, and Buffy grabbed his shoulder again, painfully hard.
"She's part of you now, Spike - right? Part of - of your family, your pack." Buffy's voice was so calm - so serene - and Spike could only nod at her, dazed. Dawn's blood worked through him, and he felt a surge of energy, strong as life. It made him dizzy - made his vision go black at the edges.

"You'll take care of her," Buffy insisted, and Spike reached out and gently pushed back a strand of Buffy's hair - caressed her cheek for one moment with his thumb.

"'Til the end of the world, Buffy. I promise you." Tears shimmered in Buffy's eyes for a moment, and then she blinked and turned to Dawn - kissed her and smiled into her eyes.

"Live for me, Dawn. I will always love you." Dawn clutched at her sister, her lips whispering no, no, no, over and over. Dimly, Spike could hear Xander and the wolf somewhere just below - nearly there. He could feel the sun coming stronger through the clouds, a prickle of fire over his skin. He watched, with a peculiar sensation of something tearing right through him, as Buffy turned and ran and leaped, falling into the portal with the light of
the sun gilding her hair - the light of the portal haloing her in white-blue sparks.

"An angel, falling like a star from heaven... Don't be sorry for that angel..." Dru's words came back to him, as Buffy fell - echoed in his head and he knew Xander and Oz heard the echo - knew they saw, finally, and their agonized denial pounded through him. He lifted his face to the sky and roared - dirge of rage and pain, for his family, for Dawn - for his dearest enemy.

He felt his legs give out, and he fell painfully to the grating underfoot. Dawn collapsed beside him, and he gathered her in close, shaking, barely noticing Xander and Oz arriving at the platform's edge. A blanket was thrown around him, muffling him from the sun, from the last scattering of silvery sparks as the portal winked out of existence. And Buffy kept falling.

Spike made sure Dawn didn't see - made sure Xander and Oz focused on him for that one moment by trying to stand and having them both grab at him - help him up. Xander's face was wet with tears, streaked with blood. Oz was shivering from the pain of his own wounds and abruptly went to the wolf, lifting his muzzle and letting out loss and grief in a low, moaning howl. In
the utter silence of the moment - of the dawn - he heard her body hit, somewhere below. He pulled Dawn in closer - lifted his eyes to Xander's.

*Oh my love, my own...*

"C'mon, Bit - let's go home, all right? Let's go home."

"Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars and say: 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.' Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot, but he'll remember..."

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers... For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother..."

*Shakespeare - Henry V, Act IV, Scene III*

The End

Changes

Book 2 – Hold fast

1 Grave
Xander wished that he couldn't remember everything that had happened. Some stuff stood out, and other stuff was vague, but he remembered, flashes and snapshots that hurt too much to examine closely.

Getting down off the tower - a nightmare. Spike was barely able to walk. Soaked in Doc's black ichor and his own blood, slipping and staggering and wincing from constant, accidental touches of the rising sun on his skin. Oz stayed in his wolf form and the scent of death was almost overpowering to his senses. Dawn was nearly catatonic and Xander half-carried her down to the ground, her tearing grief like acid in the link, and Spike too weary to even explain.

Off the tower, finally, and Xander's legs ached - his back ached, and he stung all over from numerous glancing blows; from splintered wood and flying chips of concrete. Oz trotted away, nose to the ground, and Spike huddled down into the deep shadow of a pile of bricks and lumber, gathering Dawn close and closing his eyes.

Anyā. Help, from Oz, and Xander found Oz standing over the ex-demon who was half-buried in rubble, bleeding from a dozen tiny cuts, unconscious. And Oz changed,
human and naked and bloody, ruthlessly and silently stripping down a dead body and pulling on jeans and a t-shirt three sizes too big, wrenching the belt tight around his waist. They dug Anya out and carried her to Spike - went out again, searching for the rest.

Tara found them, clambering awkwardly over a haphazard mound of bricks and sheet-iron, her cast half torn off her arm, dust and blood on her face. She beckoned frantically and they went to her - followed her over and around and there was Willow, sobbing, and there was Buffy... Xander had to take a moment to force his rising gorge back down - to take a hard, hard breath. And then he went to Willow and urged her up - got her to stand and handed her off to Tara, and she and Oz led her gently away.

Xander just looked at...her. At the body. Small, and broken, and nothing, nothing like his friend. Nothing like the blonde whirlwind that had changed his life so dramatically and so completely. Just a shell covered in brick-dust and blood, looking awkward and misshapen; one shoe off, mouth a little open, an obviously broken arm crooked along her side. He gradually became aware of Giles, kneeling to one side and silently weeping. Blood on his cheek and down the sleeve of his jacket. His
glasses half-crushed in one hand, his eyes riveted on his Slayer. Xander slowly walked over to him and coaxed him to his feet - held him as he swayed and nearly collapsed. When Xander tried to tug him away, Giles' hand had closed down with bruising force on his shoulder.

"I won't leave her. I'm not leaving her," choked out in a tear-raspy voice.

So Xander stood there, bracing the swaying figure, desperately glad to see Oz's van inch carefully around a corner. Spike inside, and Dawn, and Xander and Giles carefully wrapped Buffy in a blanket and lifted her inside. Giles climbed in after and settled at her feet. Tara and Willow were waiting at his truck, crouched in the back with Anya between them, also blanket wrapped. Xander wanted to scream.

The drive to the Summers' house was...surreal. Pink and lemon-gilded clouds, early-morning traffic, school-buses. Xander drove on automatic and stopped with a jolt of surprise behind Oz, staring at the familiar house and not even knowing, for a panicked moment, what the hell he was doing.
Then Tara and Willow were standing up, and Anya was awake and they were helping her, and Oz was walking around the back of his van, shoulders slumped and his hair matted to his head. He opened the van doors and after a moment Spike came crawling out. Xander went - in slow-motion, it seemed - to help him. Dawn like a zombie under the blanket with him, in that fucking dress and Xander wanted to rip it to shreds. Giles climbed out stiffly, showing every single year he'd lived on his face, and stood vacant-eyed as Oz and Xander slid the blanket-wrapped body out of the van and got it inside. Xander didn't even spare a thought for what the neighbors would think if they saw. They lay Buffy gently down in the dining room, stretched over four chairs. The others huddled in the living room; Willow, Dawn and Spike on the couch, Giles in an upright chair near the door. Anya hovered by the stairs, looking dazed, and Tara slipped upstairs. Xander and Oz both just flopped down on the floor, too tired - too hurt - to do much else.

The link was like an endless knife-stroke going over and over the same raw flesh, and Xander couldn't understand how it was Dawn until Spike finally showed them what had happened up on the tower - relived the fiery absorption of Dawn's blood and the three of them just stared at each other, utterly at a loss.
Tara came back with some left-over sleeping pills of Joyce's and coaxed Willow and Dawn into taking one each. Willow's face was red and wet, her mouth in a rictus of a sob that simply would not end. Anya shook her head at Tara when she offered a pill and went away upstairs herself, and after a moment they heard the shower starting up. The two girls collapsed finally on the tangled pile of blankets that hadn't been moved from the living room floor and the acid-sharp sense of loss went out with Dawn.

Need to clean you up, Xander thought, looking at Spike and the smears of blood on the blanket he'd been using, and Spike nodded wearily and pushed himself to his feet. The link flared and burned, and Xander realized Spike was just too tired to control it.

"There's a f-first aid ki-kit under the stairs. I'll g-get it," Tara said softly. Xander glanced distractedly at her, letting Spike lean on him a bit. Giles watched them shuffle away and got up from his chair - followed after, looking lost. The five of them went slowly into the kitchen and Spike got up on the counter by the sink, stripping off the rags of his shirt. Xander wet a dishtowel under the faucet and cleaned blood and ichor off Spike's
body and then bandaged the deep wounds in his sides and back. Then he went rapidly outside to throw up in the bushes, the combined assault of what was in front of him and what Spike couldn't keep out of the link too much. He came back in and rinsed his mouth - leaned next to Spike, who reached up and stroked his hair, knee nudging into Xander's ribs.

*Doing all right, love?*

*I'm all right. I'm fine. Oz?* The werewolf was hunched in the corner between door and refrigerator, and he looked pleadingly over at Xander and Spike, showing them *forest*, flooding them with his need for a stretch of silence and separateness to let everything...settle.

*Whatever you need, wolf - we'll be here. Love you.*

*Pack. Love you both.* Oz wiped his hand over his eyes and opened the door - changed and was gone, streak of russet fur and anguish fading into the morning. Spike just sat and looked at Xander, red-rimmed eyes and haggard face.

*Love you love you, Xander...should go home, take the Bit and...*
"What next?" Xander asked, thinking of when Joyce had died - all the details and phone calls that he simply didn't think he could face right then. That any of them could face. Tara sighed, picking at the remains of her cast and Xander blinked at her - went over and hugged her hard, guilt washing over him.

"I'm sorry. You're back and nobody's said anything - are you okay?" he whispered into her hair.

"Fine. I'm f-fine," she whispered back, and wiped her eyes and smiled at him, shaky smile and dirty face, and Xander hugged her one more time. He reached down and split the last bit of plaster holding the cast on and Tara eased it gratefully off her arm. Anya came in then; clean, pale, t-shirt and sweats, band-aids and gauze patches stuck all over her. She stared at all of them for a moment and then got a pot of coffee going - got water boiling on the stove. Xander just watched her, his mind a comforting blank for the moment. Anya turned from the coffee pot, frowning.

"You're acting like zombies. You have to wake up! We
have to - to bury her. We have to get started on all the - the things! Like when Joyce died, there's so many things to do and you're all just sitting here!"

"Anya -" Tara started, but Giles interrupted, his voice so calm and quiet it was nearly inaudible.

"We can't call anyone. If word gets out - if the demon population knows the Slayer is dead... The Hellmouth is - is too vulnerable. We have to - we have to pretend that Bu- that she is still alive." Dead silence, and then Spike was climbing stiffly down from the counter and crossing to the kitchen island to stand next to Giles.

"He's right. What are you thinking, Watcher?" They all saw the flinch when Spike said that word, and Giles drew a deep breath and looked at the glasses he still held in his hand, as if surprised he'd kept hold of them.

"We need the 'bot. And - somewhere to...bury her...that's private. Safe from - prying eyes." Another silence, while Xander's brain ratcheted up a notch to something like thinking, and Tara hesitantly spoke up.

"There's a place - Breaker's Woods? W-willow and I have gone uh-up there. It's like a little ss-secret spot..." Tara
looked anxiously at Giles and he nodded, rubbing his forehead.

"Yes, that would do very - very nicely."

"Do you think the 'bot can really - pull it off?" Xander asked quietly, stepping up next to Spike and Giles sat up a little straighter and put his ruined glasses on the counter.

"She - it - will have to. Willow has been programming it with - a number of - things..." Giles seemed to run out of energy and slumped again, and Tara went quietly over to the stove, getting the pot of boiling water and shakily making three cups of tea. Anya poured coffee into a mug and offered it to Xander, who shook his head. He was pretty sure if he put anything into his stomach right then he'd be sick again.

"We'll n-need a c-c-coffin," Tara said softly, putting a cup in front of Giles and one in front of Spike, and Spike touched her hand with his, holding it for a moment, and she smiled at him.

"I can...do that. Let me do that, okay?" Xander said, and Giles nodded distractedly.
You sure, love?

Yeah. I am. I can.

"Giles? Please - I-let us do this and y-you go lay d-down, all right? Just - for a l-little while." Tara held her hand out, one of Joyce's sleeping pills in her palm, and Giles looked at it for a long, long moment before taking it and putting it into his mouth. He drank a mouthful of tea, grimacing, and then looked up at them.

"I'm - I'm so sorry I - I'm not -"

"It's all right, Giles. We can do this. We'll need you to be...when we..." Xander didn't know how to say 'We'll need you to be strong for when we put your Slayer into the ground,' but that's what he meant, and Giles seemed to understand it. Spike did too, and his hand squeezed briefly on Xander's wrist.

"Yes. Yes of course. I'll just..." He stood up, wobbling, and Spike - Spike put out his hand - took the other man's arm and steadied him.

"C'mon, mate," his voice so utterly weary, and Xander
could feel Spike's exhaustion in the link - blood loss and the burns and coping with Dawn all having taken their toll.

_Gotta lay down love - gotta sleep._

_It's all right. I'll - Manny can help me. We can trust him. You rest, love..._ Spike leaned over and gave him a soft kiss, taste of blood and ashes in his mouth, and then he gently guided Giles into the living room and got him settled on the couch - curled up next to Dawn and out, like flipping a switch.

"What - what can I do? Is there something I can do? I feel all - nervous. Like I might break something or - throw up." Anya was turning her cup of coffee around and around in her hands, and Xander put his own hands gently on hers, stilling the cup.

"I'm going to make a coffin, Anya. I'll be back in a couple of hours. You can -" Xander didn't know exactly what Anya could do, and sighed with relief as Tara moved to her side.

"I helped m-my Gran lay out...some of th-the family. I know what to d-do. I need you to f-find something clean
for B-buffy to wear, Anya, and some towels and soap so we can make her re-ready. Okay?"

Anya sniffed - wiped at her nose with a crumpled napkin. "Yeah. I can do that. I'll - go do that." She nodded to herself - squeezed Xander's hand and marched away. Xander put the cup into the sink and then stood there, clutching the sink edge.

"You'll really be - okay, doing that?" he asked Tara.

"Oh - yes. We'll get her cle-cleaned up and make her ppretty for D-dawn. We can lay her ow-out in the dining room if you'll h-help me move the ta-table over."

"Okay. We'll do that before I go... God, Tara...she's really...she's really dead." Xander's voice cracked, and he heaved in one hard breath and then another, his knuckles going white, and Tara put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed tightly.

"I know. I know, Xander. But we h-have to do this. We have to pre-pretend and we have to be ss-strong for Dawn. It's going to b-be all right. It is." Xander looked over at her, at blue eyes filmed with tears and he nodded, pushing back the welling grief that was ready to
swamp him - put him flat on his face.

"Okay. Okay. Let's - go do...what we gotta do." Tara smiled, just a little, and they went into the dining room.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Driving back through early-morning Sunnydale to the tower, the bright, busy streets were like a mockery and Xander hadn't realized until he'd caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror that he looked like a victim of...something. Dirty, bloody, and haggard, he stared at himself for a split second and then looked away, hoping that no police would stop him. He got to the tower, cringing inwardly, and gathered up the 'bot; three heavy pieces of machinery that thankfully looked nothing like Buffy at all. He saw shadows scurrying in the tail of his vision. Scavengers, coming out to pillage the dead - or worse - and some of the crazies stirring. He didn't know if they were better or not, but he dumped the 'bot into the back of his truck and used a payphone to call the police. He told them that people were milling around a dangerously unstable site and some looked like they were hurt and no, he'd rather not leave his name. Then he drove to Manny's house.
The restored Victorian sat at the end of a long, tree-lined drive on the outskirts of Sunnydale, and Xander just sat for a moment when he pulled up to the door, looking at the peaceful slope of lawn and the house that was painted in shades of blue and green and gold. There were several cars parked along the drive - the whole family over for Saturday breakfast. He hated to do this - hated to drag Manny and his family into this. But Manny had tools, and a workshop, and lumber - he could build a coffin here, and know that it would be kept secret. Finally he got out, and went up to the door. Manny's wife answered, a plump and smiling woman whose dancing black eyes went immediately wide and troubled when she saw him.

"Xander! Credo! What has happened?"

"Oh - Rosalina...it's..." Xander couldn't say it - didn't know what to say, and Rosalina drew him inside, towards the kitchen. He could hear laughter - voices - and he clenched his teeth, hating it more by the minute. When he and Rosalina came through the doorway there was - something. A rapid flutter of light and color that made Xander blink for a moment. The palely green, blue, yellow and salmon dapples and stripes that marked over
half the family shifted rapidly away, leaving them all in the camouflage of ordinary skin. Like cuttlefish, that's what Manny said... Xander though inanely, and took a hard breath, trying to calm himself. Manny put a small granddaughter down and rose from his seat - came over to Xander and put his hand gently on Xander's shoulder.

"Filho. Come with me." They went through the silence to the back of the house - to the back porch, where the lawn ended abruptly with rocks and the sea, and gulls screamed and chattered, diving along the cliff-face.

"Manny, it's - I'm sorry, but I don't have any other - any other options, I just -" Xander gulped for breath - fought a sob down, his throat so tight he could barely speak. He was hazily aware that Rosalina was in the doorway behind them, silent. Manny just stood there, thin and gnarled as a piece of driftwood, dark as old planking. His shock of snow-white hair lifted and flattened with the breeze and Xander pressed his hands hard into his eyes. Fixed his gaze on the blue Spike blue sea, and told Manny quietly, quickly, what had happened - why he had come. Manny listened in silence, and when Xander finally stopped he put his arm around Xander's shoulders and hugged him for a moment.
"Filho da puta... That's bad, Xander. Of course, we can make what you need. You come with me. Everyone else is - all right? Your family?"

"We're - as good as we're gonna get, Manny. Thanks for this."

"Of course, filho. Of course. I'm glad you came to me." They went across the lawn a little way to Manny's workshop, and he hauled out planks of creamy-gold pine and dark red cedar, and they began. The sharp, clean scent of the cut wood, the soft fur of sawdust and the gradual warming of strained muscles lulled Xander a bit, muffling the sharp edges of memory so that for a little while he was only his hands, his back, his eyes, turning possibility into solid reality. Manny had a box full of wooden pegs and they fitted the coffin together with that. He found a paper bag of old horse-shoe nails and put them in Xander's hand, and Xander looked at them blankly for a moment and then tucked them into this jeans-pocket, nodding.

For closing the coffin. God...Spike? But Spike was too deeply asleep to hear him, and Xander went back to work sanding the lid, smoothing the rough spots and rubbing out the hard edges, watching Manny's hands do
the same. Thin, big-knuckled hands with the words 'Hold Fast' tattooed across them - legacy of Manny's days at sea, years ago. Xander watched those hands move gently over the wood - hold fast, hold fast echoing in his mind, and there were dark spots on the coffin lid. Xander finally gave in and laid his head down and cried, the muffling drape of routine utterly stripped away by that little bag of iron spikes.

The coffin was the color of milky honey, lined with fragrant cedar and smooth as glass and Xander wasn't sure he ever wanted to touch another woodworking tool in his life. He and Manny wrapped it in an old quilt that Rosalina brought, and loaded it into his truck. The whole family stood on the porch, a silent show of support, and Xander just stood for a moment looking at them. Then he nodded, and hugged Rosalina, and climbed into the driver seat. Manny leaned in the truck window, his eyes grave.

"We won't talk about this, filho. And if any rumors come our way, we'll be sure to squash them. Take all the time you need, eh? Don't worry about work." Xander nodded, and scrubbed his hands back through his hair, his mind still numb and working at half-speed.
"I think - I'll need to talk to you, in a couple of days. I'll...I'll be around." Manny patted his shoulder and stepped back, and Xander started the truck - backed and turned and gave a small wave, and then he was heading back to the Summers house and starting to think vaguely about a shower and clean not bloody clothes. It was just noon.

*S**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Spike woke already in motion, drawing frantically away from the knife that was slashing towards him. He backed up and was abruptly halted by the couch-arm connecting solidly with his spine and he looked around wildly, trying to find his attacker. After a moment he remembered where he was and slowly relaxed. The bandages on his torso pulled, and he looked down at them for a moment.

*Dreaming. But that wasn't my dream.* He eased forward and stroked the curtain of hair out of Dawn's face - rubbed her shoulder, whispered to her - and her fretful motions gradually calmed and she sighed into heavier slumber.

*Fuck. That's not good. What the hell gave you THAT*
idea, Slayer? Spike could just see the edge of the blanket Buffy was wrapped in, and he got up slowly and went towards it. Coming into the dining room he saw Tara on her knees, and Buffy laid out on the floor on what looked like every last sheet the Summers' house possessed. Tara had a pot of water, and a pile of towels, and was carefully washing the filth out of Buffy's hair. The front of Tara's shirt was splashed with pinkish water, and there were smears of brick-dust and dirt on her face. She looked utterly exhausted and glanced up as Spike came in, her eyes swimming.

"Oh! Ss-spike. You startled m-me. I'm just - just t-trying to f-f-." Tara sputtered to a stop and bit her lip, and Spike knelt down beside her, smelling tears and sweat and the first faint wisps of corruption from Buffy's body.

"Here now, Glinda, it's all right. Everybody run off, then?" Tara sniffed and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand and shook her head, twisting a stained towel in her lap.

"N-no, they j-just... I asked An-anya to go to the M-magic Box and get some herbs a-and things and Xander is get-getting a coffin..." Tara sniffed again, and Spike looked at Buffy. She was naked under the blanket, the clothing
Tara had cut off lying in a heap near the kitchen doorway. She was clean, but her broken arm was still crooked, and her legs weren't right.

"I'm just no-not strong enough," Tara whispered, and Spike smoothed his hand over her hair.

"That's all right, love. I'll lend a hand and we'll soon have her right." Tara nodded and inched over, moving the pot of water away, and Spike took Buffy's arm in his hands - set it straight with a quick jerk and a muffled snap, and then moved to her legs. They were a little more difficult but he had them straight after a moment, and he tucked the blanket back around the body.

*Sorry, Slayer - not very dignified, bein' dead, is it?*

"Now, let's finish this and get her dressed." Spike moved around Tara and lifted Buffy's head, freeing her hair and making it easier for Tara to finish washing it out. The matted strands finally came clean, glowing mellow gold, and Tara dried and combed them, and then put a clean towel under Buffy's neck, tilting her face up.

"I think I'll let Anya or D-dawn do her makeup. I'm not very go-good at that."
"Have you picked out a dress, love?" Spike asked, and Tara nodded and stood up stiffly. She unfolded a pale summer dress, something all lavender and salmon and creamy white; a watercolor of a dress, and Spike nodded approval. She'd be pretty, laying down for her final rest, and that would help Dawn and maybe Giles as well. Show them how peaceful she looked, so they could have that small comfort. And it was a comfort. While they got the dress on, Spike let himself think for a moment about Cousin Frieda and her first-born girl. About how pretty seven-year-old Jane had looked, dressed in lace and wearing a flower wreath, laid out on a bed of petals in a snow-white coffin. 'Like a sleeping angel,' Frieda had husked, handkerchief pressed to her mouth, and a ten-year-old William had agreed, thinking Cousin Jane the prettiest little girl he had ever seen, and wishing they didn't have to put her away in the ground.

God...Spike... You all right? Is Tara -? Xander back in the link, somewhere in his truck, and Spike closed his eyes for a brief moment, letting the love you love you miss you wash over him.

We're fine, we're - Spike sent brief images - Buffy being tended, Tara's exhaustion. Coming back?
Almost there. Tara needs to rest. Get her to lie down?

Yeah. Hurry. Spike looked down at Tara's bowed head and he reached and gently pulled the soiled towels from her hands - urged her to her feet.

"Listen now, pet - you go upstairs and get clean, and change out of these things. You'll feel better for it. And then you need to take a rest. Xander's coming back and wolfling will be here soon, and you can let us sit with her for a while, yeah?" Tara swiped at her nose - took in a long breath and looked down at Buffy.

"You know wa-what the worst part is? The w-worst part is th-that I didn't get to ss-say thank you for helping me f-for helping Wha-willow. When I - came ba-back, she was already up o-on the tower. I never ss-said th-thank you." Tara shut her eyes, and tears welled from under her lids, and for a moment Spike just stood there, looking at her. Then he folded her into his arms and held her, pack so softly from the demon - from Xander, who was somewhere up the street. Tara shuddered, breathing in gasping pants, and for a moment she simply clung to him. Then she pulled away and rubbed her face.
"When d-did you start be-being my friend, Spike?" she asked softly, and Spike tucked a lock of hair back for her - wiped a stray tear.

"When you told Xander you were happy for us." Memory flitted across Tara's face, and she smiled then, and Spike felt himself smiling back, the 'real smile' that Xander liked so well - the one he'd only ever had for Dru, for so many years.

Poor little thing. Barely got herself together and she has to deal with all this. "Go on, Glinda. I'll stay here." Tara nodded and touched his arm, squeezing gently, then she slipped past and wearily climbed the stairs. Spike looked down at Buffy - picked up the blanket and draped it over the chairs, and then carefully picked her up and laid her across them. It wouldn't do for Dawn to wake and see her sister on the floor, on wet and dirty sheets. He arranged her carefully and then tucked the blanket around, leaving her face free. Then he bundled the sheets up and took them to the basement door - tossed them down the steps. He could hear the rhythmic chuk-shush of the washing machine and whirr of the dryer.

No wonder the witchling is so tired - she's been working for all of us. There was a faded zip-up sweatshirt
hanging on the back of the basement door and he shrugged it on, feeling chilled. It held the faint scent of Joyce in it still, and he stood for a moment, just breathing. Then he went back to the dining room and leaned against the wall, sliding down until he was on the floor. The sound of the shower coming on was the only sound at all, until he heard the truck, and a moment later Xander was coming in, walking silently around the sprawled figures in the living room and sliding down the wall to sit next to Spike. He smelled, as always, of clean wood and sweat - familiar and comforting. But he also reeked of blood, and for once the demon didn't rise to that. It only wanted family - wanted pack - wanted safety and quiet and no more upset. Spike hushed it, leaning his head on Xander's shoulder, shifting a little when Xander wormed his arm around behind and hugged him close. Spike could see the coffin in Xander's mind - could see Manny and *hold fast* and he kissed Xander's neck and jaw and cheek - sighed and settled again, letting his eyes drift shut.

"Buffy looks -" *Dead. She looks dead. They always do and she doesn't look any different than the rest.*

*I know, pet. Don't look, then. Just rest a bit.*
Can't. Have to get the coffin in, have to- Spike lifted his head and put his arm across Xander's chest, gripping his bicep and holding him hard.

"No, love. You need to just rest. Nothing to be done that can't wait. She won't mind." Xander just stared at him, his eyes so wide and wounded, and then he nodded and let his head fall back against the wall and they sat there for a while, both of them drifting in and out. The shower cut off and after a bit Tara came down, and she folded silently down beside Willow, her breathing evening out in minutes. Silence again, and the thickening air as the sun beat onto the back of the house. Spike listened to Xander's heartbeat, and carefully shielded him from the nightmare images that Dawn was bleeding into the link. An hour or more passed, and then the front door opened and Anya walked in, bags swinging from her hands. She stood for a moment in the foyer and Spike raised his head, looking over at her. Xander stirred next to him - opened his eyes as well, and Anya walked over, her face unusually somber.

"I got what Tara wanted. And I had to walk around for a while before I came back here. Oh. Buffy looks nice. But she needs makeup. Some blush for sure and some lipstick."
"Sure, Anya. Let's see what you brought." Xander scrubbed his hand over his face and sat forward, his arm still around Spike and Anya knelt down opposite them, opening bags and showing them bundles and jars of herbs; things Tara had wanted for Buffy.

"Is there - did you get a coffin, Xander?"

"Yeah - it's out in my truck. I'll need some help to get it in - it's kind of heavy."

"Oh. Well, I guess we'll have to wait for Oz. I'm going to - to go through Buffy's makeup and see if she has anything suitable for being dead." Anya gathered up the bags and dumped them by the kitchen, then went away upstairs, and Xander sighed - slumped over and twisted around until his head was in Spike's lap. Spike began a slow caress of his hair, gently working out tangles and smoothing the long strands until Xander closed his eyes again. He was trembling ever so slightly, *hurt* in the link like a broken bone, insistent and marrow-deep. Spike leaned down and kissed his temple - petted and petted his hair, willing him to sleep again, to forget, for a little while.
Can't forget, Spike. I'm sorry...I can't stop -

Shhh... No apologies. You're allowed grief, pet. I just want you to rest, is all.

Feels like I shouldn't.

"I know, love. But you can." Xander sighed and burrowed a little deeper, and they had five minutes of merciful blank and then Oz was there, fading into consciousness, Pack - all right? Coming...

All right, Spike sent, vision of the silent house, and Oz's van and another vehicle stopped outside. After a minute the back door opened and Oz slipped in, and Derio. Then two women. Spike lifted his head, looking towards the doorway, scenting sachet and peppers and meat, scenting flour and fabric softener and age.

Wolfling, what is it - who is it?

Abuela Consolata. Derio's granny. She's...priestess. Spike shook Xander's shoulder.

"Love, wolfling is here. He's brought - someone." Xander
blinked up at him and then slowly pushed himself upright as the others filed into the room. Oz was clean, bandaged over one eyebrow with a patch of gauze. Derio was behind him, looking a little shaky, carrying his fiddle case. And behind him were the women. The first Spike dismissed - thin and sour looking, iron-streaked black hair bundled into a net and a dowdy dress swathing her. The other -

"Spike, Xander - this is my Aunt Gechina Padovani and my Granny, Consolata Padovani." Auntie looked them over with a critical gimlet eye and then looked away, studying the walls. Granny...

"So this is your family, Dan-iel?" she said, and Spike shivered all over. Xander was getting to his feet, stiff and sleep-dazed, and Spike stood up as well, fighting the demon. The waves of power coming off Consolata were like static, building higher and higher, deafening him. He shook his head fiercely, keeping to his human face with desperate effort, and Xander's hand clenched down hard on his forearm.

*Spike!* Abruptly the power was gone, and Consolata was just - a woman. Silver-white hair held up with sticks, a heavy, slightly bent body in a dull-purple dress and
cardigan. Spike growled ever so softly, and she smiled at him.

"Dan-iel told us - about your friend. We'd like to help you." Oz had edged over towards Spike and Xander, looking a little wary, and Spike reached out and touched his shoulder.

You all right, wolf?

Yeah. She's all right. No harm, Spike. Derio looked nervous as well, and he glanced between Spike and his granny, looking like he might want to step between them.

Pet?

We need - something, Spike. I don't mind. "It's - nice to meet the both of you," Xander said, coming forward and offering his hand, and then snatching it back when he saw the blood that still grimed it.

Consolata just smiled at him.

"Yes - I've been wanting to meet the both of you. You need to wash, nino. Go on, the both of you. You've done
what you can for the dead - let us do for the living, yes?" Xander hesitated and then nodded - turned to Oz.

"I - I went out to Manny's house. We made a coffin. It's in the back of my truck."

"Okay," Oz murmured, and Spike edged forward and took Xander's hand.

"Let's go up, pet. Get you clean."

"Yeah." Xander squeezed his hand and they turned away. Spike breathed a sigh of relief as they left the dining room, and he could hear Oz asking Derio to help him get the coffin - Consolata telling Gechina to get some water boiling while she found a chopping board.

Guess there'll be food. Hungry, love?

I - don't actually know. Hard to say. They went slowly upstairs, bringing their pack from the front hall and going into the bathroom. Spike got the shower started while Xander rooted out their toothbrushes and the last of the clean clothes and then helped Spike peel the patches of bandage off. The bleeding had stopped but the wounds were still raw.
Need to hunt,

Spike thought, and shook his head no to the brief image of Xander offering his throat. *No love. Need more than you can give me. I'll be all right.*

A few minutes later they were slipping gratefully under the hot, pounding spray, soaping and scrubbing and generally trying to shed a layer of skin. When the last of the grime was rinsing away, Xander suddenly turned to Spike and leaned hard into him, locking his arms around Spike's waist. He was crying, shuddering, and Spike held him as tight as he dared.

*Put her in the ground, don't want to, why did she DO that, Spike? Spike, why did she - should have done something, should have -*

*No, no, NO, love. No should haves, no whys. No changing what she did and no regrets. You did everything you could. EVERYTHING. You did good. It's just...*

"Way of the world, pet. Way things are. There's no blame, love," Spike whispered, wishing he could do
something to ease the broken-glass sharpness of the sorrow Xander couldn't keep back. Xander kissed Spike's shoulder - turned to the spray and held his face under it for a moment, sluicing away tears and wiping his nose. Then he turned back to Spike, blinking the water from his eyes.

"You're not actually - sorry - that she's dead," Xander said softly, and Spike leaned back against the tiles behind him.

"Be lyin' if I said I was. She's - the Slayer. Born to die, just like you all are. Only she had less time than most. What she was. She fought hard, and she did what she thought was best. She died saving her sister - saving the world. All she wanted, right then, and she died happy. Nothing to mourn, love, and the only pain I feel is yours."

Xander's eyes were so dark - so hurt. Spike hated to see that look. But he wouldn't lie - couldn't, really. And he did ache for Xander - for the wolf and for Bit. He was happy Glinda was back to herself, and sorry that she was sad. But that was all. Willow's grief - even the Watcher's - was incidental and counted only where it added to family grief. And Anya's was too oblique to even consider. It wasn't in him to care for not-pack, and he
wouldn't even try. But he wouldn't make it worse, either. *Don't mean to hurt you, pet...just can't be any other way.* All those things, a fraction of a moment in the link, and Xander nodded slowly.

"I kinda figured." He leaned into Spike again and kissed him, *Love you, vampire mine,* and then he was turning off the cooling water and getting towels, and Spike followed him out. They dried and dressed and spent another moment just kissing softly up against the door.

*Giles,* from Oz, and they broke apart reluctantly. Xander smiled at Spike, smoothing his hand over Spike's dark blue button-up.

"Guess we'd better go down. You gonna be okay with granny?"

"Long as she doesn't do - anything. Derio must be crazy - "

"Whoa - no. Don't. Oz needs him, and if Oz says it's okay, it is. And Derio is...family. He's family, Spike." Xander said that with a sudden certainty - a sudden surge of agreement in the link, soldier and hyena rousing themselves from whatever stupor the long night and day
had put them in.

*Family*

*Pack*  Spike agreed with that, because Derio was Oz's, and whatever Oz brought in - stayed in. But granny was not, in ways only the demon could truly understand.

"Can't explain it, Xander, but she's just - not quite -"

"Yeah. I could feel her, through you. It's a little creepy. But Oz said no harm, and I trust him."

"Course, love."  Spike bent and rooted through the dirty clothes on the floor and got his lighter, but the pack of cigarettes was empty and he followed Xander downstairs mentally checking his duster-pockets, wondering if he had any more.

*Need a bloody carton to get through what's coming.*  Flash from Xander's mind, the old demon's hands, smoothing the wood of the coffin.  *Hold Fast. Hold on to ME, love. I won't let you go.*
Xander was actually pretty amazed that the smell of cooking food didn't make him sick. Maybe, he reasoned, it was because it was so foreign to him - even being a SoCal boy, he'd never seen most of what Derio's granny and aunt were making. An hour past sunset and Spike was just coming back in, sleek with fresh blood and twitchy as a cat, avoiding granny like the plague. Willow and Dawn were upstairs getting changed and cleaned up, and Giles was just downstairs from his own shower, pushing wet hair impatiently back off his forehead and walking with measured steps into the dining room.

The coffin was balanced on two chairs, and Buffy lay inside, padded with a quilt. Dawn had brought it out, mumbling something about a hope chest and Willow had hugged her tight. Buffy's hair glowed against the cedar wood and the deft strokes of Anya's hand had put color into her face and eased the awful rigor of her features. Tara had put candles everywhere they could safely burn, and the mingled scents of beeswax and peppermint, rue and rosemary, sage and thyme and wormwood seemed to almost swim in the thick, spangled air. Xander stood next to Giles as the older man gazed down, his expression blank and controlled and awful.
She doesn't look so dead anymore, Xander thought, and Spike slipped into the dining room, putting his arms around Xander's waist.

Demon-girl did good. Everybody up and about, then?

"Yeah. We'll need to - go soon." Take Buffy to Breaker's Woods and... Xander shied away from that, even as Spike's thoughts turned again to Cousin Jane, and to a slow walk through London streets. Black horses with plumes on their heads and the silken rustle of his mother's black dress - her hand tight around his and her eyes wide with sorrow and fear.

My father was three years dead, then - she was afraid I'd die too, sickly brat that I was. Xander fled into Spike's memories for a moment, hoping somehow that, if he went through it in his mind first, when the time came he would be able to - have some dignity. Have some comfort for Dawn, and Willow. For Giles, who hadn't stopped looking at Buffy, and who was trembling ever so slightly.

"Giles? You all right?" Xander asked softly, and Giles moved - swallowed with a click of his throat and raised
one hand to rub wearily at his eyes.

"Yes I'm - I'm quite all right, Xander, I'm just...a little hung over from that - that pill. It was very strong." Giles' voice was thick with unshed tears but his back was ramrod straight and Spike pulled Xander away ever so slightly when he moved to put his hand on Giles' arm.

_C stiff British upper lip, love - he might not want...that._

_Can't hurt to try_, Xander thought, hating to see Giles so...separate. He lifted his hand again and put it lightly on Giles' shoulder. Giles stiffened and then sagged a little, his head going down, his hands curling uselessly into fists. He didn't move away, and Xander didn't say anything. After a few moments Giles lifted his head.

"Do we know - where we're going? And - how we're getting there?" he asked softly, not looking at Xander or Spike.

"Tara made a sort of map - it's not too hard. We're going to use my truck and - and Joyce's SUV. The van's too low to clear the trail. Spike and Oz are - are going to go up ahead of us about an hour and...and take the shovels." Giles flinched ever so slightly at that, but Spike
had assured Xander that 'mere mortals', even a more-than-mortal like himself, would be hours digging a proper grave.

*God, and I don't want to think about that, a 'proper grave'...* Cousin Jane's funeral was still stark in his mind and his thoughts skittered away from an image of mounded black dirt, a beetle crawling over the tip of William's boot, and the awful, hollow thud as the first clods were shoveled down onto the coffin.

*Throw bunches of roses all over my coffin - roses to deaden the clods as they fall... Now I GET that. Fuck, don't wanna...*

*Love, love...it's all right.* Giles turned finally and looked at them, and Spike's arm tightened possessively around him.

"Who are - these women? What are they doing?" Giles asked, and he voice was so bewildered Xander couldn't help a small smile.

"Sorry, Giles. They're Derio's granny, Consolata Padovani? Yeah, Padovani. And his Aunt Gechina. Oz brought them back. They - just want to help." Giles
noded absently, his eyes flickering around the room. Taking in, obviously for the first time, the banks of candles and the strewn herbs - the Double Wedding Ring quilt, the coffin, and Xander watched him reach out and run his hand gently over the smooth flank of pine.

"This is - this is quite beautiful, Xander." Giles gently touched the fold of quilt under Buffy's shoulder. "She told me about this. Her grandmother - Joyce's mother - made this for her when she was a baby. She..." Giles stopped - took a deep breath. "Dawn has one also. Dove in the Window, I think it's called." Giles reached one more time, slowly, towards Buffy. He very gently touched her cheek - stroked down to her chin and cupped it, for just a moment.

"Oh God..." Giles' eyes were closed, and his hand hovered, trembling, just over Buffy's heart.

*Spike -

*Let him do - what he has to. There's no shame in it.*

*I know, I KNOW...it's just...* Xander shook his head slightly and felt Spike lean his head on his back, between his shoulder blades.
I know you didn't have anything for your friend. When your Jesse died, you couldn't even - tell anyone. This is what grief is, love. It hurts, and it's ugly. And then it's gone, and things are better.

Really, Spike? A long silence from Spike, as Giles hauled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped roughly at his eyes.

Really, love. Look... Images then, of Cousin Frieda and her dashing Scots husband, and the squalling infant they'd named Eliza Jane. The first Jane's picture on the mantel, and the baby held up for inspection, and Cousin Frieda glowing with pride - with joy. She didn't forget, and she never stopped missing her. But it was easier, after a while. The hurt just...went away. But the memories stayed.

But his hurt -

He'll survive it, Xander. Spike kissed the back of his neck, willing Xander to come into the living room with him - farther away from the granny - but Xander patted the hands locked over his ribs and reached out again instead, touching Giles' shoulder.
"Is there anything we should do, Giles? Since we're not having a - regular funeral, is there anything special we should do?" Giles shuddered all over - tucked a lock of Buffy's hair aside and then turned to them again.

"I - don't know. The Summers' weren't - weren't very religious people. And - there's no need to stand on ceremony with this. We can - do as we please. I rather - rather like this," Giles gestured around them, at the candles and the dim stillness. "Reminds me..." Giles stopped and Xander made an inquiring sort of noise. The older man looked up at the ceiling, and a faint smile crossed his face. "Oh, years ago. A - a friend of ours died - nothing awful, just... Anyway, Ethan and I and the rest of us, we had a wake for him, and it was the seventies, you know, so we had candles and incense and...and The Who. We all got very drunk and Ethan managed to nearly drown himself in the Thames doing the Lyke Wake dirge..." Giles blinked, his eyes glittering, and he looked around at Spike and Xander. "I suppose if I'd like anything, I'd like that. The Dirge sung for her. My Great-Uncle Alistair... He used to sing it at every funeral. Said we had Yorkshire blood and it was only right... It always made me feel...better, somehow. The one - one thing I could count on when everything was..." Giles stopped
and rubbed his forehead - looked up at them with a thoughtful expression, and Xander felt Spike move a little behind him, coming around to his side.

"Derio can probably give us the tune, Watcher. You know the words?"

"Well..." Giles looked back at Buffy - looked up at a sudden clang from the kitchen. "I know most of it... I don't suppose you -?"

Fuck. "Yeah, I know it, Watcher. Think I'll go find Derio." Spike kissed Xander's jaw and retreated to the living room, grumbling in the link.

"What's the Lake Walk?"

"Lyke Wake, Xander. It's - it's a very old song, and it says... Well, actually, what it says is rather morbid and depressing but the point is... It's something you do for respect and for - love."

"Sounds like a good thing then." Giles looked once more at the kitchen doorway and then shook his head and went slowly into the living room. Xander followed, and as Giles settled into a chair in the corner, Xander settled
on the couch, draping himself over Spike. Derio was perched next to the vampire, slowly picking out a tune on his fiddle while Spike hummed it for him, occasionally breaking into a word or two of song. Oz was on the floor cross legged, looking exhausted. He'd taken the gauze off his forehead and the wound there was mostly healed; a crusted black line of blood but no swelling, anymore. Tara still slept, and someone had pulled a blanket over her. Anya was in the kitchen, washing pots.

"Think you have it now?" Spike asked quietly some minutes later, and Derio nodded and played the tune through softly. Giles was nodding, and Oz smiled up at Derio, his hand rubbing absently on a jean-clad knee.

"'Bout time for me and Oz to go," Spike said then, and Oz's face fell a little.

Oz - love you...don't have to go. Oz frowned, and shook his head.

"No, it's all right. Just - want it over," Oz said softly, and Derio leaned down and kissed him.

"Go where?" Dawn, coming into the living room, her hair still damp and her eyes sunk in their sockets, dark circled.
"Have to get flowers, don't we, Bit? What kind do you want, eh?" Xander leaned back as Spike stood up and went to her, and she sniffed and rubbed her eyes.

"Buffy - Buffy really liked those Star-Gazer lilies. Could you get those?"

"Course we could. Anything you like." Spike rubbed her back and she sniffed again - looked around as Willow came into the room and took her arm.

"Let's go sit down, okay, Dawn?"

"I want to see Buffy," Dawn said, frowning, but the link said fear and Xander stood up as well.

"Come on, Dawn. We'll both go see her. And Spike and Oz can get the flowers and then we'll be - all set." An hour enough?

Enough. We'll take the van as far as we can up the trail.

Right. Love you - love you, Oz... Spike and Oz slipped out, Spike shrugging his duster on and Oz getting one last kiss, and Xander got between Dawn and Willow - put an
arm around them both.

"Tara and Anya did a really nice job. She looks - just beautiful," Xander said, and fear hurt sad, raw and uncontrolled and so damn strong that Xander felt his heart thud into a faster rhythm for a moment. "It's all right, Dawn," Xander whispered, sending calm, love you, but Dawn didn't respond. They walked slowly into the dining room, and Willow's arm was tight around Xander's waist, and he could feel her trembling.

"Oh!" Dawn blinked rapidly, looking down, and then she turned to Willow with a small smile on her face. "She - she looks really pretty, doesn't she, Willow? She looks -" 

"She looks wonderful, Dawn. Just - wonderful." Willow's voice was hoarse and whispery, and Xander hugged her shoulders.

"Can I - Xander, can I put something in with her?" Dawn asked, and Xander nodded.

"Course you can, Dawn. Anything at all."

"Okay." Dawn slipped away and darted upstairs, and Willow leaned on him, sniffing.
"She does look beautiful. Tara really worked hard. Xander, I - I don't -" Willow ducked her head, shuddering, and Xander gathered her into a gentle hug.

"Shhh... It's gonna be okay, Wills. It really is. Shhh..." He rubbed her back, rocking her a little, and after a minute she straightened and rubbed her eyes - sniffed hard, making an 'eeew' face.

"Sorry. God. I need a Kleenex. Okay. I'm okay. I will be okay." Willow tried a small smile, and Xander smiled back. They stood for a few moments, just looking at Buffy, just resting against each other, and then Dawn came back, clutching something, and approached the coffin. Xander realized she was holding a small stuffed pig.

"I don't think Buffy would want to - to go anywhere without Mr. Gordo," Dawn said, and tucked the pig carefully into the coffin, nestling him up against Buffy's neck.

"You're right, Dawn. She'll like having him with her." Dawn was still touching Mr. Gordo, and her fingers moved slowly until they touched Buffy's cheek.
"She's cold, Xander."  *HURT* like nails through him, and Xander took a hard breath.

"I know, Dawn. That's - how it is." Dawn stroked Buffy's cheek one last time, and then she turned away and went into the living room. Derio smiled at her, and began to play something low and soft, and Dawn sat down on the couch, watching his fingers move over the strings. The hurt eased, a tiny bit, and Xander hugged Willow to him and followed Dawn.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The mechanics of getting a coffin up a slotted, twisting trail in the dark taxed the last bit of calm that Xander had, and when he and Derio finally entered the clearing where the grave was he could feel his control slipping - could feel the tremble in his belly and the heat in his eyes as tears threatened. He'd never been so happy to see Spike. The vampire and Oz were waiting to take the coffin as they emerged from the trees, and Xander gave up his burden thankfully, easing the coils of rope he carried over his shoulder. The rest filed in behind them - Giles with a flashlight and Derio's fiddle case, Tara
holding Dawn's hand and a bag of herbs, and Willow and Anya with a Coleman lantern and another flashlight.

Spike and Oz put the coffin down and stood silently, streaked with dirt. Spike's duster was draped over an upright shovel like a scarecrow, and Oz had hung another lantern up in a tree. Everyone gathered in a circle...and Xander wished for it to be over. He didn't want to hear speeches, or say anything at all. He only wanted to rest. To go home and scrub the last two days off of him again and again - to curl up with Spike in bed and lose himself in the taste and feel of the vampire - to make love until he was too tired to think and to sleep until the hurt had eased. Spike moved over and hugged him close, and Derio did the same with Oz, cupping his cheek and kissing him once, softly, before turning his attention back to the coffin.

Oh, please can we just...do this. Please... Spike hugged him again, hard.

"What do you want to do, Watcher?" Spike asked quietly, and Giles stirred and looked around - reached up to rub his forehead. He looked younger, somehow, without his glasses on, but Xander could see his eyes better, and the hurt and loss were stark in his gaze.
"I -I suppose... I'd like to just say... Buffy was the most amazing girl - woman - that I have ever known. She - she carried the burden of being the Slayer on her shoulders and yet - yet she somehow managed to still care for her family and her friends, and to - to fight for every bit of life, and love, and laughter that she could get. She was...like a daughter...and I shall never forget her, and I shall miss her..." Giles' voice wavered and he stopped, scrabbling out his handkerchief and rubbing furiously at his eyes. Next to him, Willow put her hand on his arm and squeezed gently, then looked down at the coffin.

"She was my best friend. She helped me to - to be a better person - a stronger person. And...and I love her, and I can't - believe - she's gone." Willow blinked, tears streaking her face, and Tara was next, clutching Willow's hand and Dawn's, still.

"I d-didn't know Buffy for as l-long as the rest of you b-but she...she saved m-my life. She fought f-for all of us, and she di-didn't ask for any rewards. She was a beautiful, loving p-p-person and I will m-miss h-her very m-much." Dawn's eyes were enormous, and she was shivering, and Tara slipped her arm around her shoulders.
"She was my sister - even when she....found out she wasn't. She never stopped loving me. She told me to - to live. To live for her. And I promise I will, Buffy! I promise!" Dawn heaved in a hard, panting breath and buried her face in Tara's shoulder.

*Pain,* in the link, *desolation, anger, fear,* and Xander, Spike and Oz all flinched from the overwhelming hurt. Spike fought the flow of emotion and narrowed the link to almost nothing, blocking it as much as he could.

*God, that has to stop, we've got to...*

*Probably won't last. Didn't get much blood. It'll be all right, we'll get through it.*

*Pack...hurts, she hurts...* The wolf wanted to kill whatever was hurting the pack, and couldn't, and its frustration seethed in the link, rousing the hyena to irritable watchfulness. Setting Xander and the soldier both on edge.

*God! Just want this done...* Anya was twisting a Kleenex in her fingers, and she cleared her throat, looking up.
"Buffy and I weren't best friends. In fact, we weren't really friends at all. But she fought for me. She - she saved the world - a lot. And I just - just want to say thank you." Willow smiled over at her, and Anya smiled back - wiped her nose.

"She was the toughest lady I ever knew. And the sweetest. 'Bye, Buffy. Sweet dreams." Oz's voice was so low Xander had to strain to hear, and Derio glanced up and shook his head slightly, declining to talk.

Spike?

All right, love. Spike sighed and looked up at the sky - back to the coffin. "She never gave up. It was - an honor, to fight her. And it wouldn't have been a disgrace to lose to her. Requiescat in pace, Slayer."

Love you... Xander clutched Spike's hand hard in his - looked around the circle, at pale faces, streaked with tears, haggard with grief and weariness.

"I loved how she never gave up, and how she always had some dumb pun for whoever's ass she was kicking. And I loved how she always did her best to - do the right thing. She made the fighting and the - the saving the
world look easy, and I'll always be glad that I knew her." There was a long silence after that, and finally Spike stirred and moved to the side of the grave, uncoiling rope. Xander moved to stand opposite him, and they laid the two lengths of rope across the grave.

"How do we do this?" Xander asked, and Spike looked over at Oz and nodded, gesturing for him to stand opposite Xander.

"You and wolfling take these ends here. Watcher - come up here, eh? Take this." Spike pushed a rope-end into Giles hand, and he stood next to Xander, winding it around his fist a little.

"You girls now - you come take this one - Niblet, I need you up here." Spike hauled three huge garbage bags out from the shadows, tearing them open. As Dawn approached him, he reached into one and pulled out a rose and handed it to her.

"You stand ready, all right, poppet?"

"All right," Dawn whispered. Spike gestured to Derio and they both walked over to the coffin.
"We'll lift this and slide it out onto the ropes. You lot - hold fast, right?" *Hold fast, love, almost done*. Spike and Derio lifted the coffin and carried it the few steps to the grave - slid it slowly out, Spike walking around the side and using every bit of his strength to keep the awkward burden from tipping head-first into the hole. Finally it rested, slung on the ropes, and Derio joined Oz on his rope, and Spike took up a position behind Anya.

"Right. Let the rope go, nice and slow." They all let the rope begin to slip carefully through their hands, and the coffin went jerkily down, into shadow. After a few moments it was done - the ropes went slack - and Xander and Giles pulled them from under the coffin and out, coiling them and tossing them away. Dawn was standing with the rose in her hand, looking confused.

"Spike? What - what do I do?"

"Toss them down, Bit. Cover her with them." Dawn looked uncertainly at him, and then pushed her hands into the bag - brought out a huge handful of roses and let them fall. Anya trained a flashlight down, and they all watched as the coffin became blanketed in red and white and pink roses, until the wood was almost lost to sight. Tara silently opened the small bag of herbs she
had brought and tossed them down as well, adding the sharp scents of mint and sandalwood and rosemary to the sweet perfume of the roses.

_Roses to cover her coffin..._ Xander thought, remembering, and Spike smiled briefly at him.

_Heard that...thought it was a good idea._ When all the roses had been tossed down, Spike got a smaller bag and pulled out a huge bundle of the lilies Dawn had requested.

"These too, pet."

"But - but there won't be anything on top -" Dawn said, her voice quavering, and _hurt hurt_, sharp as knives.

"It's all right, Dawnie - we'll come back. In - in seven days, we'll come back and - bring flowers and Tara wants to plant a yew tree..." Willow tried a smile, sniffing, and Dawn looked at her.

"Why seven days?"

"So I - so I can sit Shiva for her, Dawn. I'll tell you about it when we get home, okay?" Dawn nodded slowly -
breathed in the fragrance of the lilies once, slowly, and then tossed them in.

"Derio?" Oz said, holding a shovel in his hands, and Derio nodded and bent to his fiddle case. He drew out the instrument and bow, and after a moment he began to play. He ran through the tune twice, and on the third time Giles' voice came in. It was soft at first - cracking and out of tune, but after a moment it steadied and gained strength, and Giles stood up straight and sang his dirge. Oz and Spike began to shovel the dirt back in, and the sound Xander was dreading to hear was muffled by the roses - drowned by the song. He hugged Dawn close and pulled her away a little, listening to Giles sing. The words were old - ancient - and he couldn't understand them much, but he felt calmer, hearing it, and smiled softly when Spike joined in, his voice a little higher than Giles', and less trained, but pleasant. The hole gradually filled in, black earth into black pit, and the music swelled out softly, drifting away over the trees, carrying some measure of their pain with it.

"This ae nighte, this ae nighte,

Every nighte and alle,
Fire and fleet and candle--lighte,

And Christe receive thy saule...

Portuguese translations:

credo - loved one

filho - son

Filho da puta - son of a whore

Abuela - grandmother

"Throw bunches of roses..." is from Streets of Laredo by Johnny Cash

The Lyke Wake dirge can be found here:

http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/steeleye.span/songs/lykewakedirge.html
and here:

http://members.aol.com/WalkerToys/Childhood_Memories/lw-dirge.htm"
his work again.

They'd been in the new house a little over two months. Another house that Manny owned; built right after the war apparently, but still very much like the old one. Only this house had a second storey with three bedrooms and a small bathroom, and a covered porch that ran around two sides of the house. The best feature was an unfinished cellar with access to Sunnydale Below. Spike had taken a one minute tour and announced it was the place while Willow and Tara were still looking over the kitchen and Anya was testing the plumbing by flushing the toilets and turning on the faucets.

Ultimately, though, the three of them had decided, in a swift, silent exchange, that this would work. Since Buffy had died.... Xander stopped and shook his head, thinking about that.

That's always going to be where our history ends and begins. There's always going to be Before Buffy Died and After Buffy Died. Especially for Dawn... Xander sighed and looked at his work - reached out and ran a hand over the log of driftwood. The ashy silver color was soothing, and the wood itself was smooth as silk. The shape had
been suggestive enough that the moment Xander had seen it, he'd known what he would carve. Two earlier carvings - or attempts - were down on the beach in the pile of firewood they'd amassed. This one, though - he wanted to be different. Hoped would be different.

*Pet?*

*Side porch.* Xander bent over the log and started another groove.

*What're you doing?* Even in the link Spike sounded muzzy and half asleep, and Xander grinned.

*Fooling myself.*

"Don't say that." Spike came out onto the porch and crouched down beside Xander, leaning lightly on his thigh. Xander glanced over at the naked vampire and grinned a little harder.

"Everybody's gonna be here soon, you know?"

"Yeah?" Supremely indifferent, Spike waited until the latest curl of wood fell, and then he leaned his full weight into Xander's thigh and side, nuzzling at his ribs and
tracing a teasing path with his tongue.

*Taste goood, pet.*

*Feels...good...stop, now! I have to finish this. Do you think...*

"I think it's just fine, love." Spike reached out to take the hand that had fallen laxly between Xander's knees. He pressed his lips to Xander's open palm and kissed - folded Xander's fingers around the kiss. "Don't fret. She'll see it for what it is."

"What is it? I don't want her to - I don't want her to be sad again, Spike." Xander turned to face the vampire finally, and Spike crowded close to him, gathering both of Xander's hands into his and kissing the work-roughened knuckles. He gazed up at Xander, utterly serious, and Xander gazed back, feeling the first real stirrings of misgiving.

He'd seen this wood on the beach below their house. A sturdy chunk of driftwood, almost four feet long. A moment's effort had righted it, and its shape - a gentle, arching bow - had immediately suggested a winged figure to him. He'd seen it entire in one glance and
known what he wanted to do. Bring the form out of the wood, and put it as a marker on Buffy's grave. Because to him, the figure was Buffy; leaping away from them all, into the ether and into death. Forever caught in that one, perfect moment between flying and falling when it seemed that gravity would reverse itself and she would soar.

"She may be sad, love - but it won't last. Bit knows you - she'll see it." Spike's look was so grave that Xander had to smile, and he leaned forward and caught Spike's mouth in a long, gentle kiss.

"You're right. It'll be okay." Xander glanced to his right, down the long corridor of shaded porch that ran the entire length of the southern wall. It curved around the back of the house as well, but the west side wasn't as shaded as the south or east, and the sky still glowed blue between the tree branches. "It's what - another hour until sunset?"

"Something like," Spike answered. He got up and paced around the carving, examining it critically, and Xander watched him. The first week After Buffy Died had been the hardest, and Spike had taken the brunt of it.
"No, no, NO! Don't leave me! Please, don't leave me alone!" Shrill scream, *Fear hurt fear FEAR*, in the link, enough to bring the hyena roaring to the surface, and Spike was there, gathering Dawn into his arms and shushing her, holding her - soothing her nightmare away only to have it come back again in a half an hour - an hour. Staying with Dawn all night, pacing half the day, too afraid to leave her and too on edge to hunt. Closing the link down to almost nothing to spare Xander and Oz, but Xander had sat in the living room chair every night, watching them, doing what he could. Refusing to leave Spike to deal with it alone. Oz there too, silent and hurting, his control over the wolf fraying with each nerve-scraping night. Like the hyena it wanted to FIGHT, but there was nothing TO fight, and the two patrols they'd gone on had been - savage.

Spike looked fine - the gaunt, harried look was gone, and he seemed his old self, most days. But sometimes there
were breaks in the link - moments of blankness or confusion that Xander couldn't pin down or even explain - just feel. Spike didn't so much ignore them as seem to not notice them, but they made Xander nervous. Spike's anxiety about what Glory had done kept coming back to him, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything when nothing really seemed to be wrong. Spike had been right about the link with Dawn, though - it had faded to almost nothing, and they now needed to be close to Dawn - ten feet or less - to feel her. The magic, Spike said, that made the link in the first place had forged the bond, but without regular doses of blood - or the slightest bit of Spike's blood - it simply became a sort of heightened empathy.

That had been a guilty relief, to feel Dawn slipping out and away. The raw edges of sorrow and guilt were too hard to stitch back into any semblance of a whole when her all-consuming grief had been unraveling it daily.

Dawn seemed better now, too - more her old self, if a little quieter. The 'bot did patrol and made appearances now and again, and Dawn seemed to take it in stride. Willow had programmed away Warren's taint - something like a cross between a Stepford wife and a spinster aunt; all eager-to-please snuggle-bunny one
minute and conservative school-marm the next. Warren had issues, it seemed.

Spike ran his hand down the curved flank of the carving - skipped his fingers over the feathers carved in high relief. Xander had done random feathers - random features - so that some of the figure was unbroken sweeps of smooth, long lines, and other parts were carefully detailed, catching the light just so and making eye and mouth, hand and sweep of hair and the extended tips of two wings look as realistic as possible.

_How long?

"Mmmm...half an hour? I just want to finish this here - " Xander touched the rippled edge of the base of the figure. It had somehow acquired what looked like waves beneath the elongated, nearly featureless feet, and he wanted to add a few more shadows.

"I think I'll go up and draw a bath, then." Spike stepped around the figure and slid weightlessly down onto Xander's lap - kissed him with utmost concentration; hands twined in Xander's hair, back arching and his hips moving in a slow, slow roll. Xander's heart skipped up fast to a rabbity pounding and he had to pull back finally,
gasping in a hard breath and laughing a little.

"Fuck, Spike, you..."  Make me crazy, wanting you - needing you.

How it should be. You're fuckin' gorgeous...taste so good...come upstairs, love...

"Ten minutes - fifteen, tops. I swear." Spike nipped at Xander's lower lip - nuzzled into the crook of his neck for a moment and then he was up and off, walking inside with that loose-hipped strut that made Xander feel a little light-headed. He watched appreciatively until Spike was out of sight, then he turned back to his work. After a bit Xander could hear music - a mixed CD of stuff one of Derio's bandmates had made for Spike - and the vampire was singing in his head.

"I'm hurtin', I'm wantin'

I'm achin' for another go.

You're squirmin' wet, baby

Nothin' bad comin' very slow
And it's burnin' holes in me...

Not five minutes later Oz and Derio arrived, piling bags of supplies onto the kitchen table and talking about the beach - a fire. Making plans. It was Dawn's birthday, and they were going to cook hot dogs and marshmallows and sit on the beach, a family only party at Dawn's insistence. At the moment she was out with Tara, Willow, Anya and Janice having a 'Ladies Day' at some salon or spa or something. Xander wasn't sure, but he knew it involved seaweed and wax and mud and lattes, for god's sake. Oz came out onto the porch after a moment and unconsciously echoed Spike, crouching down next to Xander and studying the figure.

"Hey, Oz."

"Hey."

All right?

Sure. The 'bot wants to come to the party.

"What the fuck for?" Xander said it a little too sharply but Oz only raised an eyebrow and slowly shook his
head.

"It's really got the 'I am the big sister' thing down." *Its place and all. Very insistent.*

"Damn." Xander put down the knife and rooted out a piece of sandpaper from his kit - carefully smoothed away a rough edge. "I guess we - we can send it on patrol. Maybe it'll forget."

"Yeah." Oz reached out and ran his fingers over the hand of the figure. "This looks great, Xander."

"Thanks." Xander gave a final rub with the sandpaper and sat back, looking critically. "I guess most people who do stuff like this always feel like - it's never really done. But I guess - I'd better say it is done or I'll still be cutting on it come Christmas."

*It's done. Falling angel - I think she'll like it, Xan.*

*Thanks, Oz. Love you.* Oz smiled up at him, his hair freshly violet in honor of the day, his eyes vivid green in the golden light of the setting sun. He looked - so happy, and Xander reached out and rubbed his shoulder, smiling back. Happy for him.
"Hope you got a ton of stuff - Spike's never had S'mores and I get the feeling he's gonna like 'em."

"Got enough for an army. Derio has some peculiar ideas about what you cook over a bonfire."

"Hey!" Derio yelled from the kitchen. "Nothing peculiar about wanting to make kebabs!"

"Yeah, but - eggplant and breadfruit and coconut? You're a freak."

"You like me that way. Damn - that's just...estupendo, Xander - muy hermoso." Derio stood in the kitchen doorway, gazing out at the figure, and Xander felt himself blushing a little - but straightening up and smiling, too.

"Thanks, man. I - I'm really happy with it. Most of the time."

"You should be." Derio stepped out onto the porch and spent a couple of minutes examining the carving with Oz, and Xander finally felt his worries about the piece slipping away. Spike was right - Dawn knew him, and she would see - what he meant. See the love and not the
"I'm gonna say it's done," Xander said finally, and Oz helped him lift it and move it over to the top corner of the porch, out of harm's way and not immediately noticeable. Xander draped an old sheet over it and then grabbed the broom, sweeping the wood chips and other detritus into a pile.

"Leave that, Xander. If we put that all in a bucket with a little fuel oil or something it'll make a good starter for the fire."

"Sure, Oz." Xander propped the broom in the corner and closed up the tool-box where he kept his wood-caring stuff. Nothing too fancy or even professional, but over the months he'd assembled an eclectic mix of chisels and knives and other things that seemed to work. He shoved the box up against the house and picked up his shirt from the back of the chair.

"I'm gonna go - up -" he started, and Oz grinned at him.

"Yeah - noticed that," Oz said, smirking, and Xander laughed. The link was thick with formless, horny impulses and the occasional X-rated image and Oz leaned
against Derio and slipped his hands around the other man's waist as Xander ducked inside. He grabbed a couple of bottles of beer and trotted upstairs, Spike's *hurry up, pet, wanna taste you...* in his head and The Damned in his ears.

"*We made it on a Ballroom Blitz*

*I took his arms and kissed his lips*

*He looked at me with such a smile my face turned red*

*We booked a room into the Ritz*

*Ooooohh*

*He gives me head..."

"That a request? Or you offering?" Xander tossed his shirt into the laundry basket and skimmed out of his jeans. Spike was up to his nose in water, his hands lazily stroking over his body.

"That's a promise, but I won't stop you from doing - anything." Spike's eyes were half-lidded, shimmering
gold behind his lashes and Xander felt that look go straight through him, ending in a coil of heat in his cock. He put the beers on the ledge over the tub and stepped into the water. The bathroom was fragrant with bath-oil and a couple of candles; hazy with steam, gilded with diffused sunlight.

"Wait -" Spike sat up fast and grabbed Xander's arms. "Don't go under - just kneel here.

Wanna -" He leaned forward and ran his tongue slowly from Xander's ribs to this collarbone, and Xander shivered, closing his eyes.

*Taste so good, pet, love it when you're hot and sweating and all...woody.* Xander snorted laughter but it trailed off to a moan as Spike grazed lips, then tongue, then teeth over his nipples and then up to his throat. He nipped at the scar there and Xander writhed, sucking in a hard breath. He had his hands on Spike's hips and he squeezed, pulling the vampire closer. Spike resisted - bent a little and began to lick his way across pectorals, ribs and belly, leaving little beads of blood where his fangs snagged on skin. Xander ran his hands up Spike's torso, rubbing his thumbs over Spike's nipples - scratching at them - then moving higher and sinking his
fingers into Spike's hair, tugging him closer. Spike licked wide stripes up his body, sucking on the blood, clutching Xander's buttocks in his hands and kneading the muscles. Then he dipped down, half under the water, and fastened his mouth around Xander's cock.

*Oh - fuck - Spike!*  Nip with the fangs, then cool lap of tongue and Spike's fingers prying between Xander's buttocks, the oil in the water easing the way. Xander put his hands on the edges of the tub, clutching fiercely as Spike licked and sucked and gently, gently bit. As his fingers wormed their way into Xander's body and stroked him from the inside-out. Xander's legs were trembling, his lungs were hitching and catching on every breath, and if he arched his head back any harder he thought he might just snap his neck.

*That's good, that's - right - god! - there - love, love you, Spike...*  Xander groaned aloud as the orgasm pulled his body tight and sizzled through his belly and cock like cool sparks. He couldn’t stop the frantic thrusting of his hips - forward into cool moisture, backwards onto twisting, teasing, clever fingers. When it was over Spike slid up Xander's body and kissed him, pushing the demon away so he could do it hard, and deep as he liked. Then he settled back on his knees and pulled Xander over him.
"Ready, yeah? Let me in, pet -"  Xander put his forearms on Spike's shoulders and let the vampire guide him - groaned again as Spike's cock pushed at him and then eased inside.

*Ready, ready, just-*

*Hold on to me -*  Spike lifted his hips and pulled and Xander slid down, fast and hard and burn, delicious flare that settled immediately to a too-good ache. Spike hissed, his fingers clutching Xander hard, and he lifted and yanked down, setting up a fast, hard rhythm that jolted little bolts of pleasure through Xander's body, reviving his erection.

*Want it deeper - Spike, want it -*  Spike rose up suddenly, tipping Xander back and he grabbed the tub edges again - let Spike hoist him up and get his legs up over Spike's shoulders and then the vampire was pounding in; grumbling moan deep in his chest, fingernails leaving half-moon cuts. Xander let his head fall back, half-submerged, letting Spike's strength hold him up, opening himself as wide as he could, arching his back and begging for it, loving it.
Look like - perfect, like - fuckin' lovely, love you like this, Xander, mine mine MINE!

Fuck yes yours - Spike snarled and darted forward, one hand in the small of Xander's back and the other gripping his neck, lifting it and Xander tipped his chin up, gasping, pushing back. Sudden fever-hot prickle of fangs and then that ache, that fire-edged razor that skittered down every nerve ending and made him arch up convulsively, desperately. He could feel Spike inside him, pulse of seed and flesh, and Spike's hand was suddenly on his face - his mouth - awkward push and Xander sank his teeth into the meaty pad of Spike's palm and keened, his body stuttering into orgasm again as the pepper-salt-fire of inhuman blood filled his mouth.

Spike's frantic thrusting gradually eased and then stopped, and he moved his hand away - lifted Xander up and maneuvered him so they were lying together. Xander nibbled gently on the scar on Spike's neck and then kissed him. Sighed in utter contentment.

Love you love you, mindless chant that was reflected right back. Somewhere downstairs there was a creaking noise - a muffled yelp - and Spike and Xander both grinned at the image that flared in the link. Derio, Oz's
hands in his dreads and - The image cut off abruptly, laughter in the link, and Xander worked his hands under Spike and scratched gently at the small of his back.

"Don't wanna get up now. Don't wanna move for hours."

"All right love. We'll just lie here and prune. We'll look ever so special at the Bit's party."

"Spiiike! Damnit." Xander lifted his head and shot an evil a glare at the vampire as his post-coital brain was able to manufacture. "Why'd you have to fuck me half unconscious?"

"'Cause I can? 'Cause you wanted me too?"

"Right both times," Xander sighed, and levered himself shakily upright - reached for the soap. "Gotta be fresh and unsullied when the girls get here. Wouldn't want them thinking -"

"Oh please." Spike rolled his eyes, snatching the soap and rubbing it briskly over Xander's chest. "They do know we fuck at every opportunity and believe you me, if you think Glinda-witch and Red haven't entertained a few...dirty thoughts from time to time, you're barmy."
"Wha-? No, I will not go there. So not going there. Willow is practically my sister. And Tara is - shy and unspoiled. She'd never -"

"Love, that girl's wicked as the day is long." Spike grinned, splashing soap off of him, and Xander had to grin back. Downstairs all was quiet and the link projected a low, sated buzz. It was infinitely tempting to slip into it and just drowse, but Xander wet his hair under the water and reached for the shampoo instead.

"I am not thinking in any way that's remotely sexual about Tara and Willow. Can't make me." Xander stuck out his tongue and Spike lunged for it, growling.

"How 'bout demon-girl?" Xander submerged himself again, scrubbing at shampoo, and felt Spike sluicing water over his back.

_Anya? Anya..._ A brief image - the three of them doing something - athletic. There was a ripple of shocked laughter from Oz and another growl from Spike, who snatched him up out of the water.

"You're wicked, pet. Taught you well, I have." He had an
insufferably smug look on his face and Xander flicked suds at him, struggling to his feet and snatching his towel.

"You have corrupted me something awful. Whatever shall I do?" Xander simpered and clambered over the tub edge onto the bathmat.

*Wash my hair?*

*Evil undead, HA!* Xander wrapped the towel around his waist and poured out shampoo - bent to scrub Spike's hair, scratching his scalp and teasing the longish strands into soapy spikes.

*Oh! That's cute* - Xander fed the image into the link and there was a burst of raucous laughter from downstairs. Spike plunged his head under, swishing it violently to rinse out the soap. Foamy water surged up over the edge of the tub and splashed everywhere, soaking the bathmat.

*You pillock.*

*"I am not cleaning this up, Spike. You git."*
Maybe 'You wanker' would have been the better word choice. Spike surfaced and splashed the last of the soap off his chest, blinking cartoonishly as water dripped into his eyes. Xander leaned forward and kissed him fast and then skipped away, grabbing his toothbrush.

"Learned from the best. Hurry up, evil undead. We gotta get dressed."

"Should'a fucked you unconscious," Spike mumbled, and pulled the plug on the tub.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

They got downstairs without too much more delay and Oz and Xander started sorting things into coolers and bags. The radio was on, playing a selection of 'Golden Oldies.' Spike sat on the kitchen counter smoking and contemplating Derio's dreads. He fingered them while Derio tuned his fiddle.

"You need some bones in here. That would be neat," Spike mused, shaking a dread so that the cluster of tiny brass bells on it jingled.
"What sort of bones? I'm thinkin' chicken bones would be a big stray-cat magnet." Derio plucked a string and twisted the tuning key a little, frowning absently.

"No, no soddin' chicken bones. Finger bones would be best. They're small and light and make a nice clicking sound." Derio looked over at Spike and shook his head.

*Stop that, evil undead,* from Xander, and Spike blew smoke at him, grinning. Oz was smiling.

"S'true."

"I'm sure. But. I don't know anybody whose fingers I want to chop off, currently. That Riley guy is dead, right?" Spike stubbed his cigarette out.

"As a doornail, mate." He picked up another dread, examining the beads that were strung along it.

"Right. Well, until I find some other pendeja that I want to maim for life, I think I'll remain bone-free." Spike shrugged and did a last brush of his fingers through Derio's hair - jumped down off the counter and rummaged out a whiskey bottle.
"Better tuck this in somewhere, pet." He held the bottle out to Xander who grabbed his wrist and pulled him close.

"Behave, vampire-mine. No getting drunk at Dawn's party."

"Not enough in there to get me drunk," Spike scoffed, shaking the half-empty bottle and leaning on Xander, running his free hand up his back and through the glossy-brown hair.

"Mmmm...right." Xander swayed against him for a moment and then pulled away, smiling. "Gotta get this stuff down to the beach."

"Sun's not quite down -" Spike maneuvered for a kiss and Xander melted into him - pulled back a second time.

"Spike -"

"I'll carry all of it down in ten more minutes. Gimmie ten minutes, pet..." Spike fell to kissing again, swaying slightly to the music on the radio and he barely noticed Oz and Derio leaving, carrying some of the bags, *start the fire* faintly in the link. Xander was warm and solid in his
arms - in the link. Everything he was, distilled down to sweet and love and *mine yours always*  Xander settled his arms around Spike's waist and leaned his head on Spike's shoulder and Spike shut his eyes and held him close, fingers tangled in the long hair, his other hand a little awkward in the small of Xander's back, still clutching the bottle.

The music changed - segued into Glen Miller and that song, the one that had played so long ago - over a year. The first time they'd really kissed...the first time it had actually meant something. Spike sank into the memory, reliving the despair and the loneliness - reliving the rush of incredulous joy. Xander was right there, adding his own side to it, his own feelings of want and fear and budding love. In all the mess with Glory - with Joyce - they'd never really done anything to mark the year turning over, and now Xander showed Spike a flurry of images and emotions - showed him his soul and his demon and himself and made it clear, so very clear, that he had never been happier - never been more content.

*Year and a half. Feels like forever - like a day. Love you, love you.*

*Love you too, Spike. My own, my vampire, MINE for*
always.

Yeah...yours...always...  Xander lifted his head and Spike kissed him. Soft, and easy and all-consuming - everything he loved about Xander and about them swirling through the link. His heart right there, on his lips and in the hands that cradled his love closer still. Neither of them noticed the bottle sliding and thunking to the floor, neither of them noticed the front door opening and the girls coming in. The music buoyed them up and up, and the kiss did and Spike never wanted it to end.

It did though of course, when sweet hot brother hit the link and they both were instantly aware of Dawn. Spike couldn't help the grin that stretched his mouth and the kiss ended on a soft laugh.

"Is this part of the party, then?" Anya asked, and Willow rolled her eyes.

"Not until Dawn is twenty-one," she snapped, and then slapped her hand to her mouth, her eyes going wide. "I did not say that out loud!"

"You did though! And I have witnesses to prove it!" Dawn bounced gleefully, poking Willow until the
witch flailed at her hands.

"Stop that, Dawn. We'll just - we'll just talk about it later. Right. Party?"

"Party, Willow. Oz and Derio went down to start the fire, and we have some stuff that needs to go down - " Laughing, Xander made a gesture towards the remaining bags of supplies, somewhat hampered by the fact that Spike still had his arms wrapped around him.

"I just spent over one hundred dollars on manicures which nobody is going to ruin by doing manual labor!" Anya glared at Tara, who had already stepped forward to grab a bag. Tara hesitated, glancing at her hands.

"But, Anya -"

"No! Don't. Touch. Anything." She looked over at Spike and Spike lifted an eyebrow at her.

"We have a vampire and some sort of super-boy here -"

"Super-boy?" Spike sniggered, and Xander whapped him.
"Yes, well, he's not normal, is he? You two can carry stuff. Dawn is the Birthday Girl. No labor for her."

"Yeah, I'm the Birthday Girl!" Dawn preened, fanning her freshly done nails languidly in front of her face and Spike stepped away from Xander, advancing on her. Cued by a fast explanation in the link, and he smirked.

"Isn't there some Yankee custom about - spankings?" Spike asked, and Dawn gaped at him for a moment before squeaking and jumping behind Tara.

"No! I mean, yes, but - I'm too old for that"

"Never too old, Dawnie!" Xander said gleefully, advancing from the other side and Dawn shrieked and darted towards the living room. Spike pounced and scooped her up - whirled her around and around until she was beating on his shoulders with her fists.

"Spike! I'm gonna hurl! Put me down!" Spike put her down immediately and took a step back.

"Don't do that, Bit -" Spike hated being around humans that were throwing up. It made him -
Queasy? You get queasy? HA! SO not the evil undead!

You'd get queasy too if you could hear it and smell it like I can, Spike grumped, and reached out to steady Dawn as she staggered a little, dizzy.

Love family, from Dawn, faint but there, and Spike froze for one second and then pulled Dawn close and hugged her.

"Many happy returns of the day, Bit."

"Thanks, Spike." Dawn stood up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek and then she slipped away, back to the kitchen were Tara was poking through bags and Willow was getting a drink. Anya was fiddling with a disposable camera and Spike realized she'd been taking pictures.

Oh great.

Gonna get me copies - lots and lots - giant size! Xander grinned at him from the kitchen doorway and Spike chose to ignore him - stalked past and grabbed his cigarettes.

"Time to go down to the fire, eh?" he said, just as Oz and
Derio came back in.

"Yeah, time...but... Dawn - I - I have a present for you but I couldn't wrap it or anything... You'll have to get it now." Xander's voice was shaky but Dawn didn't seem to notice. She grinned and bounced a little.

"Cool! Can't wrap it, that means it's a - what - a car? A motorcycle?"

"You wish! You're not even sixteen." Xander went over to her and took her hand, leading her to the porch door. Oz and Derio stepped back outside and everyone else followed the pair out.

"So? I can get a learners permit now!"

"Over my dead body," Spike mumbled, and Tara sent him a flashing smile. They were all on the porch now, and Xander went over to the statue - took the edge of the sheet in his hand and fiddled with it for a moment. The link was full of his unease - anticipation and nerves and a little fear.

"I hope - I hope that... I really just wanted to - " Spike! Help!
S'all right, love. Just get it over. You'll see. Xander nodded and pulled the sheet off, and there was a long, long silence.

Hurt, in the link, sharp and hard and Xander flinched, eyes miserable, but then beautiful beautiful lonely love family, and Dawn was hugging Xander, whispering into his neck.

"I love it, it's Buffy, it's Buffy, right? It's so beautiful, Xander, I love it, thank you..."

Told you.

Yeah. Thank god.

"Yeah, it's Buffy. I know - you really wanted something for - a marker or something..." Xander trailed off helplessly as Willow came up and hugged him as well.

"It's wonderful," Willow said, and Xander patted her back.

"It really is, Xander. You're s-so tal-ented."
"Thanks, Tara. Thanks, guys." Xander sniffed, and Spike just leaned on the doorjamb, smiling fondly at him. Anya was inspecting the figure closely and Spike could practically see dollar signs in her eyes.

*You are talented, you know. And...love you.*

*Love you too.* Xander sniffed again - gave Willow and Dawn a last squeeze and set them back a little. "Party time, okay? I'm glad you like it, Dawn, I really am. But let's go get sick on S'mores and hot dogs, okay?" Dawn sniffed too - wiped her eyes and grinned.

"Yeah, okay. And we'll all go skinny-dipping! Like witches do! I've always wanted to do that." Tara blushed, hiding a smile in her hair and Willow sniggered softly. Oz and Derio squeezed past Spike and gathered up the rest of the bags and Spike sniffed appreciatively at the faint odor of woodsmoke and sea that clung to them.

"What? Dawn! Have you no shame?" Xander grinned at her and they moved away, off the porch, heading for the beach. Everyone trailed behind, except for Spike, who stood smoking and looking at the figure.

*Coming, love?*
Just gonna wait for the Watcher.

Oh - all right. They ambled across the back lawn, silhouetted against a deep-plum sky. The first stars of the evening were faint pin-pricks and the new moon had just cleared the roof of the house. Spike reached inside the doorway and flicked off the porch-light, relaxing into the warm dark.

Family keeps growing. Have to keep alert - can't let them come to any harm. The demon surfaced briefly, scenting the air, reassuring itself that all was well.

Protect. Protect ALL

"Yeah, no worries there, mate." Spike walked down off the porch and circled the house, the grass cool under his bare feet. There were headlights coming down the street and Spike watched them - after a moment he identified the Watcher's Crisis-mobile. He smirked a little, watching it. As Giles pulled up to the curb and turned the engine off, Spike felt an insistent tickle of something. He froze, listening, feeling - and then Giles was climbing out of the car, looking uneasy, and the passenger door was opening. The demon snarled, and
Spike let it come, his body tense. The figure in the car hesitated and then stood slowly, and Spike felt his human self come back in utter shock.

"Bloody fucking hell! Angel?"

*I'll kill Red for this,* Spike thought, stopping the DeSoto with a jerk. He got out of the car and stomped around to Angel's side - yanked the door open and bodily hauled the other vampire out. Angel was drunk, and stank vaguely of something... Spike couldn't tell what, but it was pissing him off and setting the demon on edge.

"What're we doin' here? This isn'a...graveyard." Angel blinked, bewildered, at the trees and the rutted track that led upwards and Spike wanted to smack him.

"She's not in a graveyard, you git. Word gets out the Hellmouth is unprotected, what'll you think happens?" Angel looked at him and then around one more time.

"Somthin' bad?"
"Yeah - somethin' bad. C'mon. Maybe the walk'll sober you up." They went up the trail, Angel slithering and slipping in his city-shoes, catching his jacket on bushes and brambles. Spike cursed the entire way, keeping his voice low but making sure Angel heard every epithet he could think of.

Great lumbering bastard. If he'd actually given a shite he'd have come 'round long before this. Spike whirled abruptly on the path, glaring at Angel.

"Where the hell have you been anyway, you toff? You stink of something." Angel stopped and regarded Spike, panting a little. Christ he's drunk! Never does that, otherwise.

"We - we were inna - nother' dimension. 'Nother place. I could - could be in the sun, there..." Spike stared at him.

"Yeah? So why'd you come back?"

"Oh -" Angel waved his arm vaguely, reeling off-balance just a little. "They were gonna kill me. Kill...us."
"Figures. Everywhere you go, mate." Spike turned around and resumed walking, and in a few more minutes they came out into the open. The grave had sunk slightly, but the pansies and sweet woodruff planted on it covered that, as did the three-foot yew that Tara had put near the head. Spike made a 'go ahead' gesture at Angel and after a moment the other stumbled forward. He stood for a moment at the foot of the grave and then sank down. His shoulders hunched, and he seemed to shrink in on himself, shuddering. After a moment the strangled sounds coming from him made sense and Spike stared at the bowed shoulders.

*Daft bastard is actually crying! He'll never forget I saw this - if he actually remembers any of it come the dawn.* Spike shook his head and began a slow pacing around the perimeter of the clearing. He knew Angel really had loved the Slayer, but as far as Spike was concerned, he got no sympathy. When you loved someone you didn't just abandon them. Not if you really cared. He'd never have left Dru if she hadn't told him to go - told him he couldn't make her happy anymore. And she'd only come back to him because of Angel, so there was no blame there for turning her away that last time. But the Slayer... Xander had told him, what he'd seen in her soul. That she still loved the Irish git. That
she was just too afraid and too hurt to try again, but that she'd never stopped wanting him. And Angel had just tripped off to LaLa land and never even had the decency to try and make it work. Spike snorted, laughing at himself.

*And I'm not biased, oh no. But he thinks this will somehow...make up for it? It just adds another stroke of the flogger - another act of penance. If he couldn't wallow in misery he'd probably lay down and die.*

He could very faintly feel Xander in the link - feel the warmth of being in the midst of everyone - feel the happiness. He resented every second Angel was making him miss that - missing his family, the bastard, and missing the Bit's party. He hoped Xander had been able to explain it well enough so Niblet wouldn't be mad at him.

*Hurry up, you cunt,* Spike thought furiously, and stalked over to Angel, demon to the fore and snarling.

"Get up, Angel. We're leaving." Angel shuddered, head in hands, and Spike poked him with the toe of his boot. "You can do this in the car, although I'd rather you didn't. Or on the way back to L.A. But now it's time to
go. Bit's expecting me." Angel raised his head finally, and the pallid glow of the moon caught the tear-tracks on his face and turned them silver - showed his eyes like pits, sunk into his head.

"God - Spike - is there no pity in ya? No - compassion?"

"Not for you, Angel. You had time to fix things with the Slayer if you wanted but you didn't. Cry 'til you drown the world and she won't be comin' back. Too late for pity, and compassion's wasted on you." Angel's eyes were wide and his mouth worked, as if he would speak or spit or scream, and Spike glared back at him, knowing there was nothing in his demons-face that belied his words.

"She said - I was hurtin' her, Spike. Hurtin' her an' - I couldn't...see her suffer. Do ya understand, boy? I couldn'a..." Something in the link - something for just a moment; a pang of loss and sorrow, and Spike sighed heavily - bent down and hauled Angel to his feet.

"So you left and hurt her that way instead. Say goodbye, Angel. She's for the worms two months and more, and that's an end of it." Angel stared down at him - scrubbed
his face and pushed his hands back through his hair. Spike wanted to laugh at the wild disorder of the stiff strands but for once he didn't.

"Let me...jus' say..." Angel took a hard breath and looked down at the grave again, and Spike walked a few steps away, giving him the illusion of privacy. Angel's words were slurred with drink, but his voice cracked with the emotion behind them, and Spike silently conceded that what Angel was feeling was genuine.

*Doesn't matter, though. Her dyin' still broke all their hearts, and he's lucky it's just him and me. If he'd have tried to see the Bit...*

"I'm sorry, Buffy - so sorry, sweet lass... If I could'a changed ev'rythin' - I'd do it fer ya, sweetheart. Fergi' me, Buffy." Angel took another breath and then he turned around and walked away, heading back towards the trail and the car, and Spike followed him, both silent.

As they drove through Sunnydale Angel slumped in his seat, barely aware. Pulling up to the house he lifted his head and stared through the window - turned to face Spike.
"My car - s'at Giles' house."

"The walk'll do you good, Angel. Get out." Spike got out of the car and walked around it - watched Angel lever himself out of the seat and stand there. Faintly, they could both hear Derio's fiddle, and laughter, and the pop and hiss of the fire.

"My family's waiting for me, Angel. Go on back, now. Don't come here anymore."

"Spike -" Angel lifted a hand towards him and then let it fall limply to his side, and he nodded. Spike spun on his heel and strode away, heading towards the beach, and warmth, and family, his family. He brushed Angel out of his mind and leaped lightly down the sloping cliff-face, seeing Xander's face turn towards him, and Oz. Seeing anxiety melt to happiness and welcome, and he caught Xander's hand and pulled him into a kiss.

Later, when the moon was setting and everyone was quiet around the fire - talking softly and listening to Derio play a low, slow tune...Spike felt the static-shock frission of another vampire's presence. But he didn't look around for Angel, and after a while it was gone.
Alice Cooper - Blue Turk

The Damned - Jet Boy, Jet Girl

estupendo - amazing

muy hermoso - very beautiful

pendeja - asshole

3 Surprise

"I found out why Mr. Giles is acting weird." Everyone paused, and the fledge that Spike was eviscerating dangled, whimpering. Xander shoved his stake through
the fledge he'd tackled and stood up, brushing himself off. Oz patted the bit of tomb next to him in a 'come sit' gesture.

"Did you, Anya?"

"You mean it's not that he's a middle-aged British man all alone on the Hellmouth goin' barmy 'cause his almost-daughter is dead?" Spike looked at the wriggling fledge - looked back at the other three who were staring at him. "What?"

"Stake him, Spike. We need to know."

"Right, right." Spike turned back to the fledge and grinned. The fledge did his best to smile back but his guts were slipping towards his knees and he couldn't quite manage it. Spike fished around for a stake and a moment later he was dusting ash off his arm and slipping a straight razor and stake both back into their respective pockets. He walked over to the others, lighting a cigarette. Anya was perched on the tomb next to Oz now, and Xander was leaning beside her.

"So - what's the scoop?" Xander asked. Spike slid his arm around Xander's waist and leaned on him a bit, smiling to
himself when Xander automatically leaned back.

Mine and Pack and Family and Love a low and constant thrum in the link. Spike didn't much care about the Watcher acting funny, but Anya had come by the house earlier and said she wanted to come on patrol - wouldn't take no for an answer - and Spike was curious. For a change Dawn was home, being drilled by the witches on her American Lit make-up work. She had to pass the test this week and then she could go on to the next grade. She'd whined about it, but in the end had agreed summer school was better than repeating a year. Hell gods made it difficult to be scholarly.

"Well, about a week ago - right after Dawn's party - he got a letter. I couldn't find out who it was from - the address was all blurry - but when he read it he got very white and nervous and upset. He wouldn't tell me about it. Later, when I was pretending to dust the office I found the letter and read it and now... Here - see what you think." Anya pulled a battered envelope out of her pocket and held it out to Xander, who recoiled slightly.

"Whoa! Hey. Uh - maybe not, Anya. I mean - maybe it's family business, you know? I don't really wanna read the man's private mail."
"Well - you read it, Oz." Anya held the letter out again, and Oz slowly shook his head.

"Not good for the karma, Anya. I don't think so."

"Oh, bloody Hell!" Don't be such wankers! Spike snatched the letter out of Anya's hand and opened it - unfolded the single sheet and scanned it for a moment.

"My dear Ripper

Despite our best efforts, here I am, coming right back to you like a homing pigeon. Or maybe a bad penny? Something like that. You can't begin to imagine the things that have happened, and I have you to thank for most of them.

I'll be there soon, to tell you in person. And please don't try to warn me off or have your Slayer come after me. Things have...changed.

Your old friend,
"Huh. So, an old school mate or somthin' is comin' to visit -" Spike started, but he felt the sudden tension in the link and looked up from stuffing the letter back into the envelope.

"No - not an old school mate, Spike. A very powerful wizard. Or sorcerer - something. A powerful, pissed off wizard, sounds like." Xander was looking at Oz, his eyes filled with worry, and Oz was tapping one hand thoughtfully on his knee. Anya took the letter out of Spike's hand and studied it.

"I think I can make out the post-mark. It says Rio. Is that Brazil? Or is it Reno..." She squinted, holding it to the light. Xander was looking more unhappy by the minute and Spike leaned his chin on his shoulder, thumb stroking over Xander's hipbone.

"It's that bloke that made him a Fyarl demon, right?" Spike asked. He remembered the Watcher saying something about an old mate of his, but the name wouldn't come.
"Yeah - Ethan Rayne. He's been here a few times."

"Xander and Oz both fed bits of memory through the link - Halloween, the Band candy incident, the demon-turning. Buffy getting kidnapped and almost sacrificed to a vengeful god. Bits of things Giles had said, from time to time.

He's been busy.

"Last time he was here - the Initiative took him. Giles handed him over." The silent shock in the link at that made Xander twist around to look at Spike. Spike made no effort to control the growl that rattled up out of his chest, or the snarl that was curling his lip.

Deserves what he gets, then.

I don't - know. Ethan hurt a lot of people.

You don't sell out a mate. That was that, as far as Spike was concerned, and Xander turned back to Anya, troubled. Spike sighed and reached up to stroke his fingers through Xander's hair.

"All I know is that it's making Giles act weird. He hardly
says a word, he won't discuss the sales or the stock or the money, which is just not right! I mean - how am I supposed to acquire new things if he won't look over the catalogues and approve my choices?" Anya shoved the now very crumpled letter into her jacket-pocket, scowling. "I know he only does it to humor me but it's big part of our working relationship! I pretend I care about his choices and he pretends he has any control over what I buy. It's a perfect system and it's all coming crashing down around me! I think Giles is going to leave." At this point, Anya burst into tears and they all stared at her. After a moment Xander moved a little closer and patted her knee, and Oz laid his arm over her shoulders. They both tried to calm her down, but Anya just buried her face in her hands and wailed. Spike fished out a smoke and lit it, and then took out his flask.

_Oz, what...?_

_Dunno. She's all - wigged..._ Spike uncapped his flask and took a long drink, then he stepped in front of Anya and tapped her gently on the head.

"Here, pet, have a snort." Anya shuddered and lifted her head, looking up at Spike with swollen eyes.
Spike!

Best cure for hysterics, love.

"Oh god, I really need to get drunk." Anya grabbed the flask and tipped it up, gulping whiskey like water and Spike grinned in admiration. After a moment she lowered it and wiped her mouth.

"Drake asked me to marry him."

"What!?" Double chorus from Xander and Oz, and Spike merely took the flask back and took another hit.

"Ookay... We really need to talk. What say we hit the Bronze and get comfortable, huh?"

Splendid idea, pet. Knew there was a reason I loved you.

You and me both, Oz added, and Xander laughed, helping Anya down from the tomb.

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"Spill. Why do you think Giles is going to leave and what
about Drake?" Xander put Anya's Highball down in front of her, and put three beers down for everybody else. They were in a far back corner, as private as you could get at the Bronze, and Anya took a long drink and then sighed.

"Okay. About Giles. He's just acting so...nervous, all the time. Like he's hiding something." Beside him, Spike snorted and Xander reached out blindly and put a hand on his knee.

"Well, did you think he might be tryin' to hide that letter? Or maybe - tryin' to figure out how to keep this Rayne bloke from comin' after him?" Spike tipped his beer up and took a long drink and Anya matched him.

"Maybe. But - it's more like...like he's planning something he knows we won't like. It's really very irritating."

"I don't think Giles would just leave, Anya. I mean - even if Ethan Rayne were coming back here, I think he'd - he'd stick around. That guy was never a match for Giles before. Probably he's just worried that if we find out, we'll be - upset."
"Or he's too far gone to act normal." Xander looked over at Oz and sighed, and nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Maybe so. He -"

Drinks at work, Oz thought, and they all sat in silent contemplation of that for a moment while Anya shredded her napkin.

Maybe that's what he's hiding. We'll - go see him. Something. Okay? Spike's enthusiasm was minimal, but he silently agreed, sighing. Xander squeezed his leg gently in thanks. Spike's own free hand slithered over and did the same, resting comfortably on his thigh.

"Okay, Anya - tell us about this marriage thing." Anya wadded her napkin up and tapped her fingernails on her glass.

"You guys know Drake, right?"

"Well - sorta." Xander glanced at Spike, who shrugged, and at Oz who nodded. "I mean, we've all met him but - you don't bring him around much." Drake was a med student Anya had met while visiting Joyce in the
hospital. He seemed nice, and Spike had certified him human, but he was as clueless as the rest of the citizens when it came to the Hellmouth.

"Well, of course not! The last thing I need is for him to see some sort of demonic hanky-panky or have Willow loose some weird spell on him that turns him into a goat or something. I'm trying to live a human life."

"Should probably move away from here then, ducks," Spike said, draining the rest of his beer.

"Yes, I probably should. But I'm making a lot of money here and I'm - I'm happy. I have friends - I have a family, sort of. It's comforting." Anya took another drink and dabbed at her eyes with a fresh napkin. Her mascara had run and she leaned over at Oz's gesture and let him tidy it for her.

"Thanks, Oz. Anyway, after all that mess with Glory, when I got hurt and Buffy got dead, I started thinking. I'm mortal now! All my squishy innards are very vulnerable! And my chances of being hit by a car or a bolt of lightning or a - a falling airplane engine are - well - disturbing."
Airplane engine, pet?

Donnie Darko, remember?

Oh, right. Spike snorted softly and lit a cigarette, and Xander focused on Anya again.

"Okay, so - I get that you're worried about - being mortal. But - what's that have to do with Drake and getting married?"

"Xander! I'm a Vengeance Demon! Former Vengeance Demon. I know what men are like. I know how they try to justify their actions and - and make excuses. I know exactly how low and despicable and conniving they can be." Anya gulped the last of her drink and raised her hand, signaling a waitress with a jangling of bracelets.

"But, Anya -"

"Don't try to deny it, Xander! You men are all alike. Tell somebody you love them, and that you want to spend forever with them and then - a nice piece of ass walks by and it's 'C'mon, nobody can see us up on the roof of the Magic Box.'" There was a long pause and Xander turned slowly to look at Spike, who looked back with the wide
eyes of a Japanese manga character.

You TOLD her-

Well, not exactly -

"Except they can hear you up there, and really Xander, did you think nobody would notice -"

"Right, okay, stop." Xander took a gulp of beer and glared at Oz, who was laughing helplessly into the bowl of free popcorn.

Oh god.

Yeah, that's what you said -

OZ. Xander leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Anya... Do you love Drake?" He sat up and tried to ignore the steady creep of Spike's hand from thigh to groin.

"Well -I think I do. I mean - he makes me feel all warm and...safe and...real. But what if it's not? Real, I mean?" Anya took her fresh drink from the waitress and downed a huge swallow. "What if - if he's just stringing
"Why would he do that?" Xander put his hand on Spike's to keep it from wandering higher. Spike gave him a sly, sideways glance and started to knead the muscle there. Xander twitched.

"Well, I don't know! Why do men do any of the things they do? I'm starting to wonder if being gay is the answer." Anya bolted the rest of her drink and looked sadly down into the empty glass.

Don't even go there, Xander thought, and Spike smirked at him and looked around for the waitress.

"I'm sorry, Anya - I really can't help you on the Drake-thing. You either love him or you don't and - you're the only one who really knows." Anya held her glass up as Spike's tissue-thin patience shredded and he stood up, heading for the bar.

"Get me another, 'k, Spike? That's the lamest advice ever, you know." Anya glared at Xander and he recoiled ever so slightly.

"Uh - sorry. Maybe Oz has some sort of Zen thing to tell
Anya trained her glare on Oz, who coughed and took a second sip of his beer.

"Anya..." There was a long pause while Oz contemplated his inner Buddha or something. Even Spike had paused, waiting. Finally, Oz looked up at her. "I've got nothin' here. Sorry." Anya rolled her eyes.

"Jesus, you guys are lame. How is it that you're all so - so happy? You don't have a clue."

"It's the amazing sex, love," Spike said, and eeled away through the crowd, heading for the bar. Xander felt himself slowly blushing under Anya's frankly speculative gaze.

"Xander -"

"No. Whatever it is, no."

"Oz -"

"Anya?" The werewolf looked steadily at her, laughter and fondness in the link.

"Is the sex amazing?"
"Yup." Anya reached over and picked up Oz's beer - took a long sip. "The sex with Drake is amazing. He gives me absolutely wonderful orgasms."

"Here's to Drake," Xander mumbled, tipping his beer towards Anya just a little and then taking a hasty swallow.

"Yeah..." Anya sighed happily, staring vaguely into space with a small smile lifting the corners of her mouth. She looked -

*Looks happy. Think this guy is the one?*

*Might be,* Oz shrugged, and then his eyes flashed to something over Xander's shoulder and Xander felt a sudden flare of irritation in the link from Spike.

"What is it?" Xander asked, turning, and there was Spike, stalking back over to them with a bottle of whiskey and some shot-glasses, and there was -

"Hello, Scoobies," the Buffybot said.

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"And that's 'nother thing," Anya said. She was perched up on a stool at one of the little tables near the pool tables, and she's shed her windbreaker and was attracting admiring glances from the college-boy crowd. Xander had to admit that in her low-rise jeans and baby-tee, she looked pretty hot.

Hot as me? Spike made an exaggerated move at the pool table, leaning over a little further than necessary to make his shot and Xander let his gaze wander over the lean lines of shoulder, rib, buttock and thigh.

Nothing's as hot as you, love. Spike smirked to himself and cocked his head at the table, studying his next shot. The 'bot stood to one side, frowning.

"Don't I get to play?"

"Still my shot, innit?" Spike lined up another and the 'bot watched avidly.

"Xander!" Anya brought her hand down hard on the table and Xander jumped a little and turned back to her.

"I'm sorry - what were you saying?"
"I was saying... Willow."

"Willow?" Xander resisted the urge to scan the crowd. Oz came back from a bathroom break, hand trailing over Xander's shoulder and arm as he passed, settling onto the stool next to Anya.

"Yes, Willow. Your little witchy friend. She's been acting weird, too." Anya poured out two shots and looked over at Spike.

"Hey! Spike! C'mon and drink this." She'd been matching Spike shot for shot and Xander was frankly amazed at her head for liquor. Spike was delighted. Oz had stopped after his first beer and was on water now, and Xander had been nursing his second along for the past hour.

More fun to drink with somebody.

Sorry, Spike, I'm just not a shots-doin' kinda guy.

"Don't care," Spike murmured, slipping up behind him and kissing the side of his neck.
"You're a vampire-doin' kinda guy. That's better." He reached around and grabbed his glass - downed it with a twist of his wrist at the same moment that Anya did. They both smacked their glasses down and Spike curled around Xander for a whiskey-sour kiss. Somehow, Xander mused, closing his eyes and giving in to Spike's strong, cool mouth - somehow, whiskey tasted good when it was mixed with Spike.

"You taste good too," Spike broke the kiss and smiled at him - then whirled around at the clack of pool balls rebounding off each other.

"Oi! That's not your shot!"

"But I haven't had a shot. It's boring to just watch." The 'bot pouted and Spike strode over to argue with it as Xander smirked. Spike couldn't win with the 'bot, because its logic was so convoluted - and its gaps in logic so bizarre - that arguments ended up a Gordian knot of cross-purposes and confusion. But Spike liked any sort of fight he could get.

"What about Willow?" Oz was saying, and Xander turned back to Anya.
"She's been at the shop a lot. And not in a good 'here let me help you make money' way. She digs around and gets into Giles' 'special' books and bugs me about weird herbs and stuff. She says she wants to do up some spells that'll help with patrol and I told her - you guys can patrol just fine. Giles doesn't really notice 'cause he, you know -" Anya made a sort of tipping-up-a-glass gesture and Xander sighed. Giles' drinking wasn't exactly out of hand, but it was worrying.

*Need to stop it.*

*Not as bad as it seems, love* Spike thought, and under that was the thought - and a legitimate thought - that Xander's concern was colored by his own childhood experiences.

*He's more grown-up then they'll ever be. No need to...make any accusations just yet.*

*It's not good, though,* Oz interjected, and Xander was grateful that Oz agreed with him. He had the sneaking suspicion that Spike would rather leave the Watcher to his own devices, despite the truce they'd managed. But he couldn't - wouldn't - do that to Giles. He cared for the man more then he'd ever thought he would, and the past
year had forged a bond.

*Know I'll do whatever you want,* Spike grumbled.

*I know. Love you.* The 'bot bent over the pool table and lined up a shot - drew back and drove the cue forward with a vengeance and the cue ball flew through the air and crashed into a pitcher of beer. As beer and glass went everywhere, the three boys whose drinks and jeans had just been ruined surged up, furious. The 'bot watched them approach, its head a little to one side. Spike stepped in front of the advancing trio.

"New to the game, mates - doesn't know her own strength."

"I've got glass in my hand, you jerk! Somebody is gonna pay for the beer and for my trip to the ER!" The boy was at least eight inches taller than Spike, and built like a truck. Spike grinned up at him and popped a cigarette out of his pack - lit it.

"She'll say she's sorry, maybe." Spike's grin was feral, his body seemingly at ease, leaning on his pool cue. But Xander could feel the gleeful anticipation. He reached over and grabbed Spike's duster.
"Well, fuck. Let's move up to the catwalk, huh Anya? Stuff's gonna get messy down here."

"What?" The shots seemed to be catching up with Anya finally and she looked bleary - ready to pass out.

"On second thought - why don't we get you home?" Oz slipped off his stool and caught Anya under the arm as she swayed. There was a crash and Xander looked back over at Spike, who had just tossed truck-boy into a table full of similar boys. They all sprawled and rolled and gaped, and then were up and swarming towards the vampire en masse. Spike flicked his cigarette aside and launched himself straight into them. The 'bot just watched, her 'harm no humans' programming holding true.

*Spike! Jeez.*

*Go on up, pet. Be done in a bit.*

*Chaos malice older than* in the link as the demon roared and surged to the surface, although Spike deliberately kept his human face on. Oz was leading Anya away and Xander hurried to catch up, fighting the lemming-like
flow of patrons who were swarming to watch the fight. He dug his keys out of his pocket and handed them over.

"We'll be home soon. You need any help?"

"Nah, we're fine." Oz took the keys and grinned - caught Anya as she stumbled and sketched a little wave at Xander. Xander grinned back and watched them go out - bounded up the stairs and leaned there on the railing, watching Spike whale on anything and everything in reach. Xander wondered how long it would take until Spike got bored. One way to make sure it wasn't too long.

You're so fuckin' hot when you do that. Like a dance. But... Xander fed an image or three into the link. Like that kind of dancing better. Down on the floor, Spike jumped up onto the pool table and kicked someone in the head, and then glanced up at Xander, golden eyes unerringly finding him, human teeth flashing in a smirk. The momentary distraction was enough for some unlucky guy to get in a sweep of a pool cue behind the knees and Spike went down, rolling expertly and lashing out again with the steel-toed Doc.
*Nasty little brat - that hurt. Gonna make you sorry.*

*Promise?* Another image or two - rope, this time, and Spike's straight-razor - and the fight was over in minutes. Spike grabbed the 'bot and shoved her towards the door, whispering something urgently in her ear and she nodded and strode out. Xander met Spike at the bottom of the stairs and Spike grabbed him and kissed him hard - drew blood with a sharp nip and scratched his nails down Xander's back.

"Let's get you home then," Spike whispered, and his eyes and the link promised that Xander would be pretty damn sorry, in the best possible way, for most of the night. Xander held out the duster for him to slip on and smoothed the shoulders - snaked his arm around Spike's waist.

"Let's," he agreed.

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They didn't make it home right away, though. Xander couldn't keep the lingering worry and speculation about Giles out of his mind and Spike finally gave in.
"All right, love - let's go over and see what the bloody Watcher's up to, shall we?" Xander's abstracted look flashed immediately to a smile and Spike couldn't help but pull him into a quick, hard hug and kiss.

*Love that, that smile. Just for me. Love you.*

*Love you too. Thanks, Spike...*

"You'll make it up to me," Spike murmured, quick nibble of teeth over the claim scar and Xander shivered, smiling.

They changed direction and walked on to Giles' place, and Spike lit up as they came to the edge of the parking lot. There was something...different. Xander slowed, watching him.

"What is it?"

"I dunno, it's -"  *Something... Ripper's doin' some mojo maybe, or...* The feeling was like little tendrils of heat - of cobweb fire - and it shivered over Spike's skin and made the hairs on his neck stand up. The demon wanted out and Spike let it, concentrating. Beside him he could feel Xander tensing as the sensation translated through the
link. The hyena stirred as well, on guard and nervous. Xander's blunter senses picked it up on their own a moment later and he stopped walking completely.

"That's -"

"That's warding magic. Only whoever's doing it is -"

*Sloppy*

*Yeah. Not in control*  They advanced cautiously and the sensation got stronger as they approached Giles' place; ratcheting up to the distinctly unpleasant feeling of being attacked by brambles, or maybe bees. Xander was fighting the hyena - it wanted to attack something or run - and the demon wasn't doing much better.

*Fuckin' bloody magic-users, THIS is why I hate this shite.* Spike pounded on Giles' door, snarling, and just managed to resume his human face when the lock rattled and Giles peered out at them through a six-inch crack.

"Spike. And Xander? What are you two doing here? It's late."
"What in bloody hell -" Spike snapped, but Xander's hand on his arm stopped him and he subsided, smoking furiously.

"Giles, we wanted to talk to you about something. It's - kind of important."

"I really can't talk at all right now, Xander. It would be - be much better if you came by in the morning." Giles started to shut the door and the thin thread of restraint snapped. Spike surged forward and jammed his foot in the door - shouldered it open, nearly clocking the Watcher in the face with the edge of the door.

"Don't be playing silly buggers, Watcher. We can feel whatever the hell you're doing in here." Giles gave ground, scowling, and Xander came tentatively in behind Spike, shutting the door.

"Damnit, Spike, get out! This is none of your business -"

"Ripper?" The voice was cracked - weak - and Giles snapped his mouth shut and glared at them - turned to look up the stairs.
"It's all right, Ethan. Just - just some -"

"Just his bloody brothers in arms, eh, Watcher? Oi! Show yourself!"

*Spike, come on!* Xander's hand was under the duster, rubbing at the small of his back and Spike tried to calm down. But the magic was making him - *darkspace no way out can't TRUST them hide hide hide* in stuttering jolts that were making him lose his equilibrium and his control.

*Spike! Stop - safe, you're safe, calm down - I'm here, I'm here, Spike - calm calm...* Spike turned blindly and groped for Xander - seized shirt and bicep in a trembling grip and just held on, his forehead to Xander's shoulder.

*Tell him shut it down - fuck, please -* Xander was saying something, rapid and urgent, the soldier getting in control and telling Giles in no uncertain terms what to do. After a bit - and Spike couldn't tell how long it took - the sizzling nastiness of the ward seemed to alter - to twist into something else - and abruptly Spike and Xander were inside it, rather then battering against it and the discord vanished. Spike straightened slowly, shuddering, and Xander was rubbing the back of his neck
gently, holding him close and murmuring in his ear. He could hear the Watcher upstairs somewhere, and he opened his eyes - *when did I close them?* and looked at his boy.

"All right now?" Xander asked, and Spike nodded uncertainly.

"Guess so. Fuckin' mojo -"

"Spike - I could feel it too, but it wasn't - it wasn't so bad. Why did that happen?" Spike unclenched his fist from Xander's shirt - rubbed his hand over his face.

"I - dunno. Felt like...like when Glory did that mind-eating thing. Like - when Glinda-witch was all - upset. Felt like that." Xander's eyes were wide with anxiety and the link held fear - held a long note of worry and question that was distinctly Oz and Spike shook his head and looked at Xander.

"Better - better call the wolf. Dunno if he'll hear us good enough. Tell him it's okay." Xander slid his hand around a little, so his thumb could feather lightly over Spike's cheek, and Spike leaned into that caress for a moment.
"Okay. I'll call him. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Okay now." Spike nodded and Xander finally moved over to the phone. As he dialed the number and then talked quietly to Oz, Spike pulled out his flask and drained it.

_Fucking mojo...fucking hell-bitch, what'd she DO to me? Damnit..._ A noise from above made him look up and there was the Watcher, his face a mask of rage. And there was - somebody else. Skeletally thin, dark-haired, dark eyes sunk deep into their sockets. Some trousers and an oxford shirt of the Watcher's hanging off of him.

"William the Bloody, I presume?" the man said, in that wavering, smashed-glass voice.

"Ethan Rayne," Spike said back, lifting an eyebrow.

"My fame precedes me, I see." The other man leaned heavily on Giles as they came slowly down the stairs and Spike settled onto one of the Watcher's bar stools. Xander hung up the phone and they watched in silence as the two got to the bottom of the stairs and paused for a moment so that Ethan could rest. Giles' mouth was set in a thin, tight line that spoke volumes
about his mental state. His eyes were so utterly cold and furious Spike felt the demon rising to the challenge and crushed it back. But his hands on the other man's arm and back were gentle and sure, and he guided Ethan to a seat in a padded chair. Ethan sat with a sigh of relief and Giles patted his shoulder and then moved briskly into the kitchen, getting the kettle.

"Since I doubt very much you two will just go away, I'm going to make tea. And I don't want to hear a word out of either of you until we've all had a cup. Is that clear?"

"Sure, Giles," Xander breathed, and Spike hunted out a cigarette.

"No bloody smoking, Spike."

"It's smoke or talk, mate. You choose." Giles shot him a frustrated glare, but then shook his head and turned back to assembling the tea-things, and Spike lit up.

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"So it was you that destroyed the Initiative, then," Ethan said, and the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth
was every bit as malicious as the one that Spike wore.

"How on earth -? That's ridiculous, Ethan -" Giles sputtered in confusion, but Ethan held up a trembling hand, and Xander could see a ring of scars around his thin wrist - a deep wound that had healed badly, and not very long ago.

"Was easy, mate. I had - this bloke make up a spell for me. Loosed it on the bastards the last time they were in town." Spike was pacing restlessly and he made a sudden dive for the kitchen, slamming cabinets, and coming back into the living room in triumph, a bottle of scotch in his hand.

"Spike, damnit, that's -"

"I'll buy you another Giles, okay? Please?" Xander tried to make Giles understand, without saying anything, that Spike was about to go off the rails and anything that calmed him down would be a relief. He didn't know if it was the ward-magic still, or simply Ethan Rayne, who projected an air of seething wrongness, but where his own nerves where on edge Spike's were -

*Calm down, love, please? We'll get out of here soon, I*
promise.

Sorry, love, sorry, sorry, Spike perched on a stool and took a huge swallow of the scotch - eyed the bottle and took another while Giles grit his teeth.

"How did you manage to wipe out the Initiative in Brazil, Spike?" Giles asked, his voice thick with skepticism.

"It was a fetch. It was infected. A bit of mojo'd virus, so there wouldn't be any way to fight it. Sent the fetch in and anybody it touched, they got it. Then - just a matter of time. They passed it on to the rest, like bloody dominoes, didn't they? But you -" Spike looked at Ethan, who bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. Spike hissed, the demon flickering out and back, and Ethan leaned away a little.

"You weren't infected, were you? Mage like you -"

"I was, actually - which is why I haven't - recovered, as well as I should. I was fairly weak when I got sick, so it was difficult for me to fight it. But once the soldiers and doctors were so ill that their....work....was halted, I recovered enough equilibrium to... Well, not to cure myself, because I wasn't that strong, but to engineer an
escape. Did you know, the local demon population found out about what was happening there? They got into the installation in the final days. It was -"

The man paused, and Xander shivered at the look of pure hatred and vicious satisfaction that crossed his face. "It was quite delightfully chaotic. There was even a vampire there - a most extraordinary creature, called herself Drusilla. She was quite - fascinating." Spike perked up, grinning.

"You saw Dru? She said she knew about what happened...what, she came in there?"

"Oh my, yes. Seemed a few of her - get had been captured, and she wanted them back. I'm afraid they were quite useless at that point. She drained them instead. She told me - she was going up to the City of Angels - that she had someone to find. Did she come here?"

"Oh, yeah. Had a little talk. She's gone off now, though," Spike drank again and Xander watched the emotions on Giles' face - horror and anger warring with what Xander was pretty sure was years of Watcher training, that wanted him to get out a journal and take notes.
"So you killed - hundreds of innocent people, Spike -"

"Innocent my ass, Ripper, and I think you know the difference. After what they did to your mate, here, you still give a bloody damn? Oh - wait. You turned your mate over to them. That earn you some points with your fuckin' Council of Wankers?" Giles opened his mouth to say something, furious, and then he stopped, looking over at Ethan. The anger was still there, but so was something else - something wistful and sad and regretful, and Xander remembered what Giles had said, out in the desert. He'd never regretted Ethan, just the things they'd got up to.

Should go, love. Leave them alone, get away from - whatever this is.

Fine by me. Spike stood abruptly and Giles did as well, moving between him and Ethan.

"Calm down, Watcher. Time we were gone."

"Giles -" Xander wasn't sure what to say, but he felt like he had to say something. He wanted to help Giles - he wanted to let him know it was okay. "Giles, we came by
because we've been - worried about you -"

"Not me, mate,"

*Spike.* "I have, and Oz and Anya - probably the rest, although we didn't - didn't have time to really talk. You've just been - we just wanted to know if you were okay." Giles took his furious gaze off of Spike and turned it on Xander, where it softened to one of weariness.

"I'm - sorry, Xander. I don't mean to be so - harsh. But these past few months have been - been very hard and... Now Ethan is here and I - I have some thinking to do. I may - leave Sunnydale." Xander stared at him - felt as if he'd been punched, and barely registered Spike's fingers brushing over his wrist and twining with his own.

"Leave? But - you can't! We - Giles -"

"It's really - not the time, Xander. I can't - talk about this right now. It's late and I'm tired and I know that Ethan is exhausted. Can we just - finish this later?" Suddenly Giles seemed - so old, and Xander noticed that there were lines of pain around his mouth - around his eyes. New grey in his dark hair that hadn't been there
before.

*God, he's old and he's - he looks so defeated. Damnit, when did -? Spike, let's go, we need to -*

*Be all right, pet...* Hard squeeze of Spike's hand in his and Xander blinked.

"All right. We'll go. But Giles - we have to talk. You're not going to just - skip out of here. We all need to sit down and talk. I know it's hard - I miss her too. But - you're still needed here." Giles smiled faintly - reached out and squeezed his shoulder briefly, ignoring Spike's automatic snarl.

"I promise we won't slip away like gypsies in the night, Xander. But things are - different now. I'm not sure I can stay here..." He trailed away into silence and then shook his head - took a deep breath and dredged up something like a real smile.

"Time for all this another day, eh? When Ethan is a bit stronger and we've all had time to think. We'll have a meeting, all right? At the Magic Box. Tell Anya I'm going to take a couple of days off and then - we'll talk about this."
"Okay." Xander smiled back at Giles, glad that the older man was willing to talk to them. "I'd do anything for you, to help. You know I would and Oz, too. And I can talk Spike around to your side, if you give me time." Xander grinned at the mental curses, but Spike didn't contradict him and the look of surprise and then astonished pleasure on Giles' face made up for the foul mood Spike was probably going to be in.

"Thank you, Xander. I - we appreciate that."

"As always, you take matters into your own hands. But this time you're right, my dear Ripper. Your - trust - is appreciated..."

"I don't know if it's trust so much as - I'm pretty sure between Spike, me, and the rest of my pack - you wouldn't be able to do much." Xander let the hyena surface - let it stare into the fever-hectic eyes of the mage that huddled in Giles' chair and was rewarded by a flinch.

"I see. No matter. Not being hung from the nearest tree on sight is good enough for me. A pleasure to meet you both, I'm sure."
"Not fuckin' likely," Spike muttered, and he turned and walked to the door, towing Xander along in his wake, the bottle still clenched in his fist.

"Good night, Xander,"

"Yeah - 'night, Giles. Take care." They were out the door - up the stairs - half a block away before Spike's stride slowed to something approaching normal and he gave a great shudder, the demon to the fore for a moment and then gone.

"Bloody hell. That was fuckin' nasty."

"Yeah." Xander rubbed the back of Spike's neck, squeezing the muscles there that fairly crackled with tension.

"He wasn't like that, when he was selling us costumes. That was -"

"He was leakin' magic all over the place. Lost some of his control, I guess, bein' sick. Or whatever they did to him. He smelled - off. Smelled sick." Sense-memory, in the link, and Xander wrinkled his nose.
"I thought that was just - old-guy smell or something. Wonder if he'll get better?"

"Dunno. Don't much care." Spike drained the last of the scotch and sent the bottle winging end over end, to crash into a wall above a dumpster. "What I do care about is a promise somebody made to me, earlier tonight." Spike looked over at Xander, eyes half-shut and his mouth curling in a leering sort of smirk and the want need MINE that slammed into the link left him breathless - sent a giddy flush of heat over him. He felt himself hardening and Spike yanked him close - threaded fingers through his hair and pulled his head to the side.

"Gonna keep your promise?" he whispered, lips and tongue and teeth just feathering over Xander's neck, and Xander grabbed belt-loop and buttock and jerked Spike hard against him.

"Fuck yeah, I'm keepin' it,"

"Good," Spike murmured, and bit. He barely took any blood at all, but Xander's arousal spiraled upwards like a rocket and Spike licked a quick path up his neck - grabbed his hand again and pulled him into a jog.
"Let's go then, love - time's a' wasting."

"Right with you," Xander said, and they headed home, leaving the worries and the troubles of their visit to Giles behind, for the night.

But it'll still be there tomorrow. Life on the Hellmouth just doesn’t get any easier.

4 Exposed

Another meeting at the Magic Box. I think I've had about enough of these. Xander sat in his truck, looking unenthusiastically out at the shop. He could see Anya inside, and Willow bent over a book.

I know, love, Spike thought, and Xander pulled his key out the ignition. Spike had been here for half the day, helping Anya wrestle some stock around and keeping Dawn entertained when she got out of school. He was pleased with his new freedom to roam Sunnydale via the tunnels and sewers, and Xander had asked Tara to put a warding spell on the underground entrance down in their cellar, just in case.

Wonder what Giles will say? Do you think - he won't
bring Ethan, will he?

*Might do.* Spike came out of the training room and walked as close to the windows as he could, staying back from the last, slanting light of the setting sun. *Come in, love. Miss you.*

*Yeah…coming.* Xander slid out of the truck and locked it, then went slowly inside. Spike slipped his arm around him and kissed him and his mouth was warm and sweet from the cherries he and Dawn had been sharing.

*She can get the stone right into the bin, 'bout every time.* Xander broke away from him, laughing.

"Is that what you spent all afternoon doing, teaching Dawn how to spit cherry pits?"

"I got her to admit that Siouxsee can sing. We read some, too." Spike's tone was aggrieved but his eyes danced with laughter and Xander had to pull him in for another kiss.

*Taste good. Have to get some of those for home.*

*Mmmm...yeah...* The link went X-rated and Xander
scratched his nails down Spike's back - pulled away again as the doorbell jangled. An older woman and her daughter edged around the two, eyeing them with something that looked like disgust and Xander felt the blush coming over his face.

"Can't wait to get you home," Spike said, loud and clear, and the woman jumped a little and shepherded her daughter away. Xander tugged at Spike's waistband and they both walked down the short flight of steps to the table where Willow was scowling over a thick book. Its pages were spotted with black spots of mildew and she handled them with the tips of her fingers.

"This is so gross. Giles needs some sort of - of air-tight box for these books. Or one of those rooms like they have in those cigar shops? Oh! Maybe we could make an air-tight bubble around one of the bookshelves..." Willow stared off into space, obviously contemplating some sort of spell and Xander settled uneasily next to her.

*Probably suck us all into a vacuum or something,* Spike grumbled, and Xander grinned at him.

"Can you two please not engage in foreplay during
"business hours?" Anya scolded, coming out from behind the counter. "As a rule, Magic Box customers are open-minded and tolerant, but we still get the occasional anal-retentive homophobe." Behind her, the woman who'd given them the eye stiffened and shot a narrow-eyed glare at Anya. The ex-demon, oblivious, turned around and smiled brightly.

"Hello! And how can I help you spend your money today?" Spike snickered as she bustled away, herding her customers towards the other end of the shop. He leaned on the back of Xander's chair, his hands in Xander's hair with that familiar, comforting touch that Xander loved best. He sighed and smiled, feeling his eyes close just a little, and Willow shot a considering look at him.

"Do you know why Giles wanted to have a meeting, Xander?"

"Hmmm? Oh - not...not really, Willow. Why?"

"Just wondering. He hasn't been around much lately. I tried calling him yesterday but he wasn't answering... Do you think he's all right?"
"I - think he's fine, Willow. I mean - this has all been pretty hard on him but I think he's...getting better."

"You mean, getting over Buffy being dead." Xander sat up at that and looked at Willow, who had an odd expression on her face - something between anger and excitement.

"I don't think he's - well, maybe he is, Wills, but -"

"Man has a right to live his life, Red. He can't be in mourning forever."

"What do you know about it? You didn't even care when she died -"

"Of course he did!" Dawn stood in the doorway to the training room, her expression one of shock and anger. "He didn't cry or - or make a scene but he was sad!"

"Dawn - I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you." Willow's look was pleading, but then she glanced back at Spike and it hardened. "But Spike -"

"Don't finish that, witch." Spike's voice was cold - very
soft - and Xander reached back and found Spike's hand -
gripped it fiercely.

*Don't, don't* - *Spike-love, don't...*

"Or what, Spike? You'll - you'll bite me?" The hiss that
came from behind him made Xander go cold and he
stood up fast.

"Guys -"

"I won't touch you, witch - you're Xander's and you’re
the Bit's and they come first. But you're pushing them
away with your...jealousy." Willow's eyes went wide, but
her face flushed a dull red, and Xander winced
inside. *Fuck, he might be right...* The bell jangled -
someone coming in or the customers fleeing, Xander
couldn't tell

"Jealous? I'm not - not jealous of you, Spike. I just don't
trust you! None of us should. I don't care what Xander
says he can see in you - you're just a demon! Buffy never
" Dawn was striding over from the training room, her
mouth open in shock but her hands bunched into
fists. *Anger sorrow*, in the link, strong and sharp.
"Willow? What's wrong, honey?" It was Tara that had come in, bag of books over her shoulder and an expression of confusion on her face. Willow turned sharply at her voice and seemed to slump, deflating.

"Oh, Tara, I - I just... Things are just so... They wouldn't be like this if - if Buffy were here." Willow sank down into her chair, the tears finally flowing, and Tara stepped up to her, bending down and hugging her, whispering in her ear. She glanced up at the others, puzzled, and Xander shook his head - turned and shooed Spike and Dawn away, back to the training room. *Anger* still, from Dawn, but it was fading, replaced with sorrow - with confusion.

"What the hell was that about?" Xander asked once they'd gone into the training room. He turned a questioning look on Dawn and Spike. Spike just shrugged and crossed to where his duster was hung over the horse. He pulled out his cigarettes and lit up, and Xander looked at Dawn.

"She's just been - really on edge, lately. She thinks Giles is going to go back to England and - it's really bugging her." Dawn glanced over at Spike, *Hurt* fear in the link. She lowered her voice, but Xander knew Spike
would still be able to hear her. "And she doesn't like me spending so much time at your house."

"Why fucking not? Nothing wrong with you comin' round - you've got your own room an' all! What's that bloody girl thinking?" Spike bristled instantly and Xander sent calm through the link.

"What's wrong with you being at our house, Dawn?" Dawn looked at the floor, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"She says...that...I should spend more time with..."

"With what, Niblet? With her?" Spike had come up and put his hand on Dawn's back, rubbing gently, and Dawn glanced up at him, her eyes bright with tears.

"Don't get mad, Spike! I don't want you guys to fight, please? I hated it when Mom and Dad fought and - you guys are the only family I have anymore and if you can't be friends I - I don't know what I'll do!" Fear again, and something like panic, and Spike looked to be at a total loss, rubbing Dawn's back but glancing at Xander for some sort of help. He pinched his cigarette out, putting the butt in his pocket.
"It's okay, Dawn - I promise that we won't fight," Xander said, shooting a look at Spike. *No fighting!* "Don't worry about what Willow said, okay? We'll talk to her about it. It's not your problem." Dawn sniffed - rubbed the back of her hand over her eyes.

"I just - she said I should hang out with...regular people." Spike's hand stopped its soothing motion and rage flared in the link, strong enough to bring the hyena up and out. Dawn was staring at Xander as he fought for control - fought the hyena back and grabbed Spike's arm as he strode past.

*Spike -do NOT.* *You can't - do anything.* It was the demon that turned back, snarling, and Xander yanked him even closer - wrapped his arms around Spike and just held him. *Don't, don't love - don't think about it, don't do anything.* *Dawn's freaking out, just calm down.* Spike's arms came up and hugged back, and the vampire put his face down into Xander's shoulder.

*Want OUT of here, love - want to go.* *So sick of this place, Xan, please...* Xander hugged harder, shocked. Leave? That was something they'd never really talked about and now -. Xander saw Dawn's face - white,
tear-streaked and miserable - and he held out an arm to gather her in. She came with a small sob and Spike freed an arm as well, holding her close.

*Just pack the Bit up, get the wolfling... We don't have to be here, we can - teach her and...it's hurting her to be here, love, it's - hurting all of you. Let's just go, just -*

*How can we? Spike - I don't know -* There was just *sorrow sorrow sorrow sorrow* from Dawn; a mix of things that just felt sad, and shuddered through them both.

"Please don't be mad at Willow, Spike, please? She's just - really upset about Buffy still, she doesn't - doesn't mean it -" Spike drew back a little, human again, laughing in a rather stilted way.

"Now, poppet, don't you fret. Me and Red aren't mates but I won't do anything - or say anything. I promise. Chin up, now. Meeting'll start soon, you don't want to be all - squishy, do you?" Dawn sniffed, wiping her face - smiled at Spike.

"Okay. Okay, I'm... Thanks, Spike." Spike reached out and smoothed her hair, grinning at her, and she sniffed again. "I'm gonna go wash my face." Dawn smiled over
at Xander as well and went across the training room to the bathroom, shutting the door softly. Spike leapt, furious, and hit the heavy bag with fists and feet. It took him exactly three solid hits to send it crashing into the wall, the broken chain rattling, the thick leather split open and spilling out wads of filler. Spike stood over it, snarling, and delivered a final kick.

"Got it all out now?" They both spun around, startled by Oz's soft voice at the back door.

"Fuckin' witch..." Spike muttered, going for another cigarette and Xander gave Oz the details, fast through the link. Oz frowned and walked over to the old couch, slumping down.

"That seems a little...extreme," he said finally, and Xander had to laugh. He crossed over and flung himself down next to Oz, running his hands back through his hair.

"Jesus. It's all just - crazy."

"Did you mean it? About leaving, Spike?" Oz was looking troubled, and Spike sighed - came over and settled on the floor between them, leaning back so that Xander's leg on one side and Oz's on the other were pressed into
his shoulders. *Family* in the link, and *Pack* and for a moment they all needed the contact.

"I've stayed places for longer. But this bloody place - it's bad luck for all of us. Bad memories. We don't have to stay - nothing keeping us here, right? We can just go - Bit'd be over the moon to travel, all the stories I've told her..." Spike's voice trailed to silence, and Xander reached out and ran his knuckles up the back of Spike's neck - kneaded tense shoulders and Spike sighed.

"I think... Manny's son has a company, up in Seattle. He's told me if I ever want to relocate, I'd have a job just for the asking..."

"Seattle's a cool place. Good energy up there..." Oz added, and the three of them lapsed into silence. Xander bent over Spike, kissing his temple and forehead, resting their heads together for a moment.

"Listen... I think Dawn would like to finish school here - finish with her friends. And I don't know if she'd really want to leave Tara and Willow for real... But - if Giles tells us he's leaving - if he really is going back to England, then... We'll talk about it, okay?" *All right, love? Is that enough?*
Never thought you'd even consider it, pet. It's more than all right.

You game, Oz? Oz shifted on the couch - put his hand out and let it rest with Xander's on Spike's shoulder.

Derio'd go. And I like to travel. Yeah, I'm game. The surge of happiness and relief from Spike made Xander kiss him again, sorry in the link, feeling bad that Spike had felt so - trapped. Should have said something, love. Should have told us.

Didn't want you to be unhappy. Didn't want you to think you had to leave your friends. There was an undercurrent of sadness to it all, though, because the three of them knew Tara would never come along. It would be hard, to leave part of the family behind if that's what they decided to do. They stayed like that until Dawn came out of the bathroom, smiling again and looking as if she'd never cried a tear, and then Spike got up and told her to get a stake and try a few moves - see if she remembered what he'd shown her earlier. He hit 'play' on the boombox in the corner, wailing woman's voice pouring out and they started sparring. The look of intense concentration on Dawn's face made Xander
smile, even as he felt a little pang of loss in his heart.

*Looks like Buffy, when she does that.*

Yeah, she does, Oz agreed. They looked up when Tara came to the doorway. Spike and Dawn were too busy to stop, but Spike glanced at the blonde and gave a small nod to show he saw her.

"thrown back again to drown
kinder with poison
than pushed down a well - or a face burnt to hell
feel the cruel stones breaking her bones
dead before born
words fall in ruins - but no sound
she's dying of your shame - she maimed by your paw

he gives birth to swimming horses..."

Xander caught a brief image from Spike; the singer, Siouxsee, up on stage, heavily lined eyes glaring out at the crowd, the press of bodies all around, smoke and alcohol and pot. Spike shot him a quick grin.
She's a looker, eh?

If you like that kind of thing, Xander smirked.

"Hey, Tara - is Willow okay?" He had to yell a little over the music and Tara skirted around the other two and joined him and Oz on the couch, looking tired.

"I think so. She's been - r-really on edge, the past couple of w-weeks. She's having a h-hard time dealing with...all thi-this."

"Yeah... How about you, Tara? You okay?" Xander touched the back of her hand gently and Tara smiled at him.

"I'm fine, Xander. I'm... It sounds b-bad to say it but Buffy wa-wasn't my best friend. I'm n-not as - as torn up as W-willow..." The guilty look on her face made Xander want to hug her tight, and after a moment's thought he did.

"Hey - it's okay, Tara. Nobody expects you to just stop, you know? You've got school and I've got my job... We've all got lives that have to go on. There's no - right amount to miss somebody." Tara hugged back -
smiled over at Oz, who was nodding silently.

"I know, Xander. I r-really do, but s-sometimes Willow... She's just so - up-upset. I don't know what to du-do about it." There was a long silence then, as the three of them watched Dawn and Spike, each sunk into their own thoughts. It did seem to Xander that Willow was taking Buffy's death the hardest. Dawn still had nightmares - still cried over Buffy - but she had come out of her long silence, and was more and more the Dawn they'd all known before.

_There's that 'before' again... Dawn's doing all right, really - we all are. Except for Willow and I just don't - don't know WHY. I miss Buffy...but she's gone. I can't change that._ Xander watched Dawn fake a punch and go low, getting Spike in the thigh and the vampire whistled, grinning.

"Good on you, Bit! That was great."

"But she was open on her left." It was the 'bot, standing in the doorway and looking faintly...displeased? Willow came in behind it and gave it a little push, motioning it towards the corner.
"What's - it doing here, Willow?" Xander asked as Spike and Dawn shrugged off the 'bots assessment and circled each other.

"Oh, she had a kind of - malfunction, last night. Got hit pretty hard in just the wrong place. I had to do some repairs. I programmed her to come and find me if anything goes wrong, and that worked, at least. She just needs a little charging up before patrol tonight and I thought it would look good to have her leaving from here sometimes. Like - like she...Buffy...used to." Willow bit her lip and followed the 'bot to the corner where a heavy-duty power cable lay coiled. Willow popped the stomach-plate of the 'bot open and plugged her in, and the 'bot went still.

"So, think she'll be up for orientation next week at school?" Oz asked, and Willow started to answer him when the front door bell jangled. A moment later Anya put her head around the corner of the doorway.

"Giles is here. Time for our meeting."

"Okay then." Xander wasn't looking forward to the meeting, and he could feel the reluctance from Spike and Oz as well. Oz turned the music off and they all moved
slowly into the front room, where Anya was just locking the door and turning the 'Open' sign around to 'Closed', frowning. She didn't like closing early. Giles was leaning on the display counter, looking worn out and uncomfortable, arms crossed over his chest. They all found places to sit - Tara and Willow at the round table, Oz and Xander halfway up the stairs with Spike right behind. Dawn chose to sit on the stairs too, and Anya went behind the counter again and started fiddling with receipts. Giles looked around at them all and then took a deep breath.

"I'm grateful that all of you could come here for this... I'm - I have some very serious things to discuss." He paused and took off his glasses - rubbed his eyes. "I'm sure that all of you remember Ethan Rayne -"

"Oh! I remember him! He turned you into a demon, right?" Dawn looked pleased, and Willow smiled at her, nodding.

"Ah, well yes, yes he did, among other things... And I - had the Initiative take him away."

"You did?" Dawn was wide-eyed, and Giles flinched from that a little, putting his glasses back on.
"Yes I did, Dawn. At the time I - well, that's not important. What is important is that... That he got away from them."

"Oh, no! What - what should we do? Is he coming here? Do we need - some sort of spell to - to hold him or...or drain his magic, maybe?" Willow grabbed a book at random from the stack that always seemed to accumulate on the table, flipping it open. Xander saw the wince, when she spoke - the brief look of sorrow that crossed Giles' face.

"No, Willow, that won't be necessary. He... He's already here, and he's... Well, he's really not a threat to any of us, right now."

"What do you mean?" Giles sighed and rubbed his forehead with his thumb, looking exhausted. Spike's knee pressed into Xander's shoulder and he leaned back a little, shivering as cool fingers slipped into his hair.

"The Initiative established a base in Brazil, after we destroyed the one here. They - took Ethan there. But a - but something happened, and that base was destroyed as well and Ethan managed to - managed to escape and
make his way, over several months, back...here."

"Why here?" Tara asked softly, and Giles glanced at her.

"Well, I suppose here because - because we were friends, Ethan and I. He - he didn't have anywhere else to go." Behind him, Anya had stopped organizing her receipts and was looking at Giles with a thoughtful, considering expression.

Oh crap. I think Anya just figured something out. Think she'll keep her mouth shut?

Doubt it, pet.

"Okay, so, he comes all the way back here. What does that mean, though, Giles? You're not - not helping him, are you? I mean - after what he did -"

"What he did is - is in the past, Willow. What he did was nothing - nothing - compared to what the Initiative did to him."

"But he kidnapped Buffy and tried to feed her to that Eyghon guy! Or god, or demon, whatever! And - and he nearly got us all killed with that Halloween costume
thing, and -"

"Yes Willow, I am aware of these things. That's really not the point -"

"Seems like a pretty big point to me, Giles! I mean, he tried to kill us all and you're just - gonna be his friend again?" Giles was pacing now, head down and a thunderous expression on his face, and he stopped short at Willow's words.

"Friend. I haven't been his friend...for some time. But now - yes, now I'm going to try to be. I - I owe him that much, after what I did..."

"Giles -"

"Leave off, Red. Did you know, way back when me an Angel had a little run-in with some Nazis? They were collecting us - vamps, that is. D'you know why?"

"Recruiting you for help with the Final Solution?" Willow snapped, and Xander felt Spike stiffen - felt the demon surge, and Spike ruthlessly push it away.

"No, you daft bint. They wanted to try and control
demons. They wanted to cut open their brains and make them into an army. Sound familiar? That's where the soddin' Initiative got its ideas from. The bloody Krauts. That's what Rupert turned his mate over to. All that meticulous Nazi framework embellished and improved upon by fuckin' Yankee ingenuity." Willow had gone pale, and Tara was holding her hand, looking between them. Giles had put his hand to his face, as if to hide his expression or to stop himself from speaking, and they all sat in an uncomfortable silence for a long moment.

"So what exactly does all this mean, Giles? Your friend is here and you feel all guilty, as you should, but what does that mean to me?" Anya came out from behind her counter, looking anxious and annoyed at the same time and Giles let out a strangled sort of laugh.

"Yes. Thank you for once again getting straight to the point, Anya. What it means to you - to all of you, really, is that... I'm going back to England."

"What?"

"Oh, Giles -"
"Leaving?" Willow, Dawn and Anya all started talking at once. Tara looked sadly at Willow and bowed her head.

*Guess demon-girl was right. He's off with his mate across the pond.*

*Nazis?*

*Yeah - remember?* Xander closed his eyes, letting the past surface - was jolted out of that memory - out of the stale, dead air of a dying submarine and Angel's furious face as he punched a German soldier - by Willow.

"Giles, you can't leave! You really can't! I mean - we need you here now that - now that Buffy's gone! How are we gonna figure out prophecies and apocalypses and - stuff like that? How are we gonna figure out if Buffy - if she went -"

"I really cannot have that discussion again, Willow!" Giles actually shouted and they all froze, staring at him. He stood glaring at Willow furiously, and she glared back, her mouth set in a thin line, her eyes dangerously hard.

"We need to have that discussion! We need to talk
about it and figure it out! We can't just leave Buffy -"

"Enough!" That was Ripper *darkman demonkiller* and they all felt the shockwave of power that flashed out from Giles. Spike hissed and Oz's eyes flared black, the wolf struggling for dominance. The hyena reared up as well, fight or flight kicking in hard and only the combined efforts of both Xander and the soldier kept it from launching itself straight at Giles.

"What in bloody hell is going on," Spike growled, and Giles shot a furious look at him.

"It's none of your damn business -"

"Yes it is! Well, it's not Spike's business but the rest of them have a right to hear this!"

"Willow -"

"No, don't try to stop me." Willow shot to her feet, her hands twisting together as she agitatedly paced up and back behind Tara's chair. "When Buffy died - everything was wrong. She didn't die a natural death, she died in the portal! And her soul - we can't know where her soul is -"
"Yes we can. Natural or not, her soul is where it ought to be - where it should be! We will not be performing some sort of - of obscene hedge-wizardry in the hopes of scrying out her whereabouts!" Giles voice was trembling with tightly controlled rage but his eyes were like two pits, utterly void of emotion. Willow flinched from the look he gave her, but turned to the others - to Dawn.

"Don't you see? What if she's in some - some hell dimension -" Dawn gave a choked cry, covering her mouth with her hand, and Spike was up, leaping over Oz and Xander, landing not two feet from Willow. He took her by the shoulders and let the demon out, his lips pulled back in a grimace of rage. Behind Willow, Tara stood up, her hand going out uselessly towards the two. When the vampire spoke, it was a sibilant, hate-filled whisper.

"You will shut your gob right now, witchling, if you know what's good for you. How in fuck could you say something like that in front of Dawn? If you ever talk about the Slayer bein' anywhere but up with her mum and the fuckin' angels I will personally rip out your tongue and feed it to the first fuckin' stray dog I find. Do.You.Hear.Me." He gave her a vicious shake and
Willow's mouth, which had dropped open snapped shut, and she jerked herself out of his grip.

*Spike - fuck's sake-

"I've got things to fuckin' kill." Spike glared around the room - shook his head once at Xander and with a flick of his eyes indicated Dawn, who was crying silently behind him. Then he was gone.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Well, *that didn't go well at ALL,* Xander thought, as he and Oz headed out to patrol. They could feel Spike like a cruising shark, cutting through the night-time shoals of Hellmouth demons, cold and unstoppable. He and Oz had left Giles and Willow behind, both tight-lipped and silent, furious. Anya had called Drake and gone home after Giles had rather testily told her that he was leaving the shop in her hands and becoming a silent partner. She wanted to have 'celebratory taking-over orgasms', and Drake, apparently, was always obliging.

*No - could have gone better.* Oz looked over at Xander with a small smile, and Xander shook his head. Dawn
had tried to be stoic - had stopped crying and let herself be taken home - but they could feel her upset in the link, and Tara had pulled her close and led her inside the Summers' house, whispering comfort in deaf ears.

"What in hell - I mean, if Willow really thinks Buffy is in some - some hell dimension, then what does she think she can do about it? What - would be the point?"

"Maybe she thinks she could - get her out?" They both thought about that for a moment, and then Xander sucked in a sharp breath.

"No way is she thinking about bringing her back! Not after what Dawn did... She is not that crazy!"

"Fucking hope not," Oz muttered, distaste in the link. Xander shrank away from the idea with loathing - it was wrong, to do something like that. To mess with someone's soul. As much as he hated Angel, the thought of his soul being jerked around, between heaven or hell or limbo on the whim of some pissed-off gypsy... It wasn't right.

She's daft enough to try it, maybe. Spike, somewhere down the street and off to the south, and Xander turned
the truck at the next intersection.

*No way. She - I know she's a little...casual about magic sometimes but she wouldn't mess around with stuff like that.*

*Better hope not,* Spike thought, and then the link rippled with surprise and gleeful interest.

*What is it?*

*Bunch'a demons - fuck, Hellions. What in hell?* Xander looked over at Oz, who was sitting up straight, looking back with a frown on his face.

*Spike, what d'you mean? What are Hellions?* Images, through the link. Demons in leather and chains, a convoy of motorcycles cruising through Sunnydale, heading roughly towards Willy's bar. And the knowledge of what they were; pirates, who come in and destroy - who take over, for a few days or a few weeks, and then move on when the town they've invaded is sucked dry.

*They're pretty wild but they're not big-time. Usually stick to back-water places with no real defenses. Only reason they'd be here is if...*
They found out about Buffy, Oz finished, and Xander felt a wave of fear go over him.

Wolfling's right. I'm gonna see what the hell they're doin' - make sure it's... You get Blondie and the Niblet to our house. Tell her ward it - make it a fuckin' fortress. And get Giles and his mage over there - they need to be together. It's gonna take more magic than Glinda has to keep them out. And we need to have access to the Underground, just in case...

Is it really that bad? Xander glanced behind him and swung the truck into a U-turn in the middle of the street, Oz braced against the dash.

Fuck yeah, love. If they know, then everybody knows. This place is gonna blow sky-high before daybreak. We've gotta be ready. Lock the house down. I'll be there soon. Then he was gone and Xander flattened the pedal to the floor, pushing the truck as fast as it would go.

"This just keeps getting better and better," he muttered, and had to smile when Oz belatedly fumbled his seat-belt on.
"Seattle's sounding pretty good about now," Oz replied, and Xander felt exactly the same. They drove on, heading for the Magic Box and hoping that Giles would still be there. This was going to be a long, nasty night.

Spike prowled the Sunnydale streets, watching the Hellions - do their thing. There were at least twenty, and they'd gotten into a kind of rhythm, going from store to store downtown. Not to the Magic Box yet, but getting there. He debated whether or not he'd defend the store but decided, with a snort of silent laughter, that he wouldn't.

_Demon-girl'd probably get more money outta insurance, anyway..._ The Hellions loved the smash-and-grab, but they weren't very neat and they weren't very thorough, and Spike had a pillowcase - liberated from a wash-line - that was gradually filling up with...bits. _Never have too many movies, never have too much music, and that pawn shop out by the highway gives damn good prices._ On principle, Spike wouldn't do any smashing himself - that would smack of allying himself with the Hellions and
traditionally, those demons and vamps didn't get along. But he'd take advantage of the chaos. Other Hellmouth dwellers were taking advantage as well, and the night was shaping up to be something like all right.

*And the Watcher's mate is probably eatin' this like candy.*

He'd followed Xander and the wolf's progress through the link; getting Dawn and Tara from the Summers' house, going to Giles' flat and convincing him to come, as well. The mage had looked fevered and a little out of it, but he'd grinned at Xander and asked him how 'the beast' was faring. Xander had been hard-put to stop 'the beast' from knocking him unconscious and Spike had told him, through the link, to shut his particular brand of 'come get me' down or he'd come over there and shut the mage down personally. Giles had proceeded to get the man drunk, which apparently blunted Rayne's abilities to project magic of any sort - at least, in the weakened state he was in. Which was a bloody good thing, in Spike's opinion, because the man was a fuckin' beacon to anyone with the slightest bit of magical sensitivity. And Hellions had that in spades.

*But Glinda-witch needs what Giles can give her - she's*
strong, but she's not as adept. And we might need that chaos-git in the end, if things get bad. He'd make good bait, at least.

There seemed to be a fight up ahead, and Spike strolled closer, trying to see. True to form, a number of the demons had lit fires - heaping up smashed store-front bits in the street, or filling trash barrels with scraps. The lurid firelight made the scene reminiscent of - well - a lot of Spike's past, and for a moment he felt a twinge of nostalgia.

Fifty years from now, Xan won't care one way or another...show him a bit of what it's like to travel the world with a Master... That thought made him grin, and he lit up a cigarette with a flourish. The Hellions were surrounding something now - chattering and laughing and Spike looked around - saw a high, deeply silled window just inside an alley. He jumped, hanging from the sill by one hand and jammed his pillowcase of loot up against the window for safe-keeping. Then he dropped back and sauntered up to the edge of the demon circle. If there was a fight to be had, he wanted to be in on it. What he saw made him stop and stare. The 'bot was in the middle of a circle of demons, looking a bit frazzled.
"I have to find Willow," the 'bot said, and the demons closed in. The 'bot managed to fight her way free of the demons and took off running, and with a roar the demons were after her, mounting up on their customized Harley's and zooming away up the street. Spike contemplated the situation for about five seconds before he grinned and took off running. The demons were following the 'bot, who was sticking to the sidewalk. If he ran through here - and climbed this...

*Perfect, yeah.* Spike leaped down onto the sidewalk and watched the 'bot and then the demons flash by. He stood in the middle of the street, waiting. One demon was a little behind - he'd had a moment's trouble getting his bike started - and Spike watched him coming up the street, engine wide open. The demon saw him - grinned nastily and aimed straight for him. Spike grinned back, and at the last minute leaped high into the air. The steel toe of his boot connected solidly with the demon's head and he flew backwards, skidding over the asphalt and crumpling against a light-pole. Blood welled out from under the still form and Spike laughed. He took a last drag off his cigarette and flipped it away - trotted over to the bike and righted it. It seemed all right - was still running, even - and he climbed aboard and kicked it into
gear, following the now-distant sound of the rest of the demons.

*What's going on, Spike?*

*Dunno. The 'bot's chasin' after Red, so I'm gonna see what happens. She there?*

*No - not at home, nowhere. We can't find her. Tara's going to try a spell.*

*Right... Keep safe, love.*

*You're one to talk. Watch yourself, vampire-mine. There's a lot of them.*

*Just enough, pet.* Xander was laughing, but Spike could feel his worry - could feel Oz, who wanted to loose the wolf and come join him. But he was staying with Dawn, helping her calm her nerves with a dose of sugar and cheese. They'd cooked frozen pizzas and half-drowned her with soda, and she was starting to get mouthy with Rayne - asking pointed questions that the mage appeared to want to answer but that the Watcher wouldn't let him.
That's my girl, Spike thought, grinning. The demons were on the outskirts of town now, headed towards... Fuckin' woods? Breaker's Woods. What in hell is the witch doin' out here? Or is the 'bot just fucked up... The motorcycles were circling - tires spinning and faltering in the damp leaves and uneven terrain under the trees, and a couple had gone down, pinning their luckless riders beneath them. Spike charged ahead, bouncing heedlessly over the rutted track. Something - someone - was screaming.

That's not the 'bot - don't think she's got it in her...oh fuck. It was Willow - it had to be, and Spike revved the engine higher and broke through into a clearing. Four bikes were weaving a circle around the 'bot and Red, who was slumped on her knees, looking dazed. She had something cradled in her arms, and there was mud and blood smeared on her face. The bot was fighting but she'd obviously taken several hard blows already, and random sparks of blue electricity were sparking over her. A moment later, one Hellion drove straight into her and rode her down. He leaped off his bike with a roar of triumph and gathered the dazed 'bot up - slung her over his shoulder and climbed back on his bike. Spike drove his own bike straight into him, knocking them all to the ground. He leaped free of the wreckage and ran for
Willow, snatching her up and jerking her unceremoniously towards the trees.

"No! Nooo, we have to go back!" Willow shouted, pulling against him, and he turned around and snarled into her face.

"If we go back you're most likely dead - or a bed-warmer for one of these boys. Want that? Time to fly, pigeon." Willow's eyes were wild, and she looked desperately back over her shoulder.

"But - but Buffy -"

"What in fuck are you talking about? The 'bot's knackered." Spike turned and jerked her to a stumbling run, diving into the trees in the hopes that the Hellions wouldn't be able to follow. Willow tripped and fell, sprawling, and something flew from her hand - hit with a crack of shattering pottery against a tree-trunk.

"Oh no, no, no! It can't be broken!" Willow scrambled towards the tree, groping the dimness for whatever she'd dropped and Spike leaned down and jerked her to her feet.
"We don't have time for this, Red! What the fuck are you doing?"

"The urn! Urn of Osiris, it's the last one, the last in the world -" Willow's eyes were full of tears and horror and pain, and Spike wanted to slap her - cold-cock her and toss her over his shoulder, get home before something happened. He felt uneasy up here - looked around and took a sudden hard breath, finally recognizing where they were.

"What in bloody hell were you doin' up here, witch? Why are you at the Slayer's grave? What fuckin' idiotic thing were you doing -"

*Spike! Get out of there! Get home!* Xander and Oz both in the link, fear making them loud. Spike shook his head sharply.

*What is it? What's happening?*

*Don't know, but Ethan and - and Giles are - just get home!* Image, suddenly - the Watcher looking panicked, the mage grinning like a rabid dog, his eyes rolling up white in his head. 'Chaos is loose in the world, children! Something has happened - something has
broken free. Better run!' The man looked demented, but even at one remove through the link Spike felt afraid. There was something - he turned and started to run, dragging Willow behind, letting the demon out and trying to pinpoint what it was he was sensing. He caught a whiff of wet earth - rot - but it was blotted out by exhaust from the bikes and the stink of the demons themselves, and he shook it off - plowed down the hill, crashing through underbrush and trying to get as many trees as possible between himself and the demons.

The roar of the bikes faded after a bit, and he slowed warily, giving Red a breather. She was crying now, sniffling and coughing and gasping for breath and he finally stopped in the lee of an outcrop of stone, letting Willow sink down and crouching beside her.

"Now tell me what the fuck is going on, Red." Willow wiped her nose on her sleeve - looked up at him with red, streaming eyes and Spike had a sudden, horrified thought. "Were you - Jesus fucking Christ, Red, tell me you weren't -"

"I had to do it, Spike! I h-had to! I couldn't leave her in some - some hell-dimension, I couldn't -" Spike stared at the trembling, crying girl - stared while his mind ran
furiously over and over everything he knew about...

"Resurrection. Bloody hell, witch. You don't know what you've fuckin' done." Willow shook her head and pushed herself to her knees, shaking.

"It doesn't matter. The urn - the urn's broken and - and those demons stopped me. I don't - it didn't work, Spike. I...failed."

"Be fuckin' glad you did." Spike stiffened suddenly. Something was there, in the brush just behind him. Creeping stealthily towards them. He lifted his head, scenting, and almost gagged. Wet, molding earth, the stink of corruption - of death. He spun, rising to his feet, ready to take on whatever was lurking. Green eyes stared at him - a tangle of filthy hair, a white, mud-streaked face. Rags of cloth were clutched around equally filthy shoulders, and bare feet and legs showed cuts and bruises. The reek of decomposition was so strong Spike pushed the demon away, and the figure swayed, staring at him.

"Slayer?" he whispered, and it - she - jerked and looked wildly around. Then she turned and was running, the rag of cloth - *Burial shroud, oh FUCK that's the quilt we*
wrapped her in - snagging on a bush and fluttering to the ground. It was streaked with fluids and dirt - crusted with rot and Spike shuddered, imagining Buffy waking in that filthy hole - waking surrounded by the rotting remains of the coffin and her own clothing and the mire of worms and beetles...waking alone -

"S-ssspike... Spike, was that - w-was that -"

"Yeah. That was your Slayer, witch. Or what's left of her. Fucking hell." Spike turned around and grabbed Willow - flung her unceremoniously over his shoulder and started to run for all he was worth.

Got to get home, got to...bloody hell, don't have a fuckin' clue. Is she - still herself? Is she even sane? You've outdone yourself with this one, Red...fuck, fuck, fuck! Xander! Xan-love... I've got the witch - come meet us. Got some news, love...

Siouxsee and the Banshees - Swimming Horses
5 Awake

Spike was waiting behind the Magic Box, pacing up and down the alley, cursing and smoking. Xander parked his truck at the alley mouth and he and Oz got out. The link was like coming into a hive-full of bees or something - swarming, darting thoughts, barely coherent. Rage and fear uppermost, with the fear tapering once Xander and Oz were physically in sight.

Did you tell them?

No, just said you found Willow and we were gonna come get you. What the fuck could I say? Spike - what are we gonna do?

Don't know, love...

Dawn... Oz thought, and they all flinched at that - at what this would do to her.
"Where's Willow?" Xander asked, coming up the alley and the demon snarled - was pushed away and then flickered back. This time Spike let it stay and he jerked his head in the direction of the shop.

"She's in there. Couldn't take any more of her wailin'." Xander nodded, but he didn't move towards the shop, and neither did Oz.

"Did you really...is Buffy...?" Spike sighed, flicking his cigarette away. He looked tired and angry, and Xander reached out and sank his fingers into the short hair behind Spike's ear - cupped his hand around the back of his neck and pulled him closer for a soft kiss. After a moment Spike relaxed, shifting the demon away, and Xander leaned against the shop wall and Spike leaned with him, one arm loosely around his waist. Oz stood in front of them, arms crossed, watching Spike.

"It was her, love. Christ, it was -" Spike sent it through the link again, this time slower, with as much detail as he could. Xander flinched a little from it - looked over at Oz who looked troubled. "We need to get Red back to the house. See what the Watcher has to say. She might not be - right. The Bit... she can't know, Xan. Not if her sis is...wrong. She can't know." Xander knew that - felt that
urge to protect Dawn *protect pack!* , but...

"How can we keep it from her? I mean - she has a right -"

"Sod it all, Xander, we can't! Don't you see how much it'll hurt her if the Slayer's just...a body? If her blood and bones came back but not her mind? That'd be worse then her bein' dead." Xander heard the pleading in Spike's voice - felt it, felt the truth.

"Damnit...I know, it's just - It sucks to hide this from her." Xander let his head rest for a moment on Spike's shoulder - felt the vampire slowly getting out another cigarette.

"Better that she doesn't know. I'll tell her - I'll figure somethin' out, love. You don't have to lie to her." *Anything to keep her safe, anything to keep her happy,* and if that meant lies, then so be it. Spike didn't care - he could justify any means, if he tried hard enough, and Xander felt a guilty relief at not having to find some story to tell Dawn.

"What should we do? Do we really want to talk about this at home?" Oz asked.
"We have to. Not gonna split everybody up - it's not safe. And we need to get going, loves, because these Hellions are in a bloody ugly mood and things are only gonna get worse." Xander glanced over at Oz, who nodded agreement.

*I'll get Willow,* and the werewolf walked into the shop, mentally bracing himself.

"I can't believe she'd do something like that - behind our backs... What the fuck was she thinking?" The anger that Xander had been holding in check for the past half-hour was boiling just below the surface and he knew that if he wasn't careful he would let it go - and probably lose Willow as a friend for life. But god, he was so angry!

"Watcher's gonna make her sorry, pet - you don't have to." There was a flash of white in the gloom of the alley - a malicious, fang-edged smile - and Xander shivered. If Giles didn't make Willow sorry, Spike would, and Xander didn't actually want that, no matter how angry he was.

"Yeah. Fuck, I don't want to be around for that." The door to the shop opened and Oz stepped out - turned and made a gesture and Willow came through the door,
hesitant. She looked at Xander and opened her mouth and Xander held up a hand.

"Don't, Willow. Let's get back to the house. I just - can't, right now."

"Xan -"

"Don't, Willow. Please? Can we just...go?" Xander turned on his heel and walked shakily to his truck, hearing Willow's smothered sobs, hearing Oz murmuring something to her. Spike stalked beside him and when they got to the truck he swung himself into the back.

"I'll just ride back here then, right? Keep an eye out."

Yeah. Thanks, Spike...love you...

Love you. You okay, wolf?

Probably. Maybe. I'll - tell you soon. The ride to their house was mostly silent, and Willow didn't try to talk to Xander or Oz. There were tell-tale signs of the Hellions here and there, gradually tapering off as they neared their own neighborhood.
Thank god. Think they'll come out this far?

Downtown ought to keep 'em busy for a while...we're probably okay unless the 'bot brings 'em here, chasing Red.

Where IS the 'bot? You saw them taking it, Spike?

Yeah, wolf, I did. I guess - they must still have it.

None of that was comforting and they got silently out of the truck and went inside. Xander felt the wards - like a prickle of icy claws down his back as they crossed the threshold - and behind him he heard Willow gasp.

"What is - who made that?"

"Tara and Giles did," Oz said quietly, and Willow looked at him - nodded.

"It's - it's strong." That seemed to upset her somehow, and they walked through to the kitchen. Dawn was still at the table, eating a last bit of pizza. Tara was sitting with her, looking tired, and as they came in she got up and went to Willow - pulled her into a hug and just leaned there, her face in Willow's hair. Willow hugged
her back, stroking her hair, whispering something that made Tara shiver in her arms. Ethan was slumped over in a chair in the corner, looking out of it. Giles was pacing and when they came in he looked up sharply.

"Oz. Your - your friend called. Derio. He said to tell you he's fine - he's safe - and he'll see you in the morning." Oz nodded, a small smile crossing his face, and a subtle bit of tension went out of the link.

"Hey Dawn, it's getting late - you really need to get to bed," Xander said softly, and Dawn looked at him, fear and anger and disappointment all careening through the link.

"I don't think I can sleep, Xander. I mean - it's pretty scary out there. Can I just - can I go watch a movie? I don't want to be alone upstairs. Please?" Xander didn't know what to say, and stood there for a minute, watching Tara pull back from Willow and tug her over to the table, getting her to sit down and scooting her own chair close, Willow's hand locked tight in hers.

"Course you can, Bit," Spike said, getting his flask out of his duster pocket and opening it. "You go get your nightclothes on and clean your teeth and I'll come watch
with you, right?" Dawn nodded - wiped furiously at her eyes and stood up.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks, Spike."

"Anything for you, poppet," he said softly, then took a long drink from the flask. Dawn gave Tara and Willow a little smile and picked up her plate - took it over to the sink.

Thank god - Xander thought, but suddenly Ethan stirred, straightening abruptly, his eyes going wide.

"Oh, little girl, do you have any idea what you've done?" he rasped, and Giles whipped around, striding over to him.

"Bloody hell, Ethan! No one wants to hear your ramblings!"

"You'd best hear it, Ripper my dear, you had best listen. Do you have any idea what she's unpicked, this little tailor? What seams she's ripped out and done back up again? Weren't even looking at the pattern, were you, girl?" Ethan shoved at the hand Giles had on his shoulder - stood up with a grimace and wobbled over to
the table - leaned there. Willow and Tara both recoiled, and Tara looked questioningly at Willow.

"Honey - what -?"

"Best stop right there, mage," Spike interrupted, his voice cold and level - hateful. "You don't have enough magic in you to stop me ripping your heart right out of your chest."

*Not pack not pack* flooding the link from all of them and Xander saw Oz lift his head, his eyes black. Spike was demon-faced, unmoving but tense in the doorway of the kitchen, and Dawn was cringing against the counter. Tara kept looking at Willow and Willow met Ethan's eyes squarely, with something fierce and defiant in her gaze.

"You shut up. You've haven't done anything but try to hurt us! I was doing - I was helping, I was making things right. Saving her -"

"Saving her from what, little seamstress? From eternity? From her fate? You're not the one who chooses, love; you're not the one that gets to decide. Do you have any idea what bargains you've
unraveled? What ripples you've caused? They'll come back to you like a fucking tsunami, little witch." Ethan's gaze - wild and rather glassy - roved over all of them, and he gave a short, barking laugh.

"Ethan -" Giles said, pleading in his tone, and Ethan reached and touched the Watcher's cheek - fleeting touch like a butterfly.

"Don't you know? The dead aren't meant to come back to us, child, unless they give up something..." Ethan's eyes flickered to Spike then, and Xander felt the surge of fury from the vampire - felt the coiling of power from Ethan, the hideous sub-sonic whine that was his power.  *Chaos infinite endingbeginning cold cold cold*  Janus - the balance of all things - was where Ethan drew his magic from, but he was out of balance - too ill to control it - and Tara and Willow both gasped as they felt the flaring of his power - the out-of-control surge that threatened them all.

"What is he talking about? What dead? Why is - Willow, what's going on?" Dawn's voice was shrill and cracking and Spike moved in the blink of an eye - had Ethan up against the wall, his hand tight around the skinny throat.
"You'll shut up or I'll have your bones for soup, you hear me? Turn it off, mage - you're like a fucking charnel house and the carrion crows are circling in, you fuck." Ethan's eyes were wild, but it wasn't with fear. A rusty, strangled chuckle forced its way out of his throat and Spike snarled.

"Spike!" Giles grabbed his arm and pulled, but he couldn't budge Spike's arm and the vampire turned his head and growled at the other man, snapping his fangs in the Watcher's face. Giles glared back, *darkman demonkiller* flaring off him like black fire.

*Oh fuck, DAMNIT - Spike, STOP, let him go, for fuck's sake, this isn't helping!*

*Not pack not pack don't hurt him, NOT PACK* The wolf was going schizophrenic in it's need to protect Spike and Oz's need to protect Giles and Xander could feel the hyena straining against his control - could feel the soldier as well, ready to take Giles down if he moved against Spike.

"Stop it, god damnit - Giles! Please - Spike, let him go, we have to - calm down -" Xander was crossing the kitchen as he spoke - was getting between Spike and
Giles, was making Spike look at him, making him let go his hold on Ethan's throat. And then Oz was there too, pulling at Spike, confusing the demon enough that it backed off - let go and let its family calm it - distract it.

"Stop it, please! Just stop!" Dawn cried, and Spike forced himself to calm down.

*Scaring the Bit, damnit, gotta... Pet, I'm all right, I - "Tell him turn it off, Watcher. Make him shut it down." Ethan was sagging down the wall, his ravaged body exhausted, his chest heaving in ragged, wet-sounding breaths. Giles got a shoulder under his arm - got him up and back to his chair, murmuring to him. Ethan seemed dazed - seemed a little lost - and he put his hand up to Giles' face again, touching it lightly and looking at the other man with wide, wondering eyes. And then his own eyes rolled up in his head and he sprawled loosely, unconscious. Oz moved to Giles' side and helped him lay the man gently on the floor - grabbed Giles' suit jacket off the back of a chair and folded it into a hasty pillow. Giles took it with murmured thanks and tucked it under Ethan's head - said something else and Oz went away into the living room. He came back a moment later with a blanket and they tucked it around the still form.*
For a moment Giles crouched there, the backs of his fingers on Ethan's cheek, his eyes so very weary. Then he stood up slowly, his gaze flickering over Spike and Xander. Xander tightened his hold around Spike's waist - moved to get between the two. Then Giles turned deliberately to Willow. He crossed the kitchen and leaned down, hands flat on the table. Willow stared at him, her eyes wide, her mouth set in a hard line. Her fingers were twined with Tara's, white and shaking, and Tara was looking at Willow with a dawning expression of horror on her face. Dawn was frozen by the sink still, her hand over her mouth, looking fixedly at Willow as well. Giles took in a hard breath and then spoke, and they all jumped at the deadly tone of his voice.

"Willow. Tell me - what you've done. Tell me all of it. Right now."

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Willow spoke, slowly spelling out her actions and her fears and her justifications. Spike leaned briefly into Xander, scenting deeply of the warm fragrance that gathered at the juncture of throat and shoulder - that was held by his hair. Then he moved around the room
and wrapped himself around Dawn, holding her close and feeling her heart pound and pound against his chest - feeling the *fear want fear* that was pouring off her. She was sobbing quietly and Spike doubted she heard half of what Willow was saying.

Willow's voice finally faded away altogether and there was a long, long silence. Spike looked over at Xander, who was standing shoulder to shoulder with Oz, their hands twined together. Xander had tears in his eyes and he wiped them away - took a deep breath. Tara had pulled her hand out of Willow's and was staring at her girlfriend. The Watcher pushed himself away from the table and turned his back on all of them - went over to Ethan and crouched down. He stroked the tumbled, dark hair off the man's face - briefly felt his pulse and then snuggled the blanket up a little higher around his chest.

"If it isn't her... If you've brought back something...else, Willow..." Giles stood up, and when he turned to face the witch again he was Ripper, and they all flinched from that. "You, and you alone will be the one to send - it - back. And deal with - whatever is left. Do I make myself clear?" Willow seemed to be frozen under his hooded gaze but after a moment she nodded jerkily. "Right now...we need to find - it. Her. We need
to...know..." Giles stopped talking, and his look was, for one moment, utterly lost. Then his expression hardened and he cleared his throat.

"We need to do a locator spell. Tara, I'm going to need your help." Willow stirred at that - looked pleadingly at Tara, who shook her head.

"Giles, I can -"

"No, Willow, you can not." He moved away, into the living room and Tara gathered up a backpack from under the table. She touched Willow's shoulder gently and then followed Giles.

"I - I want to understand," Dawn said, her voice high and wavering, and Spike stroked her hair.

"What do you want to understand, poppet?" he asked softly, and she took a step back, wiping her eyes.

"What did Willow do? Why is Giles so - angry? I don't - " She sniffled and reached past Spike for a paper towel - blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

"Niblet..." Spike looked over at Xander and Oz, wishing
this didn't have to be said. Then he took Dawn's shoulder and guided her over to the table - got her to sit down.

_Fuck, fuck... Why did that bloody mage have to spout off..._

_You want - want me to tell her, love?_

_No, I'll do it..._ Spike smiled faintly at Dawn, and took her hand. Oz moved slowly over to the chair Tara had vacated and sat down, putting his feet in the seat and his chin on his knees.

_Protect pack pack_, faint but constant, and Xander echoed it, as did the demon.

"It's like this, then. Red here thought - that your sis was in Hell. That when she died it was all - wrong - and she was trapped in some hell dimension." Dawn's eyes were huge, and she turned to Willow.

"Was she? I mean, how did you know? Did you do a spell, did you - did you see her there?" Willow looked at Oz - at Spike - and slowly shook her head.
"No, I - I couldn't find a spell that would tell me, Dawnie. But - but she was! I mean - she d-died in the portal, and everything was wrong because of - because of the monks messing with everything - I couldn't leave her there!"

Bloody hell. Absolute fucking rubbish - "Tell the truth, Red, you don't know anything for sure -"

Spike, please love -

Yeah, okay, I'll... Yeah... Spike leaned back in his chair, getting out a cigarette, struggling to control the demon and himself. Refraining, minute by minute, from reaching across and snapping the witch's neck. Xander moved over behind his chair, settling his hands lightly on Spike's shoulders and rubbing his thumbs up and down Spike's neck. Spike relaxed into the touch, shutting the anger down.

"So you found a spell to - to bring her back? You brought her back from the dead." Willow nodded and Dawn looked over at Spike.

"Where is she then? Why didn't she - why isn't she here? Or - is she at home? I mean, why isn't she trying
to find us?" Willow opened her mouth and Oz put his hand on her arm. Willow subsided, looking hurt.

"She woke up in her grave, Dawn. She had to dig her way out and she's...a little lost, we think." Oz's voice was calm but the link flared with pity and anger and Spike heard Xander take a hard breath - felt the tremor go through his hands.

"She - out of the ground? Oh my - god, oh, poor Buffy, oh god." Dawn shuddered, rubbing her arms, and Spike tried to calm her, thinking rapidly.

"It's not so awful, Bit. Did it once myself, you know." The memory of it flashed through the link and Xander's hands clamped down hard and, oh don't, oh Spike, god...

"You did?"

"Well, yeah. But - I had Dru waitin' for me, didn't I? I wasn't - all alone with those fu- those demons swoopin' around on their motorbikes. She's just - confused is all, Niblet - she'll be gettin' her head straight soon."

"What did Giles mean? He said - if she isn't right, if
Willow b-brought back something else... Is it like that time -?

"Just like that, Bit," Spike interrupted, not wanting to bring up Dawn's own foray into resurrection. Willow had a hand in that too, didn't she? Xander thought, and anger rippled through the link - anger and a sense of betrayal.

"So - so if we find her and - and she's okay then it'll be - everything will be like it was." They all exchanged glances and Willow smiled a fragile sort of smile.

"Yeah, Dawn, everything'll be fine. We just - we need to find her."

"We need something," Giles said, appearing in the doorway and Willow jumped a little.

"What do you need, Giles?" Xander asked, and Giles put his hand up to his face, to rub his forehead and then slide his hand back, over his hair to his neck.

"We need something of Buffy's. I don't suppose -"

"Can you use a picture?" Giles shook his head - sent an
apologetic look towards Xander.

"No, I'm sorry, it - has to be something more - personal."

"There's me," Dawn said, and Spike looked sharply at her.

"What do you mean, Bit?"

"I mean - Buffy said I was part of her - Summers' blood. So - could you use my blood?"

"Oh Dawnie -" Willow breathed, but Giles was smiling, just a little.

"Yes, actually, we could. We'd just need a drop -" Giles added, as Spike growled low in his chest.

"Okay. I can do that." Dawn got up, wiping her hand over her face, sniffing once and then pushing her hair back. Spike reached out and touched her hand.

"You don't have to do this, Bit. We can find her without you cutting yourself." Dawn smiled at him - shook her head.
"This'll be quicker, Spike. It's okay. I can do this." Spike nodded, putting out his cigarette and standing up. *Bit's getting so grown up,* he thought, and he felt Xander and Oz agree - felt the same tremble of awe and panic that knowledge brought.

"Come on, then." They all went into the living room. Tara was sitting on the floor, a map of Sunnydale spread out in front of her with candles at the four corners. She had a small bowl of herbs in her lap and when they filed in she looked up, solemn and calm.

"Dawn? Th-thank you. Can you come over h-here?'

"Sure..." Dawn crossed the living room to sit by Tara, *calm calm calm* in the link, as if she were trying to soothe herself. Spike went and crouched down next to her, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm right here, poppet," he said softly, and Dawn nodded distractedly.

"I - I need a n-knife," Tara said quietly, and Spike reached into a pocket and found his straight razor. He held it out to Tara and she reached for it.
"This is sharp enough to separate two thoughts, Glinda, so you'd best be careful." Tara's hand hesitated and then dropped back into her lap.

"Maybe you should d-do it, Spike," she said, and Spike nodded.

"We ready then?" Tara glanced up at Giles - nodded - and held the bowl out. Dawn put her hand out and it was shaking, and Spike enfolded it in his, holding it still. He smiled at Dawn.

"Now then, Bit, count to three -"

"One -" Dawn said, and Spike flicked the razor. Dawn gasped, but Spike didn't let her pull away and a drop of blood trembled on the tip of her finger - fell slowly into the bowl. Tara picked up a stick of incense and lit it over one of the candles - put the burning stick down into the herbs. A sudden, rather sulfurous burst of flame leaped up and then died just as quickly, leaving a gritty black ash in the bowl. Tara shook the bowl once - held it over the map.

"Reveal," she said softly, and tipped the ash over the map. It fell slowly, glittering, and Spike hissed a little,
drawing away. The power from Tara was nothing like Red's or the Watcher's - nothing like the mage's. It was warm and soft, but you could feel the old magic of root and vine in it, and there was no doubt whatsoever just how powerful it was. It was a little like Jack's magic, but the nerve-rasping wrongness that Jack had projected was utterly missing from this.

The ash hit the map and rippled outward, fading, and then one spot seemed to form a miniature whirlpool and then a glow, a tiny pinpoint of light. Spike bent a little closer, studying the map, and he felt Xander coming down on one knee next to him.

"You know where she is, love?" Spike asked, and Xander looked up at him - nodded.

"Yeah. She's - she's at the tower. Where she died."

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

It took a few minutes to realize that everyone wanted to go. Spike was adamant that they not split up, and he didn't, at that point, trust anyone but his pack to watch over Dawn and Tara. Giles spent a minute or so over
Ethan, gently reviving him, and then they all went outside to the vehicles. Giles, Ethan, Tara and Willow to Giles' car, the rest to the van. At the last minute, remembering what Spike had seen, Xander grabbed a pair of Oz's sweats, a long-sleeved t-shirt and some socks.

*Good idea, love,* Spike thought, stroking his hair, and Xander reached up and caught his hand - brought it around to his mouth so he could kiss the cool knuckles.

*Do you think she'll be okay? I wish I knew - why she ran from you and Wills...*

*Disoriented probably, love. And terrified. I'm amazed she got so far.* The drive there passed in silence, and as they pulled up to the site of the tower Xander felt that same clench of sick fear in his stomach.

*Never wanted to come back here. Fuck, I hate this place.*

*Be all right,* softly from Oz, who was looking a little sick himself. Spike touched Oz's shoulder and moved to open the side door of the van. Xander climbed out after him and reached for his hand - held it tightly. He could see Oz doing the same with Dawn and they stood at the foot
of the tower staring up. Giles had left Ethan in the car, and he glanced back once and then twice, making sure of the man. Willow and Tara stood side by side, and Willow was pale as paper. The tower creaked ominously, and even to the naked eye they could see it swaying - load-bearing beams beginning to buckle.

"Fuck, that's not - safe at all. Is she up there, Spike? Can you see her?" Xander looked through Spike's eyes - saw what Spike did, which was a pale figure at the end of the tower catwalk.

_God, there she is. What if she jumps? Jesus -

_Gonna be all right, pet. I'll go up -

"No, not alone." Xander frowned over at Spike, who scowled back, opening his mouth to argue. "If she's really - confused she might attack you, Spike. I'll go up with you - hopefully she won't attack me."

"I should go," Dawn said, staring upwards, and Spike shook his head immediately.

"No, Bit, it's much too dangerous -"
"Don't tell me no, Spike! If that's really Buffy - if it's her, and she's back - I want - I want her to see me. I want her to know she - she saved me, and that I'm okay. I have to, and I will." There were tears in Dawn's eyes but her expression made it clear she wouldn't budge, and Spike swore furiously.

"Fine then. But you stay the hell behind us and you don't move if we say 'stop', you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you," Dawn said, but she smiled at him.

_Careful,_ from Oz, and they started up. They climbed slowly but steadily, Spike in the lead carefully testing hand and footholds, Dawn in the middle. Xander glanced back once or twice at the receding figures below and then he focused on what was ahead. As they neared the top they had to clamber up makeshift ladders and once or twice Dawn slipped, once accidentally kicking Xander in the chin.

"Ow! Damn -" Xander rubbed his jaw and Dawn sent a guilty look over her shoulder, but they were nearly there.

_Wait, Spike - let me get up there, and Dawn, too. Don't -_
don't scare her. At the back of the catwalk there was room for the three of them and they all stood there for a moment, just staring.

Buffy stood on the very edge, where Dawn had been tied. A breeze plucked at her hair and the rags of her funeral dress, and she stood with her arms wrapped around her, staring out and down, unmoving. It seemed as if she hadn't heard them coming up - hadn't noticed them at all, and Spike and Xander exchanged worried glances.

"Niblet, you - go ahead. Take a step or two forward but no more, hear me? Say something to her."

"O-okay," Dawn whispered, and she took two steps out along the catwalk - froze when the whole structure groaned and shivered.

Fuck, this thing is going to collapse - we can't let this take too long

Too true, pet. Hope Dawn can - reach her. Dawn looked back over her shoulder and then cleared her throat.

"Buffy? Hey, Buffy - it's me. It's Dawn. Buffy?" The
motionless figure seemed to flinch, then Buffy turned slowly around, and Dawn gasped. She was filthy, her hair matted into clumps, and there were streaks down her face that made it obvious she'd been crying. She had something in her arms, clutched tight, and Xander could see bruises and cuts on her arms and legs. Her dress was a rag of dirty cloth that barely covered her and her eyes were wide and vacant.

"Oh my god - Buffy? It's me! It's your sister! Buffy, please -" Dawn took another step and then yelped when the whole tower shimmied, twisting under their feet. Buffy didn't seem to notice. Her eyes focused on Dawn and her mouth opened, but it was a moment before any sound came out, and when it did it was a raw, rusty noise from a throat that seemed scarcely to work.

"D-dawn."


*What, love?*

*If it's not her - if she's not right - Dawn's heart is gonna be*
torn to bits. And I'm gonna kill Red.

Spike, please -

I will, Xan. I'm sorry. But I will. Spike turned his head to look at Xander, his eyes gleaming gold in the hazy, reflected light of the city and Xander shuddered.

Please, just...just don't lose it, Spike. I don't - I don't know what I'd do. Willow is -

Is hurting you - hurting Oz and the Bit - hurting my family. She's selfish, and she's arrogant, and she had no BLOODY right to decide this. Spike was growling now and Dawn glanced back at him, frowning.

"Stop it, Spike! You'll scare her! Buffy - please, will you come over here? This tower isn't - isn't safe. I mean, crazy people built it and it's not gonna last much longer." Buffy blinked and looked around her - looked out over the edge, seeming to drift away. Then she looked back at Dawn.

"Dawn. My sister? You're...my sister."

"Yes! I am, that's right! And you saved me, you - you
killed Glory and you came up here and you - you told me to live, Buffy and I have but - but now you're back and I need you Buffy! Please, I need you. Please come here." Dawn was crying now but Buffy didn't seem to notice. She took a step - flinched a little as the tower shook again, girders shrieking.

Dawn? Is - is this hell?" she asked, and her voice was small and bewildered and full of fear - full of pleading. Dawn gave a coughing sob and stepped forward again, reaching out.

"No! Oh, god - no, Buffy, this is - this is home. You're home! Xander - please, tell her - Spike, tell her..." Dawn gestured at them and Xander took a step towards Buffy as well.

"Hey Buffy - remember me? It's Xander. This - you're not in hell, Buffy. You're home. You really are. But we - we need you to get down from this tower, Buffy. It's not safe. Will you just - come over here to us? Please?"

"C'mon, Slayer," Spike said, and he moved up next to Dawn. "I've been watching out for the Bit, just like I promised you. Now you need to come over here and come down with us. Dawn needs you, Slayer - Buffy. She
needs you." Buffy stared at them all - looked up and around, and tears welled in her eyes and streaked down her cheeks, unnoticed.

"This is home. Home? I remember...everything...so clearly but then it was - dark, and... It hurt." Buffy held one hand out and they all flinched a little from it; from the scrapes and cuts across her knuckles and the torn, broken fingernails. Buffy folded her arm back around her ribs and Xander finally saw what she was holding and he had to clench his fists tight, digging his fingernails into his palms to stop himself from crying - from falling to his knees and just sobbing.

*Love, what -*

*Mr. Gordo. She's - holding Mr. Gordo. God, oh FUCK, Spike, we've got to get her down, now!*

"Buffy, I know that - that you're confused right now but - please, you have to trust me! You're home, and we - we just want to get down from here, okay? Tara and Oz and - and Giles and Willow are all waiting for you, down on the ground. We all missed you so much, Buffy. Please..." The tower shifted again and Dawn stumbled forward - fell to one knee. Buffy watched her
fall and something crossed her face, some emotion, and she took one and then another step forward.

"You - Dawn? You're Dawn, I remember... My sister...Dawn! Dawn -" Buffy staggered forward and dropped down beside Dawn - reached out towards Dawn's face but didn't quite touch.

"Dawn, oh - I remember, I - oh god -" Buffy blinked at the tears that continued to well from her eyes - looked up at Xander and then Spike.

"You're here - you're... Xander? Xander - help me, please - h-help me." Buffy stretcher her hand out to Xander and he hurried forward to take it - to lift her to her feet. Dawn was on her other side, holding Buffy's arm, crying hard, now but smiling as well. They got her up and started towards the ladder and Buffy stopped short, staring up at Spike.

"You kept your promise. Spike - you kept it."

"Always do, Slayer. I'm an honorable man." The ghost of a smile touched Buffy's mouth.

"Honorable vampire. Th-thank you."
"My pleasure, Slayer." The tower structure groaned loudly and jolted sideways and they all flailed for balance. "Now it's time to go, Slayer, before this whole bloody thing come down around our ears."

The trip down was terrifying, with bits of the tower falling off as they climbed, the upper portion swaying and bending, raining debris on the ground. Xander could see that the others had retreated to safety closer to the vehicles and were watching anxiously. As they got to the ground Spike took one look up and behind them and snatched Dawn off her feet.

*Run, pet! Grab her and run!* Xander didn't hesitate - he grabbed Buffy in an awkward hold and they ran, eyes fixed on Oz and Tara and the others. Behind them the tower screamed as girders twisted and over-stressed boards and beams gave way. The tower collapsed in a great cloud of dust and it was blind luck that made it fall east instead of west and miss them completely.

*Jesus, that was too close!*  

*You all right? Is Buffy -*
We're good, wolf. Slayer is... Slayer may be okay. They slowed to a walk and Xander let Buffy regain her feet, breathing through his mouth in an effort to avoid the smell of rot that permeated her hair and skin - that flowed off the rag of the dress. Spike swung Dawn down and she scurried over to Buffy's side, reaching but not quite touching.

"Buffy? Are you - okay? I mean - does anything hurt?" Buffy looked at her and blinked - looked down.

"My hands and my - my feet hurt. My throat -" She coughed - blinked again. Then she stopped walking and stared, and Xander looked up.

"Oh my - god. Buffy?" Giles took a step towards her and then stopped, and Buffy's mouth twitched in something like a smile.

"It's - it's me, Giles. I - I'm not sure...what happened. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Oh of - of course, Buffy, I - of course I can but first, why don't we go home, all right? Take you home so you can - get clean and change into something - else." Buffy looked down at herself and nodded slowly.
"Wait! I - here, Buff." Xander trotted over to the van and pulled out the bundle of clothes - took them back to Buffy. "Here. Why don't you just climb in the van and -" Buffy shivered and took a step back, then stopped herself.

"No. I mean... No, I - I'll just step - around here, around the s-side. I don't - I don't need to get inside there." Xander stared at her for a moment and *coffin* in the link, flicker of stifling airlessness and utter blackness and he swallowed hard.

"Yeah, okay, that's - here, Dawn, why don't you help her and we'll all stay here, okay?" Xander handed the clothes to Dawn who smiled at Buffy, and they both walked around the side of the van, out of sight. Xander closed his eyes for a long moment - sighed in relief as Spike's arms came around him, and then Oz's, a moment's blissful immersion in *pack family love* before they all broke away.

"Is she - how did she - " Giles was polishing his glasses and Tara was smiling tremulously. Willow looked shocked, still - wide eyed, and Ethan hadn't stirred from his slumped position in the car.
"Seems a bit dazed," Spike said, glancing at Xander. "Seems - she didn't recognize us at first, but then - she got it. She might be all right." Giles let out a harsh, sobbing breath and pressed his handkerchief hard to his mouth - turned away from them, struggling to gather his composure.

"Oh, thank god," he whispered, and Willow finally seemed to relax just a little. She hugged Tara, who was smiling harder now, laughing even.

"Oh, she's back and she's - she's fine, it's gonna be fine!" Willow sang, and Spike pulled out a cigarette and lit it - blew the smoke towards the witch.

"Don't get too happy, witch. She's not gonna be the same person. Not tonight, not tomorrow. Don't expect that she'll just - snap right back."

"Stop being so negative, Spike! She's normal! She is," Willow insisted, looking around at them. "She just needs to get cleaned up and - and have something to eat - sleep for a night and - and she'll be just fine!"

"She's been dead, Willow, and who knows where. A
meal and a night's sleep won't...fix it." Oz's voice was quiet but Willow flinched as if he'd shouted.

"Oz! Why are you - she's fine, I'm sure she is!" Oz started to reply but Giles turned around just then, his 'Watcher' face back on, and cleared his throat.

"I'll thank you not to have an argument right now. The Hellions are still in Sunnydale, and we need to get Buffy home - or back to - to your house, Xander - safely. We all need to pay attention and not - not bicker about this until we've dealt with the problem at hand."

"Watcher's right," Spike said, and inhaled the last half-inch of his smoke - flicked the butt away. "Let's get going before the Hellions notice us. We've got to figure out how to get them out of Sunnydale."

"Is there - is there a problem?" Buffy and Dawn stepped back around the van, and they all turned to look at her.

"Nothing to worry about, Slayer. Let's get you and the Bit home, eh?" Buffy looked over at Spike and frowned a little, but then she nodded and moved towards the vehicles. Willow stepped in front of her - held her hand out.
"Buffy? Are you - okay? Do you - do you remember anything?" Buffy looked at her for a long moment.

"Willow. How did - who brought me - back?" Willow's face broke into a huge smile, and she did a tiny bounce.

"I did, Buffy! I couldn't leave you there, in hell, I just - couldn't bear it! I - I found the spell and - here you are!" Buffy just stared at her and Willow licked her lips nervously - saw Mr. Gordo. "Oh! Mr. Gordo! He's all - Buffy, will you let me - I can fix him up if you'll let me. Please?"

"Witch, enough magic -" Spike growled, and Giles looked pained.

"Perhaps, Willow, you should -"

"Guys! I can do this, it's really simple. Buffy, here -"

"Willow held out her hands and Buffy hesitated for a long moment, then gently turned Mr. Gordo over to Willow.

"Okay - first he needs to be cleaned up...Corruptio Expungere," Willow murmured, and the dirt and smears
of rotting fluid vanished. Mr. Gordo was pink and fluffy again, although sadly torn. "And now, a quick fix on his seams...Suere." The split seams mended themselves, and Willow smiled triumphantly, handing Mr. Gordo back. Buffy took him gingerly, looking him over, than hugged him close.

"Okay - I...really want to go... Giles, can I - can you put the - the top down? I don't think - I don't want to be...closed in."

"Of course, Buffy," Giles said, and went hastily around his car and slid in - started it and pushed the button to fold the top away. Buffy watched it, seeming to lose herself in the low hum and slow, mechanical movement, and she started a little when Tara touched her arm.

"I'm glad you're back, Buffy," Tara said, and Buffy looked at her and nodded.

"Yeah. Tara. It's - good to see you." The top folded away, and Buffy and Dawn climbed into the back of Giles' car. Buffy gave the sleeping Ethan a puzzled glance and then settled into the seat, looking up at the stars.

"Have to go to our house first, Buffy. There's - something
we need to take care of, okay?" Xander leaned on the side of the car, and Buffy's gaze slowly tracked to him.

"Sure, Xander, that's fine." Xander nodded and stepped away, and Giles began to drive slowly off the site. The rest of them climbed into the van and Oz followed the Watcher. Xander tugged Spike up close to him, wrapping him in his arms and putting his face down into Spike's neck, closing his eyes.

Love, what is it? Xan, love -

Please don't - please leave Willow alone, okay Spike? Buffy's okay, and Willow's - she'll understand, okay? We'll - talk about it and she'll understand. Please don't - Spike's arms hugged him back, crushingly tight, and Xander felt Spike's mouth on his neck - on his cheek and hair.

I won't, love, I won't. Promise. I'm gonna be mad at her for a while, love. But I won't - touch her. Promise. Love you.

Love you too, Spike. Always.

Always, love. There was satisfaction in the link from Oz -
gratitude and love, and they drove through Sunnydale in silence, wondering what lay ahead.

6 Trouble

Driving back through Sunnydale they were all silent; Willow was huddled in the back of the van with Tara and Spike was cross-legged on the floor between the two front seats, his right hand in Xander's and his left on Oz's thigh. Buffy was in the link - images and emotion - and Xander turned to Spike after a moment, a frown on his face.

"Remember when Drusilla came to visit? And she said - " Angel falling like a star from heaven...don't be sorry for that golden angel..."

Slayer, you think?

"I don't - what if she was talking about Buffy? Do you think - what do you think it means?" Xander was fitting
his hand palm to palm with Spike's - was tracing lightly over the skin of the vampire's knuckles and the back of his hand and Spike leaned his head into Xander's hip.

"She might have been. Might have been talkin' about something that already happened, too, or hasn't happened yet or that never will happen. Dru's got the Sight but it's not - 20/20, Xander."

"It sounds like - if it were Buffy -"  _Happier being dead_, Oz said, and the three of them exchanged glances.

"You couldn't be... I mean, being dead is..."

"Not so bad, love," Spike said softly, and Xander smiled down at him, squeezing his hand.

"Not quite the same. Willow thinks she was in - hell. Do you think - she remembers? Angel remembered." Soft snort of derision from Spike at that, and Xander picked a little at the nail-polish on Spike's thumb.

"Here now, pet, you're gonna ruin my manicure. I dunno 'bout Angel, but wherever the Slayer was, she'll tell us about it when she's good and ready."
Think she ever will be? Oz asked, and the vacant look - the lost air - came through the link, making them fall silent.

"She was in hell. She'll be better now," Willow said softly from the back of the van, and Spike turned his head to look at her, his eyes golden in the gloom.

"I wouldn't be so certain, witch. You've no idea where she's been. And you'd no business doing what you did." Willow's eyes were hard - fierce - and Xander felt a cold chill down his back.

She's so certain... HOW is she so certain when she couldn't even know -

"What was I supposed to do, Spike? Leave her there? Leave her dead? None of you even seem to - to care that she died like that - that she died at all!"

"Willow, you know that's not true!"

"Isn't it, Xander?" Willow crawled forward on her knees a few feet, evading Tara's reach for her arm. "She died and we b-buried her and then it was like - like nothing ever happened! You took over patrolling and - and took
"Don't you drag the Bit into this, Red. She's nothing to do with this," Spike said, twisting around to face Willow. *Anger* was surging in the link - anger and sorrow and fear, and Xander battered at it with *calm, calm*, knowing that the subsonic hum of power that was Willow was teasing out the worst in all three of them.

"Willow - why? I just want to know why you didn't trust us. Why you had to do this - in secret." Willow's gaze switched from Spike to Xander and her face softened a little - took on a pleading look that Xander knew intimately.

"Xander, I didn't want to but... For a long time I didn't even think I could do it, and I didn't want to upset anybody - I didn't want to upset Dawn. I thought it would be better if I just did the research and - and got everything together first -"

"But then you should have told us, Willow," Xander said softly, and Willow bit her lip - looked away.

"I wanted to. I - I just -"
"You didn't want to tell anyone, Red," Spike said suddenly, cutting her off and leaning towards her - making her flinch back. "You knew if you told the Watcher or your girl there or Xander or even the Bit they'd tell you no. They'd tell you to stop and consider and you...didn't want to do that."

"That's not true, Spike -"

"Course it is." Spike leaned back up - pulled out a cigarette and lit it and regarded Willow through the smoke. There was something like disgust coming from him in the link, and Xander put his hand out, tentatively - touched Spike's shoulder.

*Oh, Spike*...*please don't*...

"You wanted to show off your power and you didn't give a bloody damn for the consequences. And there are always consequences, witch. Every bit of magic you do has a consequence and this kind..." Spike took a long drag and blew the smoke straight at her, his eyes gleaming gold and his lips curled back in a snarl. "This kind could hurt all of us." Willow's magic - or the presence of it - flared sharply, and a sourceless wind sprang up, fanning her hair. Behind her Tara was wide-
eyed, shaking her head.

"That's not true, Spike, I would never hurt Xander or Oz or - or Tara! You don't know what you're talking about!"

*Spike, stop! We can't fight about this now -*

"Gonna use that magic on me, Red? Gonna hurt me?"

"You deserve it. You're killing people!" Willow's face was white as paper and she twitched when Tara's hand came down on her shoulder - twitched and slid out from under it.

*Protect protect, not pack! from the wolf, avoid and attack in the same breath.*

"Forgetting something, witch. Forgetting that my hurt is Xander's hurt. Gonna hurt him, too?" Willow stared at Spike, wide-eyed, and then her gaze went to Xander and he felt his heart sink. Because for a moment there was calculation there. As if she was weighing the hurt she could cause, and finding the...consequences...acceptable.

"Willow!" Tara cried, her eyes shimmering with tears,
and Willow started to turn, to say something, and Oz suddenly slammed on the brakes. They all rocked with it, Willow falling on her side and Xander putting out his hand to keep himself from going headlong into the dash. Ahead about two car-lengths was Giles' car, also stopped. About a block further on Xander could see fire, moving figures, and -

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

_There's the 'bot! Fuck - Buffy!_ Buffy was climbing out of Giles' car.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

_What in hell is she doing?_ Spike sprinted up the street after Buffy, Xander and Oz beside him. Tara was behind the wheel of the van, ready to drive away if things got ugly. Up ahead he could see the Hellions and the 'bot. They seemed to have chained the 'bot's arms and legs to various bikes and were even now preparing to quarter the ragged figure. Half the 'bots hair was missing and her clothing was torn and dirty. Wires were exposed along her abdomen and chest, and one arm was askew, as if it had been dislocated.

"Buffy! Stop!" Xander yelled, and Buffy looked over her
shoulder at him, her mouth a little open, her eyes wild.

"That's me! I have to... Help me stop them, Xander! Help me -" Buffy turned back to the Hellions, running faster now, and Spike cursed.

_Bloody stupid notion. Got to get the Bit out of here..._

_Get the Hellions out of here - let them know the Slayer is back,_ Oz, practical as always and Spike sent him a flashing grin.

_Good idea, wolf!_ "Oi! Slayer!" Spike shouted, and the Hellions jerked in surprise, looking wildly around. They saw Buffy and one stepped up, sneering.

"Take the ringer out, boys! Then we'll take out the other one and the Hellmouth'll belong to us!"

_Idiot_ Xander thought, and he was grinning now - like Spike was, like Oz and Spike saw the hyena come out in the blink of an eye - saw the glow come up in Xander's eyes and he laughed aloud. Oz was shifting, half-way to the wolf and he let out a yipping howl of excitement. Too much tension - too much emotion - and this would make a fine release. Spike let out the demon
and roared, and the Hellions holding the chains to the 'bot kicked their bikes into gear, going hard in four different directions. The 'bot flew apart with a pop of bluish lighting and Buffy screamed.

"No!" Then she flung herself forward, straight into the leader and he went down under her headlong assault. Spike dove in happily, snapping necks and ripping out throats - breaking a leg here or a skull there. The demons seemed disconcerted by a second Slayer - by a Slayer with demonic cohorts and they couldn't get themselves organized fast enough to make a decent defense. The leader was down, writhing, and Buffy was spinning and kicking, her matted hair flying out around her but Spike could sense the weakness in her. Could smell it. She wasn't up to this, not yet.

_Slayer needs help. We need to leave some alive so they can spread the word_, he thought, and Xander and Oz moved immediately to her side. Spike pounced on the leader and dragged him upright - threw him into the sadly diminished number of his fellow Hellions. Buffy backed off, standing in front of Xander and Oz and panting a little, wobbly.

"Slayer's here, boys - and she's not giving this town
up. Best go now, before she has your heads on a pike at the city limits."

"Who the fuck are you, vampire? Since when does the Slayer have a vamp or any other demon fighting for her?"

"Since William the Bloody became Master here, that's when." Xander was grinning - shaking blood off his hands and the Hellion stared at him - squinted suddenly at Spike and then at Oz.

"Werewolf, vampire...and whatever the fuck you are... Fuck!"

"I heard'a them," another demon muttered, and the leader glared at him - looked back at Buffy.

"Slayer -" he hissed. Buffy bent down, snatching something off the street and throwing, one smooth motion. The knife she had scooped up thudded solidly in to the leader's head, between his eyes and he fell backwards in slow motion and lay, twitching, on the asphalt.

"Get the hell out of my town," Buffy rasped, and the remaining Hellions scrambled for their bikes. In minutes
they were gone, the roar of their bikes diminishing rapidly and Oz couldn't help sending a ringing howl after them. Buffy looked over at him - watched as he shifted back to his human self and a small smile turned up the corners of her mouth.

"You guys - you really kick ass," she whispered, her voice mostly gone, and they stared at her.

*Never thought I'd see the day* - Spike thought, and then he was laughing, and Xander and Oz were, too.

"God, Buffy - are you okay? We really need to get home," Xander said, going forward and slipping his arm around the Slayer's shoulders.

"I - guess I am. I'm so tired... Were you tired, Spike?"

"Tired when, pet?" Spike asked, fishing out his flask.

"When you - after you...dug your way out." Spike stopped, the flask half-way to his mouth, and looked at her.

*Oh Buffy,* from Xander, soft and so sad.
Be all right, love.

"Yeah, Slayer, I was tired. And hungry." He flashed a fangy grin at her and took a long pull of the whisky. After a moments hesitation he held it out to her. Buffy tipped her head to one side, that little smile still there, just curling her mouth up. She reached out with her poor, torn hand and took the flask - took a drink.

"Blaaaah! Oh, god - that's awful!" she squeaked. Spike just grinned, taking the flask back.

"You're right about that, Buff. That stuff could strip paint." Xander hugged her a little closer and there was a little thread of happiness in the link - a blossom of hope.

"Oi! Finest kind, this. You just don't have any appreciation." Spike put the flask away and snaked an arm around Xander's waist, pulling him close. He could feel Buffy's heat, just there on the other side, and then Oz slipped up, putting his arm around Buffy too, his hand just brushing Spike's where it rested on Xander's ribs.

"I'm with Xander. I say you can never go wrong with fruit."
"Fruit in drinks is for girls and poufters," Spike declared, and Xander giggled.

"Which am I, then?" he said, and Buffy actually laughed.

"Is everything all right?!" It was Giles, halfway down the block to them, looking at the sprawled corpses of demons.

"It's fine, Giles! We're coming!" Xander tugged a little, slipping his hand into Spike's back pocket and the four of them walked down the street, grinning inanely.

*And we're a fine lot of fools, aren't we. This night is madder than that one,* Spike thought, seeing the tower and the portal again, and Xander bumped his hip a little, smiling over at him.

"This is how it's supposed to be, Spike. The white hats win, and walk away smiling."

"Yeah," Buffy said, looking at Spike too, and Oz made that wolfish little whuff down in his chest, agreement and laughter in one.

"You lot - almost make me wanna trade in my Evil
Undead membership card," Spike said, and that made Buffy giggle all the way back to Giles' car.

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As they went up the walk to the house Buffy seemed confused, and she finally turned to Xander, frowning.

"Xander, I don't - this isn't the house you lived in before, is it?"

"Oh! That's right, you - No, this is a different house, Buffy. After you died, we moved here. We needed someplace that had more bedrooms, so Dawn could have her own room." Xander stepped around her and unlocked the front door and held it open for everyone to file in. Giles went first, supporting a dazed Ethan, then Tara and Willow, both looking troubled. Oz and Dawn came next, and then Spike, who winked at Xander and took a quick little breath as he breached the wards.

Hate those bloody things.

"Does Dawn live here?" Buffy asked, completely confused, and Xander ushered her in, smiling.
"No, she just stays here a lot. She rides the bus over after school and Spike helps her do her homework." A snort of amusement from Spike, and a giggle from Dawn. "Well, okay, that would be a lie. He pretends to help her do her homework. Mostly he teaches her how to play poker. Or if Oz is home he's been showing her how to make stir-fry and stuff." Buffy smiled briefly at that. Her own kitchen skills were hit or miss, Xander remembered. "Then when I get home we usually have dinner and head over to the Magic Box so Dawn can go home with Tara or Willow - they moved into your house. Or we stay here and Dawn sleeps over." Buffy looked lost again - a little freaked out - and Xander put his arm around her shoulders, hugging her lightly.

"None of us wanted her to be alone, Buffy. And we love her. She's...part of our family too, you know? She even stayed with Giles once or twice - got some Beginners Latin in." Buffy just stared at him, then looked around the small living room, her eyes suspiciously bright. Oz was moving from place to place, lighting the candles they still preferred over electric bulbs. Ethan and Giles were at the kitchen table and Spike was assembling tea-things, grumbling about being the Watcher's batman. Tara and Willow were on the couch, curled together, and Dawn
was hovering, watching her sister.

*Batman?* Xander asked, brief image of Spike in tights and something crashed to the counter top in the kitchen.

*Bloody hell!* NO. *Batman - bloody servant.* 'Do be so kind as to make some tea, Spike, I'm not familiar with your kitchen'*... Xander bit the inside of his lip to keep from laughing.

"Buffy? Do you - do you wanna come have some tea or - or maybe hot chocolate? Spike makes really good hot chocolate." Dawn looked encouragingly at her sister, who hesitated.

"Joyce's recipe," Spike said, grinning at Dawn, and Dawn smiled back - moved a few steps closer to Buffy.

"It's the only thing he makes besides tea," Dawn whispered, "so say yes."

"Heard that, Bit," Spike mumbled, but he got a pot out of the cupboard and poured in some milk.

"Umm. Sh-sure. Hot chocolate would be - Anya!"
"Huh? Hot chocolate would be Anya?" Xander stared at her, confused himself, now.

"Where's Anya? She's not here. Did she - Xander, did she make it?"

"What? Oh! Yeah, she made it, she was fine. A little cut up. She's with her boyfriend, Drake."

"He of the endless orgasms," Willow muttered and Tara giggled into her shoulder.

"Oh, that's - that's good." Buffy seemed to waver for a moment and Xander took her arm.

"C'mon and sit down, Buff. Have some hot chocolate and then you can get a bath, huh? And Dawn has some clothes here; you can change into something clean." Buffy looked down at her smudged and bloody clothes - pushed a lock of filthy hair out of her face and grimaced.

"Yeah. That's - that's a good idea." They went into the kitchen and settled into chairs, Buffy setting Mr. Gordo next to the three large candles-in-jars that were in the middle of the table. Dawn fetched the extra two chairs
from the back porch and Oz finished lighting candles and jumped up to sit on the kitchen counter next to the stove. Spike leaned next to him and the low, contented hum of pack made Xander sigh in relief as he settled into the chair next to Giles, letting go of tensions he hadn't realized were there.

Safe at home. God. Everything about tonight was - fuckin' crazy - but I'm so glad to be here. Glad everybody is here.

Love you, pet.

Love you... Xander thought, including Oz, and the werewolf smiled over at him - helped himself to a square of dark chocolate from the package Spike had opened. Spike whacked the back of his hand but also leaned hard into his side, and Xander sighed again, just happy.

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"Giles? Is that - Ethan Rayne?" Buffy was staring at the thin Englishman with equal parts confusion and horror on her face and Giles looked up at her and leaned his
elbows on the table.

"Yes, it is Buffy. And really, it's a very long story -"

"Just sitting here, waiting on my hot chocolate," Buffy said, raising her eyebrows at him, and Giles smiled at her.

"Yes, you are, aren't you? Well, to be - succinct, when I... When I sent Ethan off with the Initiative, they...moved him to a new facility, down in Brazil. And..."

"And they tried to discover what makes a Chaos Mage tick," Ethan said, his head jerking up on his neck as if a switch had suddenly been thrown. His dark, sunken eyes roved over Buffy and he made a curious little gesture with his hand. Spike, Xander noticed, flinched from it a little as did Tara, who was standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

*What, love?*

*Nother bloody ward. Mage is superstitious, what a surprise. Against - the unhappy dead.*

*But she's NOT dead -*
Yeah, well. He's not takin' any chances, is he? Xander frowned, not really liking that. Buffy meanwhile was staring at Ethan - really looking at him - and there was dawning comprehension on her face.

"Are you saying - they hurt you? But, you're human!"

"So were the witches the Church burned. Humanity is never a 'Get out of jail free' card," Ethan said, smirking just a little. His lean face was so gaunt it hurt to look at, and Xander wondered what else was wrong, besides exhaustion and starvation. He seemed -

*His magics wonky. I think - they messed up his connections, so to speak.*

*How do you know that, Spike?*

*The way he feels,* Spike thought, and Xander thought of the wrongness that seeped from the man, and nodded to himself. Maybe it hurt, to be like that.

"He was tortured, Buffy," Giles said softly. "Experimented on. Much like your Riley." Buffy flinched a little at that, and Giles pursed his lips but
plowed on. "When the facility in Brazil was destroyed, Ethan managed to make his way here. He's only been here a short time, and he's still very ill. He's staying with me." Giles looked slightly defiant, slightly sad, and Buffy just stared at him for a moment. Spike had lit a cigarette and was stirring the chocolate, a subdued sort of laughter in the link. Laughter mostly at the look on Buffy's face..

*Stop that. He DID try to kill us all.*

*Oh, that's his job though, innit? Just like mine* Flash of fangs over his shoulder and Xander just grinned at him.

"What happened down in Brazil? Destroyed how?" Buffy asked, and Giles looked at Xander - glanced at Spike and took off his glasses, feeling in a pocket for his handkerchief.

"Well, there were -"

"It was your vampire, there. He was instrumental in bringing all the little tin soldiers toppling down." Ethan shot a look of wolfish glee at Spike, who raised an eyebrow at him.
"What? Okay - first? He's not my vampire -"

"Got that bloody right," Spike grumbled, and Buffy rolled her eyes.

"So not complaining. And second? We're sliding into bizzaro-land, here. How did Spike get down to Brazil and take out the Initiative."

"Called in a favor or two, Slayer. T'wasn't hard."

Can we please not brag about this?

Was a good job, pet - nothing to be ashamed of.

Don't play the fool, from Oz, who was staring at Dawn. The younger girl looked rather shocked and the look she turned on Spike was confused and a little afraid.

"Spike, did you really -"

"I did really, Bit. And I'd do it again. Those wankers were puttin' everybody in danger, messin' with things they didn't know how to handle. Just ask the Watcher there, or your sis. They were heading for something nasty." Spike turned his back on the group abruptly,
stirring the mixture in the pot, and Oz reached out and rubbed his hand slowly up Spike's arm and shoulder to his neck - kneaded the tense muscles there.

Fuckin' mage should learn to keep his mouth shut.

Dawn understands, Oz thought, and Spike flicked a glance at him.

Don't want her to have to, he thought back, and Xander understood that, but...

Can't keep her in the dark forever. Better she knows things - she'll be safer in the long run.

They all agreed on that, but none of them wanted to be the one to introduce Dawn to the grimmer realities of life on the Hellmouth. Well, the grimmer realities she hadn't been forced to live through, that is.

"He's right, you know," Ethan said, sitting up a little straighter and running his hand back through his hair, vain attempt to make it lie down. "They were mixing magic and science - or trying to. They were...upsetting the balance. We're all very lucky the bad thing that happened happened to them, and not... Well, I can't say
us since I was there. Let's just say the world is a bit better off without them." Ethan was serious now, looking straight at Buffy and not smiling at all, and Buffy slowly nodded.

"Giles - said something about that, the last time you were in Sunnydale. He said you'd warned him... Well I'm - I'm glad you got out."

"No you're not," Ethan said softly, and his hand reached out and touched Giles' hand, and their fingers twined together. "But I am." Buffy looked at their hands with narrowed eyes and then looked around. Tara had come over and sat down in the last free chair and Willow leaned behind her, toying with Tara's long blonde hair and not looking at anyone.

"Okay. Has everyone become gay since I died? What's up with that?" Giles just gaped at her, blushing, and Ethan laughed outright, leaning back in his chair and tugging Giles' hand down onto his thigh. Spike appeared over her shoulder, fists sprouting mugs of hot chocolate.

"Only common sense, Slayer. Who'd know better about what to do with you than another bird?"
"Spike! Gross. Can't you say 'woman' or maybe just 'girl'? Now I'm gonna have visions of chickens!" Dawn looked outraged and Buffy just stared at her - started making these strange sort of snorting noises. While everyone looked on in confusion she finally slumped down over the table and laughed. It was a little hysterical but it was a good sound, and Spike and Oz distributed cups and mugs until everyone had something hot to drink. Ethan, Giles and Spike all took slugs of whiskey in their tea. Buffy sat up finally, wiping her eyes, and she sipped her chocolate between tremors of silent laughter.

"I have - a lot of questions and..." Buffy looked around at all of them, her fingers creeping out to touch Mr. Gordo. "I'm not...really sure I'm awake, or...something. I just want to get clean and go to sleep and talk about all this -" she waved her hand around her, encompassing them all. "Talk about this in the morning. Okay?"

"Of course," Giles murmured, and he suddenly reached across the table and clasped her hand in his, squeezing gently. "I'm so very - very glad you're back, Buffy," he said softly, and Buffy's calm mask cracked for a moment, showing raw emotion that she instantly shut down.
"I'm s-sorry, Giles, I -"

"No, don't finish that. You've no apologies to make." Giles smiled gently at her and she nodded hesitantly, wiping her hand over her eyes. Oz had leaned down to murmur something in Dawn's ear and she nodded, standing up.

"C'mon Buffy, I'll show you the bathroom and my room - it's so cool, they let me paint it whatever color I wanted!" Buffy sniffed and then smiled at her sister, standing also and tucking Mr. Gordo under her arm.

"Oh, boy. Why do I think I'm gonna be sleeping in a room with orange walls and green carpet?"

"Buffy! I was five when I wanted that! I've got much better taste now. And no carpet, but the rug is purple..." Dawn led her away upstairs and a sort of tension seemed to slip out of all of them and Giles sighed and slumped back into his chair, glancing at his watch.

"Good Lord, it's nearly three! We really must -" The rest of his words were lost in a jaw-cracking yawn.

Shouldn't split up just yet, Spike thought, and Xander
glanced at him and nodded.

"Giles, you and Ethan should stay here tonight. We don't think it's a good idea to split up until daylight."

"Oh, no, we really -"

"Ripper," Ethan said, putting his hand on Giles' shoulder. "Listen to them. They're right. Things are still...unsettled." Ethan flicked his fingers out, and the wards shivered, prickle of static across all of their nerves. There was pressure, from the outside still - the Hellmouth uneasy as if the very fabric of it had been strained - frayed.

_Has, in a way. Who knows what Red pulled loose when she yanked the Slayer back home? We'll be patching things for months._ Giles had turned to look at Ethan and they stared at each other silently for a moment, and then Giles nodded.

"All right, then. We'll - we can camp down here -"

"No, Giles. You can sleep up in our room. We still have the fold-out couch, me and Spike and Oz can all fit in it. Tara and Willow can have Oz's room," Xander said,
confirmation and approval flickering in the link, and Giles looked faintly surprised and then grateful.

"Ah, well... Thank you, then. That would be - just fine."

"I'll get some clean sheets," Xander mused, standing up and gathering cups and Oz joined him. Spike was leaning against the counter, smoking, and Tara got up as well, handing her cup to Oz with a small smile.

"Thanks, guys. I th-think I could sleep for a week." She turned to Willow and reached for her hand, then frowned. "What is it, sweetie?" Willow looked up from picking at the hem of her shirt, frowning a little.

"Oh, it's just... Buffy didn't seem very happy. To be back, I mean. To be out of hell."

"She's just tired, sweetie, she'll - she'll be better t-tomorrow."

"Or she won't," Spike said, and Willow frowned at him.

"It's not like I expect you to care, but she's back! I mean, there should be a little celebration or something, not all this - doom and gloom!"
"You mean a little celebration of you?" Spike sneered, and Willow's eyes went wide and then narrow.

_Fuck, thought we could get to sleep without this -_

_Rubs me the wrong way, love, sorry,_ Spike thought, but he wasn't sorry and Xander knew it. Oz just shrugged, _pack and tired_, and Xander felt the same.

"Well, okay, yeah! I mean, that was some pretty advanced magic and - and I pulled it off! Without any help! I kinda think maybe somebody should say 'congratulations'!"

"That is not the word I would choose," Giles said, his eyes glinting with anger. He pushed to his feet abruptly and leaned on the table, staring at Willow. "The power you used is primal, Willow - power that very few have the ability - or the sheer bloody audacity to meddle with! Don't you see, you stupid girl, you're lucky to be alive!" Giles shouted the last and Willow gasped in surprise - recoiled from him. And then she leaned forward as well, anger vibrating through her.

"But I did it, Giles! I did what nobody else could! I am
powerful, and maybe - maybe you don't want to mess with me!"

"Willow," Tara said, and there was - something - in the blonde witch's voice - a whip-crack of power that made them all flinch. Ethan raised his head like a dog scenting prey, grinning.

"Root and vine, little witchling - even you don't want to cross that line."

"What -"

"Mr. R-rayne, don't," Tara said. She reached out and took Willow's hand. "We're going upstairs. Ju-Giles, I'm sorry. We'll t-talk in the morning, okay?"

"Yes, I think that would be best," Giles said shortly, then he sighed and took his glasses off - rubbed his forehead and stood there a moment, head down.

"Willow - I didn't mean to shout at you. But you cannot - cannot dismiss this lightly. There will be consequences."

"We'll deal with them, Giles. Buffy's back now and - and everything'll be fine. You'll see." Giles just shook his
head, looking too tired to even speak anymore, and Willow and Tara said their goodnights, going away upstairs. Oz followed, calling softly up after them that he'd be up in a minute with clean sheets.

"Yeah, clean sheets all around. And no alarm clocks!" Xander said, yawning hard.

"Yes, you're right. I - I appreciate - everything you've done tonight, Xander - the three of you. I -"

"Sure, Giles. No problem. And - Willow - she... She didn't mean that. You know that, right?" Xander still felt the tremor of barely-contained magics vibrating through the room - knew Spike and Oz did, as well. It made him want to bristle up and snarl, but he shoved the hyena away, determined to smooth things over.

"She is, for all her power, just an amateur, Xander. And an arrogant one at that. I - my teaching -"

"You can't stop that sort of thing Rupert - you of all people should know that." Ethan pushed himself to his feet and tentatively wound his arm around Giles' waist. After a moment Giles returned the gesture and Ethan sighed softly, leaning into him. "She'll go on her
merry way and she'll learn, eventually. Or die. You can only put the knowledge in front of her - you can't make her mind it."

"She keeps on not minding it and she'll know what it's like to piss off a Master. She does anything that threatens my family again and I won't hesitate," Spike said, and his calm, quiet voice held absolute conviction. There was a moment of silence and then Giles nodded.

"If she continues like she is, she may not survive long enough for you to extract your vengeance, Spike." Giles shook his head - turned and briefly rested his mouth on Ethan's temple - the first real sign of true affection he'd shown in front of them, and somehow that made Xander feel like Giles finally, truly trusted them all.

"Go to bed, Giles. We'll fix this tomorrow. Or, get started on fixing it. C'mon, I'll get your bed made up." Giles nodded and they went away upstairs, Oz getting clean sheets for Tara and Willow and sorting out a t-shirt and boxers to sleep in. Xander did the same, and he paused outside of Dawn's door, listening. But there was nothing except maybe a faint snore, and he smiled to himself and went downstairs again. Spike had
piled all the cups in a haphazard fashion in the sink and pulled the sofa-bed out, and was sitting moodily on the foot of it, his flask in his hand. He tipped it up, emptying it, and looked up when Xander and Oz came in.

"Need to go out, love." *Hungry, angry.*

*Yeah...* Xander slumped down next to him and nuzzled into his shoulder - turned his face up for a kiss and was rewarded with a slow, deep exploration of his mouth, tasting whiskey and smoke and Spike, *love you love you* curling through the link like a warm breeze.

*Be careful, love.*

*Always.* Spike stood up, picking up his duster and shrugging it on, then standing for a minute, his hand cupping Xander's cheek.

"You all right?" Xander asked softly, and Spike nodded.

"Course I am, love. Just - anxious, is all. Too much power flyin' about tonight. Makes me -" Spike shivered, and Xander nodded.

"Yeah. Makes me wanna fight something," Oz said softly,
and Spike grinned - reached over and pulled Oz into a hug, ruffling his hair up and kissing the werewolf on the temple.

"Wanna come run with me, wolf?" Oz hugged him back - looked towards the door with a considering expression, biting his lip. And then he sighed and shook his head, pulling away and flopping down next to Xander.

"Can't. Well, shouldn't. I've got to work tomorrow and get over to see Derio first thing..."

"Yeah. You two sleep, then - I'll be quiet, coming in."

"No you won't," Xander muttered, but he was smiling and Spike grinned back at him - slipped out the door and into the night. Oz and Xander shuffled under the covers, Xander stretching hard and relaxing with a soft groan, his back sore from the tensions of the day and long-ignored bruises from the fight earlier suddenly perking up and starting to ache.

"Christ. I'm so tired... You okay, Oz?"

"Yeah." Oz turned in the bed, curling up and pressing his back to Xander's side. "Just - gonna be weird, these next
few weeks, don't you think?"

"Yeah, weird. Well -" Xander yawned and turned as well, Oz solid and warm behind him, the rest of the bed empty, waiting for Spike. "Weird is our middle name, huh? We'll be fine." Love you.

Love you too.

Love you both and John Boy too, now get some bloody SLEEP! Smiling, Xander closed his eyes.

7 Worry

Spike breathed, slow and deep, savoring the warm, musky scent that surrounded him.

Smell so good, love... He bowed his head a little and licked the taut arch of Xander's neck - let his teeth scrape lightly over the scar. Xander shuddered, his head thrown back on Spike's shoulder and his fingers, at the moment, digging into Spike's hips. His body was quivering with tension and pleasure and Spike wound his arms tighter around Xander's ribs and breathed again, burrowing into the sweat-damp hair that lay over Xander's shoulder.

Spike, love... "Please..." Xander was grinding his hips
down, trying for more contact and Spike let him - pulled him down tight, loving the hot, clinging feel of Xander around his cock, loving the grasping flutter of muscle as he pushed deeper. He slid one hand down Xander's chest and belly to his cock and stroked there for a moment, then reached lower, between the spread legs. Spike was on his knees on the bed, and Xander was kneeling over him, back to chest. Spike loved being able to hold him this way - loved the press of flesh all down him. Xander's hands slid back, grasping his buttocks and trying to push him, to make him move.

"Sspike...please fuck me..."

"Am, love...feel this..." Spike's fingers paused for a moment to caress the soft skin of Xander's tightly drawn-up balls, then moved on to the slick skin that was beneath them. He circled the root of his own cock with his fingers - scratched lightly on the stretched muscle that surrounded it - then pushed one finger in, so slowly, filling Xander that much more. Xander writhed, panting, and Spike moved his hips, lifting Xander just a little with his other arm and pulling him back down, rubbing over that sensitive bundle of nerves deep inside. Xander's fingers sank into Spike's buttocks, hard enough to bruise, and Spike moaned. He twisted the finger that was inside
and shivered when Xander did, his teeth biting down on the scar. There was a fizzing through the link like champagne, little prickles of pleasure along the nerves and Xander bucked desperately.

 FUCK, MOVE...SPIKE, JUST...MOVE, MOVE... 

 Shhh...almost, love... Spike let his finger slip out, and he moved his hands over Xander's body - scratching over his belly, pinching at nipples, just wanting to pull Xander as close to him as he could - to touch everything, to know every inch. Xander's hands roved over hip and buttock - he lifted them over his head and hooked them around Spike's neck, pulling him closer, turning his own head so they could share a kiss. Spike nipped at Xander's jaw - his chin - pulled Xander's lower lip into his mouth and sucked for a moment and then kissed him, tongue fucking into the warm, sweet flesh faster than his cock was. Then he let go and pushed Xander forward onto his hands and knees - curled his fingers around Xander's hips and moved once, hard.

 Ready then? Love you... 

 "Yeah, god -" Love you Xander gasped and Spike started to fuck in earnest, moving as hard and fast and as deep
as Xander could take. Loving the clench and shudder every time he hit the right spot, loving how Xander's hips moved in counterpoint, how his knees spread wider on the bed, welcoming him in, wanting more of him. Spike dug his thumbs into the tensed muscle around his cock and pried Xander open a little wider, watching himself sliding in and pulling out, pushing with the tips of his thumbs until they were inside, pulling Xander open and Xander was crying out now, breathy sounds of encouragement. Spike sunk in deeper, spread him open further; arching his back, his legs trembling, he thrust, his whole body driving forward into willing, squirming flesh. The double feeling, of fucking and being fucked - the incredible burn of the hard stretch that Xander pushed back into, wanting more - the heat and tip-to-root clench of silken flesh was almost overwhelming. Then Xander clenched down harder - pushed the link wide and arched his back and thrust back hard and Spike nearly screamed.

*Love, do it, please - c'mon, yours, love, take it, take me...* Xander was groaning, panting - arching his throat, and Spike rammed forward hard, sending him to his belly, getting one hand under and around Xander's cock in a hard grip and snaking the other up to clench into his hair. Chest to back, glorious heat and friction and sweat-
wood-sweet-savory, the complicated scent that was love and home and family and mine. Spike sucked salt-tinged flesh into his mouth - let the demon come out, whining with need and bite, deep and hard. They both froze for a split second and then Spike was thrusting and sucking, all rhythm lost in the surge and twist and fire of his orgasm and Xander's. Sensation coiling through and through the link: Xander's come hot over his hand, slick as oil and rich with musk, and the fist/body around his own cock. The blood that tasted of desire and magic and spice, and the delicious sting and pull of being bitten. The low, gasping cries that Xander couldn't stop as he undulated under Spike, his skin roughening with gooseflesh and his body practically vibrating around Spike's cock, and the vampire's own growling moan from deep in his chest as he shuddered to completion.

Fuckin' lovely, you're so lovely...always, Xander, always mine, yours, always, always... Drifting into incoherency as the climax left them limp and gasping.

God yes, love you, always always...no, don't, want you there, love you there, holding me... Spike stopped in his half-hearted attempt to roll off Xander's back and simply collapsed over him, easing his fangs out carefully and licking up the smear of blood. Xander's body was still
clenching and fluttering around him and he moved his hips ever so slightly, loving the soft moan it elicited.

"Never get tired of that," Xander murmured, turning his head just a little so Spike could kiss him. Spike did, awkward as the position was, and he slowly unwound his fingers from Xander's hair and stroked the tangled strands.

"Love this. Don't ever cut it, pet."

"You just want it long so you can pull it when you fuck me," Xander mumbled, his hand twitching over the sheet and pulling Spike's out from under him - twining his fingers with Spike's sticky ones.

"That too, love. But it feels so good...so soft," Spike nuzzled into the nape of Xander's neck, rubbing his cheek over the hair bunched there and Xander sighed.

*Feels good when you pull it, though. I won't cut it but you have to beat up everybody that calls me a girl.*

*Anything for you, pet.* Spike felt the rumbling rasp of the purr starting in his chest - felt Xander's delight through the link and let it go - let it get loud. Xander took a deep
breath and tried to purr back.

"Silly," Spike mumbled, his voice choppy from the purr, and Xander giggled. Talking and purring at the same time never failed to make Xander laugh. Spike glanced up at the dresser - at the postcards that had been stuck back into the mirror frame the first day they'd moved into the new house. *See if you laugh at poetry, then* he thought, knowing it was Xander's not-so-secret weakness. He whispered in Xander's ear.

"*Rise with the wind, my great big serpent...Silence the birds and darken the air...Charge me with terror, alive for a moment...Strike for the heart and have me there...*"

"What's that? That's...weird."

"That's Auden, and he was a weird bloke. Try this, then." Spike shifted, just a little - rumbled the purr higher and grinned at the pleasure in the link.

"*He kissed me awake and no one was sorry...The sun shone on sails, eyes, pebbles, anything...And the high green hill sits always by the sea...So, to remember our changing garden...We are linked as children in a circle*"
dancing...My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely...And the high green hill sits always by the sea."

"Like that, love?"

"Mmmm...weird but pretty. How do you remember all those?"

"My very warped upbringing," Spike rumbled, and Xander giggled again. His free hand was on Spike's thigh where it sprawled down on the bed, rubbing lightly. He squirmed a little under Spike and then settled again, sighing happily. *Love feeling you on me...in me...owning me...* 

*Dont own you, pet. You're your own.*

*You DO. Own all of me. I want it like that. Love that you want me that much.*

*Always, love...* Spike kissed what he could reach of Xander's face and neck and shoulder - felt himself hardening again, as the love and want and *yours mine always* suffused him. Oz and Derio were asleep down
the hall, the faint night-time images the wolf sent - pack
and den and completeness - only added to the vampire's
own sense of utter safety, utter happiness.

"Say me another, Spike..." Xander murmured, his own
desire rising, as his blood did.

"Mmmmmm..." Spike thought for a moment - lifted
himself up a little and started a slow, shallow thrusting,
just teasing that sensitive spot, lightly brushing over
it. Xander shivered and arched into him.

"My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiepest among ten
thousand...His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are
bushy, and black as a raven...His eyes are as the eyes of
doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly
set...His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet
flowers...his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling
myrrh...His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl...his
belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires...His
legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold...his
countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars...His
mouth is most sweet...yea, he is altogether lovely...This is
my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of
Jerusalem..."
"This week sucked," Dawn said, slumping down in her chair and Tara absently patted her shoulder.

"Why'd it suck, Bit?" Spike asked, sitting up on the loft stairs in the Magic Box, smoking and watching Xander.

"Because! Janice has some new boyfriend and she's spending all her time with him and he's a big dork. And I don't get the lab we're doing in biology and Buffy is no help... And that's another thing - Buffy is acting like a total freak."

"C'mon Dawn - can't be that bad," Xander said.

"Says you," Dawn muttered, rolling her eyes. Xander ginned at her and flipped a page over in the book he was reading. Some weird demon had robbed a bank and now they were looking for it, since bank robbing was apparently not common demon behavior.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

*How does anybody know that? Maybe all the great bank robbers of history were really DEMONS - special bank-
robbing demons.

Robbed a bank or two in my day, Spike mused, grinding out his cigarette on his boot heel and pocketing the butt. Was fun. Dru wanted a house and there wasn't anybody to kill for it. He stood up and jumped down off the stairs - sauntered over to the counter where Anya was doing paperwork. The shop was closed for the night and research was the theme of the evening. Except for Willow and Giles, who were in the training room having another discussion/argument about magic, and Buffy, who was patrolling. She did that a lot, these days.

Buffy's been kinda - weird, lately. You notice?

Slayer's always weird, Spike thought, and Xander shot him a look. But, yeah...she's been kinda...off. It hadn't helped that the day after her resurrection some demon - a hitchhiker, Anya had said, that had ridden into their dimension inside Buffy - had tried to kill her. And had possessed Dawn and Anya and Xander in the bargain. Another reason for Spike to be pissed at Willow, and Xander was starting to wonder if they'd ever go back to being anything like friendly. Now almost every encounter devolved into a sniping match, and Ethan Rayne was no help. His sly or mocking or sarcastic
commentary did nothing to smooth ruffled feathers, and his own struggle to regain control of his magic made him short-tempered. And the aura of chaotic energy that constantly hung around the man set their whole pack on edge. The man himself was sitting in the fourth chair around the lighted table, deeply engrossed in something. Xander had the feeling it wasn't demon research, but at least he wasn't stirring everybody up. Xander reluctantly liked Ethan - admired his tenacity - but his ability to cause, well, chaos was too good by far.

*Only been a month since she came back. Can't expect everything to be all hearts and puppies,* Spike thought, and idly peered into a plastic bag lying on the counter. Anya slapped his hand, snatching the bag away.

"Oi! What was that for?"

"This is private, Spike. So hands off!" Anya glared at him and Spike smirked, and Xander heard the mental note to look in the bag as soon as possible. Anya shoved the bag away into a drawer and slammed it shut - went back to her accounting. Xander wished fleetingly that Oz were there - his calm always seemed to affect everyone around him - but he was helping Derio and his bandmates at a show down in Oxnard and wouldn't be
back until the next day.

"Christ, found anything yet, ducks? I'm 'bout to go to sleep on my feet -" Spike leaned over Tara, peering at the book she was looking through, and Tara shook her head.

"Nothing. This book is a bust." She closed it and pushed it aside - looked over at Dawn. "C'mon Dawnie, get out your biology book and I'll help you figure it out, okay? All these demons are giving me a headache." Dawn grinned and sat up, rooting through her backpack and Spike circled the table, eyes on Xander.

*Don't, Spike. Really. Really!* Spike just smirked, shifting from 'walk' to 'panther stalk' effortlessly, letting go a flood of X-rated images to the link. Xander closed his eyes and dropped his head onto the books in front of him. *No, no, NO! Dawn is here. And Tara. And Anya will make remarks about threesomes. And DAWN is here! And...and...there's already people in the training room, Spike!*

*Training. I like that word. 'Member what you were thinking about? Cats and...collars...and...leashes...* Xander groaned a little, putting his fists over his ears in a vain attempt to block out the silken
voice in his head. Impossible, of course. Spike slunk up behind him and leaned on the back of his chair. A moment later his cool fingertips were lightly tracing over Xander's neck. He took the elastic out of Xander's hair, fanning it out and smoothing the ends that came to the tops of his shoulder-blades. His fingers stroked up under the hair - circled Xander's throat and held him lightly, thumbs caressing up and down his spine.

*Just there, pet. Something...a little wide. You've the build for it. Dark green maybe. Or dark brown...*

*Spike, for fuck's sake...*

*Don't you wanna, pet? Wear my collar, kneel at my feet...* Xander shuddered at the images in the link - fought back with a few of his own.

*How about YOU? You're the one that purrs...I think YOU should...*

*We can do both, love...* Spike leaned over further and nibbled on the curve of Xander's spine where it showed above the collar of his work shirt. His nails scraped lightly over the claim scar and Xander shivered violently.
"Spiike - fuckin' hell -" Xander moaned. He couldn't help it.

"Do you two need to go up on the roof? Because I'm not really in the mood for sexual shenanigans right now," Anya said, and Spike hissed in dissatisfaction as Xander sat up and pulled his hands down off his neck - held them tightly in his own, crossed over his chest and trying to ignore the sniggering coming from Dawn. He shot her a look of disapproval and she raised an eyebrow at him, fondness and laughter in the link.

Thank fucking god her link is one way.

"No. Not going on the roof. We're - uh - I think we need to go see how Buffy's doing on patrol."

"Buffy's right here, Xander," Tara said, tilting her head a little and it was true, Buffy had just come in the back door and was standing by the training room door, head cocked, listening. "Maybe you do need to go up on the roof." Tara's voice was mild but the glint in her eye was wicked and Xander closed his in utter frustration. It didn't help that Ethan had apparently picked up on what was going on and was laughing quietly over his book.
Spike...Spike...I love you and I want you but for fuck's sake can we NOT have...shenanigans in front of everybody?

That's the fun of it, pet - see how far we can get-

You'd go all the way right here if I let you.

"Xander! I'm shocked. Not in front of the Bit!"

"Wha'? No way I said that out loud -" Xander looked up at Spike, who was grinning down at him. He reached and whapped half-heartedly at Spike's bicep.

"Stop it, evil undead." Spike just smirked at him, showing fangs.

"Do I even want to know...anything?" Buffy said tiredly, coming over and dropping down onto the stairs. There were grass stains on her knee and thigh, and a scuff of grave-dirt on her chin.

"I very much doubt it," Ethan said, looking over at her with a small smile. "But if you like I can summarize. School, research, nerves, sex," he said, pointing at Dawn, Tara, Anya and Spike and Xander in
turn. Buffy wrinkled her nose a little. She was gradually coming around to the idea of Ethan being a part of the group - of him being important to Giles. She didn't like it, but she wasn't actively causing trouble over it, which had frankly surprised Xander.

Too tired, maybe. She always looks tired.

It's tiring, being resurrected. Spike fingers were wiggling in Xander's grasp but he held on resolutely.

"Well, I can't help with school, I'm too tired to research, I have no idea what Anya has to be worried about since she's rolling in the green stuff, and please don't tell me one single thing about the sex 'cause... I'm actually just too tired." Buffy was slumped on the stairs, her hands limp between her knees, and her voice flat. She looked exhausted and depressed and Xander couldn't help but frown.

"I've got the school thing, if th-that's okay, Buffy," Tara said softly, and Buffy looked up at her and gave a wan sort of smile.

"Sure, Tara. It'd be nice if one of us was actually learning something." Buffy had had to miss Fall classes at UCS -
the deadline for signing up had come and gone while she was in the ground - and she'd taken it hard. Plus, the insurance money from Joyce's dying had suffered a severe dent from hospitals bills, and what was left was being nibbled away rather quickly by day-to-day stuff. Mr. Summers' child-support was generous but Buffy insisted that half went into a college fund for Dawn - just like her mother - and there just wasn't much left over. Tara was on student grants and loans and had even less to spare, and Willow was currently struggling with her parents long-distance to increase her living allowance. They were paying all her expenses through school, but had assumed she'd be in the dorms and not in a four-person household. They were being, as Willow said, real schmucks.

*Another thing that's really bugging her... Wish there was something...*

*No wishes, love. She'll be all right.*

*Easy for you to say. Xander still wasn't completely happy about Spike bringing home - whatever he found, really. Two days after the Hellions had come through he'd retrieved his pillowcase full of stolen goods and later had shoved a wad of cash big enough to choke a*
horse into the 'petty cash' jar.

'Course it is, love. You take some of that and give it to the Slayer if it makes you feel better. But you KNOW she won't like it. Probably won't even take it. Xander sighed, watching Buffy poke half-heartedly at the mud on the side of her boot with a stake. Spike was right. He just wished that he could do something for Buffy.

Oh. I can, actually. Spike? Spike took a moment, examining the suggestion Xander had put in the link.

Why not, love? Can't hurt. Xander lifted Spike's hands - kissed the knuckles and the long fingers.

Love you... He took a long breath and looked over at Buffy. "Taisbean," whispered so softly. Tara and Dawn didn't notice, Anya was intent on her paperwork and Buffy on her shoes. But Ethan's head came up sharply and he stared at Xander, frowning.

"What are you up to, boy?" he murmured, and Xander felt Spike stiffen.

"Quiet, mage," Spike growled, and Ethan flicked a glance up at him but subsided, watching Xander. Xander did his
best to ignore the swirling mass of color and sparks and disturbance that was Ethan in the sight - he had no wish to see the Chaos mage's soul. Instead he looked at Buffy.

At first glance, she seemed the same, with the endless shifting of past Slayers obscuring and then revealing her own features. But the Slayers were different this time. Instead of being alert - on guard, almost - they were passive. Many had their eyes closed and they all seemed lost - sad. Buffy's own soul was as white as always, but there was a strangeness about it. There was a mark on the soul's forehead and it shone like a star. And there was something else...a sort of ribbon, or line that came out of the center of Buffy's chest and twisted away into the air, thinning and vanishing a few feet away. It seemed like...

*Like a tether? A...line? Is that - Spike, look* - Xander put the image in the link and he felt Spike go very still - felt the vampire's fingers clamp down a little on his. Buffy got up, saying something to Dawn, and the tether shifted with her, as if she were attached to some invisible thing. It pulsed softly - pale and starry, and while Xander didn't feel anything particularly evil about it, it still didn't feel right.
And Buffy - did not feel right. The love was still there, for Dawn and for Giles - for all of them - but... Buffy was tired - tired at heart, weary to her soul. Sick of killing, sick of struggling, longing with everything in her to be...

*Oh god. Spike, does she -*

*Seems, pet. Seems she does. Red...really fucked up.* For once, Xander had to agree. Buffy was wishing that she was dead.

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"This is going to cost a fortune," Buffy said glumly, looking down into the watery depths of her flooded basement.

"Well, maybe not a fortune -" Xander started, and Buffy rolled her eyes at him. "Hey, I know some people who know some people...well, demons. I can get you a good deal." A demon corpse floated by like an overturned toy boat, bumping sadly against the stairs. Buffy stared down at it.

"Plus, I have to get rid of that...thing."
"Oh, I'll haul it into the sewers, pet, be gone in a day or so, no worries," Spike said, clumping down to the waterline and looking speculatively at the corpse. He reached out with his toe and poked it, and the body shifted and started to float away.

"Grab it, quick! There's no way I'm gonna wade through that mess to get it!" Buffy said urgently, and Spike sighed and put his foot onto the next step down - hauled the demon in by one horn. It lay across the steps and dripped, and they all stared gloomily at it.

"Nasty thing. Smells like a dog's bed. What the hell is it again?"

"I dunno. Dawn kept saying something about 'Mmm, cookies', and I could never figure out the actual name." Xander turned and went up the stairs and after a moment Buffy and Spike followed. They all sat around the kitchen island and Buffy made a face and pushed a pile of papers aside.

"God, I need a job. There's too many bills and now - the Cookie demon smashes half my pipes." Xander and Spike glanced at each other and Spike nodded, so Xander
plunged in.

"Buffy, listen - I think I can help on the job thing. Manny said he'd be happy to take you on at the site. It wouldn't be anything - well, it'd just be lift-and-carry kind of stuff, you know. But it starts at twelve bucks an hour." Buffy looked at him, frowning.

"Manny is the demon you work for, right?" she said, and there was a slight edge to her voice.

"Yeeah... But he's the demon who kept your being - dead a secret and - he really helped me out with the house and everything. Not all demons are bad, Buffy. And if you worked with them you could kind of - show that the Slayer's not out to just - kill them all." Buffy looked thoughtful at that - sighed and put her chin on her hand, staring at the counter-top. "Besides," Xander added, looking at the pile of applications Buffy had shoved aside, "anything beats working at the Doublemeat." Buffy made a face but nodded, then went back to staring at the counter.

"Things were so much easier when I -" She stopped abruptly and shook her head.
Gonna say something, pet? Xander looked over at Spike, who had one eyebrow up, looking at him thoughtfully.

I... Think I should?

Can't hurt.

You always say that.

Been right so far, Spike smirked at him, and Xander smiled back. He turned back to Buffy and reached out - touched Buffy's hand.

"Buffy - what's wrong? Can you tell us, please? You just - you seem so...sad." Buffy looked at him, her eyes very wide and very distant. She put her hand on his and squeezed gently, but didn't say anything.

"Haven't been to hell lately, Slayer, but I know a thing or two about it," Spike said softly, and Buffy blinked and looked over at him.

"Hell. Oh...yeah. You know, Willow keeps talking about that. About how I - I must be so happy to be...out of hell and back...here. Back home. But..."
"But what? Please, Buff..." Buffy closed her eyes for a moment, and then she looked right at him, and he could see fear and longing, misery and resignation in her face.

"When I died... I don't know much about the afterlife or...stuff like that. But while I was dead, I was...happy. I was warm, and comforted...everyone I loved was safe.... And I could just - rest. I could just be. I remember feeling - so peaceful. Like when I was little and it would rain and I'd lie under the covers and know mom and dad were right down the hall..." Her hand slipped away from Xander's and she lifted it to her face - touched her forehead, where Xander had seen the mark like a star.

"Someone kissed me. I think - it was mom. She kissed me and I knew everything was fine. I could sleep, and dream...and it would all be okay, 'cause I was...done." She looked at Xander again - looked over at Spike, and her eyes were wet and luminous with tears that didn't - wouldn't - fall.

"I think... I wasn't in hell, and I wasn't being tortured. I was happy. I was - in heaven."
Heading home in Xander's truck, and Spike deliberately and thoroughly pushed visions of Willow wrapped in her own entrails out of his head. The misery coming from Xander was too palpable - too much - and he wouldn't add to it for anything.

*But fucking hell. She had better tread lightly 'round me. She's just - gone too far.* Spike sat silently in the middle of the bench seat, shoulder and hip and knee pressed into Xander's, his hand on the human's thigh, feeling each shift of muscle as he drove.

*Love you... Family, Xander...we're family, we're safe and we're strong. We'll - figure out something. It'll be all right, love.* Spike had never thought he'd find himself thinking of ways to help the Slayer, but her misery was Xander's misery, unfortunately.

*Heart like a great soft marshmallow. Just wants to take and take and take, suck up all the bad. You'll kill yourself, love - there's too much bad in the world.*

*Can't leave her like that. Can’t ignore it, Spike. She's hurting so bad... I don't know - what to do. Should we tell Giles, do you think?*
Dunno, pet. Maybe think on it. Talk to the wolf. He always has a good idea.

Yeah. Fuck, I just... Xander sighed, and Spike knew what he 'just'. He just wanted to be with his family - with Spike. He just wanted to hold and be held and be told that everything would be fine. A great fat lie, but that was all right. Spike had 120 or more years of lying under his belt, and he could do it as easy as that. And he could start right now. He turned his head and kissed Xander's cheek - his temple and the faint cross-hatch of lines that fanned out from his eye - legacy of days spent in the sun.

It'll be fine, love, just fine. Nothing we can't fix if we put our minds to it. I promise, pet.

Promise?

Cross my heart, love,

And hope to die.

And hope to die.
W.H. Auden - What's in Your Mind, my Dove, my Coney and Miranda's Song

Chapter five - Song of Solomon

8 Date

Spike looked down at his cards.

_Fuckin' full house! This is definitely my night!_ He knew his face had kept its bland, slightly bored expression perfectly. He folded the cards up and laid them on the table - poured a drink and got a smoke and eyed the other players. On his left was a vampire who'd won on and off half the night and was currently 'off' and
sweating (metaphorical) blood. Spike recognized the tell-tale signs of debt panic and had been milking it for hours. A furry sort of demon that Spike had only encountered long enough to kill, in the past, and who was currently looking at Spike with beady, suspicious eyes sat across from him, huge and hulking and drinking Mai Tai's. And Clem, of course, who just couldn't seem to stop playing even when he had the worst hand possible. Spike took another drink and picked his cards up again - fanned them.

"Right then. I suppose...I'll see you and raise..." he reached into the basket by his side and counted by feel. "Raise you ten." The furry demon clicked to itself and the vamp sucked in a nervous breath. Clem just slumped a little, looking sad.

*Jesus. None of these wankers can keep a straight face.* Spike took a long puff on his smoke and glanced over as the door to the main barroom opened and Willy scuttled through. There was the sound of shouting and glass being broken, abruptly cut off by the slamming door.

"Hey, guys, hey, Spike," Willy said, and stood there for a moment, shuffling nervously from foot to foot.
"Willy," Clem said, and Spike nodded to the man.

"Well, mate, you gonna raise or call?" Spike asked the vamp. The vamp looked at his cards and seemed to be doing some sort of mental calculation.

"Hey, Spike-" Willy said, and Spike sighed.

"You already said that, mate. You need something?" Spike looked at Willy, one eyebrow up, and Willy swallowed and brushed at his shirt - looked over his shoulder when a muffled crash came through the door.

"Yeah, uh, there's - there's this little problem up front with - with -"

"Spit it out, man, for fuck's sake," Spike growled, and Willy held his hands up in a 'don't hurt me' gesture.

"There's a little problem up front with your - friend." Spike gave Willy a blank look as the man waggled his eyebrows and did some sort of hand-gesture, a sort of up and down motion that meant he was either gonna jerk off right there or -

_Oh Christ. The SLAYER? Does he mean - "Are you talkin'_
about a...small, blonde problem?" Spike asked slowly, and Willy grinned in relief, wincing when something smashed into the door.

"Yeah! That's the one! That's the problem." Willy looked pleadingly at Spike, and Spike sighed heavily, looking up at the ceiling.

_Damn Slayer. She was no trouble when she was dead._ "All right. Let me just finish here -" Spike lifted his cards just a little, indicating the table and Willy looked at them - blinked and pursed his lips in a low whistle.

"Wow!" he said, and Spike briefly closed his eyes.

_Bloody bastard just gave away my hand._ He deliberately let the demon come to the fore and opened his eyes. Willy's own eyes went wide and he paled.

"I mean - yeah, you - you finish that up then, Spike, and I'll just -" Willy shuffled away from Spike's murderous glare and the rest of the table folded practically simultaneously. Spike threw down his cards and grabbed his winnings, stuffing them into the basket he'd brought. He shoved cigarettes and lighter into a pocket, grabbed his bottle and stomped out of the back room.
"What in bloody hell were you thinking, Slayer?" Spike snapped, leading Buffy away from Willy's by one arm. Buffy yanked her arm free - reeled a little - and Spike grabbed her again.

"You just shut up, Spike! I was - I was just - letting off some steam, and - having a drink!"

"You're drunk, Slayer! You beat up half the bar! You broke Willy's Elvis mirror! Bloody git loved that mirror! I'll be hearin' about it for weeks!" Spike whacked the side of his basket with the bottle and the high-pitched meows that were coming from it subsided. Buffy's eyes went wide, and she leaned towards Spike, staring at the basket.

"Are there kittens in there? You have a basket full of kittens?"

"Was playin' poker, wasn't I? It's the currency 'round here, for certain sets." Spike irritably got out a cigarette and lit it - looked hard at the wobbling Slayer who was
still staring at the basket.

"Listen, ducks, what were you really doin' down here? It's not like you, the drinkin' and the fightin'... Well, not the drinkin', anyway. What's up?" Buffy looked up at him and blinked, then abruptly pulled away and took a few steps down the street.

"I just - I feel like I'm...lost, Spike. I went with Willow the other day, to audit some classes? And I didn't understand anything! And - something weird happened. It was like - time was all messed up, and - and I was at the shop and it happened again only it was this crazy loop-de-loop thing that - and - at work -" Buffy sniffed and wiped her eyes, and Spike came up beside her, putting the basked of kittens down between his feet.

"I know, Slayer - Xander told me. Seems like you've got some enemies, yeah? Somebody messin' with you."

"It's just too much!" Buffy kicked at an empty beer bottle, sending it rolling wildly down the street. It crashed into the wheel of a large, black van and Buffy suddenly went still.

"That van. I've seen that van. It was at the site. And -
and outside the Magic Box. That van - is stalking me." Buffy moved, breaking into a trot and Spike cursed and darted after her, losing the bottle in the process. It smashed wetly and he cursed again. He could see someone - male - behind the wheel, frantically starting the engine and then trying to put the van in gear. There was a grinding noise as he flubbed it and Buffy was at the door, yelling and pounding on the side panel.

"What are you doing! Why are you stalking me!" Buffy yelled, and Spike snarled and reached past her, grabbing the boy by his shirt-front and yanking him half out the window.

"Speak up, you bastard, what the hell -" Recognition flooded the wide-eyed face of the driver and hit Spike at the same moment. Warren, who'd made the Buffybot and who'd escaped Glory's penthouse, never to be seen again.

"You," Spike snarled, and the boy jerked frantically at his shirt, popping a button.

"Johnathan!" he yelled, and there was a scurrying tumble in the back. Spike strained up on tiptoe and caught a glimpse of two more figures - blond hair and a pale face -
and then there was a low sort of chanting and the
whump of displaced air. Buffy, who had been fairly
successfully bending the door right out of the frame
suddenly reeled back as a large, scaly demon slithered
down from the top of the van right onto her. She went
down with a yelp and Spike let the boy go to grab a
double handful of dry, horny hide and try to sling the
demon away. It whipped its head up, snarling, and
lunged for his face and Spike stumbled back. Buffy was
struggling upright and she leapt onto its back, gouging
with a stake. The van's engine revved and then it peeled
out, leaving smoking tire-marks on the asphalt. A
moment later Spike was snapping the demon's neck just
as Buffy got her stake through its hide and the demon
collapsed, dying twitches making it roll towards the
gutter. Spike kicked it, hard, and looked in fury after the
van.

"That bastard. That little fuck -"

"Who was that? Did you know him?" Buffy was looking
in disgust at her jacket, which had demon slobber on it,
and Spike grimaced and reached into his duster for his
flask. He took a long drink and offered it to the Slayer,
who wrinkled her nose, refusing.
"Yeah, I knew him. It was that little wanker that made the 'bot. Warren. Wondered where he got to. Guess he's the one followin' you, Slayer. And there were two others. He said 'Johnathan', and there was some blonde kid." Spike drained his flask and put it away - walked over to his kitten basket and picked it up.

"Well, at least I know who's been playing all those - stupid tricks on me." Buffy finally put her stake back in her sleeve and stumbled over to the curb - sank down with her elbows on her knees and her head hanging down. "Spike? Are you guys gonna - are you gonna tell Giles? What - I said about - being dead?" Her voice was shaky and small and Spike sighed - sat down next to her.

"You're just - making' Xan and everybody nervous, Slayer. You're not actin' -"

"Like somebody who's been 'rescued' from hell? I can't help it, Spike." Buffy looked up at him, and tears were making her makeup run, painting dark circles under her eyes and emphasizing the pallor and thinness that hadn't passed since her resurrection. "Everything here is so - hard, and cold and...violent. I was - glad to be done. Done being the Slayer. I was glad to be gone... And trying to be - normal...trying to
be...happy... It's just so hard." Buffy wiped her eyes - sniffed, tipping her head back to look up at the hazy sky.

"And it seems like, the harder I try, the harder it is, and just getting up - just...living...is exhausting. I don't - don't think I can -"

"Now, Slayer," Spike interrupted, and she caught her breath in a sob and looked away, fighting for control. "I know it's hard, pet. I can't imagine - what you're feeling. But the Bit needs you, Slayer. Even if you give up on everything else, she needs you. You should - tell 'em, Slayer. Tell 'em what Red did, and what's wrong. Maybe your Watcher can help. Or Glinda. They'd want to, you know." Buffy pushed her hands back through her hair - just sat there for a minute, her fingers squeezing her skull and her eyes wide and staring.

"I don't think I can, Spike. They'll look at me....they'll pity me, and... I can't - let them all down."

"Not about them, Slayer," Spike said softly, and they sat in silence for a long moment.

"Just - don't tell Giles, okay?" Buffy said finally, looking
over at Spike. "Let me - let me do it. I owe him that."

"Sure, pet. If that's what you want." Buffy smiled weakly at him and went back to contemplating her shoes - or maybe the gutter, Spike couldn't be sure. He sighed and leaned back on his hands, looking at the thin curve of the new moon, idly finding Oz in the link, and Xander. Oz was just a low hum, contentment and lust and Spike knew he was with Derio. Xander was home, reading in bed and half asleep, tired from his week's work.

*Be there in a bit, love,* Spike thought softly, and Xander sent back the mental equivalent of a hug and kiss; warm, gentle caress all through Spike's soul and he grinned into the night, shivering with pleasure.

"How did you know, anyway? You and Xander?" Buffy said, and Spike blinked - looked over at her.

"Xan saw it. Used that gift, you know - saw your soul. He could feel what you were feeling. Could feel that death-wish all twisting up around you." Buffy shook her head slowly, and looked back down.

"It's not - I don't... Damn it, maybe I do. I don't know! I'm just...so tired..."
"Plenty of people to help you, Slayer. All you have to do is ask. You know that, don't you?" Spike had to smile at the small face she made then, looking over at him and almost laughing.

"You're supposed to hand me that totally illegal razor you keep in your pocket and tell me the best place to open up a vein, Spike. You're not supposed to be all - 1-800-Life-Is-Great!" Buffy grinned, sniffing, and Spike grinned back.

"I wouldn't let you do that, Slayer - there are much better ways to go," Spike said, and flashed his fangs at her, leering. Buffy choked on a laugh, snorting, and for a moment they just laughed together. Then Spike pulled out a smoke and lit it, and Buffy sighed and wiped her eyes again.

"Xan would hate it if you did that, Slayer. They all would. And I won't let anything hurt my boy if I can help it. Or the Niblet, either. So best buck up. Go tell your Watcher and let him help, yeah? I can't keep Xander from tellin' him for too much longer." They'd had that argument, and Spike had finally convinced Xander to let Buffy have a little more time, but Xander was worried,
and fretting, and Oz too, so Spike figured he could help them by pushing the Slayer a little in the direction they wanted her to go.

"You...really love him. I mean - more than... You just...love him."

"Everything to me, Slayer. All," Spike murmured, looking straight at her. Buffy nodded and then a funny look came over her face and Spike raised an eyebrow.

Jesus - is she gonna cry again? "You all right, Slayer?"

"I think I'm gonna throw up," Buffy said, and Spike immediately scooted a couple feet away, tucking his duster protectively behind him.

"You go right ahead then, better out than in," Spike said, and Buffy did.

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fascinated, and she spun around and rolled away, graceful and...

_Damn hot in those shorts. Where'd she learn to skate like that?_

_Been practicing all week,_ Oz thought, sending a picture of Anya on her ass in the middle of the Magic Box, skates flailing. Xander choked back a laugh and pushed his way through the crowd, heading for the basement and mandrake root. They'd all agreed to help Anya with her big Halloween sale, and she had them all hopping like good little bunnies. He was pretty sure the door-bell hadn't stopped jangling all evening.

_Only no bunnies allowed. Heh. Should have dressed like a bunny,_ Xander thought, sighing with relief as he opened the door to the basement steps. He pulled his pirate eye patch off and went down. The damn thing was giving him a headache. It eliminated his depth perception and he'd tripped on the stairs in the shop proper a half-dozen times already. He so did not want to take a header down the steep basement steps.

_Told you, pet,_ faintly from Spike, and Xander stuck out a mental tongue. Spike had opted out of helping - using
his 'No self-respecting Child of the Night is out on this night' card. Which Anya totally understood, which was unfair. Xander had tried to argue that, as the husband - or whatever - of the evil undead he should be exempt as well, but Anya had just given him that look. The one that said 'I wasn't the best Vengeance Demon for 1000 years for nothing, bucko', and Xander had caved. He'd left Spike on the couch, curled up in his oldest jeans and t-shirt and one of Xander's flannels, a copy of 'Woe to Live On' propped on his knees, the big bowl of Halloween candy and his bottle of Jack beside him. The couch was already littered with mini Hershey and Crunch wrappers and Xander had poked the vampire with his plastic pirate sword.

"Don't eat all the candy, Spike! There's gonna be tons of kids out here."

"Sod 'em. Little buggers can go begging elsewhere," Spike had grumbled, reaching out and snagging a Pixie Stix.

"No, no, no. You can't NOT give them candy - they'll TP the house!" Spike tipped his head up, pouring pale pink sugar-dust down his throat.
"I'll just show 'em my real face, then they'll leave me be."

"No, they'll say it's the worst mask they've ever seen and throw eggs at the DeSoto. Hellmouth kids are tough! Just - leave SOME for the kids, okay?" Spike's eyes had gleamed gold at the mention of the DeSoto and he'd looked enraged and then disgruntled.

"Why don't you just stay, love? Demon-girl doesn't need EVERYBODY -".

"Can't do it, Spike," Xander said, gleeful now at the prospect of Spike stuck opening the door to hordes of sugar-hyped seven-year-olds all night. "She'll do something nasty to my manly parts if I don't show up. You know how she is." Spike snarled a little but he nodded, defeated, and Xander leaned down and kissed him, chocolate and tart dust, cream and whiskey. A heady combination.

"You be good and don't scare anybody and I'll let you teach me a new trick tonight, hrmmm?" he murmured, and Spike yanked him close for a hard, sharp-toothed kiss and Xander had driven to the Magic Box with his lips
tingling and his groin throbbing, willing the night to pass quickly.

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"Arrrg! Mandrake root for the bonny buxom lassie!" Xander passed the root to Willow, who took it with a distracted, smiling 'thanks', Scotch tape fluttering from her fingers and her 'Dorothy' braids looking a little frazzled. Xander grinned and went off to stop a small Harry Potter from climbing a bookshelf and laughed at Oz, who was being harried by another Harry Potter and a fairy princess, both of whom were trying to out-do each other in the wand-waving department. Dawn was behind the counter as well, decidedly not in costume, doing her best to wrap purchases in the fancy way Anya insisted on. Giles was earnestly trying to convince a trio of older granola-and-hairy-legs kind of woman that yes, datura was a sacred plant in certain circles but they really did not want to make datura-brownies for their monthly moon-sabbat. The women seemed determined and Giles was looking a bit panicky.

"Hey, Giles, can I help you?" Xander asked, waving his sword, and for a moment it looked as if the older man
might just ask Xander to make the women walk the plank.

"Yes, yes you can - please get Tara for me, would you? Perhaps she can talk some - explain." Giles glared at the women and stepped closer, catching Xander's arm. "Do you think it would be terrible of me to just let them have their datura? It's not certain they'll die a horrible death," he muttered and Xander stifled the hysterical laughter that threatened.

"You know - maybe I'll just take these ladies on over to Tara right now. Why don't you take a break, Giles?" Xander couldn't help grinning and Giles smiled reluctantly back.

"There are just so many of them!" he said, and Xander nodded and patted Giles' shoulder.

"Giles. Stay British. You'll be okay. Now - ladies! Let me take you over to our resident witch, she has all the answers." Xander herded the ladies over to the cloth-draped table where Tara was doing the occasional Tarot reading and answering questions dressed in a 'traditional' gypsy headscarf and voluminous skirts. The ladies squealed and descended on her, chattering. Tara
mock-glared at him and he darted away.

"This is nuts," Buffy said, using Slayer strength to separate a Jason and a Freddy who seemed intent upon eviscerating each other. She was wearing a Xena costume and Xander poked her in the armor.

"Yeah - but at least it's just plain human nuts and not, you know - Hellmouth nuts," Xander said. Buffy rolled her eyes.

"I'm not sure it's any better. I can't actually slay any of the customers. Stop that!" Buffy darted after a miniature witch in a fluffy tulle costume who was trailing dried frogs from a torn-open box. The door-bell jangled again and Xander glanced up to see Dawn's friend come in.

"Hey, Janice!"

"Hey, Cap'n Hook." Janice grinned and waved at Dawn who shoved a wad of glittery tissue paper into Anya's arms and scurried out from behind the counter.

"At last! I thought I was gonna go crazy if I had to wrap one more idol. Let's get out of here!"
"Where are you going?" Buffy demanded, popping up from gathering dried frogs and Dawn made a 'duh' face.

"To Janice's house? I told you about this last week. We're gonna hit the shops downtown for candy and then I'm spending the night. Remember?"

"That's tonight?"

"No - that's the other Halloween, the one that happens in June. C'mon, Buffy, you said yes already!"

"But I don't remember saying yes! That can't count." Dawn started to frown and Janice was looking a little desperate and Buffy finally sighed, shaking her head. "Right, fine. It's Halloween, nothing's going on - you guys go straight home, all right? No - loitering around in cemeteries or anything."

"Ewww - as if," Janice said, making a face, and Dawn gave Buffy a quick hug, wincing a little when the costume's buckles dug into her ribs.

"Ow! That costume is hazardous," Dawn said, and Buffy took up a stance, fists on hips and chin at a haughty
angle.

"No more hazardous than my mighty cleavage!" she crowed, and Dawn broke down into snarfling laughter. There was a running joke about 'the cleavage' that Xander wasn't privy to, but he'd caught muttered comments about duct tape and industrial strength glue, and decided he didn't want to know. The costume did show off quite a bit of...Buffy.

SO not going there. Oz, please, distract me, Xander thought, watching Dawn and Janice hurry out the door.

*Spike in a Xena costume?* Oz was sitting on the top step of the stairs to the loft and Xander looked up at him, giggling.

Oh god. Distracted now. How's it going?

Pretty good. He's staying nicely grounded. After some discussion with Derio and then with Spike and Xander, Oz had volunteered to teach Ethan what he'd learned in Tibet. He figured if it could control the wolf then it might help the mage get his magic back under control. It seemed to be working, to an extent, but Ethan had suffered real damage at the hands of the Initiative and
no matter what he learned from Oz his control wouldn't be complete until he was fully healed. Neither Giles nor Ethan knew when that might be, but the reduction in random magics - and the lessening of the out-of-control energy that had poured off the man for the first few weeks - was a relief to everyone.

Ethan seemed to have taken a liking to Oz, and at the moment he was sitting cross-legged up in the loft, meditating. Oz had thought the distractions of the shop would be a good test and had stayed close to him most of the night.

That's great, Oz. I don't think I could do that, in all this...chaos.

I think the chaos helps. It's his - baseline, I guess. He gets power from it. Only now he's controlling the chaos, if that makes sense.

Sure - like...a band. The crowd's all crazy and wild but if the band plays the right song they can calm everybody down - have 'em all swaying and holding their lighters in the air. Or have 'em riot. Oz grinned at him, his green eyes sparkling out from under the afro wig he was wearing. He'd come as Jimi Hendrix and Ethan and Giles
had both made him sing 'All Along the Watchtower'.

*Exactly*, Oz thought. Xander turned from the stairs and surveyed the shop. Children milled and darted, fueled by the huge plastic pumpkin full of candy Anya had reluctantly provided. Parents and other adults were busily stripping the shelves in a show of holiday greed. Anya's fingers flew over the register keys and Xander noticed something sparkly on her left hand.

*Wonder if that's the 'big announcement',* he thought. Anya had declared that they all had to stay until closing because she wanted to tell them something important - she'd even offered to order pizza and Xander knew there was a cooler full of soda in the training room.

*Nearly done here*, he thought at Spike, and received a blast of relief and irritation from the vampire.

*Little bastards won't stop coming! THIS is why we hide out on Halloween - this is a bloody nightmare!* Spike complained, and Xander did a little jig over towards the 'Sumerian Mythologies' section of books where an elderly woman and a college age man seemed to be having a tug-of-war.
Only on the Hellmouth, Xander thought.

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"Oh. My. God." Buffy shut the shop door and locked it - flipped the sign over to 'closed'. "That was...just..."

"Incredible! Absolutely incredible!" Anya was still at her register, surrounded by piles of receipts, checks, charge slips and cash. She was practically dancing, and after a moment she did dance. "You guys are the best! I mean - look at all this money I made!" Giles coughed loudly and Anya paused in her hip-swivels.

"We made, of course. Isn't it wonderful, Giles?"

"Delightful. What are you doing?" Giles was slumped at the bottom of the loft steps with Ethan a step up behind him, rubbing his shoulders.

"It's my dance of Capitalist Superiority! C'mon, join in!" Anya picked up some bills and fanned them - flourished them above her head."
"Ah - well, no, thank you. I'm a bit -"

"Exhausted?" Buffy said, flopping down on the other steps and tugging at her Xena skirt. Tara sat down next to her and Buffy pulled a length of gypsy skirt over her legs. "Jeez, how did she do anything in this?" Buffy muttered.

"Well actually, you've worn...much more appropriate stuff on patrol. Yeah, exhausted," Xander held up his hands to ward off the death-glare Buffy was directing at him and Tara giggled.

"I can't believe there are that many people in Sunnydale into the occult! It's amazing we don't have more wacky stuff happening." Willow looked up from examining her stuffed Toto. Someone had stuck a half-sucked lollipop to its head and she frowned, tugging at it.

"Now if you guys'll just get cleaning -" Anya said, handing a broom to Willow and dustpan to Oz, "I'll order pizza."

"Hey, why don't I just do a little cleaning spell? Like Mickey in Fantasia?" Willow sat up excitedly and Giles made a face behind her.
"Yes, we all know how well that worked out. How about we do it the old-fashioned way?" Giles hoisted himself to his feet, groaning, and Ethan stood up as well.

"Come on, old man, sit back down. I haven't done a thing all night," Ethan said softly, and Giles smiled at him.

"It'll go quicker with all of us pitching in," he said, but dropped a quick kiss on Ethan's cheek. They both moved over to the counter and started gathering up tissue paper and bags and Willow stood up, wielding her broom.

"I'd like to think I'm a little more competent than a cartoon mouse," she grumbled, and Tara patted her arm as she walked by.

"Sure you are, honey. You've even got all your fingers, so no giant white gloves to over-compensate,"

"Which really, thank god, 'cause the big white hands give me the creeps." Oz followed Willow and Xander pushed away from the bookshelf he'd been leaning on and started gathering stray books into a pile.

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It took almost forty minutes to get the shop back into shape - for the Post-Holiday Clearance Sale! Anya announced happily. She was met by a chorus of groans and Xander started babbling something about a post-Halloween blood ritual that he and Spike had to perform.

"Or we both die! A horrible, painful, messy death!" Anya just glared at him and Xander slumped in resignation. She went over to the loft steps and climbed up a couple - turned, facing them where they sprawled on the floor or sat at the table amidst a litter of pizza boxes and soda cans.

"Everyone! I have an announcement to make. You all remember Drake, my boyfriend?" They all nodded, and Anya looked thoughtful. "Well, maybe you don't, Buffy, I mean you were dead for almost five months -"

"Drake. Tall guy, brown hair, glasses. I met him last week, Anya." Buffy looked a little peeved, and Anya nodded.

"Okay, so. Drake. He asked me to marry him and I -"
"He did? Wow! Anya, that's great -!"

"Oh, c-congratulations, Anya!"

"Marry. Really? That's - that's -" Willow, Tara and Giles all spoke at once while Buffy just stared in shock. Oz and Xander exchanged eye-rolls and Ethan surreptitiously grabbed the last slice of anchovy-mushroom off Giles' plate.

"Well, I said I'd have to think about it, of course. I mean, you don't just leap into something like that! I had to talk to a couple of ex-girlfriends, and look over his retirement plan first. Things like that are very important. But yesterday morning, after we had our wake-up sex, I told him yes!" Anya beamed, looking expectant, and after a moment to catch up, everyone started the congratulations over again. Anya came down the stairs, holding her hand up and showing off her ring and Buffy, Willow and Tara bounced up to squeal over it, hugging the ex-demon.

*Jesus. Do you think we'll have to be...in the wedding?* Xander had a sudden, horrible vision of a cousins' wedding years ago when he'd been tapped to be an usher. The drunkenness, bickering, last-minute
hysteria and mind-melting orange bridesmaid's dresses had made a vivid impression.

*Scarred me for life.*

*Maybe she'll just want us to play for free? We can hide backstage most of the night.* Oz had no better memories of family weddings, except his usually involved distant aunts and half-remembered second cousins pinching his cheeks and asking his mom when he was going to get his growth spurt.

*God, that's awful. Maybe she'll elope.*

*Nothing wrong with weddings,* Spike chimed in. *Free food, free drinks, hordes of desperate, unmarried girls panting to dance with you and go for a snog in the broom cupboard. Me an' Dru had brilliant times at weddings.*

*But everyone is supposed to survive this one,* Xander thought, and he and Oz laughed quietly together, picturing Spike facing down a half-drunk Harris or a 'concerned' Osbourne.

"Oh, we should party!" Willow was saying, and waved her hand. Suddenly bright paper lanterns and streamers
appeared around the shop, a little glitter of magical energy dancing in the wake of Willow's fingers. Ethan flinched, looking sidelong at her, and Giles frowned while Anya clapped her hands.

"Oh! Very nice! This is only the first of the parties, too! There's my bachelorette party to plan, and my wedding shower - I'm told there are lots of opportunities for presents at all these traditional functions!"

"Don't you think -" Tara said, and then bit her lip, turning away from Willow to pick up her soda and take a tiny sip.

"What is it, honey?" Willow asked, stroking her arm, and Tara turned back around.

"Willow, there's a party store just two blocks away. We could have gone down there and bought some decorations. You didn't need to do - this," Tara gestured around her and Willow smiled.

"Well, we could have gone down there, but this was quicker! And - these are extra-good 'cause in a couple of hours, 'poof'! Nothing to put in a landfill!"

"Yeah, but - magic shouldn't be used for...just
anything. For just everyday stuff." Tara was frowning a little, and Willow's own smile faded a bit.

"I just wanted to make Anya happy, Tara - it's not like I conjured up a - a Mariachi band or something! Although, I think I -"

"No! Willow, you just - magic isn't for this! It's -"

"It's not a toy, little witch, and it's not a dare. Best listen to Jiminy Cricket." Ethan was still looking uneasy and Giles' hand was on his shoulder, rubbing just a little. Willow bristled at his words and shot a glare at him.

"You're one to talk. All I'm doing is - harmless stuff! Party balloons! You made people die with your magic. I'm not killing anybody!"

"Not yet," Ethan snapped, and Willow opened her mouth again to say something but stopped when Tara touched her hand.

"Honey, don't. Please? Let's... I'm s-sorry, okay? I just wanted you to - to think about what you're doing, is all,"
"Tara, I do-" Willow was interrupted by the phone ringing, and Anya waved her hand in the air.

"Don't answer, we're closed! Let's just look at these Bride magazines I've got." She moved towards the counter and Buffy followed her.

"Better answer, Anya - it might be Dawn." Anya sighed, but flapped her hand at the phone.

"Fine, go ahead. But if it's a customer we do not do after hours deliveries. Unless they want to pay triple." Anya looked almost eager at that and Buffy just shook her head - picked up the phone.

"Magic Box - oh, hey, Mrs. Penshaw... No, we're not home, this is the shop number. And Dawn's not here, she's staying over at your house... But she said... Well, no, but... Look, I'll go find them right now, okay? Yeah... I'll call you." Buffy hung up the phone and turned to them in the sudden silence that had fallen. She was pale but her mouth was set in a hard line, and when she spoke it was obvious she was angry.

"Dawn and Janice aren't at the Penshaw's - Janice told her mom she'd be staying over at our house. So my little
sister and her friend are out running around on the Hellmouth." It took five minutes to designate areas of the town and then they were gone, weddings, decorations, and magical misuse mostly forgotten.

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"Don't know what you were thinkin', Bit, but don't you ever think it again."

"But I didn't know he was dead! I only met him tonight!"

"So you were making out with a total stranger on your very first date? Are you crazy, Dawn?"

"It's not like you never kissed a vampire, Buffy!"

"I knew he was a vampire!" Buffy grabbed Dawn's arm and dragged her away at speed, lecturing at the top of her voice. Xander, Oz and Spike watched them go - turned to watch Giles and Ethan climb into their car and wave a weary goodnight. Willow, Tara and Anya had stayed at the store in case Dawn called or came by, the two witches still bristling and snapping at each other like wet cats.
"Well, that was a fine ending to the day. I think we need to go home and finish off the candy and watch 'Fight Club'," Xander said, and Oz raised his hand in the air, grinning.

"I vote yes."

"Two for me! Spike? What do you think?" Spike started guiltily and tossed something away - a purple-and-white striped Pixie Stix tube.

"I think we need to stop by the store," he muttered. "Little bastards cleaned us out."

9 Song

Oz put his arms down and then sat down, scrubbing his hands back through his hair and ruffling the dark green strands up wildly. "Ooookay. That was just -"
Fuckin' weird, Xander thought, toppling backwards, panting a bit.

Too right, pet, Spike agreed, and he hopped down from the rungs of the fire-escape ladder he was clinging to, looking around with gold-glowing eyes.

Did anybody else think 'West Side Story'? Spike and Oz looked over at Xander, who lifted his hands in a 'what?' kind of gesture.

"Hey! I do watch other stuff besides Aliens and Star Trek."

"Who'd have thought 'other stuff' meant lame musicals?" Spike sniggered, and Xander, who was collapsed across a pile of empty crates, kicked half-heartedly at him.

"You knew what I meant, so I guess you've seen it, too," Xander said, and Spike opened his mouth and then shut it. He hopped up onto a loading dock and sat on the lip, legs dangling.

"Dru loved Sondheim - made me take her to a revival of his, didn't she? Went for every bloody performance. Can't tell you how many times I've seen
bloody West Side Story and Sweeny Todd... Rather liked that one," Spike added, digging around for his cigarettes and lighter and for a moment they all sat in silence, Oz drumming his fingers restlessly on the stack of pallets he was on and Spike swinging his heels against the graffitied concrete of the dock.

"You suppose this happened to anybody else or was it just...us?" Oz wondered, and Xander sat up, pushing his hair back out of his face.

"Well, I guess we'll go see what Giles has to say...or we could just call -" he added, when Spike gave him a look. This was supposed to be their night off - pool and drinks at the Bronze, movies, junk food, 'snogging' on the couch and an early bed-time where no sleeping would occur. Spike did not want to go to the Watcher's house and get embroiled in all-night research or any other 'Scooby' business.

_Don't need to go see the old queens tonight_, Spike thought, puffing like a dragon, and Xander giggled at the mental image Spike provided with that - Giles and Ethan in slacks and cardigans, sipping tea from fussy cups, surrounded by stacks of books.
"They have kind of gone off the research deep-end," Oz mused, and Spike and Xander both silently agreed. Ethan was getting better, but so very slowly, and Giles was convinced his cure lay somewhere in the musty, leather-bound tomes he unearthed at second-hand shops in San Francisco, ordered over the Internet, or cajoled out of the few Council friends he had left.

Oz lifted his head suddenly, turning to look at the alley mouth, and Derio came around the corner.

"Hey -" Derio looked a little bewildered and Oz went to meet him, slipping an arm around his waist and getting a quick kiss. "I - couldn't find you inside, so I..." Derio's voice trailed away to silence and Oz hugged him a little.

"What's up, amante?" Oz asked softly, and Derio grinned at him - shook his head.

"I don't - know. I was running a little late - had to drop some stuff off at the printers and - this man was there shouting about an order that was all screwed up? Really being a pendeja, mi Dios. And - then - the manager found the right order and it was all fixed and - we - started singing about it." Derio looked at Oz - looked at Xander and Spike, a small, puzzled smile on his
face. Xander sighed noisily and Spike cursed.

"What?"

"We just - did the same thing. The singing, I mean." Oz sighed as well and leaned his head on Derio's shoulder. "I guess we go by Giles' house after all," he said, and Spike cursed again. But he jumped down from the dock and grabbed Xander's hands - hauled him up and into a quick kiss.

"Come on, love, maybe it'll be quick and we can get straight to the shagging, right?"

"Do our best," Xander murmured, pulling Spike forward by the belt-loops for another kiss. After a moment they turned and the four of them walked out of the alley, headed for Giles house. With a glance at Spike, Oz started humming, and then Xander did and Derio joined them, looking puzzled still but smiling.

Bloody Hell! Stop that! Oz laughed out loud and started to sing, and Spike roared, but he was laughing too, and he couldn't help joining in, snapping his fingers along with Xander.
"Here come the Jets...like a bat out of hell
Someone gets in our way...someone don't feel so well...
Here come the Jets...little world step aside...
Better go underground...better run, better hide..."

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

"Does it really matter if we find out what's behind this? I mean - singing and dancing, it's not that bad." Buffy spoke from a face-down position on the table at the Magic Box and Anya paused beside her to pat her head.

"Of course it matters, Buffy. It might have started as just singing and dancing, but now people are going up in flames! At this rate, I won't have any customers left, and paying for the wedding will be difficult. Drake's offered to pay half, of course, but if I let him do that he'll want to arrange things." Anya shook her head indulgently and moved on, and Xander, sitting across the table, shared a look with Buffy. Drake was studying forensics with a sort of manic glee and only Anya labored under the delusion that bridesmaid's dresses, seating charts, and 'first dance' song choices could drag his attention away from
five-day-old corpses and mysterious stains.

"At least he fits in," Dawn had remarked, and he did, to the extent that Anya had finally told him everything about Sunnydale - and herself. It had taken him most of a day to process and then he'd showed up at a Scooby meeting at the shop, notebook in hand and an expression of utter determination on his face. He'd come along on patrol, made notes, and gotten elbow-deep into a Nyrn demon Spike had killed. Spike had taken him for a drink. He was currently doing a side-project of his own, cataloguing the various demons Buffy or Spike killed, and he kept popping up at odd moments during patrols or at the Bronze to ask questions or beg a tissue sample. Spike encouraged him, Anya lectured, and everyone else found it secretly disturbing. But also endearing and they were happy Anya had somebody that knew her secrets and accepted them.

"What's up, Buffy? You're not your normal spunky Slayer self," Willow asked, shifting a pile of books to one side. Tara, across the table from Willow and looking intently through an old herbal, glanced up at Willow for a moment, the expression on her face unreadable but...

*Wow, that was...*  Xander shivered just a little. Tara's
look - had chilled him. *Something's going on, there.*

*Dawn said they had a bad fight about magic but - when she mentioned it this morning Tara acted like nothing had happened.* Oz, over on the loft stairs with Derio looked troubled and Xander glanced at Tara again, who was now smiling softly at Buffy.

"You do seem kind of t-tired," Tara said.

"Oh, I'm - I'm okay, I guess." Buffy sat up and brushed her hair back - idly picked up a pencil and began tapping it on the table. "I - I went to see Angel a couple of days ago."

*She WHAT?*

"You what?" Willow looked concerned, and Buffy smiled wanly at her.

"Well, I kind of had to, you know? He - found out I was back and... It just seemed kinda mean to ignore him. I mean -" Buffy sighed and tapped the pencil a little harder, and Willow reached out and put her hand on Buffy's, stopping the nervous motion.
"So - how was it? Was it awful or was it - okay? Are you okay?" Buffy let the pencil go and locked her hands together in her lap - looked over at Oz and Derio sharing a book, and at Xander who had stopped his own research. He smiled when she looked at him, and she smiled back.

"I thought it would be - terrible. I thought - it would be this huge...ordeal. But it was... You know, I think he might be falling in love with Cordelia."

"You do?" Xander didn't know what to feel about that. Cordelia had really been his first love - real love, as opposed to schoolboy crushes or schoolboy lust, and it felt - odd - to think that someone else could see the sweet side of Queen C. Especially when that someone was deadboy.

"Yeah. He talked about her a little bit. After I told him about a hundred times it was okay and he could. It was...really nice to just sit and talk, you know?" Buffy smiled again, only this smile was directed inwards, and softened the angular planes of her face - took the tired droop out of her shoulders. "It was like...we finally connected, you know? Not Slayer and Vampire or Hero and Heroine or any of that, just...two friends. It was
"Wow. That's - not something I ever thought you'd say about dead - about Angel," Xander said, and Buffy laughed lightly, standing up and gathering a stack of books.

"Me neither. It wasn't ever true before. Even Spike knew that - way back when. But I think it is now. We've both kind of - grown up."

'Bout time, came Spike's mental grumble, and then he was coming through the door, shoving a bizarre figure before him. An apparently normal man from the neck down with what appeared to be a huge dummy head from the neck up. It wobbled and almost fell, and Spike kicked it.

"Look what was lurkin' 'round outside, then," he growled, and the thing cowered.

"Ooh, is that what's been causing this off-Broadway nightmare?" Anya asked, coming around the end of the counter. She hefted a chunky idol off a shelf and looked at it consideringly. "Are you the jerk that's putting my wedding in jeopardy?" She raised the idol threateningly.
and the creature and Spike both took a step back.

"Nah, it's just a servant, like," Spike said. "Oi! Watcher! Best get out here." Xander went to stand next to Anya and a moment later Oz and Derio joined him. As Giles and Ethan came out of the office, Buffy moved up closer to the creature as well, looking pissed off.

"So, what's the story?" she said, and Spike kicked it again.

"Sing, you little bastard," he growled, and the figure puffed itself up, arms outstretched - and spoke.

"My master has the Slayer's sister. She called him and he came, and at midnight he's going to take her back with him to the underworld to be his Queen. Until then, he's waiting at the Bronze." A collective groan went up from the assembly and the creature looked as puzzled as it was possible to look with a giant dummy head.

*How in hell did it get Dawn? Gonna have somebody's head for cricket,* Spike snarled, and Xander took a hard breath.
"I'm sooo tired of fighting evil at the Bronze. Can't we just make that like - Sweden, or something? And why am I not surprised Dawn is involved in this?" Buffy groused, and Anya reluctantly put down her idol.

"Well, at least you know where to go to make all this madness stop. Hurry up and kill his master, I can be open late tonight." The creature stumbled back at that and tried to make a dash for the door, and Spike caught it and snapped its neck with a growl - dropped it to the floor.

"Spike! I can't have customers stumbling over a dead...puppet-headed thing! Take it to the dumpster!" Anya stomped irritably into the office and slammed the door, and Spike rolled his eyes.

"Christ, wish she'd just elope," he grumbled, but he hoisted the creature up and began dragging it towards the back entrance.
"So, Dawn called this demon and now it's gonna drag her off to be Queen. You know - I'm tempted to let it. See if some supernatural creature can take her. Bet he sends her back in a week." Buffy was scowling and Giles moved towards her, a faint smile on his face.

"Really, Buffy, as much of a teenager as she's being, we can't leave Dawn to the horrors of an arranged marriage. Besides, untold retribution may rain down upon us if she angers this song demon."

"Oh - probably not," Ethan drawled, and everyone looked at him. He held his hands up in a gesture of innocence and Xander felt the anger boiling up from Spike, who dumped the body in the training room and stalked back into the shop proper.

_Bastard had better not have known all this time. If Dawn's hurt -_

_Calm down, Spike - let him talk._ Xander grabbed at Spike's arm and stopped the vampire from going any closer to Ethan.

"What're you goin' on about, mage?" Spike growled, and Ethan flashed a wolfish grin at him.
"Just that Sweet won't actually harm her. Or take her. Dawn didn't call him. I did."

"What?" The chorus was loud and, in Willow and Buffy's case, a little shrill and Ethan stepped back one step, hunching his shoulders just a bit.

"Oh, I know Sweet from...other places. He mostly just likes to cause a little chaos. He gets people to sing out their secrets. Really, it can be rather amusing. This -bursting into flames thing is rather new, though."

"Ethan," Giles said, and his tone was one of long-suffering and barely leashed anger. Ethan looked over at him and smiled again, his voice going soft.

"Oh, Ripper. I'm just getting so bored, pet. Sweet won't take her, since I did, in fact, do the summoning. Just go confront him, do a little song and dance, and he'll be gone. He knows better." Ethan's voice was cajoling-caressing, and Giles sighed, shaking his head. He reached out and touched Ethan's hand where it lay on the counter.

"Really, Ethan, you cannot do these sorts of things -"
"No you bloody well can't," Spike snapped, shaking Xander off and pushing past Willow and Tara to go toe to toe with the mage. "If the Bit has one scratch on her I'll come back here and show you my favorite way to get marrow out of thighbones. Think you'd like that?" Ethan's eyes darkened, a seething flash of something and Spike hissed, vamping out. Giles hastily got between them, pushing Ethan backwards towards the office and Xander moved forward as well, shooting Ethan a dark look and tugging at Spike's sleeve.

*Spike, calm down, okay? Let's just go get Dawn -

*Protect pack. Oz was closer too, glaring at Ethan who lowered his head, mock-submission. His grin still curled the edges of his mouth up though, irrepressible and unrepentant.

"He won't be doing anything else. Ethan, you go and - help Anya in the office. We are not through speaking about this. Dawn must be rescued - again. Back off, Spike," Giles added, a touch of the *darkman* in his voice and Spike shot him a look of pure menace and whirled around - stalked out. There was a moment's silence and then Buffy grabbed a stake and a knife out of an open
weapons bag and darted after Spike.

"Wait up, Spike! I'm the one that's supposed to be riding to the rescue!" The door-bell jangled as they left, and Giles heaved a sigh.

"I suppose I should go along, just in case...anyone else?"

"Sure, Giles, we'll come," Xander said, and he and Oz and Derio walked across the shop and up the stairs, grabbing weapons of their own. Giles took an axe and followed them, and a moment later they were out the door. A few paces down the sidewalk and the bell jangled behind them. Xander turned to see Tara coming out of the shop, looking angry, and Willow trailing behind her, a sullen look on her face.

*Got the whole gang coming*, he thought, and there was a snort of amusement from the shadows up ahead. Spike was lounging against a wall, smoking, and fell into step with Xander as they came even with him.

"Slayer wanted to go on ahead - I figured I'd wait for you. Make a better entrance, the whole gang like this, all - determined." Laughter in the link, but Spike's hand found Xander's and they walked briskly to the club in a
comfortable silence. When they got to the Bronze, Buffy had kicked the door in, and they went in.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

You know, I think I hate musicals now, Xander thought, lying on his back in bed. Spike was doing something over by the dresser with his jeans and after a moment he slipped in beside Xander - eased himself over on his elbows and got one thigh between Xander's, his mouth dipping down to kiss shoulder and collarbone, sternum and jaw. Low voices from Oz's room - Derio's soft laugh - and then quiet.

Least everyone knows about the Heaven thing.

Oh, yeah, that was just...great. Not only does Willow take Buffy out of Heaven, she uses some sort of...mind-control spell on Tara to make her forget that they had a fight. And it all comes out at once. Tara's white, betrayed face - her shaking voice - had made the three of them close ranks, surrounding Tara and blocking Willow out.

"How could she," Tara whispered, hugging
herself, "After what G-glory did...how cou-l'd she just -
erase part of my mind? Erase my meh-memories? Oh
god - what if..." Oz had told Tara to come home with
them - spend the night, but she had sniffed and
straightened - shaken back her hair.

"No. Wu-we have to - deal with this. We h-have to talk
it out. Th-thank you for asking, b-but I have to go home
t-tonight."

*Red had better come up with a damn good apology for
that*, Spike grumbled, but then the link went to nothing
but sensation, and Xander happily dismissed the witches
- the whole evening - from his mind until later.

*Now is THIS...Spike...love...* Xander sighed in pleasure as
Spike's mouth moved down his body, licking and gently
biting, sucking and caressing. He shivered when Spike
took the head of his cock into his mouth and then
grumbled in inarticulate disappointment when the slick
suction moved away. A moment later, though, he hissed
and arched in pleasure as Spike slid himself slowly down
Xander's length. Spike rested one hand on Xander's
chest, the other on his thigh and worked himself
languidly up and down, his head falling back and the
moon-pale arch of his throat gleaming in the
dimness. Sensation and emotion coiled between them, no distinction of Spike and Xander, just us, us, us.

Love, love...holding me... god... sparks, like... needles and hot and... OH, there, just... yeah, like... icefire in me in you this is... love... my, mine... blood and... honeysweet, god.... just... don't stop, don't... see you, love you... demon, my own, my... never enough... fuck, how you make me... yours, just yours mine yours always... yes... The link was babble - the sudden spillover from Oz hot salt hot need, oh need.... need tooth bite sweet ice cold flame yours ours yours MINE was deliberate and heady and Xander thrashed, groaning. Reached up to yank Spike down to him and maul the vampire's mouth with his own - thread his hands through silken hair and find the cicatrix of the claim-scar and take it into his mouth - split it open with snapping teeth. Spike mewled in pleasure, his body like a vise around Xander, his hips still pumping and his own fangs scraping and prickling and sinking deep. The shivering jolt of magic-laced blood was like a shock - like a blow - and Xander's body went hard and tight, arching up, nails drawing blood. Spike's muscles convulsed, drawing him deeper and the cool, slick flood over their bellies smelt of sea and clover and pepper - smelt of magic and otherness, and the link was like a wave that
rolled over them and took them down; low, grumbling moan of the wolf and the contented purr of the demon.

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The door to the shop basement clicked shut and Giles glanced up to see what had made the noise - did a double-take, fumbling the stack of papers he was looking through. "Oh good Lord," he said, and let his head drop down onto his hand. Buffy and Anya, standing next to him at the counter, looked puzzled and then a huge grin came over Buffy's face and she started to giggle.

"Don't push it, Slayer," Spike growled, but Buffy just kept laughing and a moment later Anya joined her. Spike growled again, for real this time, and stomped down the Magic Box steps. Well, mostly stomped. The stupid shoes didn't stomp well, and the stupid jacket didn't flare and snap like his duster, and...

"Spike!" Dawn squealed, wide-eyed and she doubled over in laughter too, clutching the back of the chair she was sitting in in an effort to hold herself up. "Oh my god, I can't believe - oh my god!" Dawn choked out, gasping.
"You dared me and I did it, Bit. Now you have to take that class." Spike smirked at her and sat haughtily on the loft steps, wincing at the rasp of cheap twill over his wrists. The suit was moth-bally, ill-made, and looked... The door-bell jangled.

_Fucking hell. You look_ - Spike groaned and clutched his head in his hands.

_You're supposed to be workin' late!_

_Had a complete fuck-up at the site - NOT my fault - so, no. I'm here. Just in time, apparently. What are you...doing? _ Xander stumbled down the steps and came to a halt in front of Spike. Taking in the tweed slacks and dress shoes, the collared, buttoned-up shirt and tie, the tweed jacket, the -

_Vest. You're wearing a VEST?_

_Waistcoat, you wanker._ Spike didn't lift his head, and a moment later he felt Xander's hands gently pushing his away and combing through his hair. He'd deliberately left it alone - not a bit of gel or anything else - and Xander's fingers teased the loose curls, tugging gently.
"Love your hair like this, like you just woke up...like you just got fucked..." Spike looked up sharply, grinning, and Xander let his fingers trail slowly out and away. He grinned back and then sat down beside Spike, leaning hard into him.

"So why the sudden - Gilesification, Spike? What's up?"

Yeah, what? Oz and Derio emerged from the training room, Oz shirtless, with dust all over his shoulders and hands and Derio carrying a toolbox. They'd been installing a sound system so Buffy could have music when she worked out. She'd accidentally 'slayed' two boom-boxes, one with a poorly-aimed stake, the other with a kick and Giles had declared a moratorium. They'd all figured Buffy'd have to work pretty hard to slay something that was up in the rafters.

"Is every sodding person here today?" Spike grumbled. Buffy sauntered over from the counter, still pink-faced from laughing.

"Well, Ethan's not here. Not yet. But he's bringing Giles' tea so -" The tinkle of the door-bell interrupted her and she grinned, eyebrows going up. "So I'll bet that's him!"
"And us!" Willow called. "We thought we'd join - holy god. Spike?" Beside her Tara gaped for a moment and then put her hand over her mouth, stifling laughter, and Ethan blew him a kiss. Spike had had enough.

"Right. That's bloody well it!" Spike stood up and paced over to Dawn, scowling. "Niblet kept sayin' how she wanted to sing, wanted to do something but she wouldn't take the classes, would she? Said she was too shy! I ask you!" Spike shot a fierce look at Dawn who tried to look solemn but failed. Derio put the toolbox down and brushed a cobweb out of Oz's hair, staring at Spike with an expression of utter fascination.

"So, I told her - go ahead, dare me something. Told her if I took the dare she'd have to take the classes, these - voice or singing or whatever they bloody well are. And I won, Bit, so Monday -"

"I'll be signing up." Dawn sighed, looking down for a moment, then she looked back up at Spike, grinning again.

"I said you had to dress exactly like you used to!"

"Well, close as I could get without goin' to some museum
or other, Bit -" Spike started, but Dawn shook her head, holding up a hand.

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean - where's your glasses, Spike?"

"Glasses?" Buffy choked, and Spike vamped, snarling at her. Then he took a deep breath and pulled the demon back - reached into the inner pocket of the jacket and pulled out a pair of cheap spectacles. They sold them at the chemist's, no prescription needed, and these had the least magnification he could find.

_Sodding things give me a headache_, he grumbled, but he opened them and slid them on. "Yes, Slayer, glasses. Ruined my eyes peerin' at this or that bugger's cramped-up scribblings, didn't I? You try reading by candle-light for fifteen years, see what it gets you." He looked up at the group, unconsciously lifting his chin. Total silence greeted him.

"Good Lord," Giles said faintly, and beside him Ethan ran a glittering, speculative eye over the vampire. The girls were staring with various expressions of amazement, and Derio and Oz looked...
Somehow, you make tweed sexy, Oz thought, and Spike could see the same thought in Derio's eyes - saw him slip an arm around Oz and grin into the wolf's dusty green hair. And Xander...was lost. Memories flooding him, memories that Xander was re-living - deliberately searching for.

Walking across Hyde Park, heading for a particularly secluded bench, anticipation and joy centered on the brand-new book that was tucked under his arm. Browsing for hours in the bookstalls at Charing Cross. Sitting in the parlor with Mother after supper, listening to the quiet click of knitting needles as he read aloud to her. And oldest and most dear, huddling in the tiny space between bed and wall, the candle set carefully on an old box. Mother's faded India shawl around his shoulders and his legs going numb, his feet freezing as he read, read, read, while the old clock downstairs chimed out eleven and midnight and one a.m. and thirteen-year-old William fell asleep sitting up, dreaming of King Arthur and Captain Nemo...

Love... Xander was smiling at him and Spike smiled back, his real smile. He hadn't thought of his books - his little den - for so many years, despite the growing library they were accumulating at home.
Some of my best times, those. After Father died... Xander gently took the jacket lapels in his hands and drew Spike close - kissed him softly.

I look a right nancy.

Beautiful no matter what, Xander contradicted, and pulled back - tucked a lock of hair behind Spike's ear.

"Wow -" Buffy said, and then a soft grey haze rolled in, and everything vanished.

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Don't panic! A voice said, in his head. Hard voice, clipped and calm. Head injury or shock can cause temporary amnesia. Let it go - it's not a priority!

"Yeah, right," he muttered.

"Huh?" a voice said, and he looked around wildly - spotted a blonde woman over by some steps, sitting up slowly. She looked around, her expression utterly confused, and then stood up - crossed to a wall and flipped a switch. Lights came on overhead and he looked around in shock and growing dismay at the -

Eight...NINE people! All - passed out? Fuck, please be passed out. And - wow - damn big dog. He moved, getting his legs under him so he could stand and his hand came down rather heavily on an arm and he recoiled.

Whoa. He's pretty close. Was I - protecting him? Did something happen? Gotta - check for injuries, gotta -

Something stirred, inside, some knowledge and he crouched over the suited figure beside him, reaching to take a pulse. His fingers found cold flesh - no pulse at all -and he felt his mouth go dry.

"Oh fuck, I think this guy's - d-dead."
"What?" The blonde woman stumbled over, eyes wide, and he reached out again, pressing his fingers into the pale, cool skin of the other man's throat.

"I can't feel a pulse. Here - you - you stay with him and I'm gonna see if - if anybody else is hurt. Do you know - what happened?" The blonde shook her head, staring at the dead man, and he stood up and looked around - went to the nearest figure, a teenage girl with long dark hair. He hesitated for one moment and then he put his fingers to her neck, taking in a huge breath of relief when he felt a strong, solid heartbeat. As he pulled away her eyes popped open and she squealed, scuttling back away from him.

"Don't! D-don't hurt me!"

"Hey! No hurting! I wasn't -" He held his hands up, palms out, keeping his voice low. *Keep her calm, don't let anybody panic, just assess the situation and move on.* The voice in his head seemed to know what it was talking about - the advice seemed sound - so he just waited, watching the girl. The blonde had jerked, startled, when she'd cried out and now she moved closer, holding her hand out.
"Hey - it's okay. He was just making sure you weren't hurt. He won't hurt you - I won't hurt you. It's okay."

"What's going on?" It was one of the two older men - glasses and short, graying hair - and he was sitting up, looking around muzzily.

"We - we don't know. I'm checking for injuries. This guy - Fuck me!" The 'dead' guy was sitting up, irritably rubbing his head, and he shot to his feet and stumbled away. The blonde woman let out a tiny shriek and scrambled away as well, pulling the teenage girl with her and holding tightly to her hand.

"What in bloody hell is going on? Why are you people being so damn loud?" The dead guy - well, no, live guy! coiled gracefully to his feet and looked around - took off the glasses that were perched on his nose and regarded them with puzzlement, then put them away in his jacket.

"I th-thought you were dead! I felt for a pulse and I couldn't - you were cold!"

"I'm not dead." The - living guy - stared at him and he stared back, something tickling at the back of his mind,
something...urging him?

*What the hell? So, he's not dead and...god, he's fucking - amazing, his eyes...*

*Get back to the others!* that little voice insisted, and he blinked and looked around.

"Look - I don't know - what's going on. But we need to see if anybody is hurt and we need to - figure out what we're doing here. I'm -" Sudden and utter panic, because when he'd tried to introduce himself - nothing came.

*Nothing! Oh my god - it's not coming back...*

"Jesus, I - I can't remember my name," he said shakily, and the blond man's eyes went wide.

"What kind of a person doesn't know their own name?" the blond man asked, and he shook his head, trying to stay calm.

"I dunno. What's your name?" The blond man opened his mouth - shut it and than opened it again and then slumped, defeated.
"I - dunno. Bloody hell! What about you two, d'you have names?" he asked the girls, and they both looked confused.

"I - I'm... Oh!" The blonde woman reached out to the teenager, lifting a little gold necklace in her fingers. "This says 'Dawn' - I'll bet that's you!" The brunette smiled, looking relieved.

"Or 'Umad'," she said, looking down, and giggled. The blonde rolled her eyes.

"Steady on, then," the older man said, and another man - this one also older, but ill-looking; thin and pale, rose shakily to his feet, leaning on the counter and looking around him.

"What on earth -?" he asked, and the blond man made a sort of amused noise.

"Well, that's three of us for the Queen - any more, or are the rest of you all Yanks?" They all looked around as the other people - a red-haired woman, another blonde woman and a woman with light brown hair, and a young man whose dark-brown hair was in dreadlocks all stirred,
sitting up and then standing. They all shared the same air of fearful confusion. The dog was the last to rouse and it looked around at them - lifted its head and let loose a quavering howl, eerie and too loud in the confines of the shop.

*Has to be a shop - there's a register - but...what kind of weird shop IS this?*

"Ah! Make it stop!" Dawn said, hands over her ears, and the dreadlocked man - who'd woken with the dog draped over his legs - reached out hesitantly and petted it, tugging the mane of dense, auburn hair around its neck and shushing it. After a moment the dog quieted and leaned against the man, watching them with feral, jet-black eyes.

*Right - okay... How do we figure out who we are? Gotta be some way to identify...I.D.!*

"Hey! Everybody - check and see if you have a wallet or a purse or something. Maybe we can figure out who we are that way." They all began to check, patting pockets and looking gingerly through the various packs and bags that had been close to them when they'd woken. In all, it was amazingly successful.
The two older men were Rupert Giles (with glasses) and Ethan Rayne, the dreadlocked man was Desiderio Padovani, the red-haired woman was Willow Rosenberg, and the taller blonde was Tara Maclay. The shorter blonde woman didn't have any I.D on her at all, and neither did Dawn. The brown-haired woman didn't seem to have I.D. either, but she poked around behind the counter and came up with a purse - lifted a driver's license out and checked it against her reflection in a small compact.

"I'm Anya Jenkins!" she said, grinning, and they all smiled back.

"And I'm - Alexander Harris." A rush of relief came over him at that - as if merely knowing his name somehow made things better, and he heaved a small sigh of relief.

So...Alexander. Alex, I guess. "So - everybody has a name but you and you," Alex said, pointing in turn to the small blonde woman and the suited not-dead man, who rolled his eyes.

"Actually, I do have a name. But good god -" He held out his jacket, where a small placket of material was
sewn, with some writing on it. "'Made with care for Randy'. What am I, bloody three years old? You probably thought it was a right good joke," Randy said, glaring at Rupert, who recoiled slightly from the fierce blue gaze.

"What? Me? Why in the world are you accusing me of - of that?" Rupert waved his hand at the jacket and then turned with a startled noise to Ethan, who was reeling a bit. "Good lord, man, are you all right?"

"Just - just a bit dizzy. I really feel I must sit down," Ethan said faintly, and Rupert led him over to the chair that Tara hastily vacated.

"There now, all right? I don't suppose there's any chance of some tea -" Rupert said helplessly, looking around, and Anya perked up.

"Oh! Maybe there is. I'll go look." She turned with a determined air towards what looked like an office but Willow stopped her.

"Do you really think that's a good idea? Snooping around? I mean - this place is pretty weird with the - magic books and stuff..." She held up a book that said
'Magic for Beginners' on the cover, and they all regarded it with varying degrees of interest.


"Better not say that in front of the customers! Look - right here it says that you and I own this shop." She indicated a messy stack of papers that she had been looking at a few moments earlier. "And if we own this shop then it stands to reason that we believe in magic." She nodded decisively and Rupert looked thoughtful. "Also, there's probably a kettle and some teabags or something back here since I'll just bet you're not the kind of guy who gets a latte." Anya turned and marched into the office and Alex shrugged.

"She's probably right. Listen - Randy - what's the deal? Why are you all - accusing Rupert of...your name?" Randy snorted, his hands feeling over his pockets and coming up with a pack of cigarettes. He looked at them in surprise and then shrugged, tapping one out.

"Well, we're both Brits, for one. And that-" he added, pointing at Ethan with the cigarette, "has got Oscar
bloody Wilde stamped all over it. Plus - look how we're dressed! Must be 'drag your son to work and bore him stiff' day." Randy finally found a lighter - a sleek silver Zippo - and lit up, inhaling deeply. Rupert glanced down at this own slacks and tweed jacket, bewildered, then made the connection.

"Son?" he squeaked, looking less than pleased. "There is a certain feeling of...familiarity." He frowned, then moved to stand by the counter, looking at the papers Anya had indicated.

*Oscar Wilde? He was...oh! He was that English guy...that GAY English guy! Is Ethan gay? Well...* Alex shrugged mentally, not caring. *Gay, straight, he can't remember any more than the rest of us, so... And besides, I don't know if Randy's gay but...he's fuckin' HOT. And so is that Desiderio guy. So - maybe I'm a little...Wilde...too.*

*Get a fuckin' grip!* the inner voice raged. *We've got more important things to worry about than who likes dick! Like, why we can't REMEMBER anything and what the fuck is going on! Snap out of it, soldier, and get with the program!*
uh? Jesus, shut up! Alex wondered if the others had little voices yelling at them in their heads. He decided that maybe it wouldn't be the best idea to mention it out loud, just in case.

"You know, I think I was in the Army or something. I mean - when I woke up, I was thinking about if anybody was hurt and - I just knew what to do. I mean, I could imagine how to take care of somebody who was in shock or something."

"Maybe you're a doctor," Willow said, and he grinned.

"Nah. I've also got a card for a carpenters' union of some kind so - probably not. But I just kinda feel like..." He stopped talking, shaking his head. He couldn't put it into words; it was just a feeling, but a strong one.

"You know, I - kinda feel the same. I - remember? Some stuff..." Randy's voice trailed off, and Alex looked over at him. Something - was there. Some sort of - familiarity and he nodded slowly at the other man.

"Yeah. I think so too. Maybe we - met in the military? Something... You just -"
"Yeah," Randy echoed, looking back at him, and they both smiled at the same moment.

*Wow - niiice smile. I wonder...* But that line of thought was interrupted by the blonde woman.

"I want to be called Joan!" she said, and Dawn made a face.

"Joan? Yuck! That's so - so boring!"

Joan made a face right back. "Better than 'Umad'!"

"Oh, shut up," Dawn snapped, just as Joan said:

"You're such a pain!" They stared at each other.

"Hey, maybe we're -"

"Sisters?" Dawn finished, and they both smiled and hugged each other.

"Hey, Alex, maybe these are yours," Desiderio said, softly accented voice that placed him from south of the border somewhere. He was indicating a toolbox and Alex went over to it - crouched down to look. He froze as the huge
dog pulled away from Desiderio's grip and stalked over to him - pushed his nose into his shoulder and then his neck, sniffing.

"Sheesh, that's cold and wet - ah - hey! C'mon, dog, don't do that." Alex turned slowly and equally slowly put his hand out, letting the dog sniff it before he curled his fingers into the thick, russet fur. It was silky-soft and the dog felt good - felt solid and right, and Alex shivered just a little.

Maybe I know this dog? Maybe me and this Desiderio guy...?

"That's not actually a dog. That's a wolf, although I've never seen one so large," Rupert said quietly, and Randy glanced at him and then moved closer, his eyes on the dog.

"How d'you know what it is?" he said softly, and crouched down next to Alex, hand outstretched. The wolf - eyed him for a moment and then sniffed his outstretched fingers - nuzzled his face into Randy's palm. Randy grinned, delighted, and stroked the thick fur of the wolf's chest and neck.
"I - don't know, exactly, how I know... I just do. Perhaps I'm a - a weekend naturalist?" Rupert looked back at the papers and Alex smiled at Randy and the wolf.

"He's really beautiful, isn't he," he said softly, and Randy grinned at him.

"Yeah, he is," he replied, and Alex reached out to touch the wolf again. When he did it was like - felt like -

*Like a circuit completing. Like...feels RIGHT. What the hell? NOT me and Desiderio.* The feeling was so strong he gasped, and beside him Randy did the same.

"What the hell was that?" he said under his breath, and Alex shook his head helplessly.

"I dunno, but I think - we'd better stay together. And - and Desiderio, too." Randy nodded - looked over at the other man who was watching them with sharp, black eyes.

"I think you're right," Desiderio said, just as quiet. They all jumped as Anya suddenly popped out of the office.

"I was right! There's an electric kettle back there and tea
things, and this!" She held up a folder of some kind, brown with an elastic fastening. Across the front in bold letters was 'My Wedding Planner'. "I'm getting married! There are all kinds of charts and - and lists and - tons of stuff!" Anya looked pleased and she turned to eye Rupert.

"So, do you think it's us that's getting married? I mean - we're co-owners of the shop and everything. Makes sense."

"Hmmmm..." Rupert looked a little startled at the thought, but before he could say another word there was a sudden crash of breaking glass.

"What the -" Alex jumped up, heading for the front of the shop and Randy fell in step with him. Dawn and Joan hung back, wide-eyed. There was a spray of glass across the floor, and a chunk of what looked like cinderblock. It was just twilight outside - deep, blue-amber haze that made the edges of things fuzzy and indistinct. Someone was standing on the other side of the door - several someones.

"We want Spike!" a muffled voice yelled, and Alex and Randy looked at each other, puzzled.
"They want spikes?" Another piece of cinder-block crashed through the window and Alex jumped - glared at the door.

"This is really pissing me off." He reached out and put his hand on the knob - caught Randy's eye. "You ready?"

"Ready," Randy said, grinning, and Alex wrenched open the door. Three figures whirled to face them and they stared for a long moment. Alex slammed the door shut - turned the security bolt. Randy lunged for the window and yanked down an anti-theft mesh, clicking it shut. Then they both stared at one another.

"What the - the fuck was that?"

"Vampires!" Randy said, and Alex gave him an odd look.

"What d'you mean, vampires?" Randy stared at him, utterly blank, and then a thoughtful look came over his face.

"I... Did you see their faces?"

"Yeah. They looked...weird."
"They looked like vampires. They - bloody hell! They just did!" Randy looked frustrated and jumped when Joan came up behind them.

"So what's going on outside?" She peered through the broken window, and suddenly a ridged, fanged face appeared in it, snarling.

"Send him out or we'll burn the place down!" Joan gave a yelp, jumping back, and Alex moved on pure instinct, the voice in his head screaming instructions. He punched straight and hard, dead center, and was rewarded with a sharp snap and a howl as his fist broke the vampire's nose. The face disappeared backwards, streaming blood.

"Brilliant!" Randy crowed, slapping Alex on the shoulder and Alex winced, stumbling forward a step.

"Damn! You're strong, Randy." Alex rubbed his shoulder and Randy looked at his hand - smiled delightedly.

"Am I? Bloody brilliant."

"Those are vampires, huh?" Joan asked, inching up to peer through the mesh again. Alex tugged her away.
"Yeah, vampires. And they want - somebody. Spike?"

"Who the hell is Spike? We've all got names. Unless the sods want the wolf?" All three turned to look at the wolf who lolled his tongue out at them, looking for all the world as if he thought they were utter idiots.

"Well, they can't have him. What would vampires want with a wolf, anyway?" Desiderio said, kneeling down and hugging the wolf. The animal leaned into him, letting out a low hmmph sound.

"No, they can't have him," Alex said slowly. Because they couldn't. The wolf - was important.

"Listen - this is a magic shop - maybe we can find some kind of spell or something to get rid of them? And - what kills vampires?" Willow sounded excited, looking through the books on the table in the center of the shop and Tara, Dawn and Ethan started to go through them as well. Rupert put the papers down and opened a book that was beside him on the counter.

"Well, let's see... According to traditional lore - if, of course, I remember correctly, vampires may be killed
by...holy water, or - or crosses, or a wooden stake through the heart."


"Yes, or beheading. So - do we have any stakes, I wonder?"

"Let's see what's back there," Joan said, pointing, and Alex and Randy followed her across the shop and through the door in the back.

"Wow! Look at this!" Joan darted across the room to a wall of axes, swords, daggers and staffs. Other, more mundane equipment - weights, a horse, a punching bag and a stack of mats - was scattered around.

"This is giving me a very...bad...feeling," Randy said, looking around. He stripped off his jacket and rolled his shirt-sleeves up, and Alex couldn't help noticing his pale, muscled forearms and agile fingers. He shivered, just a little.

What the fuck? I wonder if we're...close? He just... Alex shook his head.
Focus, for god's sake! the voice screamed, and Alex sighed.

"Bad feeling why?" he asked. Joan had doubled up her fists and was punching half-heartedly at a heavy-bag, and Randy watched her for a moment.

"It just seems - there's vampires out there. And we're in a bloody magic shop... What if this isn't our world? Or - what if in this world, the vampires have taken over? What if we're the only humans left?" Joan stopped punching, staring at him, and Alex felt a quiver of fear go through him.

"No way. We can't be the only humans. Can we?" Randy looked at him, his eyes wide and a little spooked.

"No, we can't 'cause - what would the vampires eat if all the humans were dead? They need us to survive, so..." Joan put her fists on the heavy bag, head to one side. "So maybe it's a war. And we just got - trapped, or something, but there'll be a rescue soon or - something." She drew her fist back and punched, and the bag swung violently, the chain creaking. Alex
whistled.

"Wow - you're strong too. What if -" He was interrupted by a cracking sound and suddenly a back door splintered away from the jamb and swung inwards, crashing into the wall. Two figures leaped through: vampires, fangs gleaming and golden-glowing eyes wild.

"Got 'em now!" one crowed. He pounced towards Joan whose face went from utter shock to grim determination. The other leaped for Alex, grinning, and he ducked and rolled, bringing his fist up as the vampire flew over him, sinking it deep into his gut. The blow seemed to shock the creature, who rolled awkwardly to his knees. Out of the corner of his eye, Alex could see Joan punching and kicking, and the vampire reeling under her blows.

Fuck - what -stake, holy water - gotta be a stake back here! Alex pushed himself to his feet and then Randy was there, raining blows down on the other vamp and Alex darted away to the wall of weapons. He searched frantically and almost tripped over a duffle. He yanked the zipper down and saw stakes, and grabbed a handful.

"Joan! Catch!" he shouted, and lobbed one to her. She
snatched it out of mid-air and he turned to Randy, who had the vamp pinned and was methodically pulverizing its face.

"Randy!" Alex yelled, and tossed the second stake. As Randy started to turn Joan lunged and stabbed her vamp with the stake. It exploded into a cloud of dust and she reeled back, coughing.

"Did you see that? That was awesome! I think I'm some kind of superhero!" Joan was grinning, panting, and Alex grinned back - turned back in time to see Randy bring his own stake down on the vamp beneath him.

"Hold your breath!" Joan cried, and the dust swirled up. Randy let out a shout of triumph and bounced to his feet - turned to face them.

"I guess that won't be a problem," Alex muttered. Randy just grinned at him - golden eyes, fangs, a ridged and alien face.

"Oh my god!" Joan looked around frantically, as if for another stake, and Randy took a step towards her, his grin fading.
"What's the matter? Did you see how he just - disintegrated? That was bloody amazing!"

"Randy - you... Uh, you - your f-face."

"What about it, mate?" Randy's hand went up to his cheek - to his forehead - and froze. Wide-eyed, he felt carefully over his features, his fingertips just brushing the tips of his fangs.

"But - what -" Randy looked utterly shattered and Alex walked slowly over to him. He wanted -

He's - a vampire. But he's in here with us - he's our friend, he HAS to be... God, just wanna... Alex reached out and hesitantly put his hand on Randy's shoulder and the vampire slumped a little, looking at him.

"I can't be a vamp, Alex. I'm - I'm in here with you - you blokes! I'm - a good guy, aren't I?"

"Y-yeah. You have to be. Maybe there are - are good vamps and - and bad vamps and - you help us! I mean - Joan is like - WonderWoman over there or something and you must help us kill the bad vamps. Maybe - maybe there's lots of good vamps!" Alex couldn't stop staring
and Randy looked away, shrugging his hand off.

"Don't have to stare. It's - ugly."

"No it's not!" Alex snapped. Where the fuck did THAT come from? But...it's not.

"It's just - different" Joan said softly, walking over to them and studying Randy's face. "It's like - a lion's face, kind of."

"Yeah?" Randy looked pleased - glanced over at Alex, smiling, and suddenly the vampire face was gone.

"Oh! It's - how'd you do that?"

"It's gone!" Alex stepped up close, his hand going to touch Randy's now-smooth forehead.

"Hey, guys?" They all started, turning around, and Desiderio was in the doorway, the toolbox in his hand. The wolf pushed past him and trotted over, rubbing up against Randy's leg, pushing him back a step. Randy laughed and dropped his hand down onto the tall, broad back.
"I think we'd better get that door nailed shut or something," Desiderio said, and he came across the room as well.

"Oh - yeah. Lucky they didn't all just run through!" Alex went to help the other man, looking around for something they could brace the door up with.

"So, you can put your vampire face on and off," Joan said, and Randy grinned at her.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Two hours later and the vampires outside had tried to rush them three times. They hadn't set fire to the building yet - they kept threatening it - and everyone was getting antsy. A call to the police had proved fruitless, since the vamps had apparently cut the phone line, and no one had a cell phone.

"Can't believe we're living in the bloody Century of the Fruitbat and not one bloody person has a cell phone!" Randy groused, smoking his last cigarette and pacing back and forth in front of the counter. He'd torn the sleeves off his shirt but left his vest on and the flex of his
muscles under milk-white skin was fascinating. At least - Alex and Desiderio couldn't stop watching, and Ethan seemed to be sneaking glances as well. Anya had tried a spell-book, but she'd only managed to conjure a spotted black and white rabbit. She'd screamed and passed out, and Rupert was currently trying to revive her with Essential Oil of Eucalyptus and scotch.

Ethan, Willow, Tara and Dawn were still poring over books, and Joan was in the back again, trying out different weapons. The occasional thump and 'awesome!' drifted out to them.

"Century of the Fruitbat? What the hell is that?" Alex asked, leaning over the wolf's back and rubbing it behind the ears. The wolf made that little hmmph noise again and pressed against his hands.

"It's - it's... I don't have a soddin' clue! It just - popped into my head! Listen, we can't just sit in here - we need to do something. We need to -"

"What? Attack? We're not all superpowered like you and Joan, Randy! We'd get killed!" Dawn was the most afraid, of all of them, and Randy pinched his cigarette out and put the butt in his pocket - went over to her and
crouched down next to her chair.

"Listen, Dawn, there's no way I'd make you fight these wankers. I'd keep you safe." Dawn looked down at him and a small smile turned up the corners of her mouth.

"You - you would?"

"Course I would - we all would! You saw the pictures in all the wallets! You're - all of you are family. Something like. Me an' Ethan, we're the odd men out." Dawn looked thoughtful at that. She'd even had pictures in a small backpack that had included Desiderio and a shorter, blue-haired man, an obvious couple. Randy was right - it seemed that he and Ethan were the only ones not pictured anywhere.

*Doesn't matter. Randy BELONGS. He's one of us. Maybe - you can't take pictures of vampires. They don't show up in mirrors, so - probably not.*

"You don't feel - odd," Dawn said, and Randy ducked his head - smiled up at her and then stood up, patting her shoulder gently.

"Thanks, pet. But don't be scared - it'll be okay." Randy
went back to his pacing, his brow furrowed in thought, and Alex found himself staring upwards at the loft that held more books and a couple of straight-backed chairs.

"You know..." he said slowly, listening with concentration to the voice in his head, "I've got an idea..."

*\*\*\*\*\*\*

They were crouched in the loft, waiting tensely. Alex's palm was sweaty on the stock of the crossbow he held and he wiped it hastily on his jeans. Beside him, Randy's vampire face was evident as he scanned the shop below. They'd put out almost all the lights, and there were people hidden with crossbows and stakes all over. Tara had a found a spell, one that would cause an intense flash of light. They were going to lure the attacking vampires into the store and at Joan's signal Rupert would use the spell. They hoped it would momentarily blind their opponents since Randy had said he had no trouble seeing in the darkened training room, or out into the nighttime street. There were about ten vampires and one strange sort of fish-headed demon still outside, and Joan waited by the door, ready to open it and lure them in.
"Ready?" Randy called softly, and there were murmured acknowledgements from around the shop. "Go, Joan!" he called, and Joan opened the door and strode outside. A moment or two later she pelted back in and the vampires streamed in behind her, snarling. Joan dove for cover under the table and a volley of cross-bow bolts leapt across the room. Two vamps were dusted and two more went down, one shot through the eye and one in the knee.

Alex swore, his hands shaking as he hastily reloaded. Next to him Randy did the same, and Desiderio on the other side. Another volley went off, dusting one more vamp and wounding another and then they were in the shop and it was too dangerous, now, to use crossbows anymore.

"Rupert, now!" Joan yelled, and Alex shut his eyes tight. A brief murmur and a flare of white behind his eyes and there were screams from the vamps. He looked again just as Randy leapt off the balcony, ignoring the stairs altogether. He landed on two vamps, fists in the back of their necks. As they collapsed Willow and Tara darted out, slamming stakes down hard and both vamps dusted.
"Whoo hoo!" Tara yelled, pumping her fist, and Willow looked wide-eyed at her and then grinned back.

"Only five left, Joan! Let's bloody do it!" Randy shouted, leaping on another vamp. Joan came out from under the table, fists and feet already in motion and Alex darted down the loft steps, Desiderio's feet ringing on the wrought iron behind him. Ethan, Dawn and Anya were in the office and Rupert stood guard over the door, axe in hand. From out of nowhere the wolf came running and he landed on the fish-headed demon, toppling it to the floor, snarling and snapping in its face. The demon snapped back, showing a mouthful of impressive teeth.

Alex swung his own axe, slicing into the thigh of the vamp with the crossbow bolt in his knee and Desiderio was right there, swinging a short sword, hacking ineptly but hard. The vamp snarled and lunged at them and all three went down. As they struggled the vamp suddenly disintegrated and Willow stood over them, coughing.

"Thanks!" Alex cried, and then Joan and another vamp bowled into her, knocking her flying. "Shit, Willow!" Alex scrambled to his feet, rushing to help the redhead. Out
of the corner of his eye he saw Desiderio hamstringing the vamp Joan was fighting and the vamp poofed into nothing, Joan's stake finishing him off. Randy was twisting the head off another vamp, and one was trying to get the wolf off of the fish-demon.

More like a shark, Alex thought, reaching out to Willow. She grabbed his hand and pulled a little more enthusiastically than he was ready for and he stumbled forward, his foot coming down heavily on something that broke with a small crack.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Whoa - dizzy. Fuck! What in hell - Xander stared down at his foot - up at Willow, who was on her knees, hand to her head. He heard a small cry and glanced up to see Buffy jerk a vamp off Tara and dust it. Then nothing but the low growl of wolf-Oz, who was crouched on the chest of a shark-headed demon over by the door.

"What -" Tara said, and then she looked at Willow and her face crumpled into tears. Giles was putting his axe on the counter, opening the office door and Dawn and the others came out, looking bewildered. Ethan came
out last and he was pale.

"Ripper, love - I can feel it. We're leaving right now," Ethan said, and Xander stared at Ethan for a moment, confused.

Feel what?

HIM, love. Christ - Spike was backing away from Giles, getting Tara to her feet and bringing her with him. Xander looked at Giles and - darkman demonkiller DARKMAN was like a solid wave of deafening, ice cold energy that crashed over them all. It was like drowning in half-solidified ice and Xander took in a hard breath and grabbed Derio, pulling him back, getting them both close to Spike. The hyena howled, mindless fear. Xander didn't think he'd ever seen quite that expression on Giles' face, although it was obvious from Ethan's slightly panicky look that he had.

"Ripper - now. Right now, or you'll be bloody fucking sorry," Ethan hissed. Giles was staring at Willow, his mouth working silently, and suddenly he turned and looked straight at Ethan - managed one sharp nod at the rest of them and strode out of the shop. As he passed the shark-headed demon it cringed away from him and
Oz growled. Ethan followed behind, his eyes blazing, that seething coil of dark smoke that was himself almost as strong as Giles' barely banked fury. The door slammed and they all waited for a moment.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK. What did she - what in HELL was she -

Memory - memory spell, god - from Oz. Nothing coherent from Spike, the demon's rage incandescent and savage. Xander was startled when the vampire spoke and his voice was utterly flat.

"Slayer - best get the Niblet home. Glinda's coming with us. We'll come get her things tomorrow."

"Spike -" Buffy said, her arm around Dawn's shoulders, frowning.

"Do it, Slayer!"

"It's all right, Buffy. We'll - we'll call you." Xander moved so that Tara was between he and Spike, and Buffy looked at him - looked at Willow with a mixture of confusion and anger on her face. She sighed finally, and nodded.

"Okay. What about - that," with a gesture towards the
shark-demon.

"I'll take care of it," Spike said, and Buffy nodded again and she and Dawn left. Willow watched them go, tears streaming down her face. Anya came out from behind the counter, her purse under her arm, her face furious and set.

"We're going to be closed tomorrow. You guys - get going. I'm locking up." She disappeared into the back and Derio shakily walked over to Oz, who was still standing on the demon.

*Let him up, Oz,* Xander thought, and the wolf snapped at the demon one more time then hopped off - met Derio half way and leaned into him.

*Fucking naked again,* Oz thought, and Xander almost laughed - hugged Tara instead who was crying silently into his shoulder.

Spike growled. "Get the fuck out of here, Shark. You ever do anything so stupid again and -"

"Yes, yes, right, of course, Mr. Spike, of course," the demon mumbled, climbing awkwardly to its feet. It
hurried out the door and was gone, and Derio looked around - walked over to the counter where Oz's shredded jeans were lying and picked them up. Keys jangled faintly in the pocket.

"There isn't anything... I'm gonna drive Oz home. I'll - see you guys there."

"Yeah, right behind you, Derio," Xander said, and the two of them were gone as well.

_Xander - get Spike home, get TARA home. Don't let him - don't let him hurt her._

_I won't. Love you._

_Love you. Pack, Xander. Can't lose any of them._

"Tara? Tara, I'm - I'm s-sso sorry, I'm so, so sorry -" Willow choked out, crying harder now, and Tara shivered in Xander's arms, silent. Xander felt the hyena surge - felt the snarl distort his face. He fought it - fought back the incoherent rage and the desire to rend - to end this threat to his family, _protect pack protect pack protect protect protect_ dining in his mind - echoing from Oz still, shouted from the demon.
"Willow... Don't - come around for a few days," he finally managed, his voice harsh, and he turned abruptly and started out, Tara held close in his arms. Behind him he heard a muffled wail.

"Xander! I didn't mean - I wasn't trying to -"

"He could have died, witch! They all could have, forgetting what's out there - what we are." Spike's voice was as cold and dreadful as a snake's hiss, shaking with a desire to kill so tenuously leashed that Xander spun around, dreading what he might see.

Spike stood over Willow, the demon there, his body quivering with tension. He crouched down suddenly, his hands on either side of Willow's thighs, his face inches from hers. He took a deep breath, scenting her, his mouth slightly open and Willow was leaning frantically back.

"Did you see the wolfling, red witch? He forgot his humanity - or he forgot how to find it. What do you think would have happened if Xander had forgotten like that? If I had? Want me to tell you?"
"S-spike, get away from -"

"I'll tell you, witchling." Spike's nails dug into the floor, splintering it, and Xander smelled blood suddenly - felt the stab of splinters through the link but Spike didn't seem to notice. Anya emerged from the back room and froze, staring. Beside him, Tara had lifted her head but she was still silent.

"If I had forgotten, Willow - oooh, if I had forgotten..." Spike's voice had dropped to a crooning whisper - to a rumbling purr of a voice and Xander shuddered violently all over, the hyena wanting.

*Oh god, want it want it, blood and bones, blood and BONES - Spike! Get away get away -*

"I'd have had every drop of blood in the Watcher's body, Red; I'd have taken that misbegotten mage and eaten his heart, pretty. A quick death for demon-girl, because she still reeks of D'Hoffryn and even William the Bloody doesn't cross him." Spike licked his lips, head down, golden eyes fixed on Willow.

"But I'd have had my hat trick, witch, I'd have had my third Slayer because she's no match for the demon when
she can't remember her hate, witch. And Dawn, and Tara, and Derio... They're pack, witch." Spike shredded a line of splinters out of the floor - lifted a bleeding hand and touched Willow's forehead with it and she flinched, trying to scrabble away. The same hand darted out and grabbed the front of her shirt - yanked her back.

"And pack means I'd have turned them, witch. Because that's all the demon knows - that's all the demon wants and it's only the soul and my boy that keeps it from the things it wants, witch." Spike lifted his head and growled - let it rumble up and out, louder and louder to a roar that made Willow cry out and that the hyena answered, full-throated shriek. Tara jerked against Xander's ribs and he shushed her absently, everything in him tuned to the demon.

"And you - Red... I'd have sucked the magic from your body and the marrow from your bones and had that pretty hair for my lair, sweetheart, and that is why you don't do magic on me and mine ever again, Willow - ever fucking again." Spike rose in one fluid motion - whirled and stalked out and Xander couldn't bring a single word past the growl that was lodged in his throat. Every word Spike had said was true - Xander had felt it - had known it like his own mind, and the images of what might have
happened would wake him, sweating and shaking, for weeks.

When they got home, Derio and Tara both nodded silent, weary understanding and they gathered Oz and went back out into the night. Hunting - had never felt so much like absolution and Xander wondered if he would ever, ever love Willow again.

*Stephan Sondheim - Jet Song, West Side Story*

10 Lessons

"It was the forty-fathom slumber that clears the soul and eye and heart, and sends you to breakfast ravening. They emptied a big tin dish of juicy fragments of fish - the blood ends the cook had collected overnight. They cleaned up the plates and pans of the elder mess, who were out fishing, sliced pork for the midday meal, swabbed down the foc'sle, filled the lamps, drew coal and water for the cook, and investigated the fore hold, where the boat's stores were stacked. It was another perfect day - soft, mild, and clear; and Harvey breathed to the very bottom of his lungs."
Tara was talking softly on the phone, and Xander and Oz were at the kitchen counter, slicing up onions and peppers and spinach. Derio was trying out a lasagna recipe and he'd dragooned them into chopping duty. Spike had got out of it by volunteering to help Dawn with her homework. She had some sort of summer cold and had gotten a sick day - and proposed to spend it watching TV since her head 'hurt too much' to read. Spike had sorted through her backpack, found her book report homework and the book, and was now cozily on the couch with tea and his 'private' reserve of Jaffa Cakes, making Dawn take notes as he read aloud.

*I should take a picture. The evil undead reading to a little girl and sharing cake.*

*Bugger off. Just helping the Bit.* Spike shot them both a look. Xander grinned over at Oz, who grinned back.

*And he's wearing YOUR purple flannel shirt and it's about three sizes too big so he's all - floppy and cuddly looking.*

*Just 'cause it smells good -*

*And he didn't fix his hair! It's all curly and loose and fluffy*
- he looks about fifteen!

And your lumberjack socks!

Awwww!

Awwww!

"You two had bloody well better stop that right now!" Spike yelled. He glared at them over the long kitchen counter that separated the two rooms and scrunched down further into the couch, tucking his feet under the throw Dawn had over her legs. She jerked, her head bobbing up and her eyes going wide.

"Right, stop that! Who said that now?"

"Bit, were you sleeping?" Spike looked shocked and Xander couldn't help the snorting laughter that had him doubled over the counter. Oz was holding half an onion and a knife out in front of him, his eyes pouring with tears, giggling uncontrollably. Derio wiped Oz's face with a paper towel.

"Are you guys making fun of Spike?" he whispered in Oz's ear, and Oz turned his head just enough to get a kiss.
"Course not," Oz whispered back, grinning. Xander straightened and resumed chopping, and Spike glared at Dawn - at Xander and Oz - at the book. Then he took a deep breath and went back to reading.

"When dad kerflummoxes that way," said Dan in a whisper, "he's doin' some high-line thinkin' fer all hands. I'll lay my wage an' share we'll make berth soon. Dad he knows the cod, an' the fleet they know dad knows. See 'em comin' up one by one, lookin' fer nothin' in particular, o' course, but scrowgin' on us all the time?"

"I have to go, Willow. I - I'm glad you fixed Amy, but... We'll talk l-later. Bye." Tara turned off the phone - got up slowly and went to hang it up. She looked upset and Xander watched her as she washed her hands and found a knife - started chopping spinach.

"All right, Tara?" Xander asked, and she gave him a haunted look from behind her hair.

"Willow fixed Amy-the-rat. She's a p-person now. And I'm glad Amy's - back to being human but..."
"But Willow promised," Xander said sadly, and Tara nodded. Two weeks since the memory spell and Willow had promised no more magic.

"She didn't even....t-try, I don't think. She said she had this idea and -" Tara chopped in silence for a moment and then stopped, her shoulders slumping.

"What am I gonna do, Xander?" she said softly, and Xander was pretty sure she was crying.

"So Disko Troop thought of recent weather, and gales, currents, food supplies, and other domestic arrangements, from the point of view of a twenty-pound cod; was in fact, for an hour, a cod himself, and looked remarkably like one. Then he removed the pipe from his teeth."

"Tara -" Xander stopped chopping peppers and wiped his hands on a paper towel - put his arm around Tara's shoulders. She sniffed and rubbed her arm across her face - started chopping again in a determined, jerky fashion. "I think - she's just so confused right now... Giles is working on getting her into that coven in
England - getting her some help... This...addiction...they'll know how to fix it."

_Can't be addicted to magic, love - it's not like that._ Spike's gaze caught his above the edge of the book and Xander slowly nodded. Willow said it was an addiction - that she craved it. Giles - disagreed.

_How do you know? I mean, couldn't she -_

_Don't know for sure..._ Spike stopped reading - reached out to get his cup and take a long drink of tea. Dawn blinked at him and held up her pencil, proving she was awake. _Something Dru told me once... If you can do magic, it's part of you - you can't...it's not something you can have and not have, like a cigarette - it's always there. It's - what you do with it, how you use it..._ Spike trailed off uncertainly and the link was filled for a moment with pictures of Dru - unconnected, random, murky. _I don't...remember._ Xander frowned at that and slowly went back to chopping. The little stumbles of memory were getting worse.

_Be all right, softly from Oz, and Xander nodded, trying not to slice his fingers off._
"It'll be okay, Tara," Xander said finally, and the blonde woman glanced at him, smiling softly. "We'll figure this out."

"Sorry. I don't mean to be all - m-moody."

"You're entitled," Derio said, coming to scoop her spinach into a pot and Tara smiled at him, too. It was fun, having her there, despite the reason why. She had classes at odd hours and odd days, so you never knew when she'd show up. She talked about the professors and the other students with a dry, unexpected wit that made them all laugh. She had discovered a shared interest in cooking with Oz and Derio - and a shared interest in more basic, passive magics with Dawn. Spike - she treated like a trusted older brother and they'd had one or two late nights, drinking tea and talking. It made Xander feel even safer - even more content - then before.

Family is getting bigger. I love it.

Enough for an actual pack, softly from Oz, and Xander had to smile at that. At the thought of them all living nesting denning in their house - as a family that didn't go away or break your heart.
Tara had moved some pots of herbs onto the back porch and Dawn had graciously allowed her to take over her room a bit, and movie nights and dinner times were more crowded, now. Derio was coming around more often too. He felt too restless at home, he said, with aunts and cousins in and out all day long. He wanted to be with Oz and if nobody minded, he'd do just that. Nobody did.

"Now you look somethin' like," said Dan. "Hurry!"

"Keep nigh an' handy," said Troop, "an' don't go visitin' raound the fleet. Ef any one asks you what I'm cal'latin to do, speak the truth an' say ye don't know."

A little red dory, labelled "Hattie S.," lay astern of the schooner. Dan hauled in the painter, and dropped lightly on to the bottom boards, while Harvey tumbled clumsily after."

Get Tara settled - get Red bundled off...we can make our own plans to go, Spike thought, and Xander heard the wistful note that was in that suggestion. Spike still
wanted to go, to leave the Hellmouth. Xander did, too - but he felt like he couldn't, with everything so up in the air. They'd agreed to make plans, but nothing fixed just yet.

*Just a little more time, love. We'll do it, I promise. Love you.*

*Love you. Want you safe,* Spike added, and Xander couldn't argue with that.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

"And the wackiness just keeps happening," Buffy said grumpily, tossing a paper down onto the table at the Magic Box. The headline said something about a diamond and a 'freeze ray' and while Oz read through it Buffy shed her jacket and hat and stomped over to the counter. She joined Anya in flipping through Bride magazines.

"It's those guys - that Warren guy....the little evil threesome. I mean, who else would come up with something lame like a freeze ray." Buffy continued to mutter under her breath and Xander had to admit that
the Threesome or whatever - god, NOT an image I want to contemplate were pretty annoying. They apparently were spending a lot of time calling up various demons and getting them to steal things or fight other demons, and the whole non-human community was getting pretty tired of it. They'd actually approached Buffy - at Willy's, neutral ground - and through Spike, who didn't know whether to be annoyed or flattered. Asked her to get them. Buffy had promised to try, and had gratefully listened to every last scrap of information the different demons had. But the geek trio was amazingly sneaky, and so far they didn't have anything.

"So, did they kill the security guard? I mean - frozen, that's kinda extreme," Xander said, looking at the newspaper over Oz's shoulder.

"No - he seems to be okay. Which is too bad 'cause that'd give me an excuse to go all - Terminator on their asses." Buffy pushed the magazine away with a sigh and started an aimless walk around the Magic Box, poking at things and making Anya stare at her, narrow-eyed, as she moved the merchandise around infinitesimally. "Where's Spike?"

"Hunting," Xander answered automatically, and then
looked up guiltily at the hiss of indrawn breath. "He's not killing anyone, Buffy. Swear."

"Better not be," Buffy grumbled, but she sighed again, and Oz looked at her, head a little to one side.

"You okay, Buffy?" The slayer poked distractedly at a cluster of chicken feet and then flopped down into a chair.

"Yeah. Kinda. I'm just... There's this woman from Social Services coming over."

"There is?"

"What? Why?" Oz and Xander both spoke at the same time and Oz pulled his feet up onto the chair seat, frowning over his knees. Xander sat down in one of the other chairs, frowning as well. Dawn had been acting out a bit - skipping some classes, getting 'fresh' with the teachers - not doing her homework. Why was anybody's guess, although Spike was happy to blame it on Janice and brought up the Halloween debacle fairly often as proof. Dawn just rolled her eyes and snapped back about pots and kettles and then Spike would yell and Dawn would shriek. It was like Jerry Springer only no
nudity, thank god, or chairs being thrown.

"So - when is she coming by? And why?" Xander asked, and Buffy leaned her elbows up on the table.

"It's 'cause Dawn's been goofing off in school. And apparently she told the school counselor some stuff. And - I dunno. I missed a meeting, but there were these vamps..." Buffy shook her head. "I've got a good job, thanks to you, and Dawn has a house and - and tons of people who love her! I don't understand what more they want!" Buffy looked frustrated and close to tears and Xander reached out and touched her hand.

"What is it, Buffy? I mean - Child Welfare around here is a joke. I should know. What's the problem?"

"Oh - just... This woman at the office. She said - if Dawn doesn't start...behaving...they might take her away. Send her to live with Dad." Buffy's lip trembled and she jerked in startlement as Oz growled, wolfing for a moment.

"Over my fucking dead body," Xander snapped, and he wanted to growl too. "What the hell - is your dad tired of paying child support or something? Why would anybody
think he's the right person to take care of Dawn? He didn't even come to - to the funeral!" Buffy winced at that and Xander bit his lip, instantly sorry. When Hank Summers hadn't shown up to see Joyce laid to rest, the three of them had privately vowed to never let the man have any say in Buffy's life again. Or Dawn's.

"Geez, guys. It's...he is her dad," Buffy said slowly, looking a little bewildered, and Oz took a deep breath, hugging his legs tightly.

"It's just - Dawn's part of the pa- part of the family, Buffy," Oz said softly, and Xander nodded.

"Family. You mean pack. You almost said pack. She's part of...this...whatever." Buffy made vague motions towards Xander and Oz, frowning a little.

Well, won't lie to her about it.

Can't hurt, as Spike says. Want me to tell her? Oz looked considering - nodded, finally.

Still closer friends than me, so yeah.

"Okay... Remember up on the tower, Buffy? When you -
when you gave some of Dawn's blood to Spike?"

"Yeeah..." Buffy said slowly. "I just - I hoped he'd just... I thought it was kinda ritual-y. That he'd...kind of adopt her or something. I just wanted her to be safe," Buffy whispered the last, and Xander smiled at her.

"It's okay. It worked. It's just - there's all this magic, in blood... And it worked really well. You know how I can hear Spike and Oz - and they can hear me? How we all know what the other is thinking and feeling?" Buffy nodded, wide-eyed and Xander smiled at her, trying to be reassuring.

"Well, the thing is...after that we could hear Dawn. It was good!" Xander said hastily, as Buffy scowled, opening her mouth to say - something. "Wait, okay? It was good. She had a lot of...nightmares, at first, and - she stayed with us and we knew what she needed, you know? We could help her. It faded after a week or so. Now we can only hear her when she's in the same room, and it's just - basic stuff. Strong emotions. Helps us know when she's lying." Xander grinned and Buffy stared at him a minute, and then she grinned back.

"So that's how Spike - ! Oh, wow, that's...kinda
creepy. But good! You're right. It's good. Does she know?"

"We never told her. Didn't seem like a good idea." Buffy nodded - thought for a second and then a look came over her face. "She can't hear you guys, can she?"

"No. Not at all. She didn't - she never got any of Spike's blood, so - it's only one way."

"Thank god. I mean, you guys - not exactly discreet... Anya told me about The Roof." Buffy giggled, and Xander put his head down on the table. "No teenager needs that in their head."

"I'm never going up there again," Xander mumbled, ignoring Oz's snickering.

"So, anyway," Buffy said, heaving a huge sigh, "this woman is going to come by and - inspect - and they don't say when or anything and I might not even be home or - or what if I'm all covered in demon goo or something? What if I forgot to do the dishes?" Xander lifted his head and pushed his fingers back through his hair.
"They don't take kids away 'cause there's some dishes in the sink," Oz said calmly, and Buffy shook her head.

"But what if there's a lot? And - and Willow is there - what if they think I'm in a gay relationship? The government hates that! And -"

"Buffy -" Oz said, and he leaned forward, putting his hand on top of hers. "It's going to be okay. You've got a good job - insurance, even! You've got friends who are willing to help any time. And you know the government will love Giles. And - even if they don't like something, they won't just snatch Dawn."

"Yeah, he's right," Xander said, and Buffy looked from Oz to him, her expression eloquently pleading for comfort.

"I mean - they came to my house a couple of times, but I never got - taken. They just...don't care that much." Xander couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice and Buffy winced slightly.

"Oh, Xan, I'm sorry. I'm being such a - drama queen. I know you guys'll do anything... Dawn really loves you, you know?" She looked at him - looked at Oz, her face softening into a relaxed, slightly bewildered smile. "Even
Spike - or maybe, especially Spike. She just... She loves you guys and loves being part of your...family. I never really..." Buffy stopped, and wiped distractedly at her eyes, blinking. "I never really said thanks for - everything you guys did while I was dead. It was wonderful and - I can't ever repay you."

"Buff - come on. Repay? There's - we'd have done it no matter what."

"'Cause of the blood," Buffy said quietly, and Oz shook his head.

"No. I mean, yeah, that made it stronger but - she was f - she was pack long before that." Oz said it calmly but Xander could feel his anxiety in the link and there was an echo from Spike, who'd been eavesdropping the whole time - who was just down the street, now.

_She won't care._ _She - understands._ Xander was sure of it, and the anxious feeling lessened a bit.

"She was? My bratty little screechy little sister?" Buffy said it with a smile but there was something - else - there.
"You're part of our family too, Buffy," Xander said. "Not quite the same, but - you know we'd do anything for you."

"I know," Buffy said quietly.

"Enough of this." It was Spike, coming in the back door, cigarette pluming smoke and blood down the side of his duster and Anya put up a hand, having been engrossed in her Bride magazine the whole time.

"Don't get blood on anything, Spike," she said, and Spike grinned at her.

"Too much wallowing. Everything'll be fine, Slayer, you'll see. Won't let anybody take the Bit." He swirled the duster off and draped it over the stairs - came over to Xander's chair, Scoot up in the link. He swung his leg over the back of the chair and dropped down behind Xander, putting an arm around his waist and snuggling his face into Xander's hair for a moment. Xander leaned back into him, smiling.

"I can't believe I'm saying this but... I believe you, Spike. Must be the apocalypse when a Slayer trusts a vampire more than...just about anybody else."
"Nah, no apocalypse," Spike said, his voice a little muffled. Xander shivered pleasantly at the lips and tongue-tip that were just brushing the nape of his neck. "Just you finally using your brains, 'stead of your fists." He grinned over at her and reached out with his other hand, to rub once gently down Oz's arm, love safe family in the link.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Like you'd know anything about that. Fine. I'm going to just - just try not to wig about it. Tomorrow - I'm going to get my hair cut." She lifted her hair up over her head, letting it fall through her fingers and Anya perked up, coming out from behind the counter and looking interested for the first time all night.

"You are? Really? Do you have a style picked out? Maybe you should look through some magazines and see what you'd like. I know the stylist downtown, he's just so good -"

God - let me up! Don't want to be dragged into a hairstyle discussion! Xander struggled a little against Spike's hold - mostly he just rocked back, grinding his ass into Spike a little, twisting, and Spike's teeth bit down on his neck, making him shiver.
Fuck yeah. We're done here, anyway. Oz was already standing up and grabbing his jacket, feeling for his keys. Derio had had a rehearsal tonight - well, more of a 'band talk'. A couple of the band members were starting to want to move on - do other things, and they had to figure out the band's future. He was coming by later.

You hurt, Spike? What was all that blood? Oz added, sniffing pointedly towards the vampire and Spike grinned, standing up and pulling Xander with him.

Not hurt. Just found a fledge who had a little fight in him - took my time. The cascade of images made Xander shiver, just a little. And not because they were gruesome, but because of the rush of gleeful pleasure and arousal that they had sparked in Spike, and that he was pouring through the link. Spike grabbed his duster and carefully folded the blood to the inside - hung it over his arm.

"'Night, Buffy! 'Night, Anya!" Xander called, and got a double hand-flip from the two. They went out the back to where Oz had his van parked.

"So - anybody up for a little more patrol?" Spike asked,
snaking one arm around Oz's waist and the other around Xander, pulling them both close. The link was alive with energy, arousal, bloodlust, and Xander felt the hyena stirring - let it surface and voiced a low, chuckling sort of growl.

"Count me in," he said, and Oz yipped, black-eyed and grinning.

"That's my boys," Spike murmured, gold-gleaming eyes sparkling in the dimness. He put his duster in the back of the van and then they were running, the link thick with excitement, into another Hellmouth night.

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Under the bed? How in hell - He reached as far as he could and snagged it - hauled himself back up and flopped down on his back, fumbling blindly for the button. He wouldn't normally touch the phone but this many rings meant someone was calling twice in a row, neatly circumnavigating the voicemail. So it could be an emergency.

And if it's not I'm gonna kick somebody's arse. "Fucking what?" he growled, and heard a sharp intake of breath on the line. Then:

"S-spike?"

Oh BLOODY HELL! Red.

"What the fuck do you want, witch," he snapped, his hand tightening down dangerously hard on the handset. The plastic creaked and he forced himself to relax a little.

"I - is... No, okay. Listen, Spike. Those guys - Warren and his friends, they've been screwing around again and they made some sort of - ray. And now Buffy's invisible and I'm trying to figure out how to undo it before something awful happens."
"Yeah, so? I don't give a fuck 'bout that." Another intake of breath, sharp and startled and Spike grinned to himself. *You'll figure it out eventually, Red - I'm not your friend.*

"You - you just..." Another few breaths and a nervous cough. "I'm calling to tell you that Dawn is going to come over after school. Buffy doesn't want her around in case - in case we have to go find these guys or something. So just - just be ready for her."

"Yeah, no problem," Spike said and punched the off button. *Bloody Threesome. Christ.* Spike pushed the phone under his pillow - grabbed Xander's pillow and curled himself around it. The working clock said one-seventeen, so he let his eyes drift shut, snuggling down. *Bit's got a key, and it's daylight. She'll be safe comin' up the walk and I'll know she's here.* He was asleep again in moments.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Waking up the second time was just as annoying, only this time it was Dawn pounding up the stairs, singing
along with her Discman to some awful pop tune. Her voice was fine, but the lyrics were dreadful pap.

*God. And I thought MY poetry was awful. How in hell do they even get record deals?* Spike rolled onto his back, groaning, and Dawn stopped outside the door.

"Spike! Are you up? Are you dressed?"

"I'm up now, Bit! But you know I'm not dressed - in bed, aren't I?" He grinned, waiting.

"TMI, Spike! I'm gonna get something to eat. Want something to eat?"

"Sure, Niblet. Be down in a minute." She stomped off, singing again, and Spike winced - got up and stretched hard. He took a fast shower, more to wake up than to get clean, and rubbed his hair with a towel but left the gel out. Xander liked it this way, soft and a little curly, and he'd be home soon... Spike felt for him in the link and got a distracted internal pet, Xander's focus being mostly on a blueprint or an invoice - something work related and complicated. Oz was, apparently, playing his guitar at the shop, singing softly with Giles. Spike got the impression that they were taking a break, and a brief
impression of Ethan practicing his meditation on the exercise mats came through. Satisfied that his family was fine, Spike pulled on some jeans and then looked around for a shirt. The two he picked up were stained, one with blood and one with -

\textit{Lube. And come. Jesus. Why is it MY shirts are always the ones used for clean-up?} Grimacing, he tossed the shirt aside. There were some clean ones down in the laundry room he was pretty sure, so he padded out of the room and downstairs, wondering why Dawn had stopped singing. When he got to the bottom of the steps he saw why. Sitting bolt-upright and uncomfortable on the couch was Dawn, and across from her in the newer recliner was...

\textit{Well fuck}, Spike thought, staring at the folder the woman held in her hands - the one stamped Child Welfare Services. \textit{This won't be pretty.} He fought the desire to simply vamp out and pounce on the woman - drain her and toss her in the river. \textit{Government employees get killed all the time. Everybody wants 'em dead - who'd care?} But Dawn looked anxious - looked a little ill, in fact, and the anxiety rolling off her was intense. He sighed internally - ran a hand back through his hair.
"Uh. Hello. Haven't had a chance to bring the clean clothes upstairs yet," he said, smiling something as close to his real smile as he could. The woman was eyeing him with what looked like disapproval and he swung around the newel post and walked swiftly back to the laundry room and snatched the first t-shirt he saw. It was white - one of Xander's - and a little baggy but that was probably better than skin-tight black. He looked down at his bare feet and then shrugged. Nothing to be done - his boots were in the utility sink, covered in muck. Dawn's anxiety nattered at him and he walked back to the living room, wishing he could get a quick drink.

"He - he's here when I come home from school - he h-helps me do my homework and - and we make dinner together -" Dawn was talking too fast, her face stiff and uncertain and Spike put his hand gently on her shoulder, squeezing just a little. Then, with an internal shudder, he dredged up William.

"I'm William Sinclair, Miss -?"

"Oh! Mrs. I'm Mrs. Kroger," the woman smiled uncertainly and Spike smiled back - moved forward to take her hand. He squeezed gently, leaning forward the tiniest bit in an imitation of a bow.
"Mrs. Kroger. I never would have guessed. Such a pleasure to meet you. Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

"I - uh - no. No, Mr. Sinclair -"

"Call me Will, Mrs. Kroger, please," Spike said, and sat down on the couch next to Dawn. Dawn was goggling at him and laughter shock laughter was in the link.

"Will. Yes." Mrs. Kroger seemed flustered and she looked down blankly at the folder in her hands for a moment. "Now then. Dawn was just telling me that you live here? And who are you, exactly? As pertains to Dawn?"

"Well, I feel like a big brother," Spike said, patting Dawn on the knee, smiling hard. Dawn looked down at his hand and then made a muffled noise, burying her face in her hands. "Bless you, Dawn. Hay fever, you know," Spike continued smoothly, feeling Dawn tremble with fiercely repressed laughter. "I'm just an old friend of the family, really. We met through Mr. Rupert Giles? He was the librarian at Sunnydale High school and became close to Dawn's mother and older sister. Both of us being British, we banded together somewhat." Spike smiled
again and Dawn snuffled into her hands.

"Go and get a tissue, Dawn," Spike said, and Dawn shot him a look, scrambling up off the couch and heading towards the bathroom, laughter still in the link.

"Yes, I see that Mr. Giles is listed as one of our contacts in case of emergency. You are, also, as well as a - Alexander Harris? Is he here?"

"No, he's working. Alves and Son? He's a foreman there." Just answer her questions, don't volunteer anything. He could feel Oz in the link, question, and he answered him fast. There was a moments pause, then question again, and Spike knew what he was asking.

Nah - be all right. I'll be fine, he thought, and Oz backed off. Xander was still vague - caught up in his work - and Spike did his best to keep the link calm.

"I see. There are - several other people here as well - Dawn has an impressive number of contacts." Mrs. Kroger rattled her papers and Spike nodded. Who bloody else? Not demon-girl, I hope...

"She has a lot of people who love her, Mrs. Kroger,"
Spike said smoothly, and the woman looked blankly at him, as if not quite believing him.

"Yes. I see that a...Daniel Osbourne also resides here? Is he here?"

"No. He works downtown. It's just me right now. Is that a problem?" He let a slight frown cross his face - leaned forward, projecting as much sincerity as he could. Mrs. Kroger smelled of hairspray and patchouli.

"Oh, no, mister... Will. I just like to meet as many people as I can. So what do you do?" Spike stared at her, his mind utterly blank.

"He's in a band," Dawn said brightly, startling them both, and Spike turned to look at her, making a face where Mrs. Kroger couldn't see. Dawn grinned and came to sit down next to him again, her face pink but the laughter under control, apparently.

"Yeah, a band. They play all over the place - they're getting real famous!" Mrs. Kroger nodded, making a note, and Spike gritted his teeth.

"Well, not terribly famous. But you have to do
something. I'm - going back to school in the spring." Heard the Slayer and Glinda talk about it enough, I can do school-talk...

"Oh? Well that's good. School is very important." Mrs. Kroger looked ready to pounce and Spike quickly out-flanked her.

"It is important, Mrs. Kroger - very important. We've all been very - upset about the liberties Dawn has taken in school. But I can assure you - she's back on track now. Aren't you, Bit?" Dawn scowled at him, then turned a sweet smile on the woman.

"Yeah. I -uh - there was...my mom, and...that really upset me. And my dad - he just...isn't around. Sometimes it's hard to concentrate on stuff like math when - when you feel all alone." Dawn said, and Spike wanted to roll his eyes. He settled for another knee-pat instead, and Mrs. Kroger nodded slowly.

*Christ, Niblet, lay it on with a trowel! Just - promise you'll be good so we can throw this bint out!*

"I understand that losing your mother was hard, Dawn, but that was - some time ago. Don't you think that -?"
"It wasn't even a year ago -" Spike interrupted, his voice dropping to a growl as anger sorrow flowed out from Dawn.

"Losing a parent affects everyone d-differently," a voice said, and they looked up in startlement, seeing Tara standing in the doorway, clutching her backpack. "I lost my mother - years ago. It s-still hurts me. I'm Tara Mm-

"Maclay? I don’t' see your name here."

"Oh, no. You don't. I'm just staying here temporarily. I - was in a b-bad situation with a roommate who was - out of control. Xander and S - everyone are l-letting me stay here until I can find something of m-my own."

"Oh, I see." Mrs. Kroger sat down again, making more notes, and Tara made a wide-eyed face at Spike and Dawn, and then moved around to sit in the other recliner, the one they'd moved over from the old house.

"So you live here - and Mr. Osbourne, Mr. Harris, Mr.
Sinclair... That seems like a lot of people for this house! Must be pretty crowded." She looked around her, and Spike fought the demon, wanting her out. *Protect pack protect family* thrumming in the link and Xander was aware, now, and telling him *calm* and Oz the same. He breathed deeply and smiled some more, wondering if it looked as awful as it felt.

"Dawn has her own room upstairs, Mrs. Kroger," Spike said quietly, and she looked sharply at him.

"Does she now? I'd like to see it, please. Dawn, if you'd be so kind?" She stood up and Dawn shot a worried glance at them both. Spike nodded, trying to look relaxed.

"I don't think I left a mess, Dawn - go ahead," Tara said, standing up as well. "Dawn's letting me use her r-room while I'm - in transition," Tara added, smiling, and Mrs. Kroger made a note and followed Dawn upstairs. When they heard Dawn's door open, Spike jumped up and vamped, growling.

"Bloody hell! That woman -" *Gotta do this right, gotta be calm, Bit's fine, she's fine...* The demon was raging - was terrified and Spike couldn't figure out why. They had
a handle on this! But the demon was incoherent - confused and angry, and he felt his control slipping. Felt his hold on things rippling out of place, becoming unsteady.

Tara shushed him. "She's just d-doing her job. You're doing great, Spike, r-really."

"Hate this," Spike muttered, pacing. He ran his hand back through his hair and wondered if he dared smoke a cigarette. Protect protect protect...not pack...dark in here...don't trust them, don't - see them - who's here...? He felt - wrong. He felt lost. Tara was saying something and he couldn't hear her and he shook his head helplessly. The demon howled, and Spike struggled for control. Dawn's here, she's safe, we're - fuck, fuck, fuck, where IS she, where's - Xander, can't - why can't I hear Dawn, why can't I hear Tara? Family, should hear the family -

Calm calm - love, what is it, what is it? from Xander, insistent, and he shut his eyes, breathing in ragged pants.

Tell me - can't...see...safe? Is it safe? Xan - where - The phone rang, startling him, and Tara went to pick it up, looking frightened. A moment later she came over to
Spike, holding it out.


"Xan?"


"I can't - think. There's - something..." He couldn't remember, suddenly, where everyone was - couldn't remember if the Slayer was there or dead - if Dawn was dead or if he'd saved her and he groped through the sudden fog in his mind - felt Tara's hand on his arm, guiding him into the kitchen and getting him to sit down.

"Spike, it's okay. I'm coming home. Oz is. Just - hold on, okay? You have to just - calm down. Dawn's safe, Tara's there - it's okay."

"What is this?" Spike whispered, shaking hard. He put his head down on the table, his fingernails digging into the wood, the phone creaking in his other hand as he all but crushed it. "What is this? What - Xan - it's all....come loose, it's -"
"It's okay, it's okay!" Calm calm, love you! Look - it's all fine, it's all good... Images in the link that Xander was pouring out to him - Buffy alive, all of them together, Dawn safe - and Spike latched onto them fiercely, forcing himself to calm down, forcing himself to see.

What the fuck is this? I'm not - it's like that fuckin' bitch is in my head, it's like that ward-magic the mage does, it's...

Hold fast, Spike. Right? Hold fast, I'm coming, I'm coming,

Pack pack pack from Oz, closer and closer and suddenly the back door - specially rigged - flew open and the wolf bounded in, moving fast. He was across the room and against Spike; hot, panting breath and heaving ribs, russet fur warm from the sun and Spike slid off the chair and folded himself around Oz, burying his face in the fur that smelled of cinnamon, magic, almonds, family family

Safe, we're safe, I'm here, hold on - hold on... And Spike did.
"What did she do to me, love?" Spike asked softly, and Xander shifted a little, pulling him closer. They were on the couch and Spike was between Xander's legs, leaning back against his chest. Oz was there as well, Spike's legs in his lap, his fingers gently rubbing ankle-bones and shins, cupping his toes. Tara and Dawn were on the floor, within reach, and Spike kept putting his hand out, touching Dawn's hair or Tara's shoulder. Xander hugged him closer - buried his face in Spike's neck for a moment.

Love you love you. "I don't know, Spike. I don't know. But we'll fix it. I mean - Willow got Tara back so we can - we can find a way to fix whatever Glory did. Promise, love." Spike was just - numb, in the link - family family pack safe here here here. Desperate for confirmation and they were trying - were staying close, touching him - trying to ground him. Xander kept his own terror locked down tight.

What if that fuckin' chip did some damage, anyway, and then Glory just - made it worse? What if - fuck - what if it CAN'T be fixed? God...love you, love you, safe now...
"Spike? I still - get nightmares. I ssometimes just - lose it for a second. I d-don't think - I th-think it's just...the aftermath. I think you'll g-get better." Tara looked scared and a little guilty, and Spike turned wide eyes on her, touching her cheek.

"Glinda, you should have said, you - are you okay, pet? You -"

"Yeah, I'm - f-fine, I'm just saying it's - What she did was p-pretty extreme, it's n-not something you can j-just...shrug off."

"You should have told us, Tara," Oz said softly, smiling at her. "We want to help - with anything, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Tara whispered, looking down, and Dawn took her hand. There was the roar of an engine and the screech of tires, and running feet. Oz looked sharply at the door, tense, and Derio burst through, wild-eyed. Something - changed - something seemed to charge the air, and Xander felt Spike relax in his arms that little bit more. Felt himself relax, and felt the wave of relief from Oz, and something like it from Dawn.
God, this is getting so - weird...

"Dios mio, Oz, Que paso?! Ta bien?" Derio stopped - took a huge breath - walked fast over to Oz and kissed him hard. Then he turned to Spike, Oz's hand tight in his, and finally spoke in English. "Spike, you okay? I got this - this horrible feeling -" He shuddered all over and Spike smiled at him, leaning forward to gently rub his shoulder.

"I'm - okay now. Let - let Oz or...Xander tell you. I'm just...tired..." Spike slid down a little, burrowing into Xander's arms, and Xander hugged him close, kissing his hair, his forehead.

Family's all here, pack's all here, we're safe, safe... he thought, and Spike sighed and closed his eyes.

____________________

Rudyard Kipling - Captains Courageous, chapt. 3

Dios mio, Oz, Que paso?! - My God, Oz, what the Hell is going on?
Ta bien? - Are you all right?

Thank you, Jillapet, for translating!

11 Enemies

Spike was walking down by the river. Just strolling, really. Remembering.

_THERE was where wolfling was, and HERE was where we went into the river, and there....fuck, there was where we fucked and it was bloody good..._ He'd been doing this every night for nearly two weeks. Remembering. Because - whatever happened at the house - whatever that fit was - it would not happen again. It had scared him, that slip. He'd had fuzzy moments, since Glory. A minute here or there when he just wasn't sure what was going on. But they'd been fleeting - easily put aside. That had been horrible. He'd
knelt there on the kitchen floor for twenty minutes, give or take. Holding desperately to Oz, sliding in and out of knowing like a needle through cloth - sometimes on the right side, sometimes not. The woman from the state had been ushered out, and Spike knew Tara had pushed her just the tiniest bit - told her that everything was fine in just that way so the woman walked out without asking after Mr. Sinclair. He'd felt that, that push - it had shivered over him and made him keen in terror - it had twisted him inside out for a minute or more and thank god, thank god - Xander had come in the door then, Xander had added himself to the link and to him - physically holding him, stroking work-rough hands over and over his arms and neck and hair - had lifted him and carried him to the couch while Oz darted into the back for clothes.

That was what had brought him back - Oz and Xander piling on, physically anchoring him and then Dawn, holding his hand in a death-grip, and Tara the same. Solid presence, holding him against the swell and toss of whatever dark sea he was lost in, the link thick with them - with love and reassurance and pack family safe, safe, safe.

_Fucking Hellgod._ He fumed quietly, smoking, standing
and looking at the glinting surface of the river - at the far shore where willows and cottonwood dipped down towards the water. Even without his vamp-face on, he could see the bare limbs swaying and threshing in the breeze. *Glinda can help - she knows... And the Watcher.* He shook his head, thinking of Tara. She'd been so upset, the next day, guilty over the push she'd aimed at Mrs. Kroger. Second and third-guessing herself and her anger with Willow. They'd talked about it, and she'd finally let it go, but vowed quietly to never, ever do it again. Spike wanted to tell Tara that she could do ten times the magic Red did and never do the harm, because Tara thought things through, and she listened. She was a sea-anchor - a tap root that went deep - and she would have to truly want to hurt someone for her magics to be bad.

A report from Dawn - that Willow had gone out with Amy and spent all night doing magics all over town, had made her sink a little deeper into her sadness - but firm her resolve to not go back until Willow managed to stop. Privately, Spike didn't think she'd ever get the chance to go back, and he was glad. Willow - had hurt Tara enough, and he wouldn't let his pack be touched again.
Finishing his cigarette, Spike flicked it away and started walking again. In three weeks, it would be Christmas. This year the same as the last, with only the Slayer's house being decorated, and the rest of them planning their holiday around what Dawn might like. Tara had told her all about the Solstice - told her they'd stay up all night with a fire on the beach and sing King Lugh back up into the sky - send the Lord of Misrule back to sleep.

And then the New Year and then it's two years I've had my love and we're still here in this misbegotten hole. We've got to get OUT of here...it's not safe... Spike shook his head. He wasn't going to think about that, not right now. Not out here in the dark, when his family was so far away. He felt for Xander and Oz and smiled to himself. Xander was at home, on the back porch, braving the few bugs drawn to the porch light to finish the gift he was making for Buffy. A beautifully carved chest, lined with cedar, ornamented with brass. He was making things for everyone - useful things, practical things. But everything was decorated in high relief and low; carved with birds and flowers, animals and stars and leafing vines. He spent hours rubbing the wood smooth, and working oil into it to make it glow - polishing and perfecting and Spike felt a swelling of pride every time he
saw the beautiful things his Xander made.

A handsome man and a goodly man and a man of talent and skill... He grinned to himself. Xander made him think in poet's words, and that was...

A wonder. You're a wonder, my love. Warmth, all through the link and Xander right there, practically inside him.

I'm not any more special than you are. I love you...my Spike, my own...

Love, you've no idea... Spike had to close his eyes, almost reeling from the flood of love and warmth and want that Xander sent - pack and family. From Oz came much the same - contentment and love and connection and he sent it all back as hard as he could. Oz was out as well; it was the full moon, and he didn't have to change but he always felt restless, and Derio had encouraged him - told him it was natural for the wolf to want to be out and that he should go. The night was overcast - rain imminent - but the moon still called him. Spike had felt it, through the link - a wordless, skirling song that Oz wanted to dance to - howl to - hunt to. Oz was somewhere...south, loping through a neighborhood,
tailing a small demon that seemed to prey on household pets. A hunt that would settle him and send him home relaxed. Spike smiled, sliding into the images the wolfling was sending for just one moment and he practically jumped out of his skin as a ripple of - something - washed over him. He froze, concentrating. He could hear a fight - flesh against flesh and a cry - and felt a familiar itching at the back of his skull.

*Slayer? What the hell - she's not dusting a vamp -* He looked up, searching the top of the bluff. There was a cemetery half a mile away, but the riverbank here was all trees - a thin tongue of forest that the city hadn't cleared yet for more graves. The land sloped rather sharply up, and Spike could only see tree-tops and tufts of dead grass.

*Spike? What is it?*

*Don't know, love, it's-* There was a sudden thudding flurry and Spike whirled around - watched a body flop and tumble its way to the bottom of the steep incline. There was a crashing, and a moment later Buffy was stumbling down the hill, tripping and skidding and catching wildly at winter-bare branches.
"Oh my god - oh, my god -" She was mumbling to herself and Spike strode towards her, watching as she frantically turned the body over, feeling for a pulse.

"Slayer? What -" 

"Ahh! Oh - god, Spike!" Buffy leapt half-way to her feet, startled, and then slumped back down, her eyes huge and bewildered looking under the knitted cap she wore. "I think - I killed her. She's dead and I killed her!" Buffy's voice was rising - getting a little hysterical - and Spike moved swiftly - knelt down beside the body. A college-age girl, definitely dead. Spike took a deep breath - reached out and carefully felt the body, testing.

_Jesus - Spike, what in hell?_

_Something's not right..._

_Question_ from Oz, faint but steady, and Spike shook his head.

_Don't know - hang on... "Slayer - calm down. She's hours dead. Already going into rigor. And I can smell - "_ Spike stopped talking because Buffy looked like she might be sick. She stared at him, shivering.
"What - what do you mean? How can she - she was screaming, she was being attacked and -" Spike lifted his head suddenly, scenting - listening. He put his finger up to his lips, and then in one swift, near-silent move he was on his feet and running. He saw the figure - the spy - dart out from behind a tree and make a run for it, struggling clumsily through the underbrush. He accelerated and pounced, bringing the fleeing figure down and rolling once, twice. He pinned its arms to the dirt - got one knee sharply into a heaving abdomen and looked down in disbelief at the face of the dead girl.

*I'm still confused,* Xander thought, and got back the mental equivalent of a snort.

*So am I. But we'll have this sorted soon.* Xander did a rolling stop through a deserted intersection and then accelerated up the street, heading for Giles' house. It had started to rain and the windshield wipers were a slow and steady counterpoint to the wilder beating of his heart. Spike and Buffy were almost at the older man's house; Spike carrying the body, Buffy carrying the - body - which wasn't dead. Oz was nearly there as well,
streaking across town, demon prey forgotten. Xander had a bundle of clothes for him in a bag that Tara was holding in her lap.

"So this is what it's like to really be a S-scooby," she said, grinning at him. "Called out in the middle of the night to bring c-clothes for naked werewolves." Xander grinned back, nodding.

"Oh yeah. At least it's not a naked vampire. I wouldn't mind, but I don't think Buffy or Giles would appreciate it. And calling Giles at ten o'clock at night to tell him Spike and Buffy are bringing bodies to his house? Not so much fun." Derio they'd left behind, asleep in Oz's bed. He had an early morning, and didn't feel quite as comfortable around Ethan as Oz did.

*Their magics don't get along*, Oz had said, meaning that whatever gifts Derio had - the Knowing, he called it - jangled rather badly with Ethan's perpetual, chaotic seepage.

Xander made the last turn, pulling into the parking lot and there was a thump behind him. He glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw Oz in the truck-bed, panting, mouth wide in a wolfish grin.
Pack, the ever-present hum that identified Oz more than anything, and Xander braked to a slow stop and they got out. Oz leapt lightly down, pushing his nose under Tara's hand, leaning into her legs for a moment.

Spike's just at the door-

What in BLOODY HELL-

Crap - what now? "Gotta hurry," Xander said. He grabbed Tara's hand and they ran up the sidewalk and down the stairs, the rain falling harder now, pattering on car-roofs and the sidewalk, bringing a strong ozone smell to the air, and the rich scent of wet earth and leaves. Oz bounded ahead, his wet fur clumping in spikes. Giles' door was open, and Buffy was inside - Spike in the doorway itself, body slung over his shoulder. Voices were being raised, and:

Angelus DARLA what the FUCK from Spike, all-over shiver of familiarity and dislike.

Darla? What - Spike, is Giles all right? What's going on? They got up to the doorway themselves and Giles was standing there, looking harried. Ethan was at the
breakfast bar, perched on a stool and looking gleefully amused. And there was a stranger - a man - worn jeans and work-shirt, scruffy beard, dark hair, glasses. He was holding something.

"What is it?" Tara whispered, and Xander shook his head.

"I don't - know. Something strange is going on. Spike - come on, we're getting wet."

"Watcher, what the fuck is going on? Where's the bitch? Where's Angel?" Spike was as tense as a bow-string, vamped and growling and Oz was trying to push past him into the apartment, growling a little himself. Spike's hair was wet - raindrops were spangling on his eyelashes and beading on the shoulders of his coat.

Fuck. So beautiful...I just want to BE with him. I'm so sick of all this damn Hellmouth crap... For the first time, Xander truly felt he could simply walk away from Sunnydale and never come back. The rush of pleased surprise from Spike made him smile.

"Spike, if you would come in I could explain - there's really no need for everyone to be standing on my
doorstep, getting soaked! Especially -" Giles lowered his voice, taking a step closer, "since you are carrying a body. Now get in here."

Angel's not here. Go in! Oz was frustrated and he grabbed the edge of Spike's duster in his teeth and pulled.

"Oi! Wolf - you'll tear it! And how do you know..." Another growl from Oz and Spike hissed in frustration. "Fine, then. I'm comin' in. But if the bastard and the bitch are here, somebody's going to be bloody sorry!" Spike finally stomped in and Xander and Tara exchanged looks of bewilderment and followed. Buffy had put her own body - a blond-haired girl - on Giles' couch, and Spike took the person he was carrying and laid her out on the floor. They were identical. Giles shut the door, locking it, and Ethan got up from the stool, eyeing the figure on the couch.

"That's a - glamour. An illusion of some sort." He went over to the unconscious girl and put his fingertips on her forehead. "Let go, let go," he murmured, and the figure rippled - reformed. It was a boy, slight and dark-haired, pale. A bruise on his jaw and a trickle of blood coming from his nose.
"Hey! I know him!" Buffy was staring at the boy. Tara handed the bag of clothes over to Oz and he trotted away down the hall, bag swinging from his jaws, going to the downstairs bathroom. Spike was glaring at the stranger, who was staring at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"Rupert, you never said - William the Bloody? In your home? I thought -" the man shook his head, cuddling his bundle closer. "Good Lord, man!"

"Wesley?" Xander asked, incredulous, sudden recognition flooding him. He sent it through the link, fast, telling Oz and Spike. He's a Watcher! They sent him for Buffy when Giles got kicked out - he's ...really changed. What's he doing HERE?

"Yes, I'm - Xander? Xander Harris? Good Lord." Wesley looked at him in shock and Xander had to grin.

"Wesley?" Buffy gaped at the man - shook her head in disbelief. "Okay - what is going on? I thought I was in the middle of something weird... Giles? Wanna explain?"
"Not really," Giles said, sitting down heavily on a stool and Ethan went over to him, settling beside him and putting one hand lightly on his shoulder, rubbing.

"It's all right, love," he murmured, and Giles gave him a tired smile, patting his hand.

"Please - if everyone will sit down - Tara, good heavens, I didn't see you - please, sit down..." Buffy and Tara took the couch on either side of the unconscious boy. Xander went to where Spike was standing and tugged his hand - got him to sit on the floor facing Giles. Wesley took the armchair, fussing over his blanket-wrapped bundle, and a moment later Oz came out from the bathroom, dressed and carrying towels. He handed them out to Spike and Buffy and Tara. His own hair was sticking up in the exact damp tufts the wolf's had been, and Xander had to suppress the sudden laugh that came with the mental image of Oz doing a full-body shake, spraying water everywhere.

_Did that in the bathroom_, Oz thought, grinning.

_How come I don't get a towel?_

_You have to share with Spike. And Giles is out of_
towels. Quick image of the bathroom - muddy paw prints and water spattered everywhere, and Xander snorted into his fist, trying not to laugh aloud.

"Oz?" Wesley murmured, and Oz nodded at him and sat on the other side of Spike. They unconsciously leaned together, touching where they could, and Wesley stared at them for one moment, wide-eyed, and then turned his head to Giles as well. Spike scrubbed fiercely at his hair and then dropped the towel on Xander's head. Xander gratefully wiped his own face off and rubbed at his hair, squeezing the ends so it wouldn't drip all down his damp shoulders. He glanced sidelong at the vampire's wildly spiked hair, wishing he could run his fingers through it. But that didn't seem quite appropriate, just then.

"Right - all settled then? To begin - You all seem to remember Wesley - Wesley Wyndam-Price, Tara, also an...an ex-member of the Council and former Watcher for Buffy."

"She had two?" Tara asked, and Xander had to grin. A year ago, Tara wouldn't have said a word.

"Yes, she has and - it's a very long story. We'll discuss it later, if you don't mind. This is Tara Maclay,
Wesley. She's - she is also a witch."

"I see. Pleased to meet you, Ms Maclay," Wesley said, smiling faintly.

"T-tara, please, M-mr -"

"Oh, you must call me Wesley - we're all on a first-name basis here, I'm sure," Wesley said, and Tara smiled, ducking her head. Xander couldn't believe his eyes - or his ears. Wesley was - totally different, even to the way he held himself, and spoke.

*Wonder what the hell's happened to him? He's -*

*Not quite the total prat he was? Wonder why in HELL he's here, and why he just reeks of the poof?* Spike slipped his pack of cigarettes out and lit up, totally ignoring Giles' glare.

"Glad we're all so comfy and friendly-like, but I want to know what the hell is going on, and why it involves Darla and her bloody Irish get." Spike was staring hard at Wesley, who looked over at Giles. Giles sighed and nodded.
"The reason you're confused is because - because of this." Wesley leaned forward, pulling the blanket aside from the bundle in his arms. A baby's face was revealed, relaxed in sleep. There was a long moment of silence, and then Buffy leaned forward, smiling.

"A baby? How does a baby have anything to do with - anything? Is it a boy or a girl? It's so cute!" Buffy was inching closer and Wesley smiled back, turning the baby a little so she could see better.

"It's a boy - his name is Connor and - he's Angel's son. Angel and Darla's...child." This time the silence lasted for a full minute, and Buffy just blinked at the infant, then looked up at Giles.

"Am I on drugs? Is this whole evening courtesy of Demerol and in a few minutes I'm going to wake up in the hospital with a broken leg or something?"

*Oh man, this CANNOT be good,* Xander thought, and Oz silently agreed. A rising tide of irritation was coming from Spike - irritation and anger, and Xander hoped for calm, sent it urgently through the link.

"Vampires can't have babies," Spike said, and his glare
was gold-tinged and murderous. "What in hell are you playing at, Watcher?"

"Ex-watcher, actually," Wesley said mildly, settling back in the chair. He held the baby comfortably, obviously at ease with his role of care-giver. "As a rule, you're right; a vampire cannot impregnate anyone or become impregnated. However - there is a law firm in Los Angeles, called Wolfram and Hart. They used some...very dark magics to bring Darla back to life. As a human. They then somehow convinced Drusilla to turn her into a vampire. And then - Angel and Darla... Anyway, Connor was the result. We still don't actually know - how." Wesley flicked a glance at Buffy at this. She was sitting on the edge of the couch, looking lost and a little hurt. Tara looked as confused as Xander felt, but the glance she sent Buffy's way was full of compassion.

_Damn, bet Buffy's hurting..._

_She'd never have been able to do that with him, anyway - why should she care?_ Spike asked grumpily. He took a long drag of his cigarette and plumed the smoke upwards, staring at the ceiling.
"Darla - killed herself so Connor could be born."

"First time that bitch has ever done something I liked," Spike muttered, and Wesley glanced at him.

"Yes, well - she was very...different, when she was pregnant. It was interesting." He paused for a moment, smoothing the blanket over the baby's chest.

"Angel loves his child. Very much. But there is a - a prophecy. It says...the father will kill the son. I brought Connor here in the hopes that - that I've somehow translated it incorrectly or - or that it's wrong. If Angel were to harm Connor in any way... It would kill him." They were all silent again, considering that, and then the unconscious boy in the couch jerked - coughed - and sat up.

"Where - oh my god! The Slayer!" He tried to leap to his feet but tripped himself and fell back, flailing. Tara flinched away from him and Buffy reached over and grabbed a handful of his shirt - jerked him upright.

"Okay - I know you! Johnathan! You were up in the tower, with the gun! And - you gave me the umbrella at Prom! So what are you doing running around in the
woods looking like a dead girl?" Johnathan blinked at her - swallowed audibly. He looked a little frantically around the room but everyone was staring stonily back at him, and he put a hand up.

"Now - just wait, okay? I can - I can explain everything. It's all - it's all Warren's fault!"

"Warren? That wanker in the van? The one who made the robot?"

"Huh? Yeah - in the van. He - he made this - cerebral dampener. It - it makes you do whatever we - whatever he tells you to."

"Just tell me how you killed this girl." Buffy gave Johnathan a shake, gesturing with her free hand and he looked wildly from her to the body on the floor.

"I didn't kill her! It was Warren! He hit her! He - he enslaved her and -"

"Shut. Up." Buffy leaned in close to the boy and he tried to lean back, sweating and gasping.

"Why did he kill her, and why didn't you stop him."
"He - look, Katrina was his ex - he didn't tell us she was his ex! We just wanted a girl, you know? And - and he got her and he was getting all stalker-y with her and then the dampener stopped working and - and she kicked us and she knocked Andrew down and ran..." Johnathan wiped at his eyes - looked pleadingly around the room. Spike blew a stream of smoke towards him and he coughed weakly.

"Hey, I've got asthma! Don't -"

"Finish your story, you pathetic little git," Spike snarled, vamping, and Johnathan let out a little shriek.

"Oh my god! It is you - it's -" Spike growled again and he swallowed heavily. "Okay, okay. She started to leave - she was getting away and Warren hit her with a bottle of champagne and she fell down..." Johnathan's voice suddenly dropped to a whisper, and his shoulders slumped. "And she was dead. Warren said - said we'd fix it so B-buffy would get the blame."

"You're out of your minds," Xander said, and there was a murmur of agreement from Oz - from Tara. Giles looked as if Ripper was struggling to be free and Buffy was just
staring, openmouthed. Wesley looked disturbed, and cuddled Connor closer to his chest.

"I can't believe you three - freaks - would kill someone and - and - try to frame me for murder! I have a little sister, you know! I - I keep your asses safe from the Hellmouth!"

"We - we didn't - Warren killed her! I s-said we should call the police -"

"And yet - you ended up in the woods, disguised as a dead girl, watching the Slayer think she'd killed someone." Spike uncoiled gracefully and stalked over to the couch - leaned one hand on the back, his vamp-face inches from Johnathan's. "You have fucked up, you miserable little tosser. How are you gonna fix it?" Johnathan's face was white - utterly bloodless - and his mouth opened and closed soundlessly for several moments. Buffy let go of his shirt and he shrank as far away from Spike as he could.

"I - I - I'm gonna - call the police?"

"Wrong." Spike reached out and tapped him on the side of the head. "Try again, braniac."
"I - I'm going to tell you - e-everything about Warren and - and Andrew and...what we've been doing?"

"Good boy," Spike said, and patted Johnathan's cheek hard enough to make his head snap to the side. He pushed away from the couch and strolled over to the kitchen. "Fancy a shot, Rupert?" he asked, and Giles sighed.

"I'm going to make some tea, actually -" Spike opened the cabinet - a different one from the last time - and pulled out a new bottle. "But please, go ahead and drink my alcohol, I don't need it, I'm sure," Giles grumbled, getting up and shouldering past Spike to the sink.

"Ta, mate," Spike said, and cracked the seal.

*Stop that, evil undead,* Xander thought, getting up as well. *Good job with the kid, though.*

*Look at him, love - the Niblet could intimidate him.*

*Dawn's pretty scary, actually,* Oz thought, and Xander grinned. He looked over at Johnathan, who had his head in his hands and was leaning with his elbows on his
knees, shoulders shaking.

God, this is - pathetic. But maybe we can get them to quit with their idiocy now. He went over to the chair where Wesley was sitting and crouched down next to him.

"So - Wesley. You - what, work with Angel now?" Wesley looked down at him, his blue eyes mild behind his glasses. There were some scars on his knuckles - a small one under his chin - and he just seemed - so much more confident. Relaxed, and capable. It was - a good look on him.

You lustin' for the watcher-boy? Spike asked, amused, and Xander suppressed a laugh.

Nah. He's just - I think he's happy, now. It's...nice. He wasn't a bad guy, just - new, you know? We really gave him a hard time.

If he's workin' for Angel, he probably looks back with longing. "That right, Watcher, you working for Angel now?" Spike called, and came over to stand behind the man.
"Ex, I said." Wesley looked over his shoulder at Spike, frowning just a little. Then he looked back at Xander. "Yes, I'm working for Angel. We - we do a lot of good. Help people."

"Who's we? Buffy asked, and Wesley looked up at her and smiled softly.

"Well, your old friend Cordelia, for one. And a woman named Winifred Burkle - we call her Fred. And Charles Gunn."

"Yeah - Cordy... We knew she was there... Is she - doing all right?" Xander asked.

"Quite well, actually. She - she's the conduit for visions, now. From the Powers that Be. She sees bad things happening, and tells us and we -" Wesley made a little gesture with his hand, smiling. "We go stop it."

"Really? Visions?" Xander mulled this over. It was hard to imagine Queen C having visions - working for the greater good - but apparently she did. And the warmth and affection in Wesley's voice when he spoke of her made it clear that she was in good hands.
"Yes, she -" a soft burring interrupted him, and Wesley dug into his pocket and pulled out a cell-phone. "Excuse me, Xander. Hello? Gunn, I - Oh..." A long pause and Wesley's eyes went wide, and then he slumped in relief. "Oh, thank god. What are you...yes... But don't you think... Yes, yes, all right. Are you sure? Yes - second shelf behind my desk, it's green with a yellow silk ribbon marker. Yes. I - I hope Angel understands... Thank you, Charles...yes, love, see you soon - take care." Wesley clicked the phone shut and then just sat for a moment, and Xander could see he was shivering slightly.

"Good news, I hope?" Giles asked softly, and Wesley took a deep breath - lifted his head, smiling.

"Yes - very good news. One of Holtz's soldiers - a woman named Justine - decided to turn traitor. She told us that the prophecy is a false one. That a demon - a demon that can move between dimensions as well as time - changed some things so that..." Wesley took another deep breath and ran one finger lightly along the sleeping baby's cheek. "It's all right, now. We know - what's happening. This Holtz is someone from Angel's - well, Angelus' - past. He wants revenge. They're going to find him - stop him." Wesley seemed on the verge of some
emotion and Xander stood and moved away, giving him some privacy. Spike had gone back to sit next to Oz and now he took another long drink from the bottle he had found and looked speculatively over at the ex-watcher.

"So - you and this Gunn, eh?" he said, and Wesley blushed bright red as every eye in the room suddenly fastened on him with curiosity.

*Spike - good god. We don't care about his sex-life. Do we?*

*Well, no. But it's more fun to talk about than some bloke Angelus managed to piss off.*

*Why don't we question Johnathan instead? He needs to tell us lots more about him and the Threesome.* A snort of laughter from Spike and a nod, and Xander looked over at the boy, who was trying hard not to look at the dead girl on the floor. Tara had, sometime in the last few minutes, gotten a tartan throw off of Giles' couch and draped it over her.

"So - Johnathan. First question - where's your secret lair?"
"Well, the lair is empty." Buffy said, coming in Giles' door, her shoulders sagging in disappointment. Spike slipped in behind her, equally put out but for different reasons. Buffy had been hoping to find Warren and pin Katrina's murder on him. Spike had just been hoping for some hunting. They'd left the body there anyway, carefully laying her out as Johnathan had described. Then they'd called the police and complained about screaming - things being broken - and left a door invitingly open. With luck, Katrina would be discovered soon.

"I can't believe they left me -" Johnathan mumbled, and Spike reached over and whacked the back of his head.

"Shut it, you. If I hear that pathetic whine out of your mouth one more time I'm gonna -"

"Please, Spike." Giles held up a hand wearily and Spike subsided, glaring at the boy who cringed away and went to slump on the couch. Tara and Oz had gone home - Xander had gone by to check on Dawn and Willow, and
do a slow drive through Sunnydale, just in case. Spike could hear him in the link, tired and frustrated. He hadn't found anything either. Wesley was upstairs with Connor, and the combined scents of his former companions was thick throughout the apartment.

*Drivin' me out of my mind,* he thought. *I need to get out of here.*

*Meet me up the street then, love, and we'll go home. Nearly dawn, anyway.* Spike nodded to himself and looked over at Giles.

"So, what are we gonna do with the Mini-me, then?" Giles stared at him, confused.

"The what? Really, Spike, for a Victorian man you use the oddest terms -"

"Watcher. Not a man, and not a Victorian anymore. What are we gonna do with the boy?"

"Ah - ummm... I - don't really know. I can't keep him in the bath," with a quick glance at Spike, "and with Wesley and the baby here I really don't have much space at all." Giles made a small gesture to his sitting room,
where Ethan was curled into a sleeping bag on the floor, dead asleep.

"Yeah - you don't. We're pretty much out of room, too. Guess he's yours, Slayer."

"Huh?" Buffy had been sitting at the breakfast bar, head on hands, zoning out with her eyes half-shut.

"The boy - you're gonna take him home and keep him. See he doesn't do anything stupid."

"What? But - but I don't -"

"You've got the room, Watcher's got the chains - it'll be fine."

"Chains?" Johnathan popped up off the couch and stumbled over the edge of a rug - caught himself against the Watcher's desk. "You can't just - lock me up! I'm not an -an animal! I have rights! I -I should get a phone call and - and a lawyer -"

"This isn't Law and Order, you pillock. You three have been causing havoc and threatening the Slayer's family." Spike stalked towards the boy who paled,
hunching away. "You're lucky she doesn't just hand you over to me. You'll go with her, you'll behave, and you'll keep your hands, eyes, and thoughts off Slayer's little sis. Understood?" Spike stood inches from the boy, vamped and snarling, smelling his utter terror.

"Y-y-yes, sir, yes I'll - won't even look, I'll - I'll -"

"Good boy," Spike smirked, patting the rounded, tear-stained cheek and the boy all but fell over trying to get away.

"Really, Spike, is it utterly necessary -"

"Goes faster this way, don't you think? Xander's waiting on me - I'm off home. Don't call." Spike whirled around and strode out, pulling the door to behind him and lighting up as he jogged up the steps and across the parking lot, the rain still falling in slanting lines, cool on his face. Xander's truck was idling at the end of the block and he slid into the seat - cuddled close and got a long, sweet kiss from the human.

*Always taste so good, always smell so good, love.* Xander's fingers curled into his hair and pulled him a little closer, and he sighed happily as Spike let the purr
rumble up to audibility.

*You do too, Spike...god...want you...* Spike let his mouth trail down, kissing over Xander's jaw and then throat and he felt him yawn.

"You're so tired, love. Let's go home and get you in bed."

"But I want to feel you, Spike - want you in me..." Xander protested, and then yawned again, and Spike chuckled into his neck.

"Here's what we'll do, love. We'll get home and take a shower, right? Get all warm and clean. And then we'll slip into bed..." Spike got his hand under the edge of Xander's shirt and stroked the lean belly and ribs - let his fingers dip down under the waist of Xander's jeans and Xander sighed softly. "And I'll slip into you, love... And you can just sleep, love, just drift away and I'll stay in you all night, all morning..." Xander shuddered, breathing in sharply, and his eyes flashed green at Spike, wide and wicked.

"You can do that, Spike?"
Course I can, Spike thought, kissing Xander's throat again - rasping his tongue over the scar so that Xander twisted, his hips rocking up into Spike's hand.

God...fuck yeah. Let's go. Spike smiled, and settled himself so that he was touching all of Xander that he could, and they drove through the darkness, the rain ticking and sliding over the glass.

***

Two days later Buffy came into the Magic Box, looking pissed off.

"Well, Johnathan's gone. The little bastard." Xander looked up in surprise at her tone - at bastard, because Buffy rarely said anything like that.

"Gone how? What happened?"

"His little rat-fink friends came for him. They had some demon - I think that Andrew can call them or something. Anyway, I was fighting it off and they got him loose - took off."
"Jesus. You okay? Is Dawn -?"

"She wasn't home." Buffy slumped down into a chair, watching Xander listlessly as he put the last touch on a bookshelf for Giles. Xander watched her out of the corner of his eye as he swept up sawdust and tidied - moved the empty shelf into position under the loft staircase. She took a sharp breath, suddenly, and her eyes closed.

"Buffy - you all right?" he asked, and Buffy looked up at him and there was something...shining... Something so tangible... It was as if -

"I'm - fine. I just... Sometimes? When I feel really...lost...it's like... There's a tug. A kind of little - pull. To get my attention, maybe? And it feels like... It feels like mom is kissing me again, like she did when I was...in heaven." Buffy's fingers had been resting lightly on her sternum, where Xander had seen that insubstantial rope of mist and witch-fire stretching away to nothing.

_The tether. Is that what it really is? She's still - connected - to heaven?_ The thought shook him, and he went slowly over to a chair and sank down. Buffy watched
him, smiling just a little, her eyes glimmering.

"Do you think - it might be?" she asked, and Xander couldn't help it - he laughed.

"Buffy - considering it's you? I'm sure it is." He just grinned at her then, because she looked happy, and that was nice. She grinned back.

"I can't believe it's going to be Christmas so soon... Do you think... Could you guys take Dawn for - for the day after and...up until New Years, maybe?" Xander widened his eyes in surprise at her.

"You planning on a vacation?" Buffy looked anxious for a moment and then sighed, looking down.

"Okay... You can tell me I'm being an idiot all you want... But Angel calls Wesley every day - like, five times a day! Checking on Conner. And - and sometimes we talk. And... They'll have this Holtz guy out of the picture by Christmas. Half of his people are gone or - well, Angel says sent back, and I'm not sure what that means but... Anyway, he wants me to come down to L.A. He wants... Wants me to spend some time with him and Conner." Buffy looked - well, Xander couldn't really tell
how Buffy looked. Eager? Happy? Nauseous? She was poking at a book, turning the pages, fiddling with the ribbon marker and Xander reached out and touched her hand.

"Hey - whatever you want to do is fine, Buff. You know that. I'm not gonna - not gonna tell you you're crazy or anything. You know - well... You know I don't like Angel but that's kinda my problem." Buffy nodded, still staring at the book. She sighed a little, making a face.

"I really think - I don't think I can ever feel about him like I did, you know? And I'm pretty sure it's the same for him. But it's like - we've been through the same things and - shared so much... And I don't have to put up a front with him, you know?" Xander nodded silently, wincing a little. Willow - still prodded at Buffy to 'get happy'. Still wanted to act as if what she'd done meant nothing at all. Oh, she said she was sorry - had baked cookies and gotten all sniffley, even. But her eyes told a different story - her eyes said 'praise me, see me, thank me, love me', and though they were all willing to do some of those things, they weren't willing to do all of them, and Willow...just couldn't grasp that. She was spending more and more time with Amy, and Dawn said she was doing - a lot of magic. Said she acted weird
sometimes, like she was drunk. But she didn't smell like alcohol. It was making them all nervous, and Giles had stepped up his plans to get her to England - to the coven that he said could help.

"Buffy... I think it's great. If Angel - if you can talk to him and feel... I dunno - happy, or - or at least, not unhappy, then - that's great. I think you should do it. And yeah, we'll keep Dawn, you know we will."

Buffy looked up at him finally, and the troubled look on her face melted into a huge smile - a Buffy-smile from years ago, when the world hadn't been so hard, and so cold, and the death and despair and just plain ugliness of her life hadn't mounted up as high as the sky. Xander smiled back, and they both jumped up at Giles plaintive call for help and went to help the older man with the stack of books he was struggling with. They shelved cracked volumes of demon lore and esoteric magic until twilight, when Spike cat-prowled in, looking for a kiss and something to kill. And Buffy just laughed, and invited them out on patrol.
Xander came awake abruptly and he lay in the bed, frozen, searching for what had roused him.

*Bed's empty...Spike was IN bed - Spike? Love, where -*  
He sent his awareness out along the link, searching. And Spike - wasn't there. Well, he was there, but it was that strange, fuzzy blank that was him when he was -

*Forgetting. Spike's forgetting. Fuck, where IS he?*  
Xander scrambled out of bed and into his robe - went rapidly and silently down the hall. Sleep-thoughts from Oz, silence from Dawn's room where Tara lay. He caught the faint glow of light from the corner of his eye and was going down the stairs before he made the conscious decision. At the foot of the stairs he stopped dead and stared.

Spike was sitting at the desk - his desk. The one Xander had secretly made for him, and given to him at Solstice. Sitting with his hair sleep-tousled, paper spread before him. His brocade robe wrapped tightly around
him, a candelabrum of candles burning at the corner. The glasses - the prop ones he'd used to 'dress up' for his bet with Dawn - were clutched in his right hand, and he leaned on it, staring down. His left hand held a pen and he was writing rapidly, his lips moving a little. He looked -

*Looks like when he was human. Like his own memory in his head of himself. Like William. Harris, what's going on? We can't have this - fragmentation.*

*He's not fragmented, for fuck's sake - * "Taisbean," he whispered, because he had to know, and maybe that would help. And Spike was there, shining like fire and sunlight together. The demon and the human soul more closely entwined than they ever had been - one entity. But the sparks were duller - blacker - and there were shadows like dapples all through the pale-gold of the soul's bodies. Through Spike's head, and Xander felt his stomach knot in dread and horror. The shadows were faint, but they were there. Xander took a moment to take a deep breath - another. His heart was pounding and he felt...ill. He wiped his hands on his robe and walked slowly over to the vampire, who glanced up at him, flash of confused blue.*
"Spike? What're you doing, love? Don't you want to come to bed?"

"I really just need to get this down, before I forget," Spike replied, and Xander blinked. Perfect diction - like Giles. And no recognition. Xander swallowed heavily, his fear ratcheting up a notch.

"Spike? What are you writing? Can you tell me?"

"Oh, I -" Eyes up again, so confused, and Spike smiled at him, tiny little nervous smile. "I really have a terrible head for this sort of thing. I forget much too easily. All my tutors have said so. So I thought - I'll write it all down and then..." Another nervous smile and he pushed his hand back through his hair - winced when the glasses tangled in it. He pulled them free and put them down. "And you know, these are not - correct. Someone is playing a joke on me, I really do -" Spike stopped, staring at his hand, which had a cut across the top courtesy of that night's patrol and a fresh coat of black polish on the nails. And a ring he'd recently acquired, a silver band with a Grecian-looking 'X' design all around it. He looked up sharply at Xander. And the link snapped open wide, a torrent of confusion and fear and anger - desperation.
"Why am I...? Xander?" Spike's face was a mask of bewilderment and the link surged with fear - with black, skittering things of thoughts that Spike shoved hard away. Xander crouched down beside him, his hands on thigh and shoulder, helping Spike push the confusion away, anchoring him with:

Safe, you're safe, I'm here - you're home and I came looking for you, you were writing - Spike, my Spike, I'm here, you're safe - Family, family, pack - safe! There was a noise on the stairs and:

Pack! Pack protect pack, pack - SpikeXanSpike safe safe Sleep muddled thought from Oz and then the werewolf was there as well, crouching next to Xander, hand on Xander's back - on Spike's - and Spike was slipping out of the chair and down onto the floor with them, reaching out and getting Xander's hand and Oz's in a bone-crushing grip.

"Xander - Xander I was - I couldn't remember and I was - gonna write it down and - and he remembered, but I didn't want - Xander, I can't remember!" Spike was shivering hard and Xander pulled him close, getting Spike's robe-tie loose and his own in quick movements so
they could touch skin to skin. Oz got behind, adding his own heat to Spike's back, pulling the edges of Xander's robe around Spike's back as far as he could. Hugging as hard as Xander was, and rubbing his nose into the short hairs at the nape of Spike's neck. His own soul glowing an ashy-rose, the wolf a specter inside it, all lunar-white and black. Sparks of silver and fire-red, of black and green.

*Pack protect pack love you love you,* from Oz, and *Love you LOVE you, mine, my own, safe here, always,* from Xander, fierce and loud, straight at Spike.

"What were you trying to remember, love? Tell me and I'll help you," Xander murmured, his own face in the opposite side of Spike's neck, and Spike shuddered, panting.

"Was - was thinking about the first Christmas I had with Dru and the Angelus and all... And I c-couldn't remember it -"

"Shhh, it's okay. I can remember it. I've got it. Here - here, love -" Xander thought hard, dredging up Spike's earliest memories as a vampire and the scene came to him, finally.
Crowded London streets, bustle of parties and theatricals and weddings at every turn. Good food being cooked, and Wassail; the scents spilling out of every home, thick as cream in the cold, damp air. The people - out and about, so warm and so wonderful, full of life and wine. Snow like black icing over everything, filthy with street-muck but still white and pretty here and there and William, standing under a gas light, flakes falling into his open, upturned mouth - into his eyes. And he can see - he can see the snow falling down from miles above and it's like looking up at the stars only they're moving and whirling and dancing. And he laughs, catching Dru around the waist.

"Is this what it's like, Dru? Is this what you see? The stars all dancing and the world turning like a top?" And Dru is laughing too, kissing him with her cold, apple-cider mouth, her fingers in his like frozen twigs, her hair satin and spice under his palm and Angelus calls impatiently, lifting Darla up into a hansom, smiling even though he's trying to be stern...

"There love, see? I've got it all, I remember, and now you
remember, right?" Xander combed his fingers through and through Spike's hair - felt Spike's arms tighten around him and then relax marginally.

"Yeah, I... We went to see a play and - there was this little girl selling posies outside, Angelus bought some for Dru and Darla and then Dru wanted to take the girl home, give her a happy Christmas..." The rest of that memory was sharp and clear; the table heaped with meat and pies and sweets, the girl drowsy and smiling and incredulous at her luck, and her blood like pale rose wine on Spike's tongue...

Xander hugged Spike hard and then slowly sat back - pulled Spike's robe shut, to keep him warm.

"You all right now?" he asked, and Spike sat back on his heels and tugged Oz around to where he could see him.

"Yeah, I'm... We've got to fix this, Xan. This is - bad."

"I know. We'll - we'll go talk to Giles... Damnit!"

"Yeah," Oz said, and they huddled there for a moment in silence. Tomorrow, Giles and Ethan were going with Wesley back to L.A. Holtz was dead, the crisis was over,
and Angel was missing his son. And Wesley thought he might have a book or two that would help Ethan, so they had decided on a little trip. Everyone was gathering to see them off around noon from the shop.

"Well, we'll - get there a little early and maybe - mention it, and they can think about it on their trip. Maybe Wesley will have some ideas."

"Yeah. Maybe." Spike sighed and scrubbed his hands back through his hair - looked at them both and the link was thick with anger and agitation. Spike - hated being vulnerable. Hated doing this to his family.

You're not DOING anything to us, Spike, we're fine - it's FINE.

I can't protect you if I'm goin' round the bend now can I? Can't do a damn thing if I'm - if I'm off in the damn corner or - A flurry of images - Dru at her absolute worst, when it took the combined efforts of Darla and Angelus to hold her down so Spike could force laudanum down her throat. Tara, mindlessly rocking and crying, yelling at Willow and hiding from all of them those awful weeks when she'd lost her mind to Glory.
"It's not like that, Spike! God, it's - you're not crazy, you're not gonna go crazy, you just - there's some damage, you know? That's all. And we can fix it. It's just - aftermath." Xander pulled him close again, wanting to protect him from his fear - wanting to fix it, and Spike laughed shortly, snuggling close - pulling Oz into the embrace and just leaning there with them, breathing in long breaths, calming himself.

Family. We're here, all of us... Safe now. Got to - figure this out and then we'll be fine... Fuckin' Hellmouth -

I know, love, I know - I talked to Manny. He's talking to his son - Seattle could be sooner than we think.

Lots of woods up there, Oz thought, and there was something there - something to do with Derio, and running under the moon, under a thick canopy of leaves and stars and Xander jerked away a little, staring at Oz.

"Oz? Jesus, are you - is he...?"

"He wants to be the wolf too, love?" Spike breathed, shock awe love you love you in the link, and Oz ducked his head - looked back up at them, smiling a little.
"He talks about it. He...says he doesn't feel like it would...hurt him. He says... I dunno. We talk about it."

"God, Oz... That's... Is it - do you want to?"

Oz shrugged, pack love you safe forever. "I don't know. I could, if he really wanted me to. I just - have to know that he does..." Spike leaned over and kissed him, soft and sweet, and Oz sighed and leaned into him - into Xander. He smelled of incense and lemon and blood, just faintly - smelled of sweat and earth and magic and Xander had to kiss him too, smiling.

"Whatever you decide, whatever you want - just...ask, just - you know -" Love you LOVE you, family always always.

"I know," Oz said, and they stayed like that for a minute or so, until Spike shivered all over and Xander stifled a yawn.

"Time for bed then, my loves. Nearly dawn," Spike murmured, and he rose fluidly, pulling the others up, and they made their way upstairs. As they came to the head of the steps Tara poked her head out of the bedroom, looking muzzily at them. She was soft greens and browns
and golds, sparks like fireflies all around her, a shadowy figure of a woman inside and behind her that was, Xander thought, her mother. Or the memory of her mother, that guided and helped her, and kept her safe. Tara's own soul always looked - serene.

"All right?" she whispered, and Oz touched her cheek, going on to his own room.

"We're fine. Tell you in the morning," he said, and she nodded. She looked over at Spike and Xander, head a little to one side.

"Fine. Swear it, Glinda. Go on back to bed?"

"Okay. Tomorrow, boys," she said, best mother-hen voice and they all chuckled softly. Oz opened his door and slipped inside, a sleepy query from Derio audible to all, and Tara ducked back, shutting her own door. Xander pulled Spike closer to him, wanting Spike to lean on him, wanting to do something...

"Love you, Xander."

"Love you too..." Xander whispered, and they shed robes and climbed into bed. Spike curled himself around
Xander, holding him tight enough to almost hurt, face in Xander's neck and breathing him in, tasting him with tiny, damp kisses to his neck - to the scar.

"Love - want you in me, Xander, want you to...fuck me and show me... us, show me..."  
*My soul, show me what I am, make me real.*

"You're real, love, you're so real and you're here and you're -"  
*Safe and mine, mine always, my vampire, love you forever, love you* - Xander turned so he was on top, covering Spike, kissing him and touching him, making him feel every part of his body, making him know he was there and it was all real. The slow slide of his body into Spike's was shivery delight, and Xander moved with deliberation, making all his moves at half-speed, making it last. The seeing made a glow of gold and crimson and pale topaz all around them - made Spike into some sort of ethereal creature - angel, demon, it didn't matter - he was beautiful, he was shimmering with light and with shadow, with his love and his happiness and Xander fed it through the link, opened wide to it and made Spike see and never once let his gaze leave Spike's. They'd both have bruises in the morning, from being held so tightly, but they didn't care - welcomed the pain as another part
of reality - welcomed the bruises as proof. So they
wouldn't forget.

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They left for the shop around eleven, Xander yawning
every other minute, Oz looking dazed. The spill-over in
the link had kept him and Derio up as well, although
Xander didn't think the werewolf minded too
much. Spike was already at the shop, having gone via
Sunnydale Below, and Derio leaned sleepily on Oz's
shoulder, his fiddle-case in one hand, his other twined
with Oz's.

*Another wolf in the family. That would be - would Derio
be part of the link, then? Would it work that way?*

*Dunno, love. Have to think about that. Oh, buggering
hell!*

*What is it?*

* Fucking bastards...*

*Spike? Xander made a turn and pulled into a parking*
lot. He was going to run into the grocery store and get some sort of breakfast-type things. Pastries. Fruit. Juice. Tara had had an early class and had left twenty dollars and a note - "Nothing left for breakfast here - we need to go shopping! Maybe bring some stuff by the Magic Box - we can have a little brunch? No Pop-Tarts for me, please!" Xander would do his best to accommodate the health-minded witch but this grocery made its own éclairs and tarts and he wasn't going have a melon-cup for his breakfast.

Watcher and the other Watcher and the mage went for coffee and something - some 'essential travel' item. Spike's mental tone took on a pompous sort of 'Giles' sound, and Xander sniggered to himself, avoiding the narrow-eyed glance the stock-boy was giving him.

So? You can snoop around in Giles' office and stuff.

They left Connor here! The bastards. An image of the sleeping baby made Xander laugh again, and he hastily stifled it.

He's asleep! You'll be fine. He's your - nephew, after all. Or is he your half-brother? What IS he?
He's the unluckiest bloody kid in the universe. I don't know what he is. He'd better STAY asleep, Spike grumbled, and Xander sent him a mental pet, stepping up to the counter in his turn at the bakery.

Halfway to the shop and Xander and Oz both stiffened in startlement at a blast of irritation and - could it be fear? - through the link.

*Spike! Fuck's sake -!*

*Sodding HELL, Xan, I dropped something an' he woke up! He's screaming like a banshee! Get here quick!*

*I'll be there in - ten minutes, love* - Xander couldn't suppress the amusement in this thoughts - couldn't stop the laughter as Oz relayed the problem to Derio, and the irritation from Spike jumped up a notch.

*Ten minutes! Christ -*

*Pick him up and rock him,* Oz thought, and the thought that came back was incendiary. Abruptly, Spike shut the link down.

"Oh crap. Well - he'll be all right. And if Conner really
does cry for ten minutes... It won't hurt him." Oz just smiled, thinking of his own nephew and the babysitting he'd done once, long ago. The nephew who'd bit him and turned him into a werewolf. There was a moment's uneasy speculation.

"Hey, Xander, if you go left here and then - well, go faster, we'll get there a little quicker."

"Right," Xander said. Derio fumbled his seat-belt on and Oz had a death-grip on the breakfast.

When they screeched to a stop outside the Magic Box, Giles, Ethan and Wesley were all about a half-block away, walking leisurely towards the shop, Giles with a holder full of cups in his hands. They saw Xander, Oz and Derio piling out of the truck and immediately started walking fast - Wesley actually breaking into a trot.

"What is it? Did Spike -"

"Spike didn't do anything. It's just - Connor was crying and -"

You lot shut it. He's quiet now and if you wake him I won't be best pleased, Spike said, the link suddenly there
again, and Xander held up a hand.

"Wait - it's okay. Spike said to be quiet."

"I really do wish you'd tell me more about this link, Xander -" Wesley started, and Xander grinned at Oz and they all filed into the shop. Spike was sitting on the loft stairs, his legs together and Connor lying on his back along Spike's thighs, his head at Spike's knees. The vampire was slowly swinging his legs back and forth, one hand splayed carefully on the baby's belly, the other holding a book. He was reading, in a soft and steady, rumbling voice, and Connor was making small, sleepy noises like a drowsy kitten.

"The boy's eyes grew bright. "Bull Run, ask him Bull Run..."

"I was there." Softly.

"What about Shiloh?"

"There's never been a year in my life I haven't thought, what a lovely name and what a shame to see it only on battle records."
"Shiloh, then. Fort Sumter?"

"I saw the first puffs of powder smoke." A dreaming voice. "So many things come back, oh, so many things. I remember songs. 'All's quiet along the Potomac tonight, where the soldiers lie peacefully dreaming; their tents in the rays of the clear autumn moon, or the light of the watchfires, are gleaming.' Remember, remember..." Spike's eyes came up from the page to Xander's, storm-murk blue, the link troubled but quiet.

"Oh, well - that's -" Wesley sank down onto a chair by the round table, his eyes on Connor.

"That's bloody typical, reading to a child about battles..." Giles grumbled, but he moved almost silently over to the counter, putting the tray of coffee-cups down. Ethan made a face after him, smiling.

"Don't pretend you didn't thrill to the gore of Charlemagne and King Arthur yourself, Ripper," he chuckled, and Giles shot him an amused glance, lifting cup-lids to check what was inside.

"Why can't they mark these things?" he muttered, and Ethan went to help.
"Do you think I can pick him up?" Oz asked, and Spike looked down at the baby, tipping his head to one side a little.

"Probably. Give it a go, then." He shut the book - something he'd been reading on and off - and tucked it into a duster pocket while Oz crossed to him and set the bags of breakfast food down - carefully scooped Connor up. The baby yawned hugely, his eyes drifting shut, and Oz sat down carefully next to Wesley. Derio moved next to him, leaning on the table and smiling down at the pudgy face.

"How'd you like playing daddy?" Xander asked, sitting down in front of Spike and leaning back. Spike's thighs fell open and he leaned forward, his forearms loosely crossed over Xander's collarbones.

"I'll play daddy with you, love," Spike said, nibbling at Xander's jaw, sending something truly pornographic through the link and Xander flushed, hardening in his jeans and trying not to just turn around and jump Spike right there.

"Fuck. Spike, you...are so evil," he whispered, and Spike
kissed him, slow and thorough. It did not help.

They eventually moved to the training room, where Xander and Derio and Ethan spread out breakfast food and coffee on an old library table and started eating - Xander mostly éclairs, Derio mostly fruit, and Spike making leering suggestions about both. Wesley had Connor in his car-seat and was idly rocking it with his foot, sipping coffee and trying not to smear powdered sugar on a copy of some book or other that Giles was showing him. The door-bell jangled and Giles glanced up.

"That would be Buffy, I suppose," he said, and jerked in startlement when Spike leapt to his feet, game face and growling.

"No, it's bloody well not."

"Angel?" Wesley said, spitting sugar. "Gunn?"

"Wesley, you are in so much trouble," Cordelia said, somewhere behind the two hulking men in the doorway. Xander couldn't help it, he laughed.

"Well, this is in no way...awkward," Wesley said, getting to his feet and looking around helplessly for somewhere
to put his coffee and cake.

"Wesley -" The man who was apparently Gunn; a tall, broad black man with a shaven head stalked across the room, frowning. Straight for Wesley.

"Gunn, we -"

"He's been working up a head of steam the whole trip," Cordelia said, coming around Angel finally. A bulging baby bag hung from her shoulder.

"But - we worked all this out on the phone..." Wesley said, eyeing Gunn with misgiving and Xander could have sworn this Gunn growled.

"He decided to be pissed instead," Angel said. He looked uneasily at Spike and then at Gunn, who was a foot from Wesley. Then he looked at Connor and his whole face lit up in a smile, and he went forward, kneeling down beside the car seat. Xander blinked, amazed at what the smile did to Angel.

*Never saw THAT before.*

*Too happy to be brooding, usually.* Spike let the demon
go and leaned back on the exercise horse, watching Wesley and Gunn.

"Don't ever do anything like this again," Gunn barked, and then he grabbed Wesley and pulled him into a kiss that was broken only by Dawn squealing from the back doorway.

"Oh my god!"

"Old home week," Cordelia said, smiling.

"Bit! You're supposed to be in school!"

"Teacher's day, Spike, we got off early. Buffy and Willow are gonna be here in about ten minutes. Who is that?" Xander thought fast.

"Wes? Uh - Wes - Gunn? Hey?" Gunn pulled away from Wes long enough to whip his head around and glare at Xander and the hyena growled. "Hey! Uh - I'm Xander. Right over there - see that? Stairway to the roof. Nice and private. Wanna - show Wes the roof?" Gunn opened his mouth - looked at the sea of faces that were staring at him. Looked at Dawn and winced.
"Right. Roof. Let's go." He wheeled Wesley around and frog-marched him to the door and through it, but Xander saw the smile on Wesley's sugar-flecked mouth.

"Okay, and - Connor's sleeping so maybe the reunion should be up front?" Xander made a shooing motion at Dawn and she bounced over to Cordelia.

"My god! I love your hair! Are those Prada? Tell me all about L.A.!!" Oz was gathering food, and Derio was, and Giles, and they all slipped away to the front of the room as Angel leaned over Connor's car seat and gently lifted his son out.

"Little man," he crooned, cradling the sleeping baby close, and Xander put his hand over Spike's mouth and dragged him to the basement steps.

"We're just gonna go down here for - a few minutes -
" Spike grabbed his arm and yanked and Xander just managed to slam the door shut behind them.

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"We should go up," Xander murmured, kissing Spike's neck, licking away the trace of blood there.

"Mmmmm..." Spike's fangs were still in Xander's throat - he was still sipping miniscule amounts of blood from him and Xander shivered and sighed, leaning into Spike's chest, clenching his body around Spike's cock.

*Tara's here,* from Oz, amusement and fondness, and Xander sighed.

"They'll wanna go, love..."

*Let them go. Don't care. They can all bloody go,* Spike thrust up ever so slightly, holding Xander down, and Xander shifted, gasping.

"Love, please - I need..."

"'Course you do, love. Like you in my lap like this..." Spike whispered, going back to his leisurely sucking, the link dark and throbbing with images.

*That is so wrong, Spike. Daddy? Just wrong.*
Tell your cock that, Spike thought, amused and breathless and starting to pant, just a little, and Xander let his head fall forward onto Spike's neck - let the link and the dual physical sensations wash over him - fill him - make him moan and shiver. Spike flexed upward; harder, faster, and a moment later he was trembling, his jaws locked down hard on Xander's throat, his body arching into orgasm.

Love you love you, fucking god that's lovely...

"Spike," Xander whispered, breathless, and Spike's fingers eased up from their pinching grasp on Xander's cock. A moment later Xander was lying over a pile of boxes and Spike's mouth was on him, sucking hard, and he bit the fingers that Spike pushed into his mouth, crying out softly as Spike swallowed him down.

"F-fuck -" Xander gasped, and Spike leaned over him and kissed him, salt and blood and musk.

"Nice and neat, that way," Spike said, grinning, and he stood up, stretching hard.

"Not that neat. I think I left a roll of paper towels down here -" Xander sat up slowly as Spike rooted around,
finally tossing him a roll of towels and then his jeans.

"Best get dressed, love - want to say goodbye, don't you?"

"Oh, fuck off," Xander had to grin as he pulled his underwear and jeans on - as they both found their shirts and stamped their boots on. They clattered up the stairs and at the top Spike grabbed Xander around the waist and gave him one last, spine-melting kiss.

*Love you always, mine always always.*

*Always yours, love you...*

*Sodding Angel -*

"Ah - he's all wrapped up in Connor, you know? Don't worry about him," Xander whispered, and opened the door.

Everyone was there; Tara was alternating finishing off the last of the strawberries and talking softly to Willow, who looked radiantly happy. Giles was patting his pockets, looking distracted, and Ethan was watching with amusement as Dawn went through a small photo-
album. Buffy was sitting next to Angel, talking quietly while Angel rocked the baby. It had taken longer than anyone could have guessed to get rid of Holtz, and now Buffy and Angel were making new plans for a visit - sometime after Anya's wedding, probably.

"Xander! These pictures are so cute! Connor looks like Superman in this one 'cause Angel's invisible -" Dawn waved the album and Xander came over to the girls, watching out of the corner of his eye as Spike stalked around the edges of the room and settled half-way up the loft stairs, searching for his cigarettes.

"Here, let me look. You - you look great, Cordy," Xander said, glancing at the pictures. Cordelia did look good, and she projected an air of confidence - of businesslike intelligence - that had been missing from the more brittle and secretly insecure 'Queen C.'

"Thanks, Xan. So - you and Spike. I just had to see it to believe it."

"Yeah. It's...the best thing that ever happened to me, Cordy. It's - been amazing." Cordelia looked at him, her head a little to one side, and then she smiled that million-dollar smile.
"Yeah. I can tell. You look - great. Even with the long hair, you look - just...great." Xander smiled back - looked down at another picture of Connor, nodding his head to Dawn's excited chatter.

"Well - we'll be back some time on Monday, Tara. I trust you and Willow and - and Dawn will keep things going smoothly?"

"Don't worry Giles - we'll be fine!" Willow said, patting Tara's hand gently, and Tara smiled at her.

"I h-have the number for the H-hyperion, Giles, but we won't n-need anything," Tara said. Anya and Drake were at some sort of weekend retreat, a 'relationship building' thing that Anya had read about. Something she thought they should do before the wedding. Drake had confided to Spike and Xander during a patrol that he was going because the place was a spa and he could lie in hot mud or bubbling springs all weekend and have sex, because Anya was sure that sex in new places was the way to marital bliss.

"Works for me," Drake had said happily, tweezering a strand of demon gut off of Spike's shoulder and studying
it intently under his flashlight beam.

"Right, so - we're off, then. Don't hesitate to call if you -"

"Leave it, Ripper. They'll be fine," Ethan laughed, tugging Giles' arm and Giles smiled sheepishly, gathering up a jacket from the counter.

A few minutes slow exodus and then the cars were driving away; Giles and Ethan in the convertible, Angel's crew in an SUV whose windows were so darkly tinted Xander was surprised it was legal. A brief honk of the SUV's horn and they were gone. Everyone but Spike stood on the sidewalk just outside the shop.

"Well - that's that, then," Buffy said, looking around with a bit of a deflated air. "I guess I'm gonna go home. Stuff to do like - laundry, and dishes..." Buffy looked bummed out and Tara gave her a brief hug.

"Willow and Dawn are having a movie night tonight, why not meet me and we'll have d-dinner?"

"Hey! That'd be great. Thanks, Tara!" Buffy grinned and then spun on one foot to stare at Dawn.
"You. Be good. Help them, don't break anything, don't mouth off to any customers, and don't read the books!" Dawn rolled her eyes.

"Buffy - I'm almost sixteen. I think I'll be safe at the Magic Box with Tara and Willow. Geez." Dawn flounced back inside, crossing over to Spike. He was still sprawled on the steps and he leaned forward, saying something to her.

"I'll be in around four, okay?" Oz said, and Tara nodded as he and Derio wandered off down the street. Derio was trying some solo things, and he'd go play in the park, just practicing and fooling around, sometimes with Oz playing his guitar. They'd made thirty-seven dollars one day last week, totally unintentionally.

Xander followed the girls back into the shop and Spike shot him a leering grin.

"I think we'll just go home. I've got a piece I'm working on -" Xander said, and Tara nodded and smiled, reaching for the phone that was already ringing.

Woodcarving? Can think of a better way to spend a day off, love, Spike thought, easing down off the stairs and
gliding towards him.

*Had some other kind of...artwork in mind. That whole Daddy thing - that was wrong. And bad. And you need to be punished for making me think it.*

*And for making you get off to it,* Spike added, getting around behind him and sliding his hands over Xander's belly.

*That too. So - get home, get naked, get out - oh - some rope and...*

*And let the artist work,* Spike sighed happily, nibbling on the claim scar, and then he was gone, down the stairs and out into Sunnydale Below. Xander waved distractedly at the girls and headed for his truck, hoping he could concentrate well enough to stop at every stop sign.

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"Xander? Xander - Oz - are you guys home?" Xander jerked awake, lifting his head with a snap from Spike's chest. Spike was scrambling off the bed, growling, and
Xander followed him, stumbling over a coil of discarded rope.

"Hey! I need help!" It was Buffy and Xander grabbed his robe, yanking it on. Spike didn't bother - was already out the bedroom door and pounding down the stairs.

"Slayer - what the hell?"

"It's Dawn and Willow - they should have been home ages ago but they're not and I can't find them and -"

"What in hell is the Bit doing out with -"

"Spike! Don't." Xander caught himself on the newel post, staring at Buffy who was oblivious to the naked vampire not three feet from her. A vampire criss-crossed with mostly-healed cuts. "Buffy - just, go slow." Buffy took a deep breath - nodded, shutting her eyes for a moment.

"Okay. Dawn and Willow were going to a movie tonight. And they left around six. And - the movie was supposed to be over right around nine. But they're not home. It's almost one, and they're not home, and nobody's called! Tara and I - she went to Giles... We
saw Oz and Derio, out at - at the Bronze and I asked them to look. I think -" Buffy stopped, biting her lip.

"What, Buff?"

"That Amy? The rat? She was in the house today. I had to run out and get some laundry soap and when I got back she was - snooping around. Trying to find spell components, or that's what she told me. She said - she and Willow had been going to this guy, called Rack? Spike - do you know him?"

"Yeah. He - buys and sells magic. You can't get addicted to magic but you can get addicted to what he does. He - gives you a rush and he takes some of your energy."

*God - why would Willow DO that?*

*She thinks it's makin' her stronger. It's just - opening her up to the dark side of things.* Spike turned and put his fist through the wall, and then he looked at Buffy, game-face.

"If Red took Dawn there - I'll kill her, Slayer." He spun on his heel and pelted upstairs, and Xander held out a hand, stopping Buffy from whatever she was going to say.
"I know. Don't. Let me get dressed and we'll go. Do you know where this Rack - is?"

"No - Amy said his place is hidden - it moves around. He gives you a key. Willow had the key they were using."

"Fuck." Xander turned and ran as well, and they were dressed and gone in minutes.

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"It could be any bloody where, that's the point," Spike snapped, and Buffy opened her mouth to say something back and then stopped.

"God, just - is there anything? Anything at all?"

"No," Spike said shortly, and then relented, seeing Buffy's eyes widen and then sparkle, filling with tears. "Listen - Oz says nothing - he's coming back up, gonna try near the docks. Xander says -"

*Nothing. There's nothing. Is there anybody we could ask?*
That Amy bint might talk if I put the screws to her, Spike thought, and he felt the hesitation in the link - felt Xander weighing that option, and Oz.

Only if we have to. I'm gonna come back around to where you are, Xander thought, and Spike nodded absently.

"Xander's coming back this way. Let's -" They both stopped, listening, as not-too-distant car-tires squealed sharply, someone braking or turning too fast. A moment later there was a scream.

"Dawn!" Buffy took off running and Spike loped after her, game-face, scenting the wind.

Xan, she's here! We're -going towards that bridge -

Spike sent the image to Xander and Oz - scented magic on the night air, and blood, and demon. Something that should not be in Sunnydale, despite the presence of the Hellmouth.

Dawn's blood, fucking HELL-

Just find her! I'm coming -
Coming, from Oz, getting stronger. And Spike ran.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Dawn was crawling, screaming, kicking ineffectually at the demon that was crouching over her, grinning. Buffy didn't hesitate - she plowed into it, rolling with it over and over and Spike swooped down on Dawn, gathering her up out of the dirt.

"Dawnie - Niblet, it's all right, I'm here -" Dawn whimpered, flinching, and Spike pulled back a little, looking at her. There were claw marks over her cheek - blood down her face from a gash on her forehead. And she was holding her left arm awkwardly.

"What hurts, love? Tell me what hurts."

"Spike! S-spike...god...m-my head hurts and my - my arm, I can't m-move my fingers -" Spike shushed her, pulling her close.

"Just let me look, poppet, shhh..." He ghosted his fingers over her forearm, feeling the muscles as tight as wire,
vamping for a moment to use every sense he had. "Think it's broken, love. Now you come here -" Spike led her over to a haphazard pile of boxes and broken pallets and made her sit. "You rest here a minute, I'm gonna check on big sis, all right? Xander and the wolf are coming, they're nearly here, all right?"

"Oh-ohokay Spike, okay," Dawn whispered, and she was white as paper, shivering.

*Damnit, she's going into shock, Xan -?*

_Almost there, hang on - _Spike slipped off his duster and snugged it around Dawn's trembling shoulders and glanced over at the Slayer, who was advancing on the demon. The demon wailed - choked - went up in a blast of smoke and sparks and Spike growled.

"Witch," he hissed, spotting Willow leaning against a pillar, blood on her face, residual magic crackling over her hands. He pounced, flattening her to the pillar, threading his fingers through her hair and jerking her head around so she could see Dawn.

"Slayer! See to your sister, she's hurt," he barked, and Buffy hesitated for a moment and then went to
Dawn. Willow bucked under him, panting.

"Spike - let me g-go, leave me -"

"Do you see what you did? She's hurt, witch! She's broken and she's bleeding and it's because of you. It's because of your fucking magic. Because you're too fucking weak to say no. You took her to Rack." Willow gasped, and Spike let his fangs trail over her throat - let his face press into the side of hers, so she'd know.

*Know how she's gonna die. Her fucking blood might poison me or it might get me off but I'm gonna TASTE it -*

"Spike! Don't!" Xander was there, suddenly, the truck crooked in the street and the door hanging open and Spike wasn't even sure when he'd pulled up. He could taste blood in his mouth and he realized he'd scraped Willow's neck - cut it just a little with a fang. Her blood was hot and alive and rank with blackness and twisted desire and Spike wanted it.

"Dawn's hurt, Xander! She needs the hospital and this -" Spike shook Willow like a rag-doll and she wailed, flailing. "This needs to be dealt with."
"Spike - you're not gonna kill her. C'mon - let's take Dawn to the hospital - she's what counts right now. Spike?" Xander was walking to him, his hand out, and Spike felt, for just one moment, that it didn't matter. That he would take the witch's blood and let it go through him like toxic fire. That he would make Xander not care, somehow - that he would gather his family and leave this place and never once look back. He could see it unfold in his mind, every step.

*Spike, please don't. Please, please don't.*

"Xan? Did you see what - she did?" That disconnected feeling was back - that sense of things in the darkness, and abruptly Spike let Willow go - shoved her violently away and in two strides was on Xander, pulling him close, wrapping his arms around heat and solidity and *Love you love you - come on, let's take care of Dawn, let's get her to the hospital-*

*Won't hurt you, pet, won't, I won't -*

"I know you won't, love," Xander whispered, urging him to walk, and they went over to Dawn and Buffy. Behind them, Willow choked, crying, and Spike pushed the demon away, not wanting to scare Dawn any more.
"I think - she has a broken arm, she needs to go to the Emergency Room. Xander, can you -"

"Yeah Buffy, we'll take you. Oz and Derio are just - " Xander waved a hand and Spike listened, hearing Oz's van less than a block away. "They can take Willow home, and get Tara." Acknowledgment of that in the link from Oz - anger and sorrow and disgust - left-over fear.

"C'mon, Niblet, let's get you up," Spike said, wearily disengaging from Xander and holding out his hand - lifting Dawn to her feet. She clutched the edge of his duster in her hand, and her eyes looked bruised and sunken - her teeth were chattering. They turned to walk to Xander's truck and Willow was there, crying so hard she was coughing, holding her side.

"Dawn! Dawnie, please - I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry!"

"Too late for that, witch," Spike hissed, and the urge to just end it - end her and end her threat was so strong Xander grabbed his arm - squeezed as hard as he could.

"Get Dawn in the truck. There's Oz. Go, Spike! Please, love -" Spike blinked and looked at Xander, and the link
was thick with rage and sorrow and bewilderment - with a hurt so vast his own eyes pricked for a moment.

*Her tally is so high she can only pay in blood, pet - she can only pay in fuckin' blood.* He put his arm around Dawn and walked her to the truck - got her in and got the seatbelt on her, and a moment later Buffy was sliding in from the other side, a smear of dirt and tears on her cheek. Willow was climbing shakily into the van, and Oz was saying something to Xander, and Spike...was tired. Tired and heartsick and done with it all.

*Meet you at the hospital, love. Get her there fast.*

*Spike? Wait - please don't -*

*Have to, love - have to.* Spike let the demon out, scenting blood and rage and tears, and he turned and ran, hunting in the purest form of the word. Looking for blood to spill because his anger and his sorrow were too strong to contain - too much - and if he couldn't be the demon for at least a little while he felt that he would fly into pieces.

*Out of control - you're out of control.*
NEED it. Won't stop. The demon wouldn't take anymore restraint and Spike didn't care what he killed tonight. He shut the link down hard, knowing he couldn't let Xander feel what he was going to do.

Keep away from them - keep away from the family - get this OUT and then... Spike ran, and the demon roared.

***

It was nearly dawn when he got home - near enough that he jogged the last few blocks, eyes nervously on the horizon. And Xander and Oz in the link, angry at him. He eased into the house, knowing Tara was asleep upstairs, and Derio was, and Xander and Oz were both in the kitchen, drinking hot tea and being...angry. His duster was lying across the couch, and he caught a faint whiff of Dawn's blood still on it. The radio was playing softly, and he just leaned in the kitchen doorway, watching them.

"You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss

A sigh is just a sigh...The fundamental things apply
Louis's voice, strong and rasping and warm, and Spike slid down the jamb, letting his legs just go.

"Sorry," he whispered, and there was nothing - just silence. And then Xander was getting up and coming over to him - was sitting down and wrestling him half onto his lap. And Oz was there, getting between him and the wall, leaning heavily on him and making that wolf-noise, that hmmph down in his chest that mean amusement or irritation. That meant -

"Don't do that. Don't run away. Don't - push me out, love. Don't push us out. It doesn't work that way," Xander said, his voice fierce and hoarse and Spike just burrowed into him - hid his face in the fleecy softness of a well-washed flannel shirt. Oz's hand was on his belly and he pulled it up - got one of Xander's hands and just held them, all together.

Was gonna hurt you - was gonna KILL her...everything we
wanted to do would have hurt you and we...had to get out of there.

"I know. But you don't do that. You wouldn't ever hurt me, love." Xander's voice held conviction - the link did, and Spike shuddered.

Don't know that.

"He does. I do. You can't hide your heart from us, Spike." Oz laid his cheek on Spike's bowed neck and sighed. "You think you're the only one that gets scared, and mad and - a little crazy? We all were, tonight."

Not the same, not the same, Spike thought frantically, the disconnected feelings, the forgetting all there in the link.

"Still you. Still Spike. Love - just don't run away. Trust us. We can fix anything if you trust us." Please, love? Please say you do...so fuckin' scared... He had been scared, and Oz had been - scared under the anger, and lost - adrift without him.

We're three. A triangle, a tripod. Take out one side and it all falls apart, Spike. You can't do that to us. Trust us.
Wolf - Xan, love...sorry...so sorry... I do. I trust you. Love you love you love you... despairingly, and Xander hugged him hard - Oz did.

MY Spike. My own, my love. Always, always...

Pack, mine, family, LOVE you, always...

"It's still the same old story, a fight for love and glory,

A case of do or die... The world will always welcome lovers

As time goes by..."

The quote is from Dandelion Wine, by Ray Bradbury

As Time Goes By - Louis Armstrong
"What could possibly be taking them so long?" Anya paced back and forth in front of the Magic Box counter, looking anxiously towards the training room door. Giles, who was leafing through a large supplies catalogue, glanced up at her.

"It hasn't been that long, has it? Oh! Eye of Lepus! You told me they didn't sell this!"

"It's rabbits' eyes, Giles! Do you really think I'm going to have those in the shop? Have them - looking at me, every day? Not on your Nellie, buster." Giles shot Anya an annoyed look and folded the corner of the catalogue down. Beside him, Ethan distractedly lifted a cup of tea and sipped at it, grimacing at the heat. He was reading a particularly old-looking book and little flakes of the binding came off on the counter-top every time he touched it.

Xander grinned, leaning back against Spike. They were waiting for the girls to come out and model the bridesmaid's dresses. They'd been back and forth with alterations and now, two days before the wedding, they were ready.
"Oh, for hell's sake!" Anya muttered. Oz was re-arranging some stock and he patted her arm as he walked by.

"Just relax, Anya. They haven't ever been bridesmaids before - they're excited." Xander could hear Spike making a groaning sort of noise down in his chest and Oz shot him a look.

You don't know what she's like when she's nervous. Anything to calm her down.

Let's call Drake and tell him she needs an emergency shag, then, Spike thought, and Xander giggled.

He'd do it, too! At least Anya got somebody as - enthusiastic - about sex as she is.

You're enthusiastic, pet. Spike combed his fingers gently through Xander's hair and Xander sighed happily.

Sure. But at least I don't talk about it - to everyone - all the time.

You could if you wanted.
No! *Some stuff is just for me,* Xander thought, and he squeezed Spike's calf. Spike hmmm'd to himself, pleased.

"Finally!" Anya exclaimed as the training-room door creaked open and the girls filed out, rustling and...

*Glowing? Are they glowing?* Xander stared, feeling his mouth drop open.

*My eyes!* Oz ducked behind a bookshelf and Xander and Spike could both hear him snorting quietly. Spike was shaking with silent, suppressed laughter. Silent because the look on Dawn's face threatened instant death.

"Oh!" Anya stood in an attitude of utter shock, her hands over her mouth. Giles glanced up at the sound - glanced at the girls - and then stared.

"Oh dear Lord," he muttered. Ethan's cup clattered loudly into its saucer and he abruptly scooped it up and did a fast march into the office. Suspicious strangling noises began to drift out.

"Look at you!" Anya advanced on the girls, her face slack
with disbelief. "You. Look. Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful! Don't they look incredible?" She turned to Xander and Spike, and Xander sat up straight, closing his mouth.

"Yeah, don't we look beautiful," Dawn said, glaring, and Xander grinned at her.

"Oh, yeah, you guys look - totally - amazing. I mean - wow! I would never have - would never have -"

"Never have imagined how much chartreuse does for your complexion, Slayer," Spike said, his voice completely serious and now it was Buffy's turn to glare. Giles made a noise like a suppressed sneeze and dropped his catalogue.

"I think I'd better check on Ethan," he muttered, and bolted for the office as well.

"Spike! They're not chartreuse, they're -" Anya seems to be groping for the right word and Oz finally stumbled out from behind the bookshelf, his eyes suspiciously wet.

"They're a kind of peacock color," he said, and Anya shook her head.
"No, no - the dressmaker said - emerald? Jade? Anyway, not chartreuse. And they're just perfect! Totally perfect!" She went up to the girls and pulled them into a sort of five-way hug. The layers of taffeta ruffles rustled alarmingly. Dawn made a gruesome face over Anya's shoulder and Spike snorted out loud.

*What was demon-girl thinking?*

*I kinda doubt she WAS thinking. She's been -*

*A raging lunatic,* Oz thought, coming over and sitting down next to Xander. Xander scooted over a little and they both leaned back on Spike's legs.

*She's been asking me about seating charts and a set list for days - she keeps changing her mind! And Drake just nods and says 'whatever you want, honey'.* Oz closed his eyes and sighed as Spike's fingers rubbed his neck and petted through his hair.

*Poor wolf. Better you than me.*

*Jerk.* Xander and Spike watched as Anya made the girls twirl around and around - as she quizzed them about
their hair and makeup and reminded them that Halfrek - her demon friend - would be her maid of honor.

"So - Xander - you have a suit, right?" Anya asked, turning around suddenly and pinning Xander with a steely look. The girls fled back to the training room to change and Xander shook his head.

"Suit? Uh - no? I don't need a suit; I'm not in the wedding, Anya."

"Well, no, but you're going to be there and you can't wear your usual." She gave his work-uniform - dirty jeans, t-shirt, ragged flannel - a scornful once-over.

"I won't wear work-clothes to your wedding, Anya, I promise," Xander smiled at her and she just shook her head, stomping off into the training room, muttering.

"Told me I couldn't wear my coat," Spike said, sounding amused, and Xander tipped his head back to look at him.

"Really?"

"She told me I had to dye my hair in a complementary color," Oz said. Spike was still rubbing his neck and he
was limp and relaxed. His hair was currently a strange sort of purplish-red.


"Two more hours, then I'm home," he said, and went back to work.

"Is it safe?" Giles poked his head around the door and he and Ethan eased back over to the counter. "My god. I thought my cousin Taffy's wedding was awful, but at least she only dressed her entourage in sky-blue sailor suits!"

"Taffy?" Xander asked, standing up and pulling Spike up with him.

"Oh, family nick-name, you know -" Giles waved his hand vaguely and Xander just shook his head.

"Well, we're gonna go patrol, see what there is to kill. With so many of Anya's - family - here, things are a little..."
"Twitchy," Spike finished. Giles opened his mouth to say something but the front bell jangled wildly as someone all but fell through the door. A young man, his clothes dirty and torn, his face bruised and bloodied, staggered inside and nearly fell down the steps.

"Help me! Please, can you help me? They're gonna kill me -"

"Johnathan?" Xander darted forward just in time to catch him as he passed out.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

"Nezzla demons? You must be mad," Giles muttered, and Johnathan just looked at him.

"So - tonight's the night, he's gonna go all - Superman and rob this bank?" Buffy was pacing, still in her bridesmaid dress. The others were perched here and there around the room, listening to Johnathan's story. His lip was split, and one eye was swollen shut. The way he was moving, Xander was pretty sure he had some cracked ribs, too. His 'friend' Warren had
worked him over.

"Yeah. And those orbs - he's really, really strong now. He - he's just gone crazy - crazier. He decided I was a spy for you, you know? 'Cause you had me in your house for those two days..." Johnathan's voice trailed into silence and he sniffed - shifted uncomfortably on his chair. "I thought he was my friend...I thought they both were. But they're - they want to kill you, Buffy." Johnathan cringed a little when he said that, and Dawn glared at him.

"They won't get the chance," Buffy snapped. She looked down at herself. "I'm gonna go change. Dawn, you need to go -"

"To our house," Xander said, and Buffy looked at him, hesitating. Then she nodded and spun around, walking rapidly to the back.

"Let me and the Slayer take him on, love," Spike said, sliding his hand over Xander's belly and pulling him into a close hug. Johnathan stared for a second and then blushed, looking away.

"You think?" Xander asked, and Spike kissed the side of
his neck.

"Yeah. You and the wolf keep an eye on the rest of the family, keep 'em safe. No telling what this bastard might do."

"Yeah." Xander sighed - turned his head a little and kissed Spike on the cheek. "Yeah, okay. Willow, you want me to take you home?"

"Uh - no, I promised Anya I'd help her tonight - last minute wedding - things. Rehearsal dinner and all that." Willow didn't look too happy, but Anya smiled at her and hugged her around the shoulders.

"That's right. We have to double-check the seating chart and - oh! - one of Drake's aunts and her kids are going to be at the airport in an hour, we have to go meet them. Come on, Willow - lots to do!" Anya bounced over to the counter for her purse and Willow made a sad face - smiled shyly over at Tara.

"It was good to see you, Tara. I guess I'll - I'll see you at the rehearsal tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow, Willow. It'll b-be fun." Tara
smiled softly and Willow beamed - waved at everyone else as Anya grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the shop, chattering about the wedding. Drake's family had been arriving from all over the world for three days. His family, it turned out, was huge, with four brothers, two sisters and innumerable cousins, as well as aunts, uncles, great aunts and uncles, second and third cousins, and two sets of grandparents. It boggled the mind and they'd had to rent out a bigger space for the rehearsal dinner since everyone was going to be there. Anya was past nervous and now moved in a perpetual state of hair-trigger hysteria.

*Man, I'll be SO glad when this wedding is over, Oz thought. He'd borne the brunt of Anya's nerves, being at the shop with her, and it had taxed even his remarkable calm.*

*Me too, really. Everything seems so...unsettled. Xander leaned back comfortably in Spike's embrace, watching Johnathan sneak glances at them - watching him shrink down on himself a little more.*

*Why don't I take him home? Keep an eye on him?*

*Sure. Can't do YOU any harm and I wanna know he's*
under lock and key. Can just shove him down the cellar, Spike thought, and Xander grinned up at him.

"That's not nice, love."

"Not nice, am I? And you love it." Spike vamped - kissed him carefully, just nipping his lip a tiny bit. Xander felt the shudder that went through Spike at the taste of his blood and he closed his eyes.

Go get those bastards and come home, love. Need you.

Need you too. Watch yourself, pet. Don't let Pinky over there do anything stupid.

Nah - he's too freaked. Think he's got some cracked ribs - if he does anything too stupid I'll just poke him.

Buffy came out of the training room pulling on her coat and stopped for a moment to talk to Dawn, who had been sitting with Tara.

"Okay - I'm ready to kick some ass. Let's go, Spike."

"See you soon, love," Spike said, giving Xander a fast, final kiss and he and Buffy were gone. Giles was locking
up the office and tidying the counter and Ethan wandered over, shrugging on a sweater.

"Would you like us to come over for a while, Xander? Make sure of the wards?"

"Oh, I think they're all right, Ethan. Thanks though. Did Wesley have anything new for you?" Since the whole incident with Connor and their trip to L.A., Wesley had been in contact with Giles and Ethan almost every day with suggestions and tips. So far they'd only made minimal headway.

"No, I'm afraid not. Seems junior hasn't anymore leads than we do. I imagine it's back to the Mother land for us, and soon." Ethan looked - strained - and Xander frowned at him a little.

"Is something - wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, no - no..." Ethan looked over at Tara and Dawn for a moment - flicked a glance at Oz, who was going up to the loft with a book. "I'm just...it's the Hellmouth. It constantly - weakens me. It has its own...influence - its own aura. I’m sure your little kitchen-witch knows all about it." He smiled at Tara, and Xander didn't even take
offense for her at the title. Ethan had a very healthy respect for Tara's power and had made it quite clear that she was out of bounds as far as he was concerned.

"Anyway, it makes it - difficult. I think a break from it, and the efforts of this coven - might just make me...more my old self." Ethan grinned then - an expression every bit as wicked and gleeful as anything Spike could produce and Xander felt a tiny shudder go through him.

"Just keep clear of Spike if you get back to your old self too much. He doesn't have much patience and your...aura kinda bugs him."

"Oh I know that, dear boy," Ethan said, chuckling. "Quite frankly, his devotion to you makes you the bigger threat. You must have some powerful enchantment working for you, to have William the Bloody at your beck and call."

"Nothing as mysterious as all that," Xander said slowly, not liking that for some reason.

"Tell me what it was you did - that day here at the shop? You said...taisbean. It was...I felt something...very old. Very strong. And not - right."
"What do you mean, not right?" Xander asked. He didn't mind telling the story about Jack, but Ethan was - being a little creepy.

"Oh - just..." Ethan shuddered, his expressive face showing confusion, a little fear, and intense curiosity. "It wasn't your power, per se - it was borrowed, I could tell... But it was you, as well. Oh, I can't explain this!" Ethan raked his hand back through his hair and watched Oz come back down the stairs and go into the training room. Giles followed him, asking about something and Dawn was showing Tara a schoolbook. Johnathan was watching him and Ethan and Xander frowned at him a little. He looked hastily away, feigning interest in Dawn's homework.

"Do you know about - the Sidhe, Ethan?"

"Do I -? Yes, I do."

"Ask Giles, tonight. He'll tell you."

"I will indeed," Ethan said, and suddenly he smiled, and his dark eyes twinkled. "It's all right, dear boy. I'm not trying to discover your secrets. I just - want to
know. Curiosity killed the cat, they say, and I suppose I've lost three or so lives to it already."

"That's what Willow says, too - she just wants to know. But I don't think she has nine lives," Xander said slowly, eyeing Ethan with suspicion.

"Your little Willow...she needs to be nipped in the bud, and soon. I know what she wants - she wants to know and she wants to do. Unfortunately, she doesn't seem to want to wait. Not that I did." Ethan sighed, his smile a little rueful, now. "I did some unholy damage to myself when I was younger - to my soul. As did we all. I may never recover from it. She's still untouched, mostly - she's got a chance. I'm no - Pollyanna. But she trifles with things even I never dared touch and - I like living in this world." At Xander's stricken look, Ethan's expression softened, and he reached out hesitantly and patted Xander's shoulder.

"Don't worry. Ripper can fix it, you know - him and his coven. He won't let her fall from grace. He knows how hard it is to climb back up, just as I do." The glitter in Ethan's eyes wasn't tears - it was mirth. He had admitted to incredible, dangerous, stupid things. But he had never regretted living, and he was happy to go through his life
like a super-ball, bouncing from here to there at a whim. His time on the Hellmouth - with the Initiative, too - had made him a bit more cautious, but no less alive. Xander admired that in the man even if his love of chaos made Xander wary.

"Yeah - I think she'll be okay..." Xander hesitated, and then he smiled. Ethan, in his own way, was being comforting. "Thanks, Ethan. I guess we'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight then," Ethan said, and he looked up as Giles came over.

"Ready to go? Oz is going to close for me. And I'm in the mood for a dinner I don't have to cook - sound good, Ethan?"

"Sounds lovely, Ripper." Ethan grinned that Cheshire-cat grin and Giles grinned back and they went out. Xander wandered over to the girls.

"So - ladies. I do believe there's a pizza calling our names! Care to go home and keep it company?"

"Yes!" Dawn bounced a little and started gathering
books, stuffing them in her backpack while Tara did the same at a slightly less manic pace.

"Actually there's some soup Derio and I made in the 'fridge and some bread from the co-op - I think that would taste better than pizza." Dawn and Xander exchanged looks but they knew it was hopeless - Tara had an iron will and she thought that 'the boys' fed Dawn too much junk food.

"I bow to your superiority, oh magical Witch of the Kitchen," Xander said, laughing and giving Tara a bow and she smiled at him and linked her arm through Dawn's.

"As it should be," she murmured and Dawn whooped laughter.

"See you later, Oz!" Dawn yelled, and Oz popped his head up from behind the counter.

"See you guys." Be careful. Call if -

I will. Love you. "Come on, Johnathan, we're going!" They went out into the twilight, heading home.
"So he just - flew away? With a jetpack?" Xander couldn't help smiling in disbelief and Buffy shook her head, smiling back.

"Yeah. A jetpack. And he left Andrew behind, crying his head off. The cops took him. Warren was pretty freaked out when I - smashed his orbs." Spike laughed and Buffy blushed, flicking some of her punch at him. "Stop that! There's just no good way to say it."

"Got that right," Spike smirked. "But it finished his little power trip." He leaned back in his chair, idly toying with a cigarette, watching with wary eyes the crowd that milled all around. The wedding rehearsal had gone off without a hitch, and so had the dinner after. But Drake's family was not only huge, they knew - everything. All night various cousins had been coming up, begging Spike to show them his 'real' face and he'd finally snapped and done it, to a round of disconcerting applause. Now he was sulking and letting Xander tell the cousins - who ranged in age from 2 to 19 - to go away. Dawn was in the center of a knot of more cousins, basking in the attention
as they asked her question after question about life on the Hellmouth. She was the expert, for once, and loving it. Especially since tall, dark-haired, and attractive seemed to be the norm for Drake's family.

Giles and Ethan were in the center of an equally excited but more subdued group of older aunts, uncles, the grandparents and the parents as they talked about the Watchers' Council and its role in preserving the 'cultural heritage' of non-humans. Giles was hotly defending the killing of demons and Drake's father, grandfather, great-aunt Mabel and assorted older cousins were arguing that it was the same approach used by 'European invaders' the world over to decimate native life. Drake's family, by and large, were archeologists - the Indiana Jones family! Willow called them - and had documented historical atrocities for years. That demons didn't qualify as 'native', at least by Council standards, seemed to be a moot point to them and there was already talk about some of the younger cousins training to be Watchers and bringing the Council 'into the 21st Century'.

Anya and Drake were oblivious to the whole debate; swaying dreamily on the small dance-floor to something slow and forties, gazes and hands locked together.
Huh. *Who'd have thought - a Vengeance Demon finds love.* Oz watched the two with a small smile, leaning back against Derio and idly stroking his fingers over Derio's encircling arms.

Yeah. *It's nice. I hope Drake really GETS what that means.*

*I think I made it pretty clear.* Spike could smirk mentally, which was unfair as far as Xander was concerned.

*Oh, probably. He was actually looking a little green, which I didn't think was possible.* Xander watched the two moving slowly around and around and sighed, just a little.

*Care to dance, love?* Spike looked at Xander with a small, sweet smile and Xander felt his heart pound just a little faster.

"Love to," he murmured, and they both got up and moved out onto the floor. The lights were dimmer here and there were green and gold balloons drifting lazily in a slight breeze from the air ducts. Spike pulled him close and settled his head on Xander's shoulder, arms around his ribs and his hands slowly stroking up and
down. Xander did the same, wrapping himself around Spike and getting lost in the music and the sensation - in the warm wave of love you love you mine yours from Spike.

*Love you, vampire-mine. Always love you.*

*Love you... Pet - do you want this? What demon-girl is doing, I mean.* Xander pulled back minutely, looking with surprise at Spike, who looked back steadily. After a moment he leaned his head back down on Spike's, the soft hair smelling of ginger and smoke and citrus.

*I...no. I never really thought about it but... What we are - what we have - is MORE than marriage. I don't need any...ceremony. Did you -?*

*Nah. But you seemed...felt like you were sad, love. Felt...*

*I guess I am, a little. Manny called this morning, said - anytime we want to go, Seattle's ready. We can just - go.* Spike froze in his arms and than hugged him tight, and Xander could feel the joy and the excitement rising in him.
That's good news, love! Don't be sad.

I just...don't think Tara will come. And I'm going to miss her - miss Buffy and Giles...and fuck, miss Dawn so much...and there's never been a time when Willow wasn't just...down the street from me, you know?

I know, love. Spike kissed slowly up Xander's throat and then lay soft kisses all over his face, ending at his mouth and taking his time. Xander just held on and let him do it - let himself sink into the love and the want and the need. He hated the thought of leaving part of the family behind. Hated that he felt as if he were abandoning Buffy and Dawn. But they had to go, before things got worse. Had to get out and figure out how to make Spike better, because the Hellmouth - seemed determined to suck them in, and Xander couldn't let that happen, no matter what.

God, love you, LOVE you... You know it'll be fine. We'll go and we'll do what we have to do and...Seattle's not too far away and it'll be summer soon, Dawn can come stay and...Tara would probably visit too... God...is this right? Are we just - running away? Spike's kiss faltered for a moment and then he pulled away and gazed at Xander, his hands lightly on Xander's shoulders,
fingertips stroking the ends of his hair.

"No love. Not running away. The Slayer doesn't need us, not really. We just take the edge off, but - half the demons here are just trying to live, they don't bother her. And this business with the Threesome - it's made 'em all a little more willing to stand up and fight." Spike kissed him again, gentle as before, and Xander realized they were barely moving - that they must look a little odd to everyone. But he really didn't care.

"I just want this to be...over, Spike. I want whatever happened you to be fixed. I hate seeing you hurt... And I'd go - anywhere - if that's what it took. Go to the fucking moon." Spike laughed softly, hugging him close.

_Maybe we will, love. Go to the moon. They did it once, didn't they? In a hundred years...who knows?_

_You think?_ Xander was distracted for a moment by the thought - the idea that Star Trek could become a reality and that he could see it. See it with Spike. "There's no sun in space. You'd be safe." Spike laughed again and spun him around.

_You're such a geek. Love you, geek-boy. Take you to the_
moon - wherever you wanna go. It'll be all right, love.

Yeah. Yeah, I know. Love you, vampire-mine.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The wedding was set for sunset and Spike and Xander slept in - the whole house did - since the rehearsal dinner had run very late, with the older crowd getting a little drunk and the younger ones running wild. When Spike woke up it was to Xander humming something slightly off-key and an aroma of cherries and chocolate in the air. Spike stretched and turned over and stared. Xander was lying on his back, and there were little chocolates in a heart-shape on his chest. He was nibbling on one contemplatively and a drop of red syrup lay like blood in the corner of his mouth. His cock was hard and damp, tight against his belly. Spike breathed in deeply, scenting sweet and spice and arousal, and felt his own cock rising and filling.

"Xan, love? What are you doing?"

"These are kind of like - like biting into a person, huh? Yummy on the outside, red and squishy
inside?"  Xander grinned at him and Spike grinned back, confused but delighted.

"If you say so, love, though I'd rather bite you than chocolate any day."  Spike moved carefully until he was lying between Xander's thighs, the hot flesh of his erection pressed to Spike's belly.  Spike's own cock brushed teasingly at Xander's balls and the curve of his ass, and he wriggled a little.

"It's Valentine's Day, Spike.  Gotta have chocolate and hearts.  So - here you go."  Xander lifted his arms and crossed his hands behind his head and Spike laughed softly - bent his head to slowly lick and nibble at the chocolate that made the point of the heart.  Licking and nibbling at the skin beneath it, as well.  Xander was right, chocolate-covered cherries were a little like people, but Spike was right, too - he preferred Xander.  It was satisfyingly sweet and messy sex and they both laughed until their stomachs hurt when Buffy stormed upstairs to make them get up and stared for one long moment at the smeary bed and the sticky lovers.  Then she wheeled and darted back down the hall, threatening them both with something awful - she'd ask Dawn for ideas! - if they didn't get going now.
"That dress looks no better in the day," Spike said, and hauled Xander along to the bath.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The wedding had been over for two days and they were still eating left-over wedding food and cake. Spike wrinkled his nose at the cake and sighed. He'd agreed to help the Slayer go over her house with a fine-toothed comb. Johnathan had told them that Warren had planted cameras outside the house and inside, and to Buffy's horror Johnathan had admitted that he'd seen everyone in the house in their underwear. Xander had about strangled the boy and for once Spike found himself on the calmer end of things, telling Xander he had to wait, that they still needed Johnathan - still needed information. It had been a close thing.

They'd been all over the second floor and found two tiny cameras which Buffy had torn out in disgust. Now they were taking a break. Tara and Dawn were upstairs going through some of Tara's things that she hadn't moved yet, and Willow was downstairs with him and the Slayer, chattering about classes and generally getting on Spike's nerves. She pointedly did things without magic and
mentioned more than once how hard giving it up had been and Spike was about to snap.

*Calm, love, please? I'll be there in a few.*

*Thank gods. I'm not going to forgive and forget and it's obvious that's what she wants.*

*Just - don't say anything. She really is doing better, so just...have a smoke?* Spike chuckled to himself and then frowned when Willow gave him an odd look.

"Talkin' to Xan," he said shortly, and then it was her turn to frown.

"I don't know why Xander wants to have -" Willow started, and Spike shot to his feet, his patience at an end.

"Leave it, Red! Don't start with me today."

Willow's mouth opened and closed for a minute and then she scowled, and Buffy heaved a heavy sigh.

"Can you two stop that? It's like Divorce Court in here. Let's just finish up and find the rest of the cameras. I can't believe that freak saw us..."

Buffy shuddered and Spike growled. He agreed with the Slayer
on that, at least. When he found Warren, the little bastard was gonna lose his eyes for looking at the Niblet like that. And that Andrew - he was going to suffer as well.

"Freak is right. Let's go," Spike said, pushing away from the kitchen counter and stalking into the living room. He looked around, wondering what piece of bric-a-brac or family photo had been tainted with a little spying eye. He heard the rumble of Xander's truck and a minute later the door opened and Xander walked in, smiling as soon as he saw Spike. It was like a ray of pure heat.

Love you. Spike moved immediately to hug him, breathing deeply the mingled smells of clean wood and varnish, sweat and coffee and sweet. Smell so good...just want to eat you... Xander hugged him back and laughed softly - claimed his mouth in a hard, hungry kiss.

I like that. Nibble, nibble, nibble... He nipped at Spike's mouth and then pulled back, still grinning. "Hey, there was some guy outside - was there a delivery? He was just going around the side of the house.

"No guy," Buffy said, coming into the living room, a small china figure in her hands. Willow bent to peer out the
window and then Spike snarled because Warren was standing there in the kitchen doorway.

"You think you can just - ruin my life and get away with it?!!" he shouted, and he pointed - no, he lifted a gun and Spike roared, diving for him. The gun exploded and something hit Spike hard, spinning him around, making him stumble. Willow shrieked and he could smell blood - too much blood. The gun fired again and Xander was shouting something and Spike dragged himself up in time to hear running footsteps - see Dawn and Tara pelt down the stairs. The booming roar of the gun seemed to echo and roll, not stopping, deafening him. Then Tara was falling, red blooming across her chest and Dawn was screaming and he turned to find Warren, to kill him and he was gone. A haze of smoke and the stink of cordite filled the air and Spike staggered upright and ran, through the kitchen to the door, stopping in fury and agony when sunlight seared across his face and chest.

"Spike! Don't -" Xander snatched him back, reeling, and Spike stared for one moment at the blood on his boy's arm - on his chest.

"Xander - fuck - are you -" No, no - love, no -
"I'm okay, I'm - fuck - where's the phone, Buffy and Tara - f-fuck -" Xander's legs went out from under him and Spike saw the phone on the kitchen island - snatched it up and dialed. He dropped to the floor next to Xander, pulling him half onto his lap, holding him tight.

Coming coming coming! Who's hurt! Oz, getting louder, frantic, and Spike didn't know what to tell him, could barely think what to do when the operator's voice came on the line.

"Shot. Three people have been shot," he said, and I don't know, don't know, Xan's shot, Tara, the Slayer, oh fuck, maybe Dawn, maybe Willow I don't KNOW - The operator was saying something - 'ambulances on the way' and Spike let the phone drop from nerveless fingers. He looked down and realized he had been shot - that his rib was broken and that the blood down his belly and thighs was his own.

"Spike? Spike!" Dawn was screaming - running into the kitchen and Spike heaved himself and Xander upright.

"Bit - it's all right, I called - they're coming -"

Spike! Xander! The front door slammed open, cracking
into the wall and Pack pack pack.

"Oz is here, Bit, let's -"

"Fuck, I can w-walk, I'm - I can walk, Spike -" All right, I'm all right, just my arm... Xander staggered and Spike held him, wincing in pain. The three of them went as quickly as they could out into the living room. Oz was crouched over Tara, his fingers on her throat, and Dawn flung herself down beside Buffy, wailing. Blood was bubbling up out of the Slayer's mouth and she was pale, so pale.

"Jesus - where's - where's Willow? Is she - ?"

"She was outside - she was running - she looked like...she had blood on her..." Oz stroked the hair back from Tara's face and her eyes fluttered open - tracked dazedly.

"Hurts," she mumbled, and Oz shushed her, stroking her arm.

"It's okay - help is coming. Is Buffy -?"

Spike was on his knees beside the Slayer. The bullet had gone in high, missing her heart but shattering her collar-
bone and Dawn was sobbing hoarsely into Buffy's hair, a
death-grip on her hand. He could hear the faint whistle
of escaping air and knew her lung was nicked - was
leaking air and maybe sucking up blood and where was
the fucking ambulance!

"Buffy, don't die, don't die! I can't take it, I can't take any
more -"

"Shhhh, Dawn - it's okay, it's - gonna be okay." Xander
sprawled awkwardly, trying to hold Dawn. His left arm
was bleeding and Spike could see the black edges where
gunpowder had burned his shirt.

"Wolf, how's the witchling? What happened?"

"I don't know - it's low down - her ribs - I can't tell!" Oz's
eyes were full of pain - of fear, and his blood-slick hands
were pressed to Tara's side, high under her breast.

*Be all right, be all right, fuck...fuck...it was that Warren, it
was -*

"Where the fuck did Red go?" Spike growled, yanking a
throw off of the couch and covering Buffy. She was going
into shock and he could do nothing at all. He strode to
the hall closet and found a blanket for Tara, covering her carefully and cupping her cheek in his hand. She was blinking, tears coursing silently down her face, and he tried to wipe them away but stopped when he saw he was smearing blood on her. Spike looked helplessly - furiously - around the room.

"Sh-she said she was gonna kill him. She said she was gonna get - enough p-power to send him to h-hell," Dawn stuttered, shivering in Xander's arms, and Spike looked at her - nodded, finally, and sagged in relief to hear the approaching sirens.

 Fuck, Red - hope you do. Hope you do.

14 Rage
Spike ran, darting through Sunnydale Below like a fish through black water. He could feel the blood on his shirt, cold and sticky - he could hear Xander in his head.
Hurts, hurts, fuck - are they all right?  Is Tara all right?  Won't tell me...  Taking too long - FUCK, needle - Spike...  Spike snarled, running faster.  He had to get to the hospital before the ambulances - had to get some damn blood.  Xander had panicked at the thought of the EMT's seeing him and trying to help him - trying to get his vitals - and he'd picked up a piece of broken glass off the floor and cut his arm, holding it out.

"Drink it, Spike, dammit! They're gonna give me blood anyway and you can't be bleeding when they get here! Just do it, fucking do it -"  tears in his eyes and his other arm tight around Dawn and Spike had drunk, shaking, taking in fear and despair and pain with every mouthful.  He'd pulled away as soon as he could and then Oz was calling him, urging him to hurry.  Pulling his shirt down away from his neck and telling him to drink, NOW, Xander was right, just DO it and he had.  Knowing puncture marks from his fangs would be too much to try and explain away but hating that Xander was hurt more, now, blood pulsing sluggishly over his hand and dripping onto the living room carpet.

But it wasn't enough, for the kind of damage that gun had caused.  He'd stopped bleeding - he'd been able to pass the mess off as Buffy's blood, Tara's, Xander's, and
they'd let it go. He'd called the Watcher and told him to
get to the hospital - called Derio, who'd been on his way
anyway, his knowing telling him something was wrong,
just like before. The EMT's had been quick, efficient,
and practiced and Buffy had been whisked away first, a
tube down her throat and IV's already in place. Her lips
tinged blue and the broken ends of her collarbone a dull
ivory gleam against the scarlet of her blood.

"Collapsed lung," the EMT muttered, and Dawn had
fought to get in the ambulance, going white and furious
and the man had taken pity on her and let her in. Tara in
the next one, oxygen mask on her face, IV for her as well,
her side spattered with blood to the hip and her breath
hitching in pain, erratic. Broken ribs, furrowed flesh, and
Xander had climbed in with her, a wad of gauze held to
his arm, his pale face alarming them all.

In the flurry of departures Derio had arrived in his little
Honda, cursing in Spanish under his breath and pulling a
gore-flecked Oz to him for a hard kiss. Spike had slipped
out and into the nearest sewer entrance - half a block
away and thank fuck the sun was going down, the street
was shady. And now he dodged and ducked his way
through the murk, nearly there, listening to Xander
worry, to Oz trying to be calm. The smell of death and
blood and chemicals increased and Spike was under the hospital and finding an opening - climbing up and out into the dank sub-cellar that housed the boilers and generators and decades of abandoned, obsolete equipment. He headed straight for the incinerator - where Xander had taken him so long ago, to buy him human blood and tell him, obliquely, that he cared. As usual there was blood there, stacked in Styrofoam coolers, waiting for disposal. Spike tore into them, drinking rapidly, ignoring the staleness, simply gorging himself so that his rib would heal and he could safely sit amongst the nurses and doctors without drawing unwanted attention.

Here, we're here, thank god. Spike? Oz and Derio are right behind us, there's Buffy - ow! Damn, Dawn is -

I'm here, love, be right up, hold on - Spike drained a last bag and flung it into the incinerator and then he was going up and up, finding his way easily through the labyrinth of corridors. He could smell his family - could smell their blood - and he fought the demon back and down. Let his soul soothe it and shush it and make it stop because the demon was close to losing it right there. He finally found the right door and pushed through - felt his knees go weak with relief as he saw Oz
and Derio and Dawn, huddled into plastic chairs in the chaotic ER. He strode across to them, ignoring the shocked looks his appearance was getting.

Wolf, I'm here, I'm here. Where's Xan, where -

Stitches, he's okay I guess, family only back there... Spike, fuck pack pack pack. The wolf was desperate to be free and Oz was fighting it for all he was worth. Spike took a last few steps and then collapsed to his knees, pulling Oz into a hard embrace. A moment later he could feel Dawn's hand on his shoulder and he freed an arm to include her, fear sorrow no no no in the link from her. Dawn shuddered against him, crying softly, and Spike pushed his face into Oz's neck for a moment, just breathing, and then he looked up - reached out and snagged Derio in as well, family family pack need you, the demon doing its best to include him.

A hesitant cough made Spike look up, snarling, and the Watcher held his hand up, standing there looking pale and lost.

"Giles, Buffy was -" Dawn buried her face in Spike's shoulder again and Giles' mouth compressed to a thin, hard line.
"Yes, yes I know, do you know - anything?" Spike stood up slowly, transferring Dawn to Oz, letting his fingers linger for a moment on Oz's shoulder, Derio's hand. He jerked his chin up, indicating over there, and he and Giles walked to the other side of the waiting room where Ethan stood, looking ill and uncomfortable and distinctly nervous.

"Slayer's bad. Lung collapsed, broken bone -" Spike indicated his collarbone and Giles' mouth opened and then snapped shut again. "Tara, she was shot in the ribs - don't know how bad, she was awake... Xander..." Spike blinked - took a hard breath, calming himself, calming the demon. "Got hit in the arm. Not too bad. They're all - back there somewhere." He indicated the trauma rooms that lined one hallway. "Won't let us back." He dug out his cigarettes and lighter - lit up and inhaled hard. His hand was shaking - was smeared with blood - and Giles stared at the dried-black streaks for a moment, silent. Ethan reached out and put his hand gently on Giles' shoulder and Giles blinked - looked around at him and smiled faintly.

"Yes, well - I... I am listed as next-of-kin on Buffy's paperwork so I'll - I'll go and see what's happening and -
see if they'll tell me about - about the others."

"You do that, Watcher. Oz said - Red ran out of the house. Talking about power - talking about sending that Warren bastard to hell. She's not here, Rupert." Giles' eyes went wide and Ethan scowled. He stepped up a little closer, and his pallor had taken on a tinge of green.

"Ripper-love, this place - is making me ill. Why don't I go to the shop, see if - if I can find out what she's up to?" He tried to sound off-hand but his voice was shaking and when a doctor in a white coat walked by, brushing his arm accidentally, he flinched hard away and shut his eyes. Spike could hear his heart - could see the sweat sheening his skin. Ethan's magic - his self - that was under fragile control at best had gotten loose and the seething wrongness of it made the demon snarl - made it want to bite and tear. That in itself told Spike how close to the edge Ethan was, here, because just lately he'd gotten very good at controlling the residual magics that crackled around him.

*Calm, calm, calm,* from Oz, and *It's okay, it's okay, ouch, fuck* - from Xander.

*Man's gonna lose it. Send him off, Ripper, we don't need*
his chaos here, anyway.

"I think - that would be best, Ethan, thank you," Giles said softly. He leaned over and kissed the mage - cupped his cheek for a moment and then Ethan was turning and striding rapidly out, his face grim, his hands in fists. Giles watched him go for a moment and then turned back to Spike, who was intent on inhaling the last inch of his cigarette.

"I'll go see what I can find out. I'll be back soon."

"Right," Spike muttered, and Giles walked over to the admitting desk, dredging up a faint smile for the harried-looking woman working there. Spike finished his cigarette and pinched it out - shoved the butt into his pocket. He went back over to the others and settled down in a chair, hands deep in his pockets. Waiting, and he hated that.

Xander, love - you all right?

I'm okay, I'm just... They're working on Buffy...fuck... A brief flash of the Slayer, naked on white sheets with a towel over her hips, blood like a shawl over her shoulder and chest, dripping on the floor. Machines, noise, a
swarm of scrub-suited men and woman buzzing around her with gloved hands and masks. There was a flinch in the link - Oz - and Spike felt blindly for his hand and squeezed it.

*Slayer constitution, love, she'll be all right. Can you see Glinda?*

*A little - she's not - not as hurt as Buffy, but -* A similar scene, a little more subdued, Tara wincing and talking to a doctor, hands and drapes and machinery around her like bizarre apostles. Xander was in the middle room, and no-one had thought to shut the blinds over the big windows that flanked him.

*God, I hate this. Wish I could leave...* Xander was keeping calm by the thinnest of margins and Spike shut his eyes and concentrated, sending as much calm - as much love and reassurance - as he could muster. He wished they could just go home, too, but he knew they couldn't - knew they'd be here for hours, or days, and Xander had to calm down. The human was faint from blood loss - from the after-effects of the adrenalin surge - and feeling nauseated. The smells and sounds weren't helping and Oz was suddenly there, singing something into the link. Low, wordless hum, part of the chant he
used to keep the wolf at bay and Spike let it wash over him and calm him - opened wide to it and just waited, eyes shut. It was all they could do.

A half-hour later Spike surreptitiously pulled his t-shirt off his ribs and grimaced as the dried blood unstuck from the raw, new skin of the gun-shot wound. Beside him Oz twitched and glanced over - put out a hand and let it rest on Spike's knee. Spike took it and squeezed, grateful. Dawn was sitting huddled into his other side and he stroked her shoulder over and over, unconsciously humming Oz's wolf-chant under his breath.

Derio pushed in through the doors at the end of the hall, soda cans and cookies in his arms and he sat on the magazine-strewn table in front of them, putting the packages down.

"Hey, Dawn - why don't you try and have some of this? Make you feel a little more steady, huh gatito?" Dawn's hands, curled over the hard plastic of the chair arm, were shaking, shaking, shaking, and Spike nudged her a little, making her sit up fractionally.

"Have a bite, poppet. We'll be here a while yet - don’t
want to fall out before you get to see big sis, do you?" Dawn's eyes - dark and wet and bloodshot - gazed up at him blankly and then she blinked and shifted - put one foot tentatively on the floor and leaned forward. Derio opened a soda for her and held it out - opened a miniature pack of cookies and she took one, nibbling slowly, sipping in miniscule mouthfuls. Sugar and carbohydrates, natural tranquilizers so maybe she could relax a little - maybe wake up. The link from her was numb - whisper-faint and full of utter despair. He could feel Xander, who was finally getting stitches - who was tranked up on Demerol or something so that his thoughts were skittery and strange.

*Loud, that was loud, makes my head - Spike? You there? It's not...is this what it's like when - Spike? Where's Oz? Why can't you... Spike? I can't see you, I - need to...*

*Love, love, I'm right here, I'm just waiting for you. Get you all fixed up right and then I'll be there, love, just -

*Spike? Fuckin' cold, I...* Spike stood with a snarl, taking three fast steps towards the hallway and the trauma rooms before Oz's hands were on his arm - around his waist. Oz got in front of him and stopped him - held him
tight and flooded his senses with Pack pack stay here pack love you stay here stay here safe, he's safe, pack pack pack. Scent of earth and pine, scent of blood, fucking blood. Xander's and Tara's and Buffy's blood all mingled and Spike stared down at the werewolf, shuddering.

"Don't, Spike. Come sit back down, okay?" Soft voice, pleading eyes, and Spike slumped a little and pulled Oz close - hugged him, his face pressed into the prickly-soft hair, his body pressed against the small bones and warm flesh. Oz's hands rubbed up and down his back, slow caress and Spike finally sighed and backed off a little - let Oz turn him and tug him back to the chairs where Dawn was eating like a little zombie mouse and Derio was tight-lipped and furious - as scared and as angry and as helpless as they were. Derio watched Dawn for a moment and then turned to Spike, a small frown on his face.

"Where's that Johnathan?" he asked softly, and Spike had to think about that.

"No idea, mate."

"He's at the shop today," Oz said, elbows on knees,
looking utterly worn. He lifted his head and looked at them, his eyes dark-circled. "He was going to do some inventory. I think he's trying to get us to....keep him. Make himself useful."

"Never happen," Spike muttered, tipping his head back to stare blindly at the ceiling.

Giles had disappeared into the warren of rooms somewhere beyond the waiting area and no one would talk to them. Spike was ready to get up and start shouting - or smashing - something, when he felt Oz stiffen beside him and looked around for whatever new threat had arrived.

_Ah, bloody hell, the filth. Just what we need_. Two Sunnydale police officers stood at the admitting desk, flashing badges and asking questions, and the duty-nurse pointed over at their group. Spike felt the growl rumbling up out of his chest and beside him Oz took a long, slow breath.

_CALM! Calm down. I'll talk, I'll tell them what they need to know. Don't do anything, Spike_, Oz thought, his hand tight in Spike's, his wolf-scent getting stronger as his own control slipped for a split-second.
"Do my best. Keep it simple, wolf."

The officers walked over and stood there for a moment, just staring. Spike knew what they saw - three blood-soaked people, pale, shaken, and about done-in, and Derio who was bristling like a pissed-off cat the longer the stare went on.

"Hello. I'm Detective Eric Watson," the first one said, a tall, thin man with salt-and-pepper hair and glasses. "This is my partner, Ron Moore." Detective Moore was also tall, but built like a bull with a fringe of gingery hair around his head and a nose askew from being broken. They both wore crumpled, dark-colored suits and stank, to Spike, of stale sweat and cigarette smoke, grease and blood and chemicals. "You were involved in a shooting today? Care to tell us what happened?"

Watson pushed his glasses up, blinking at them.

"Victims of a shooting," Derio muttered, and Watson glanced at him.

"Your name, sir?" Moore pulled out a little notebook and flipped it open - got a pen and sat heavily on the low table across from them. Dawn stared blankly and lifted a cookie to her mouth, eating it slowly.
"Desiderio Padovani. I wasn't there when it happened," he said shortly, and Oz reached over and grabbed his hand, pulling it into his lap and lacing their fingers together. The detective's eyes flickered at that but he said nothing. Spike pulled out his cigarettes again and lit one, desperate for something to distract him.

"You can't smoke in here," Moore said, pointing over his shoulder at a red 'No Smoking Allowed' sign and Spike took a long drag and blew the smoke in his face, feeling that utter stillness that came over him when he was on the verge of mayhem.

"Piss. Off," Spike growled, and Watson reached for his cigarette, scowling. Spike felt the demon rising, and Oz did, because he intercepted Watson's hand, stopping him cold and obviously surprising the man with his strength.

"He'll put it out. It's been a rough day, okay?" Watson withdrew his hand slowly and Oz looked over at Spike, tipping his head a little.

*Put it out, okay? We'll do this and they'll go.*

"Yeah, all right," Spike grumbled, taking a last hard hit
and then grinding the smoke out on his heel. He shoved the butt into his pocket and glared at the officers, who stared back.

"Now," Watson said, settling his tie and taking a deep breath, "why don't you tell me -?"

"Xander." Spike was up and out of his chair, knocking into Watson and ignoring his yelp of surprise. Xander stood unsteadily in the hall, his arm bandaged and up in a sling, his face shockingly pale despite a transfusion. There were still smudges of blood down his cheek and on both hands, and his jeans were stained with dark spots and streaks. His shirt was gone and he had a scrub-shirt on, the sleeve split so his bandaged upper arm would fit through. Spike just grabbed him and held on, face buried in his neck and arms tight around him, hugging him from the side a little so he wouldn't crush Xander's hurt arm.

_Bloody hell, about time, you all right, love? You look knackered, gotta get you home and in bed, love, god, love you love you love you... _Spike knew he was babbling - didn't care. Just wanted his boy, just wanted Xander; smell of wood and spice and sunshine, smell of home. Xander's right arm was tight around him, and his
lips were against Spike's neck, moving as he murmured softly.

"Love you, it's all right, hush, love, I'm all right, love you, love you...."  

Love you love you pack pack pack pack.

"Christ."  Spike pulled back finally - pushed his hand back through Xander's hair, feeling the stiff strands where blood and sweat had dried, matting it.  Xander wobbled a little and Spike held him, frowning.

"You guys okay?  Did Giles find out anything?"  Xander asked, and Spike shook his head.

"We're fine.  Nothing yet, he's still back there.  Ethan went to try and track Willow - she's out hunting Warren."  Xander's eyes went wide and then he looked over Spike's shoulder.

"Fuck.  The cops.  Never around when you need them..."  He sighed deeply, and Spike ghosted light little kisses over his cheeks and lips.

"Yeah.  Gotta tell 'em what's what and then they'll go.  You up to it, love?"
"Yeah. You stay right with me," Xander murmured, and Spike kissed him again, slow kiss on the mouth, and they finally turned and went slowly back over to the chairs.

"Xander?" Dawn said, staring at him, and Xander sank down in a crouch in front of her, ignoring the detectives.

"I'm right here, Dawnie. You okay?"

"Where's Buffy? Is she okay? Nobody'll tell me -" Dawn blinked, and tears streamed down her face unnoticed. Spike crouched down as well, wiping the tears off her face with his thumb.

"She's fine, Dawn, just fine. She's hurt so they have to help her, and it takes a while is all. She'll be just fine, okay? Promise." Pain in the link, and fear - flashes of Buffy being wheeled away, and Spike wanted to put his fist through the wall - through something, because there was too much pain, too much despair, and Oz and Xander and Dawn were drowning in it.

*Hold it together, damnit, just -*

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we really do need to ask some questions," Watson said, sounding anything but
sorry, and Spike was standing fast, feeling his lips going back, feeling his hands spread and stiffen in anticipation of - something. Of tearing the man's heart out and shoving it down his partner's throat.

"Spike!" Xander shoved bodily into him - Oz did from the other side, just crowding him, distracting him, sending so hard through the link he cringed, just a little. The detectives were looking irritated and ready to blow - Dawn was sending nothing but fear through the link and Spike shut his eyes and just let them do it - let them soothe the demon, smooth his rough edges down - let the soul take control so thoroughly that for a moment Spike felt dizzy. Then he opened his eyes again and looked at Xander. Exhaustion, fear, grief, and a desperate pleading in his boy's eyes.

"I’m sorry, love. So sorry. Be all right now, yeah? I'll just -" Spike sank down slowly into the chair that was behind him and Xander came around and sat next to him, hand tight in his. Dawn on the other side, and then Oz was sitting as well, and Derio, all of them shaking with reaction - desperate to get this over with. The detectives exchanged looks - cleared throats. Started with the questions.
"I really don't know," Xander said, for about the third time, and he could feel the hyena pushing, pushing. He was so tired and his arm felt as if it were on fire, pulsing flame with every heartbeat. His head was pounding, he was hungry and nauseated at the same time, and Dawn looked ready to collapse. Spike was shredding his way through his fourth magazine, his teeth gritted so hard Xander could feel the ache in the link and Oz was starting to get snappish. Even Derio seemed to be hanging by a thread, and he kept turning and looking over his shoulder as if expecting someone to walk up and touch him - or hit him.

"Does this Warren have any friends in town? A place he could stay?" Watson asked, and Xander should his head.

"The only friend I know about is Andrew, and he's in jail right here in Sunnydale. Why don't you go ask him - " Watson's phone beeped suddenly and he held up hand and flipped it open - stood up and moved a few paces away. Xander felt Spike stiffen beside him and he knew Spike could hear what was being said. Xander
could hear the other voice, as well, but he couldn't make out individual words over all the other noise - over his own heartbeat.

"Gotta go," Watson said shortly, and Moore stood up, shutting his little notebook and stuffing it away in a pocket. "If you hear anything, give me a call, all right? We'll be in touch." Watson held out a business card and after a moment Xander took it, nodding. The two men hurried away and Xander slumped back in the chair, his back screaming in protest.

"Fuck," he muttered, and Spike's hand slid over his lower back, rubbing gently. "What was that about?"

"Seems someone is at the jail. Seems someone is busting the place up." Spike looked grimly pleased and it took Xander a moment to figure out what he meant.

"Oh, fuck. Willow? Is it - do you think it's Willow?"

"Something is going on," Derio hissed, leaning over Oz and looking a little spooked. "It all feels - it feels wrong. If Willow is looking for power, she's found it, and she's using it." Derio's knowing was something like a spider-web: it stretched far, but Derio only got the
distant vibration of actions and reactions - enough to tell him things were happening, not enough to tell him exactly what, or where. Although it had gotten fairly accurate if the 'something' involved any member of his adopted family.

"Jesus. What in hell are we gonna do?"

"Nothing," Spike said, and his eyes were gleaming gold, looking surreal in the flat fluorescent light. "Let her have her power, and let her have her revenge. He needs seeing to, anyway."

"But - if she's at the jail she's - she must be going after Andrew. And he didn't shoot anybody..." Xander felt fear - a cold, skittering sensation - washing over him. Willow had pushed limits before. And now - fueled by anger - who knew what she would do?

What if she can't stop? What if she hurts innocent people? We have to -

Don't have to do anything, love. Spike looked grimly satisfied at the idea of Willow extracting revenge, but Xander could feel the demon, and it wanted to join in - it wanted to urge Willow to a rampage and cut a swath
through the milling cattle of Sunnydale. Whatever Willow was doing - it was broadcasting far and wide, and Xander could feel it through the demon - through Oz, and it was slowly but surely putting them all on edge.

*Don't, Spike! You can't - do that. WE can't. We have to make sure Tara and Dawn are all right - we have to make sure BUFFY is -*

"Protect them," Spike muttered, and the demon meant 'take out all enemies, no mercy'.

"Fuck," Xander didn't know what to do - felt relief as Giles came down the hallway finally, looking rumpled and tired, frowning.

"Giles - thank god - what's going on?" They all stood up, even Dawn, clustering around the older man and Giles rubbed wearily at his forehead.

"It's all good news - it's good news, Dawn. Buffy had to have surgery. The - the bullet hit her lung and she was having trouble breathing... They had to repair the damage and - and fix her collarbone, it was badly shattered... She's in recovery right now, she's still asleep. We can - see her in a little while." Dawn gave a
sort of breathless 'ooh!' and darted forward to cling to Giles, hugging him hard. Giles slowly put his arms around her and held her, and then looked wearily up at them again.

"Tara is fine, she's.... The bullet cracked two ribs and then traveled...she was standing just right and - it went around her ribcage, along the - bone. Very painful and - a lot of muscle and tissue damage but she's - she's fine. She was in surgery, as well, but... She's asleep, now - they've got her on a rather high dose of pain medication." Giles rubbed his forehead again and sighed.

"The police said that no one could go back into the - house for a few days, so..."

"Dawn can stay with us, Giles, no problem. She's even got clothes there. How long...will Buffy be here?" Xander reached out and patted Giles' shoulder and the Watcher smiled briefly at him. Spike shifted restlessly and Xander leaned into him, making the vampire concentrate on him - trying to keep him there - keep him calm. He could sense it was a losing battle.

"I think - Buffy will be here for a week, at least. Maybe
longer. Her Slayer constitution will make any stay shorter, but...she'll need time to recover. She's going to be just fine." Giles said the last to Dawn, who nodded into his arm, still hugging him.

"Thanks, Giles," Oz said softly, and Giles nodded.

"I think it would be best if we all went home and - got clean. Changed." Giles was looking rather pointedly at Spike and Xander, and Xander nodded. He could smell the blood, even dry, and it was contributing in no small part to his continuing nausea. "And then we can come back here and - and be here when Buffy and Tara wake up." Giles ran a slow hand down Dawn's back - gently got her to let go of him.

"Will you be all right, Dawn, going home with Xander and - and Spike? You need to change out of those clothes before you can see Buffy."

"Yeah, I'm fine - I'll be fine." Dawn wiped her eyes and forced a smile and Xander hugged his arm around her shoulders.

"We'll take care of her, Giles. Okay." He looked around at his family and could see they were all as ready to leave
as he was. "Let's just go." Giles nodded, sighing a little.

"I'm going to go by the shop, see if Ethan knows anything, or if Willow has turned up. I'll...I'll see you all later." Xander smiled faintly, hugging Dawn close, and they all turned and walked out of the ER. Oz's van was off to one side and he plucked the parking ticket off the windshield with a bit of a snarl, shoving it into his pocket. Xander helped Dawn up into the back of the van and climbed in after her, Spike steadying him as he stumbled a little, off-balance.

The drive home seemed to take forever and Xander leaned back against Spike and closed his eyes - wished that he could just sleep for a day or so. Just let it all go. But Dawn was trying her best to carry on a conversation with Oz and Derio, and he could still feel the tension that was zinging through Spike and making the vampire shiver all over, like he had a fever. Xander sighed and sat up a little.

"We can get something delivered when we get home - try to eat."

"Yeah, I - I'm kinda hungry," Dawn said, eyes downcast as if she shouldn't be, and Spike finally broke out of his reverie, slipping an arm around Xander's waist.
"Course you are, Bit. Nothing wrong with that." Dawn's face, intermittently lit by streetlights looked relieved and she smiled, just a little. *When did it get dark? God, how long were we there?*. 

They ordered Chinese while Dawn took a shower, and Spike paced around the house. Something was pinging through the link - something was happening, in Sunnydale, and Xander was sure it was Willow. Was afraid it was Willow. Derio was restless and nervous and when Dawn came downstairs in fresh jeans and a sweater Oz snagged his boyfriend's arm and hustled him upstairs.

*Sorry, gotta get him calm, we'll go fast*, in the link, Oz getting Derio under the hot water and letting him scrub at dried blood.

*It's okay. Don't worry about it.* Xander picked at some soup - ate a few noodles - watched Spike smoke one cigarette after another. Watched him drink longer and longer swallows from a bottle and felt the unease - the prickling of rage hate want want want that the demon seemed to be channeling from somewhere get stronger and stronger. When the phone rang they all jumped, and
Xander went to answer it as Derio and Oz thumped down the stairs.

"Hello?"

"Xander, it's Giles. Willow - well, she was here. She apparently got Andrew out of the jail and then she - " Giles paused, and Xander felt a lurch of fear.

"What, Giles?" Oz and Spike watched him, tense, listening. Oz muttered something to Derio, who nodded slowly.

"She stole power - she's drained several books of - of everything. She - tried to take energy from Ethan but his power... Well, it doesn't work that way. She's hurt him."

"Damnit! Fuck, Giles, I -" Xander shut his eyes for a moment - gasped in surprise at the touch of fingers on his neck and then sighed as Spike wound his arms around him. "Do you need help? Do you -"

"No, I... " There was a murmur - probably Ethan - and then Giles was back on the line. "Yes. Could you ask Oz - to please meet us here at the shop? We need his help to
find Willow. And - and Spike as well. The coven - sent me...something. But it's going to take - a little time to work. We need to - to find her. We need to try and stop her. Or at least, distract her." Oz's eyes were black, and pack protect not pack not pack was in the link, the wolf ready to fight Willow - to do whatever it had to. The demon was incoherent - was rage hate end it end it and Xander wanted to cry.

"I'll - yeah, we... They're on their way, Giles." Xander hung up abruptly and turned, grabbing Spike's arms in a hard grip, his wound screaming in pain that made Spike and Oz both flinch. "Giles needs your help, Spike, and so does Willow and I know - I know you don't - care. I know you're fine with her - killing Warren. But if she does, Spike - if she does she'll never - get over it. She'll never - recover." He stared at Spike - stared at him and opened the link wide, letting everything he felt for Willow flood the link. All his love and pride, all his awe and fear, all his anger and all his forgiveness. The demon fought it - surged wildly and Spike snarled, game-faced and furious. He wrenched away and a bolt of pain sizzled through Xander's arm. He gasped, cradling his arm to his side and the demon gave a mournful wail.

*Sorry sorry protect not pack not not not.*
"Spike! I know. I know. But please, please - for me, please, don't - try not to let her...do this. Please." Don't want to lose her. She's done so much but she's still...Willow. Still...part of me. Dawn was frozen at the table, terrified, and Oz was shifting over, becoming more the wolf. He leaned up and kissed Derio - stalked slowly to Xander and Spike and forced his way between them, growling at them both.

Go, let's go, safe safe, keep her safe, protect, let's GO! Spike blinked and seemed to come back to himself, and he kissed Xander hard.

"Do my best, love. Do my best, promise. Love you. Stay here, stay safe -"

"Yeah, I will. Fuck, Spike - Oz, please help her." Oz nodded - rubbed his cheek along Xander's and then he turned and darted out of the kitchen - out of the house - Spike on his heels. They ran, and Xander slumped down next to Dawn, trying to smile. Dawn took a sip of her juice and then put her hand out. Xander took it - watched as she did the same to Derio and pulled the other man close.
"We have to stay here and be strong for Buffy and for Tara. Willow's going to be all right and - and we'll go to the hospital in a while and see Buffy, okay? And we'll be fine." Dawn looked anxiously at Xander - at Derio, and they both nodded, dredging up smiles. But the air seemed to burn, and Xander followed Spike and Oz through the link - felt the shifting lines and wells of power that made up the Hellmouth grow agitated and erratic. Willow was stirring a seething pot, and it was very, very close to boiling over. Xander hoped Giles could somehow put out the fire. He glanced at the kitchen clock and winced. Not even nine. *God, could this day be any longer?* Spike - Oz...love you...

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Running through the night with Oz - with the Hellmouth lit up and pulsing like a neon heart - and Spike roared out fury and glee to the night sky, the link to Xander closed to the merest thread. Oz grimly fought the full change, but he could feel the magic as well - could feel the warping of energies all around them and control was becoming less and less of a priority. It was a threat, this surge of energy - a threat and a challenge and the demon wanted it. Months of frustration were coming to a head
and Spike wondered if he'd even bother trying, with Willow. Or if he'd just fling himself in head-long, and take out her and Warren at the same time. Beside him Oz growled, snapping at him, pushing hard into his shoulder as they ran, knocking him off balance a little.

*Protect her, protect! For the pack, pack, pack...*

*She's the threat. SHE'S the danger. NOT pack, kill it kill It KILL IT.* Oz snarled and his teeth snapped inches from Spike's face, and Spike just laughed.

"Don't tell me you don't want to end this, wolf - don't tell me you don't want them all safe!"

*Break his heart,* Oz thought, furious and panting, shivering all over. *He'll hate us, Spike.*

*Can't hate us. Won't. We can fix it.*

"No!" Oz leapt forward and got directly in Spike's path - slammed into him, full-body hit, taking him to the ground. Half wolf or more, his eyes black, black claws sunk deep into Spike's arms, pinning him there. "No fix. No kill. Hear me?" Oz forced the words through the wolf's jaws and Spike hissed at him, the demon all but
taking over. He pushed - rolled - flung Oz off of him and then crouched there, his fingers sunk to the second knuckle in the dirt.

"If she hurts him she's dead, wolf."

"Yeah." Oz rolled to his feet - padded over and held his hand out, and after a moment Spike took it - let Oz pull him up.

"Hold fas'," Oz said, around wolf-fangs and wolf-muzzle. Around wolf desires. Fighting the curdling wrongness of the night. Something - twisted - something seemed to break and build at the same moment - bubbles rising up and up from an underground trap, breaking and forming endlessly as they went. Power, surging into the Hellmouth.

Oh fuck, that's her, she's got something, she's -

Love you love him, pack FAMILY hold fast, Spike, keep it together, can't let this happen, hear me? Can't let this happen. She could kill us so be CAREFUL. Spike stared at him - closed his eyes for a moment when Oz's clawed hand touched lightly at the demon's features - caressing. Lover's touch, brother's touch.
Careful, Spike thought finally, shivering, and Oz nodded. Then they both turned and ran for the shop.

The Magic Box was all but destroyed; the loft crumpled down onto the main floor, the display cabinets and shelves crushed and broken. Giles was sitting in the midst of it all, unnaturally pale, blood on his face and hair - on his clothes. Ethan lay on the floor beside him, stretched out like an effigy on top of a tomb, dusted white with plaster and red with blood. Spike could feel nothing at all from him and he crouched down beside the mage, listening. Faint heart-beat, like a wren's wings, fluttering, fluttering; his breathing a faint susurrus. Giles looked -.

Is he even in there? Christ, what did that cunt do?

"Watcher! Where is she? Where'd she go?" Giles looked up at him, blinking - lifted a shaking hand and wiped at the blood that was trickling down his cheek.

"She - the - the coven. In Devon. They extended their
powers to me. And...she took it."

"She's got more power? Whose bloody stupid idea was that?" There was a small crash and Oz appeared from around the corner of a bookcase, snarling.

*She's got most of the magic that was here. She's like a fucking reactor.* The Hellmouth was vibrating like a beaten drum and Spike knew that no matter what Willow did, every demon for miles was feeling it - and was gonna try - something. She was a candle to a hundred-thousand moths and whatever damage she did, they would double.

"She's got Andrew, and Johnathan. And - Warren. She had something...she was pulling him in. She's going to - burn out, Spike. She's going to burn herself with the power she has. Too much, and the wrong kind, besides."

"What do you mean, the wrong kind?" Giles looked dazedly around him and then he looked at Ethan - put his hand out and stoked the man's cheek. Ethan's eyelids flickered and his heartbeat sped a little.

"Earth magic. Root magic. The oldest magic there is. What she's used to - what she took from
here..." Giles made a sort of wave with his hand around the shop. "This is borrowed stuff. Made stuff. Calling up spirits and demons, using talismans and rituals imbued with the power of gods... That's all a pale copy of the magic that holds the earth to the sun. Holds the air to the earth. She's never tapped that magic, and she can't control it." Giles took a deep breath - coughed, holding his side. "She doesn't know how to use it, and it doesn't like being...manhandled. She thought she just got my power, but it was a - puzzle-box, with the coven's power inside. And - you felt it. She's opened it."

_Fuckin' Pandora's Box. Where's Hope, I wonder?_ "Gonna kill her, then?" Spike asked. Oz came to stand behind him, legs against his back, and Spike reached out and touched Giles' shoulder - shook him a little. "Is it going to kill her, Watcher?" Giles looked at him, his eyes mild and dazed behind his dust-flecked glasses.

"It may very well, Spike. I don't know. But if it doesn't burn her out soon, she's going to kill all of us."

Spike looked at him - looked up at Oz, and they both moved at the same moment. Heading out, into the night again, following the path that Willow had left. Poison
smoke from a psychic burning and it was choking them both.

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*Where in fuck is she going?* Spike thought, and Oz leaped a downed tree, panting. Willow's back trail was as easy to follow as the path of a tornado; furrowed dirt, shattered trees, rocks pulverized to dust. A few houses and streets had also suffered, and cars had been tossed like tin toys. The skirl of chaotic magic was a bee-hive buzz, maddening and inescapable. Spike wanted to find the source and make it stop, preferably with blood and cracked bones.

*Kingman's Bluff is the only thing up here...* Oz thought, bewildered, and they ran on. Spike could feel Xander in the link, trying to get his attention; an insistent, warm push that nearly overrode the mind-numbing static that was Willow.

*Talk to him,* Oz thought, sending him a look and Spike finally let Xander back in.

*Spike, you fuck. I called Giles - he said there's an old*
temple up there - some old cult...they were gonna destroy the world but an earthquake got 'em and now...Willow's going to finish it. There was panic in his mental voice - panic and bewilderment and an constant undercurrent of grief that his friend, his Willow - could be so utterly out of control.

You told him where she was, Spike accused Oz, and the werewolf yipped in exasperation.

Yeah. Deserves to know. Protect pack, Spike! We're not killing anybody tonight. Spike snarled at that - jerked in surprise at a sudden flash from Xander. His truck, skidding around a corner, Dawn sliding into him and hurting his bandaged arm, Derio cursing and wrestling with the stick-shift.

What in bloody hell do you think you're doing! Spike stopped dead, turning furiously in a circle, trying to pinpoint the direction Xander was coming from.

I'm coming to help, damnit! You don't care about Willow, and Oz...has too much baggage. I'm still her FRIEND, Spike, still her friend and I have to help her if I can... Another flash - a parking lot, concrete steps, and Spike roared, furious.
Getting ahead of us, getting there alone - He didn't remember starting to run, but he was - running flat out, the air whistling past and Oz full wolf now, a streak of blackness in the moonless night.

Xander, you bastard, you can't be up there alone! If she hurts you -

Spike...love you. It'll be all right. The top of the bluff was in sight and Spike re-doubled his efforts until he was practically flying, skimming over the ground, his newly healed rib protesting in dull stabs. They reached the top of the bluff, skidding and scrabbling in rocky brush and Willow was there, the black heart of a nimbus of sickly green energy floating several feet off the ground. Some sort of spire - church-spire - stuck drunkenly up out of the ground, the churned and broken earth around it stinking of old death. Bits of bone gleamed there, and rusted metal, and a woman's figure graced the spire. Some dark goddess, some witch, forever frozen in a lurid dance. Above it was a red mass - a squirming lump of flesh and blood, skinless and dripping. Its mouth was sewn shut - its eyes bulged in agony and Spike knew it was Warren. Willow was sending a stream of twisted light into the statue, and Spike was sure the figure was
moving - was coming to life.

Uncaring, he leapt straight as an arrow at Willow. They connected with a hissing of magic - a boom of energies and Spike stared into her face, his hands like claws on her arms. She was bloodlessly white, veined in black. Black hair, black lips, and her eyes the whiteless, lifeless black of a shark.

"Come to drink my blood, Spike?" she crooned, her voice layered and echoing and too loud, and Spike fought the urge to do so - to simply sink his fangs in and suck her power down his throat.

"Think I wouldn't witch? That'd be the fuckin' meal of a lifetime. More kick than any Slayer." She grinned at him, a death's head parody of her former self.

"Riley sure liked being bitten. Maybe I'll like it, too. Wanna try? If it's real nice, I won't kill you. I'll keep you - make you my pet." She lifted her chin, baring her throat. Spike felt as if he were suffocating - felt the same mindless, claustrophobic fear he'd felt waking in his coffin. Willow's magic was winding around him, tighter and tighter, making him groan. Making him shatter and he felt himself unwinding - felt the damage Glory had
done multiplying in him - breeding faster than any virus.

*God, what is she DOING! Spike! Oh, fuck that's Warren, Jesus, how could she* - Xander's voice, and Spike struggled, terrified Willow would do something to Xander while he hung, helpless.

"Willow!" The witch's eyes widened in shock and she snarled - flung Spike aside and he crashed to the ground, gagging. Oz was there, pushing at him - morphing enough to have hands and yanking him up and away. That feeling of coming to pieces stopped abruptly and Spike crouched in the scrubby grass, panting. Xander was standing beside the spire - was staring at Willow, hand on knee, panting. His sling was askew and Spike could feel the pain of his wound - could feel despair and terror and stubborn determination.

*Love - careful - god, WHY!?*

*She's my friend. She's my oldest family. I owe her.* Willow floated down towards Xander - stopped when her feet lightly touched the cracked earth and rocks that surrounded the spire.

"You! Betrayer. Do you think you can stop me? Think I
care about you? Think I'll just - fold up, give in - 'cause you tell me to? Be the good little girl and follow orders?" She lifted her hand and shot a bold of pure energy at Xander and he reeled backwards, striking the spire and grimacing in pain.

"Willow - no matter what's happened - you're still my friend. My oldest family!"

"But you've got your new family now, Xander," she hissed, and the magic crackled around her, lifting her hair, painting her with a deathbed pallor.

"That doesn't change anything. I still love you, Willow!"

"Oh, you love me. And that's going to make it all better? I can feel it, Xander! Whatever - Giles had, what I took - I can feel the whole world and do you know what I feel? Pain!" She flung another bolt at him, sending him stumbling back a pace, but the maelstrom of light and energy around her was flickering now, unsteady.

*What is it? What's - happening?* Spike asked Oz, and the werewolf shook his head.

*Giles said she would burn out - maybe she is. But*
Xander's...

Stopping her. *Fuck...* He wanted desperately to rush in again but sensed that he shouldn't - that her rage was dying as surely as her power was, and that it was because of Xander. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement and he realized Johnathan was there, crawling weakly towards a sprawled figure - towards Andrew. They were both bloody, but alive.

"Everybody feels pain, Willow! Everybody. But that doesn't mean you just - give up! There's still love, Willow. I love you - no matter what."

"Oh, am I supposed to just - get all weepy? Fall at your feet?" Willow flung both hands out, but the magic was thin, now - fuzzy and almost colorless, and Xander didn't even stumble. Willow looked shocked - a little frightened - and her eyes darted around, as if she were coming awake - seeing where she was.

"No. You're supposed to remember that you're not alone. Tara's alive, Willow! She's waiting for you - she's hurt, and she needs you. And Buffy - Dawn... Do you really want to just - end it for them? They love you - they need you. I need you, Willow. I need a witchy woman in
my life." Xander walked forward slowly and Willow was gasping now - shaking. She was slowly fading back to herself as the power drained away, and the oppressive hum of magic was fading fast. Age was overtaking the spire and the statue and it was cracking - falling. The lump of meat that was Warren was barely twitching, and Spike could hear his heart stuttering and failing.

"Willow, please - I love you, and I'd do anything to make this better. I'd do anything..." Xander stopped right in front of her and Willow looked up at him, her chest heaving, tears streaking down her cheeks. She looked around her again - looked up at the sky, taking a hard, gasping breath.

"I'm so scared, Xander! Nothing's the same, nothing's right anymore! I don't know - who I am anymore. I just wanted everyone to be - to be happy, I just wanted things to be like they were!" She crumpled to her knees, sobbing for real, now and Xander went down beside her and gathered her in close, whispering to her.

"Willow, it's okay. We can fix it, we can. I love you, it's okay, Wills, shhh..." The magic was utterly gone now, as if it had never been, and the temple spire abruptly went to dust, shattering into nothing. Warren's body flopped
obscenely to the ground and his heart faltered and stopped altogether. Spike felt his legs wobbling under him and they gave out finally, and he sat down hard. Oz was behind him, pressed tight, arms around his chest and Spike held on, watching Xander comfort his oldest friend - watching him tell her lies and promises and weave a pretty story for her. Because he could feel the link, and he could feel the bond those two had shared was severed for all time now.

*All she wanted was revenge. Didn't think of Tara, or Buffy...didn't think of anyone but herself... God, how could she do this...*  Rage and grief and Spike couldn't think of a thing to say. He watched, uncaring, as Johnathan hauled Andrew to his feet and they both stumbled away - probably gone for good. He watched Derio and Dawn come up over the edge of the bluff and stare for a moment, then they both sprinted to where Spike and Oz sat. Spike wearily shrugged out of his duster and gave it to Oz, who pulled it on gratefully and then hugged Derio to him. Dawn sat down next to Spike and just stared at him.

"This is just too crazy," she said softly, and Spike nodded.

"You all right, Bit?"
"I'm fine. I want to see Buffy. You okay?" Dawn was calm - was different - and Spike suspected that this day - these things - had forced her to grow up just a bit more. Had forced some realities on her that she would never be able to forget.

"I'm fine, Dawn. Shouldn't have come up here, you know." Dawn shrugged, looking over at Willow and Xander.

"Well, Derio didn't know how to drive a stick and so I came along as back-up." Spike stared at her and she grinned suddenly, and he had to laugh. Just hug her and laugh until his sides hurt, because that made as much sense as anything else had that night, and he had never been so tired in his life.

_____________________

gatito = kitten
15 Breathe

It was raining and Spike lay in bed, curled close to Xander, just watching him and thinking. Remembering. He'd been doing that a lot - doing it like an exercise, like Oz sitting and saying his Tibetan mantra that made the wolf a part of him and not a savage interloper. Remembering that evening in early March, when the whole gang of them had driven down to L.A. to the airport. Seeing Giles and Ethan and Willow off. To Devon, the coven, and whatever help they could offer.

Ethan is still frail from his encounter with Willow - still a magical negative, as far as Spike can tell, which is a relief and disconcerting all at the same time. He doesn't look at her, and Spike doesn't blame him. Willow is - the same. Hair cut a little shorter, eyes still holding that wounded, waif-like 'I'm so sorry' look. The look that won't go away and that means less than nothing, now, because she can say 'I'm sorry' until her heart stops
beating and it won't change what she did.

Giles and Buffy talk quietly, Buffy with unshed tears shimmering in her eyes, Giles with the stiff-shouldered, head-down posture he adopts when emotions are too near the surface. When the flight is called and they gather their things - prepare to go - Ethan looks dumbfounded to find Dawn hugging him - and then Oz, and Xander. He just stands there, looking at them, and his clever fox's face is for once devoid of all malice and mischief and instead looks rather like Scrooge when he wakes to find it's still Christmas Day. Giles is also pulled into hard, trembling hugs and Buffy finally breaks down, sobbing into his handkerchief, her make-up running and her eyes impossibly wide. She looks all of 13 and Giles can't say a word - kisses her forehead softly and walks briskly away, Ethan's hand tight in his. Willow lingers, accepting their stiff hugs - accepting the little planner that Anya gives her that has her schedule of payments. Willow's in serious debt to demon-girl over the shop and Anya has the look of a pit bull when she explains the payments and the interest owed. Willow just looks bewildered - scoops up her bag and waves forlornly and stumbles away down the concourse.

It's a relief to see her go; for the family most of all but
even for Buffy and Dawn, who spent the last three weeks consoling her and helping her pack. Buffy had just the day before removed the sling she'd been wearing for three weeks, pronouncing herself healed and ready for patrol. Tara still moves gingerly, her cracked ribs sore, the muscles all along that side stiff and achy. She's taken to doing yoga with Dawn every day in an effort to get limber again and she and Giles cooked up a salve that works wonders. Xander has used it, too, and has healed as quickly as Buffy. But he still rubs his arm from time to time, as if the pain lingers. Rubbed it at the airport, watching his oldest friend walk away, and Spike and Oz and Derio crowd close, soothing the last of the hurt away, making sure he knows how much he is loved. Tara...takes a deep breath and whispers 'Goodbye, Willow,' and Spike hears the finality in that, and hugs Glinda-witch close.

Spike reached out and traced the scar on Xander's bicep. A palely pinkish spot on his honey-brown arm, the tissue twisted and a little raised. Mostly circular in the front, but larger and star-shaped in the back, where the bullet had torn out. It hadn't had much time or room to
fragment or the exit wound would have been bigger - the injury worse. It hurt, to see that. It felt like failure to touch that scar and Spike touched it one more time to remind himself - to remember.

*So sorry, my love... So very, very sorry.* Xander stirred, sighing, and Spike pulled his hand back - watched Xander's head turn on the pillow, watched his hand reach out, searching. It found Spike's hip and gripped there, and then Xander was still, and Spike blinked, fighting tears.

*Still trusts us. See how he trusts us? Touches us and that makes him calm... Never break that trust.*

*Family always MINE.* The demon had never quite recovered from that day - had never quite relaxed again, and the trouble Spike had with forgetting didn't help. But things were getting better, if slowly. Spike reached out again - junkie to drug - and ran his fingers through Xander's hair. Scent of sandalwood and cedar, the ocean and the sap-heavy pines that grew in the nearby park. A long night of patrol, working out tensions and nerves. Tomorrow - today, really, since Spike could feel the sun clearing a rain-shrouded horizon - they were heading out to the forest and...something new. Spike squirmed a little closer, resting his cheek on Xander's
chest, inching his leg up and over. Remembering something else, now - reaching for each detail.

Since the shooting Buffy has worked inside at Alves and Son - has started doing inventory and billing and customer service. Learning to use the computer Manny has, graduating up a couple more dollars in pay and being excited over going to work in heels and kicky skirts instead of worn dungarees and a hard-hat.

But even the pay raise and one less person in the house has not been enough and Buffy has them all gathered in the halfway repaired Magic Box to listen as she tearfully tells them it's time. Time to sell the house on Revello and find something cheaper - smaller- maybe newer, so she won't ever have to face the nightmare of 'full copper re-pipe' again. Probably just a rental, since she's sure her credit is nil.

Dawn is sulking, not talking, her eyes red, and Tara hugs Buffy gently and tries to make a move sound exciting: a new place for old, loved things and a chance for a killer yard-sale! It's Anya who really saves the moment - Anya
who whips out a newspaper and a pen and starts showing Buffy all kinds of real estate listings. Tells her in mind-numbing detail about points and balloon payments and closing costs and then mentions in a off-hand way that she has, in her spare time, gotten a realtors license and could she be Buffy's agent? And how buying is better than renting and Buffy can get First Time Home Owners assistance from the government. She promises she won't screw her on the commission. Buffy just stares at her, and then starts laughing, which sets Xander off and then Tara, and in the end it becomes almost a party atmosphere, with Dawn chiming in about what she wants in a new place (her own bathroom) and what she doesn't want (a creepy basement).

After a long talk with Manny, the old demon shows the girls three houses his company owns - older but refurbished, and all the pipes guaranteed. The prices - suspiciously low. The sale goes smoothly and Anya throws a little 'closing day' party at the flat she and Drake live in. They spend three days moving Buffy and Dawn - and Tara - into the new house.

"A girl's house and a boy's house. What are we, Catholic?" Dawn mumbles, but Tara wants to come back - to help Buffy and be with Dawn and the pack lets her
go. The new house IS smaller, and Dawn doesn't get her own bathroom, but like all Manny's houses it has graceful details along window and door frames, a mind-boggling number of doors and - special treat - a fireplace. And a view of the sea, which Tara appreciates and Dawn envisions as a place to host parties. They make almost two thousand dollars at their yard sale, and with it they buy cell-phones for everyone.

"We need to be able to keep in touch," Buffy says, handing them out. Spike snorts and tucks his away, dismissing it, but a week later he's making a deal with Dawn to show him how to decipher the damn thing and retrieve the twenty-seven text messages Dawn has sent him. Anything to make the damn thing stop making NOISE. His next poker night he deliberately wins and loses until he's seen every kitten every demon has, and brings home a graceful seal-point Siamese for Dawn.

"Miss Kitty needs a friend when we're all out of the house," Dawn says, arms crossed and lip pouting out, daring Buffy to say no. To Spike's horror and Xander's endless amusement, she names the creature Sinclair.

"Because he looks like you, Spike," Dawn says, holding the wriggling scrap of cream and sable up for Spike's
inspection. "Look at his blue eyes! And the fangs!" The kitten bats at Spike's face and he hisses at it - gets a hiss in return and Dawn points triumphantly at the needle-sharp teeth. Miss Kitty takes her time warming up.

Spike smiled to himself, thinking of his namesake stalking Tara's swishing skirt-hems and rabbit-kicking Mr. Gordo, and Xander moved again, his hand coming up to rest on Spike's back and pet there for a moment before going limp once more. Spike contemplated the fine hairs that grew down the center of Xander's chest and thought about the past spring. So much change - so many things.

The Watcher and company off to Blighty the first week of March, the old house on Revello sold and the new house occupied in the last week of April. And then, one week into May they had their own announcement. A place opening up, a chance to go, and Xander looked at Buffy with hope and sorrow and pleading as he told them they were leaving - going to Seattle.
That had been days and days of 'talks' and shouting and fights - a night's worth of patrol wherein Buffy detailed every single thing Spike had ever done to screw them over and everything Xander had done to help her and told him, her voice cracking, that if Xander wasn't happy - if he wasn't deliriously overjoyed, she was going to come up there and move him back herself. And kick Spike's ass.

Spike had listened in silence and promised utter contentment and had seen blame in the Slayer's eyes - had seen accusation and 'You're the reason he's leaving everything, leaving home, leaving US!' He silently accepted it, but felt no guilt, and no remorse. The Hellmouth was a sink - was a lodestone for more than demons, and Spike couldn't tolerate the thought of his family living there - dying there - if they didn't have to. He schemed to have Dawn come for the summer - tried to cajole Tara into coming along. But Tara had finally and tearfully said no - said she had to stay and keep Dawn safe and Buffy sane.

Dawn at least had come, to spend a month with them in their house right off the Duwamish Waterway. Rough neighborhood, but that only made the patrols they'd never given up on more exciting, since sometimes they
fought a demon and sometimes they stopped the sort of mindless violence that made newspaper headlines. Dawn had kept up her training and came out with them a couple of times, actually staking her first vampire with only a little help. She spent her days with Derio and Oz at Pike Place Market or the Junction, wandering around the shops and watching the Sound ebb and flow - listening to Derio play his fiddle. Oz was working at a club doing sound stuff again, and Derio still did his computer thing, something Spike had never quite figured out but did bring in fairly regular paychecks.

Dawn had stayed at home with Spike a lot, as well; watching movies and teaching him about the computer Xander had bought so they could email every day or chat late at night. Nearly complete, the family - nearly perfect and Spike had ached for Tara and spoilt Dawn horribly. Seeing her off at the airport had been hard - the demon had screamed for him to just take her and keep her and make the family whole, but Spike had let her go - watched her hug them all and sniffle a little and march onto the plane with her chin up and shoulders straight, wishing there was some other way. And now it was almost the end of September and things had settled into a routine - into life again, without the endless
intrusions of Hellmouth origin, and Spike desperately wanted this to be good - wanted it to be right.

Spike sighed and closed his eyes - listened to the rain falling, steady and soft; listened to the distant sounds of barges and transport ships nosing into port with the occasional blast of an air-horn or a more prosaic bell. Guilt twisted in him - guilt and unease and the sense of having failed again, somehow - somewhere. News from Sunnydale said nothing had happened - was happening - but still...

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Driving north finally, most of their things in a rented truck with Xander's truck on a trailer behind. A Clem-cousin is driving the DeSoto up and they follow Oz's van, silent. Xander suddenly shivers - looks over his shoulder and then looks at Spike, eyes wide.

"God! It's been so long since I left, I forgot... You really - feel it, when you're away from it. You feel -"
"Lighter," Spike says, and Xander nods, frowning.

"Yeah...lighter and... Like I can really hear - can really see. God, it's WEIRD." Xander reaches for Spike's hand and holds it tightly but he's smiling, and the link is full of happiness. Oz sends the same back and Derio says the Knowing...just stretched itself a bit further. So it's good.

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But now Spike wondered if he really had got it right, and he sighed again, pressing in close to Xander's warmth, listening to the heartbeat that was steady and strong and solid - unstoppable, if he had anything to say about it.

"What's wrong, love?" Xander asked softly, and Spike smiled, not moving.

"You're getting good at that, pet. I didn't even know."

"It's a good trick," Xander said, and he slid his hands around Spike, pulling him closer and petting in earnest now - long, heavy strokes of his hands that pushed muscles around and made his skin tingle and Spike
sighed in pleasure this time.

"Now tell me what's wrong? I can feel you...fretting." Spike laughed, hearing his word from Xander's mouth.

"I'm not...well, I am. Just...wondering..." Spike couldn't say it, couldn't really think it, but Xander knew, anyway.

"Wondering if this is right. I know. It's - weird, not being in Sunnydale. But it's better. You're better. That's all I care about..."

"Don't tell me lies, love," Spike said softly, and Xander's hands stopped for one moment and then resumed their movements, the friction making Spike warm.

"I'm not lying. I wanted you better, and you are. You're more important than the Hellmouth, Spike...fuck, you're more important than the world, as far as I'm concerned. If something big comes up, Buffy can call Giles - or Angel - she doesn't need us like I need you." That internal pet, then - Xander pushing love and want and need and family pack us mine always through the link like sunshine and Spike had to smile again, half-drunk from it all. And still...guilty.
"But we're not all here, love. And I know you miss them..."

"So do you, Spike. But we do what we have to do. We'll go visit sometime...we'll have Dawn back, and we'll make Tara come... Fuck, we'll make Buffy come - show these northern vamps what the Slayer's all about." Spike laughed, and Xander hugged him - sighed a little himself and squirmed, getting Spike exactly where he wanted him.

_Love you forever, vampire-mine. Things change, it's just...life..._

_I'm afraid that..._

"That what, Spike?" Xander asked, threading his fingers slowly through Spike's hair, and Spike opened his eyes - looked at the window where the curtain belled and swung in the breeze, letting in scarves of rain-scented air.

"That you...resent..." Xander's finger on his lips stopped him, and he waited, almost trembling.

"Love - you didn't force me. You asked me. And I made
up my mind, and Oz and Derio did... We came along because we wanted to." Xander's hand slipped under his chin - lifted his face so he could see the dark, concerned eyes. "Want this, want you... Trust me to make up my own mind, okay?" Xander leaned a little and kissed him - sweet and mint and warm - and Spike kissed back - curled up and around and got both arms around him and just pulled Xander close, kissing and kissing until his mouth felt bruised.

Trust you love, always trust you...my own, family, always always, always...

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"So, we ready?" Xander stood nervously bouncing on the balls of his feet, watching as Spike dragged on his duster and loaded the pockets with sundries. Oz walked by carrying a sleeping bag and he reached out and rubbed Xander's back for a moment, grinning.

You okay?

Fuck, yeah, I just - "Just feel like...don't wanna screw anything up," Xander mumbled, and Oz dropped the
sleeping bag and pulled him into a hard hug.

"You can't screw it up, Xander. It's okay, man - just be...you, you know? Just be calm."

"Be me, yeah. Jesus, that's usually the problem -"

"Xander." Derio stomped over to him and Oz, frowning. "Stop that, hermano. You know it's not true." Xander laughed, a little shakily, and pulled Derio in for a hug as well.

"Sorry, sorry," he mumbled, and then Spike was there, displacing Oz just a little, running lips and the tip of his tongue over the claim-scar and making Xander shiver and smile.

"Just be calm, love. It'll be fine." Love you. Can't mess this up. Gonna be brilliant, love...

"Yeah, okay...fuck, guys, I'm sorry, I just -" Xander kissed whatever bits of the three of them he could reach and they all pulled back a little, disengaging but still touching, letting pack family us always surge through him and through the link. "I just want this to work. And I don't want anything to happen and I can't make my brain stop
thinking about it."

"I could make your brain stop," Spike murmured, shuttered gaze and half smile and *What's your pleasure, love; collar, rope, sit on my lap...*

"Oh fuck. You do that and this really won't work!" Xander had to grin and Spike did, and the mood lightened - lifted. Xander gave Derio an extra little squeeze and turned away, gathering the last item he needed. Spike did the same, and Derio shouldered a duffle. They'd be gone for four days - camping, which was something Xander equated with a tent made from a quilt in Jesse's back yard, flashlights and Oreo cookies and Willow sneaking over to sit, round-eyed, as Xander and Jesse both tried to tell the scariest story.

*And it sucks that that still hurts to think about.* Because it did hurt to think about Jesse - still hurt, always hurt - and it hurt to think about Willow. They had gotten an email from her, telling them she was settling in, learning things. But that was all. Xander had sent a desultory reply but...his heart hadn't been in it. He felt like...he was in mourning, and trying to talk to what was left of his best friend just made him tired, and angry. *And it HURTS.* *Fuck.*
*Don't think about it, love, don't. Please?* Xander nodded distractedly - looked up and caught Spike's eye where he was waiting by the door and smiled, just a little. Spike was more than happy to never contemplate Willow again - had dismissed her from his life and his future without a second thought. And Xander knew Spike wanted him to do the same but...

*Just hard, Spike. It's okay. Love you.*

*Love you too, pet.* Spike sighed, holding open the door, and Xander hoisted his toolbox where he kept his wood-carving stuff and went out to the van. He thought maybe he'd have a chance to work on some little things while they were out in the middle of nowhere.

*City boy, Oz thought, internal laugh, and Xander grinned to himself.* There wasn't actually that much in the van - there was more wood than supplies, which made Xander a little nervous again. He'd never done this kind of thing for real, like Oz had - driving and camping across the country and then halfway across the world, living on stuff he could cook over a fire and bartering his possessions away one by one for essentials like gas and water.
Just for four days, love. I'll keep you warm...keep you fed...

And again with the x-rated. I'm starting to think camping is gonna be like a long weekend in Vegas. Spike laughed from somewhere in the front of the van, messing with a portfolio full of CD's. It was just past nine in the morning and the sky was darkly blue-grey, overcast enough for Spike to safely be out without cover. Xander slung his tool-box up into the van and wedged it securely between a cooler and a milk-crate that held a couple of lanterns and jugs of oil for them, a few coils of muddy rope, a short-handled shovel and several pots nested together. Derio came out of the house with two jugs of water and Oz came out right after him, locking the door.

"And we're off," he said, pack love you happening happening stay close.

Close as you like, Spike thought, coming around to the back and brushing his fingers lightly through Oz's hair. They all settled into the van: Oz driving, Derio doing DJ duty, and Spike and Xander in the back, manning the map. They were heading for Mt. Rainier and the over 200,000 acres of forest and solitude that surrounded it. National park, full of rabbits and bears and trees, full
of glacier-melt streams and snow and silence. Privacy, for Derio to change for the first time.

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It was only about two hours, to get to the park gates. Whatever fees or notices were required Oz had already dealt with, and they drove through and then upwards, slowly. Xander knelt between the two front seats just staring. The forest on either side was thick and green - dark, in the greenish murk of the storm-light-shining-wet with rain. There were patches of snow in the deepest shadows and birds everywhere. Oz rolled his window down and the sharp, cold air came in like wine, thick with the scents of wet earth and wood, wet vegetation mouldering into compost and autumn-turned leaves smelling like baked bread and cinnamon and old books. Xander just shut his eyes and let the hyena out, closer to the surface than it had been in long time - since Toth's stick had sheared him from it and set it free. The scents and sounds coming in the window were intoxicating and he just hovered there, breathing in deep, slow breaths. He started in surprise when Spike crawled up behind him and got an arm around his waist, holding him close.
It's beautiful...god... This place is...

Perfect, Oz thought, and Xander agreed. Their campsite was half an hour up the mountain and they only saw three other cars as they drove the twisting road up and up. A strong breeze was blowing and occasionally rain would fall, gusting through the open window and spattering them all only to taper off and stop again. The campsite was deserted.

Setting up camp was easy, since they planned to sleep in the van. Oz had a tarp and two tall poles and he and Derio set up a sort of awning over the back of the van so they could cook and sit and stay mostly dry. The wood was off-loaded - Spike did it in three overloaded trips - and the Sterno cooker and cooler were placed to one side. There was a brick-lined pit with a grate over it and Oz set about making a fire.

Xander watched him for a few moments and then wandered away, towards the water he could hear on the other side of a thin belt of trees. He pushed through springy, rain-drenched pines and stopped, grinning. A small creek rushed past at his feet, crystalline water pouring over pebbles and larger rocks and one blackened
length of tree-trunk, half sunk in the water and covered on one side with pale green fungus. From here the view was clear and he could see the hoary, eroded cone of the mountain, white with ice and half-sunk in clouds and mist. He breathed, and felt the champagne air to the very bottom of his lungs.

*All right, pet?* Spike slid out of the trees, smiling at him, and Xander nodded.

*It's amazing. I've never - been anywhere. Never seen a mountain like this or...*

*Want to take you everywhere, love - want to take you over the whole world.* Spike wrapped his arms around Xander and leaned against him, hand sliding up under the denim jacket and flannel shirt - finding the edge of his thermal and then his t-shirt and burrowing under.

*Too many layers,* Spike thought, with a mental laugh, and Xander shivered as the vampire's cold hands stroked up and down his back.

*Just enough, and it'll be colder tonight. Aren't you freezing?*
Not with you to snog. Spike pulled him closer and found Xander's mouth and they stood pressed together for a very long time, kissing slowly. After awhile they separated, and Xander leaned his forehead onto Spike's, one hand idly tracing patterns over the black thermal shirt Oz had talked him into wearing.

When do you think it'll start working??

Dunno. It HAS been, a little bit... Have you felt it?

Maybe... It'll be weird, having somebody else to talk to like this. But good. Do you think it'll freak him out?

Dunno. Don't think so. He almost does it already, with the wolf... Spike lifted his head and Xander looked at him - looked into his eyes, that were calm and so vividly blue - at the small, real smile that made Xander's heart skip a beat and made his breath catch.

That for me?

Always for you, my one, my own, my only... They kissed until they heard Oz saying something about food, and then they went back to the camp, and Oz started showing Xander how to cook over an open fire.
Around five they had everything in place and it was dark already, the setting sun only a streak of deep scarlet for a moment along the high ridges of the mountain before the clouds swallowed it for good. The fire was burning steadily, several big logs laying half in and half out of the pit, ready to be pushed in further as they burned away. The inside of the van was lined with sleeping bags, blankets, quilts and pillows - a den for later. Spike had crawled in to nap for a couple of hours and now he was crawling back out, hair tousled up and his eyes half-shut and almost violet in the dimness. Oz had made coffee and they sat on camp stools drinking it in silence while Derio played something on his fiddle - sang softly, and Xander closed his eyes and just listened.

"I was born in a forked-tongue story...raised up by merchants and drug store liars...
Now I walk on the paths of glory...one foot in ice, one in fire...
I see the mountain...the mountain comes to me...I see the mountain...and that is all I see...
Some poor prophet comes, some find solace...some lay
him down in a junkyard bay...
Some will chase us and some will call us...gone, gone, gone in a day...
Gone to the mountain...the mountain comes to me...I see the mountain...and that is all I see...
Miller take me and miller grind me...scatter my bones on the wild green tide...
Maybe some roving bird will find me...over the water we'll ride..."

Xander was doing his own remembering - fretting, as Spike would say, but he wanted this to work, so he went back over things obsessively - particularly what they'd done a week ago, in preparation for this. Sitting in the living room, the old fold-out couch open so they could all sprawl on it in a comfortable tangle, watching movies and talking. Then the last movie was over and everyone was just comfortably relaxed in the warm, quiet house. Waiting.

*Your boy ready, wolfling? Does he know? Does he consent?* The vaguely formal words from Spike makes Xander sit up a little and Oz lifts his head and runs his hands back through his hair. He has, for some reason
known only to himself and possibly Derio, re-dyed it just the day before in a half-dozen shades of fire. Now in the saffron glow from a dozen candles his hair is static flame, tufted upright in locks of scarlet and dull gold, wheat and rust, amber and bronze and snow. Oz looks at Derio, a small tilt of his head, and then at Spike.

*He knows. He consents.*

*Has to say it, love,* Spike thinks, settling cross-legged, wearing Xander's ratty Sunnydale Swim Team sweats and nothing else.

"Derio, mi amor...it's time," Oz says softly, and Derio stares at him for one long moment and then he's sitting up too - scooting nearer to Oz and they're in a sort of circle now, facing each other.

"Do you want it? Do you want - us?" Xander says, low and a little hesitant, and Derio nods - swallows and takes Oz's hand tightly in his.

"I - I want it. I want - all of it. Familia..." Oz smiles at him and Spike does and Xander just feels a wave of relief.

"Oz told me - how it was? But I wanted to ask..." Derio
stopped and looked down - looked back up, nervously twisting the tip of a dreadlock in his fingers. "I wanted to ask - no acero. No i-iron." His nerves are making his accent more pronounced and Xander thinks for just a moment how much he loves to listen to Derio speak - how his native tongue creeps in and makes simple English sound so pretty.

*Pretty words, pretty boy...* Spike thinks, and he looks at Xander and smiles - looks back at Derio.

"What do you mean?"

"I just - don’t want any knives, yes? Just - would you - usar sus dientes, no mas..."

"Teeth, pet? Want me to bite you?" Derio shivers all over, his eyes closing for a moment and his hand is clutched so tightly around Oz's that his knuckles are white.

"Si, si, por favor mi hermano, por favor..."

"Hush, pet, it's all right..." Spike's eyes are gold, now - the link is thrumming with want and lust and happiness - with love and wonder. "That's all right - I can do
Derio nods - opens his eyes again and looks at Spike, smiling. Then he turns to Oz and kisses him, sweet and slow and love, love him, want him, pack pack pack from the wolf.

Love you, love him... Xander thinks, and Spike - reassuring the wolf that Derio is welcome - that he's WANTED. They end the kiss reluctantly and Derio ducks his head and pulls up the edge of his t-shirt - lifts it off and tosses it aside. He's slim and brown and sleek as a mink and on his left shoulder, close to his throat is a mark - a bite. Oz's bite, two days old, healing fast. The bite that will bring him over, the next full moon, into the world of the wolf. He has a string of beads around his neck, looping down to his belly, red and black. He lifts the beads, slipping them through his fingers and Xander is reminded of the old woman that lived next door when he was a kid, who would sit on her porch and pray over her rosary, glossy-dark beads looping endlessly through her fingers.

"Legba Ati-Bon, open the way. Dios travesia, protect us, guide us..." he whispers, and then he looks shyly up at them, smiling.

"Can I - give you a gift? Before we -"
"Of course, love," Spike murmurs, and Xander nods.

"Sure, Derio. But - I don't have -" Derio laughs, stopping him.

"I just wanted to - bring something to this -" Derio says, and Xander shakes his head.

"You only need you, Derio," he says, and Derio's smile is wide and happy - a little shaky at the edges.

"I...oh, I..." He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and then leans over a little, reaching out to the small table by the arm of the couch. It's been made into a small shrine and he's had set up there for a day, with candles and incense and a pack of Spike's smokes and a shot-glass off whiskey on it - a small statue of a wolf that Xander carved and a sheet of music that Oz wrote. Derio's fiddle is there as well, and he touches it fleetingly as he picks up something - three strands of beads in rich, shining colors. He holds them for a moment in his hand.

"These are just - because I want you to be protected my way, too," he says, and Oz rubs his knee, squeezing a
little. Derio separates out a strand of beads and goes up on his knees - crawls the few feet to Spike and loops it over his head. The beads are very small, strung in a repeating pattern of three black and three green.

"Ogoun is your protector - he who metes out life and death - he who clears the way when Papa Legba has found it. Ogoun, protect him." Derio kisses Spike lightly on the mouth and then sinks back - moves so that he's in front of Xander and Xander watches him, feeling as if something is building around them - feeling a low and subtle tingle that he associates with magic - a sort of pressure. Derio untangles a strand of white beads and lowers them over Xander's head and Xander shivers, his skin rising in gooseflesh. The pressure - the tingling - is stronger.

"Obatala is your protector - he who creates, he who metes out justice with compassion. Obatala, protect him," Derio breathes, and he leans forward and kisses Xander - faint taste of pepper and honey, scent of lime and warm earth. Derio moves to Oz now, and slips the last strand over the werewolf's head; pale yellow and rich amber-gold.

"Oshun is your protector. Goddess of the waters, and so
of blood - of the heart. She who makes beauty with her voice, her hands, her body. Oshun, protect him." His kiss for Oz is only a little bit longer and Derio settles back into his place and takes a long breath - puts his hand to his heart.

"He who finds the way," he says, and then he points to Spike, Xander, and Oz in turn. "He who makes the way safe, he who sees the truth, she who makes us joyful. As above, so below." As he says the final word there is a strange, singing sort of noise - a whisper-rush of air that swirls through the room and makes them all shiver, flattening the candle-flames. The pressure is for one long moment unbearable - frightening - and then it's gone and Xander is panting, staring at Derio and feeling his heart pound in his chest like a drum.

"God, Derio -"

"It's all right -" Derio says, and Xander laughs.

"All right? It's - fuck, it's - amazing." He lifts the beads in his hand and they seem to almost burn, and he laughs again. Oz is grinning, and Spike leans up on his knees and pulls Derio close - kisses him with on hand gently cupping his cheek.
"Thank you, pet," he says, soft, and Derio's eyes are shining like stars.

"I wanted...it just seemed like I would be taking -"

"No, you're giving," Oz says, and Xander nods. Spike is still leaning close to Derio and he runs his finger down Derio's neck, making the man shiver.

"Are you ready to give again then?" Spike says, and Derio nods - reaches blindly and takes Oz's hand in his. Spike pulls Derio close again - lets the demon out and for a moment Derio just stares at him - puts up one hand and traces his fingers lightly over the ridged brow. Xander and Oz feel the surge in the link - the shuddering twist of pleasure and desire, and then Spike bends his head and kisses Derio's throat on the opposite side of Oz's bite. Opens his mouth and sinks in his fangs and Derio makes a small, breathy sound - a whimper of pleasure and pain and Spike drinks for a moment and then backs away, licking his lips, his eyes gone heavy-lidded. Blood wells up and trails away, down to Derio's collarbone. Oz flicks a glance at Xander and Xander moves forward and licks, lapping at the blood and sucking for a moment at the wound. Derio's blood is like his kiss - pepper and
honey and earth and iron, and Xander shudders. The link is thick with WANT, now - thick with desire and with pack ours family ours ours.

Oz is panting a little now and he moves swiftly to the bite - licks the blood from Derio's chest and from his shoulder - cleans the bite and drinks what blood will come out and then he's kissing Derio. His hands sink into the bead-strung dreads, his mouth is hungry and demanding and Derio's fist twists in his shirt, pulling him closer.

Spike pulls Xander to him and yanks his shirt off - catches his mouth in a hard kiss and then slides his mouth down, to lick at the claim scar and send juddering bolts of heat through him.

Open the scar, love, make it bleed Spike thinks, and when his fangs sink into his throat Xander hisses, going from half-hard and pleasantly wanting to immediate, burning lust. He snaps his jaws shut over Spike's scar, feeling the static-shock spark of demon's blood over his tongue and then Oz is there, hand on Spike's shoulder and Derio is bending over him, hot mouth on his throat, tongue slick and probing and throat working as he takes in Xander's blood - Spike's. He is flushed - dazed - and when Spike opens the old, old mark on Oz's throat he moans, a deep
and urgent sound.

"Mi amor, mi amor..." Derio gasps, and then he's drinking, writhing, and Spike pushes Xander down, kissing him with sharp teeth and invading tongue, his hands pushing Xander's sweat pants down and away, kicking at his own as Xander does the same. They are thrusting, twisting; trying for maximum contact and Xander lets his thighs fall open - squeezes Spike's ribs between them and pulls him closer still, fingers sunk deep into the flexing muscle of Spike's back and ass, head thrown back as Spike's mouth worries over the scar.

Oz and Derio are twined together, the same urgent movement, the same groaning sighs and Xander reaches out and find's Derio's hand - laces their fingers together, palm to palm. Holds tight, pushing love you want you family ours always always into the link as hard as he can, hoping Derio might hear it - feel it -something. The tingling pressure of Derio's magic comes back - grows stronger - and the hyena snaps and bites, claws and writhes and WANTS, and the demon's growl becomes a roar of possession and triumph. Oz has shifted, just a little - black eyes staring into Derio's and the wolf opens his mouth and sings out love and joy and completion - PACK. The rising power crests and breaks like a wave in
the sea, flurry of fading wisps like dissolving foam and they ride the ebb of it down and down into sleep. When they wake hours later, a tangle of limbs and salt-sweat and heat, they can all feel the difference.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Xander looked up suddenly, aware that the music had stopped and found Spike staring at him from under half-closed lids, his mouth in a lazy smile. Oz was flushed, leaning on Derio, and Derio was staring at him, open-mouthed.

"Were you - Dios mio, Xander, I felt - is that the link? Were you thinking about...that night?"

"Uh...yes? Sorry, I -"

"Nothin' to be sorry for, love," Spike said, and Fucking want you, making Xander take in a sharp breath.

"You really felt - something? Felt it?"

"Fuck, I - yeah, felt something, all right," Derio said, half-laughing, and Oz let his hand rest high on Derio's thigh.
"Moon's gonna be up in about...an hour. Should get ready," he said, and Derio blinked and looked at him - seemed to gather himself together.

"Yeah, yeah okay, lobo." Derio began to put his fiddle away and Spike got up and stretched - came to stand behind Xander and started combing his fingers through Xander's hair, tugging and gently scratching and Xander leaned back against his legs, *love you so much...you nervous?*

*A little, I suppose,* Spike answered. Xander half-closed his eyes and Spike caressed his cheek and lips - went back to his hair, calming them both with that familiar touch. Oz was moving around the camp, doing small things like lighting a lantern and hanging it carefully from a hook in the van and shutting the doors.

*Keep out the damp and make it a little warm in there,* he thought when Spike sent a question through the link. Time seemed to pass in a convoluted fashion - slowly and then quickly and then slowly again and Derio and Oz took off their clothes and put them in the van - huddled close to the fire, a blanket wrapped around them. Waiting again. Derio was saying Oz's mantra
under his breath, slowly and carefully, keeping his breathing even. His fingers were locked in the beads he still wore and for the first time Oz was wearing something too - the strand of beads Derio had given him that night. The strand was long enough Xander doubted it would break during the change. His own strand was under his layers of clothing, a faint whisper of power singing through him whenever Xander really thought about it. Spike wore his as well. Suddenly Oz became as still as stone, and Derio's voice faltered and died away. Oz twisted his head around, looking up into the blank sky, and even though he couldn't see it he could feel the moon, and that feeling shot through the link. Rumbling static that was sensation and sound too deep to hear with your ears. It made Xander's bones shake and behind him Spike was growling out a sing-song groan.

"Oz?" Derio whispered, and his eyes were black.

"Say it, now, Derio, look at me -" Oz said, his hands on Derio's shoulders and Derio nodded. His lips moved, saying the mantra, and the change...happened. But slowly - as slowly as Derio said the words and Xander watched, fascinated, as Derio's body twisted - extended - warped into the wolf-shape that they knew so well. Oz
changed too, but much faster, and they were standing there, motionless. Derio lifted his head, scenting the air - swinging the narrow muzzle around until it pointed at Spike and Xander. His eyes caught and reflected the fire-light and Xander could see the red and black beads glinting in the deep brown fur. And other things - the tiny bells, the beads and wire and trinkets he had woven into his dreads. All there, in the thick ruff that fell around his shoulders and neck. Oz was scenting as well and he went to a tree a few paces away - reared up and clawed the bark, then dropped back down, scratching the earth.

*Keep the bears away,* he thought.

*Bears? Fuck... God, Oz - he's...look at him. He's -*

*Beautiful. Derio -* Spike was pushing - pushing *pack love you family beautiful* hard through the link and Derio-wolf paced closer, a thin whine escaping his throat. He snuffled along Xander's thigh - pushed his nose into Xander's hand and then came closer - reared up as Oz had done and put his forepaws on Spike's shoulders.

*Pack.* Faint. But it was there and Spike laughed.
Yes! Pack, pack, family - love you! Oz - love you... Spike put his hands out and ruffled the thick, dark fur and Derio whined again - lifted his muzzle and let out a short howl.

Pack...night...cold good prey run run run RUN love... Something seemed to break and then Derio's awareness was flooding them. The scents and sounds of the night doubled - tripled - and Xander gasped. The hyena shot to the surface and let out a shriek of pure joy and Derio snarled for a moment and then howled - long, quavering cry that Oz joined in on a moment later. Derio dropped back to all fours and trotted to Oz, nuzzling into his side, tail whipping furiously.

Pack run hunt blood run run HUNT The demon roared to life, and Xander pushed himself to his feet - turned around to see Spike pulling off his duster - his own clothes.

Hunt pack family hunt, from the hyena, urging him on and Xander struggled with the laces of his boots - flung his clothing down as the wolves leapt away, careening into the trees. Spike turned golden-glowing eyes on him and grinned, then he grabbed Xander's hand and they ran.
The air was cold and sharp, knifing into Xander's lungs. The patches of snow were like fire under his feet and branches whipped over his skin, stinging him. But it was good - it was right. Something startled in the brush ahead and the wolves yipped excitement, the link just mindless hunt and run, the rumbling static-roar of the moon like a heartbeat underneath it all.

Hunting in cities was relatively new, to the demon; it flooded the link with feelings -with memories - race-memories older than time of hunts that were exactly like this. Tracking prey through forest and across plain; running, and finding and drinking blood hot and spiced with fear, with adrenalin, with life. The demon roared, dodging trees, and the hyena called again and again, keeping the pack together. Xander felt his human self slipping back. Not running away, and not being locked out, just...letting go. Letting the hyena take over so that the woods were in sharp relief, everything seeming to glow just faintly with reflected light from the distant cities and filtered light from the moon. The clouds were moving fast overhead and the occasional break in them was like a halogen spot, shining down. Spike was like a flare of white fire in his vision, moving as if his joints were liquid mercury.
Scents - of earth and water, tree and stone. Scent of the demon, which was a burning, sweet smell of magic and age and old, old blood. Wolf-scent, which was a sharp, thick musk, Oz's earthier, Derio's more citrus. Even his own body had a scent, of salt and blood and something honey-sweet, and Xander drew in great lungfuls of the air and let it swirl in his mouth - let it inform him and guide him.

As they ran, small animals started out of the brush around them, skittering away until they finally broke out of the trees and were running across a grassy meadow, the wind in their faces. A scent - hot and rank and thick - blew straight at them and *prey prey blood hunt* was in the link, from all of them. The clouds thinned a little and Xander could see deer - a herd, heads down and grazing. As they got closer the deer shifted - heads came up sharply, ears turning and tuning. Oz made a low sound - a 'go' sort of sound and he and Derio launched themselves flat out. The deer bolted, panicked and running in seconds flat and then Oz was leaping, paws extended, jaws closing down on the haunch of a fleeing doe, and Derio was leaping for the throat. The deer stumbled and slewed sideways - scrabbled at the earth desperately with her hooves.
Spike and Xander were a few paces behind and Spike put on an extra burst of speed and hit the deer solidly in the ribs, his hand crooked like a talon and shredding into the soft underbelly. Blood-scent hit the air, thick and hot, and the deer was down, on her side, legs kicking. Derio let go of the neck and howled, a wild ululation that sent shivers down Xander's back. Spike pounced on the throat of the deer and sank his fangs in, the taste of the blood exploding through the link and Xander wanted it. Oz was ripping the belly open, and Derio was worrying at the flank and Xander pushed between them. The hyena knew what to do - where to grab - and he went armpit deep in the cavity of the body, searching.

*Pack is strong...blood and bones...* The hyena yipped in triumph as Xander's hands found his prize - the liver, hot and blood-rich and melting on his tongue, settling in his stomach like a burning coal. Derio sniffed and then tore a piece away, bolting it and Oz pushed in for his own share, bloody to the eyes. Spike tore away from the throat, blood down the front of his body and roared, that booming, ferocious cry that echoed and re-echoed off the flanks of the mountain. Something replied - a grumbling, coughing sound that Oz identified as *bear.*
The body of the deer steamed in the cold air - the blood and the bones under his hands felt good - felt right... The hyena was almost in a frenzy of ecstasy, extending itself as far as it could, feeling and seeing in ways Xander almost never let it. His heart was pounding, solid and fast and strong, his chest dragging in huge gulps of air and he was hard, so fucking hard it almost hurt. He wanted to shred the deer - wanted to roll in it, in the blood, wanted to burrow into the earth and take his pack with him and live in this moment forever.

*Spike...leader...this...this!*

*This this blood and running, sweat and spit and marrow, full belly, hard cock, this this...* Spike slithered off the carcass, side-stepping Derio who was shaking his head and shoulders, the hide between his teeth slowly peeling back off of raw muscle. Spike yanked Xander into a hard embrace, his mouth moving in sharp bites over Xander's neck and shoulders - over his chest. Xander sank his fingers into Spike's ass and ground them together, sizzling shock when their cocks rubbed and Spike pushed his hand between Xander's legs, breeching him with blood-slick fingers.

*Fuck, fuck, Spike - pack, pack leader YOURS, mine, mine*
now... Coherency was fragmenting and Xander dragged Spike down to the grass - wormed his way onto his stomach and spread his knees wide, bracing his elbows on the ground, inhaling the sharp spice of the crushed blades and the rich soup of the earth-smell underneath.

When Spike slammed into him, no preparation and almost no warning, he lifted his head and screamed and it was so fucking good. Oz and Derio were snapping and snarling, shifting back off the full change and rolling onto the grass as well, clutching and biting, *mine yours pack mine* mindlessly in the link from Oz, nothing but pure want from Derio.

Xander pushed back hard into Spike - arched his throat and begged for the bite he knew was coming, his own hand tight around his cock but *love this love you yours yours TAKE it, pack Spike fuck fuck fuck*. He knew, dimly, he'd be sore and maybe sorry in the daylight, but right now he never wanted this to end.

*Mine*, the demon growled, and the fangs were needles of silver that sent a wave of fire through him and he howled to the sky. This was belonging, this was pack, and if it never happened again he would never, ever forget.
Spike shuddered awake, gasping, twisting frantically away from the hands that were on his shoulders. He growled, feet skidding over the flannel sheets and then there was nothing and he was falling and he hit the floor with a thump that jarred his teeth together.

"Spike? You okay?" Xander's voice - Xander's face, peering at him over the edge of the mattress, wide-eyed and Love, safe, you're safe - Spike? Wake up, love, wake up, you're safe -. Spike just stared back for a moment and then slowly he sat up - pushed up until he was on his
feet and crawled back into the bed. He was shivering and Xander pulled the covers back - got under with him and snuggled close, pulling Spike into the furnace heat of his own body and bedclothes warmed by an electric blanket.

"Love, shhhh, it's all right, it's all right..." Xander stroked his hair - rubbed his back - and Spike just clung to him, face buried in Xander's neck, trying to sort dream from real - frantically shoving images, memories - sensations - back into the deepest recesses of his mind.

*Question fear question,* from Derio, downstairs somewhere, and *Nightmare, it's all right...Spike? Okay?* from Oz. But Spike couldn't quite articulate a response - couldn't get the nightmare packed away fast enough and Xander's arms tightened around him, just holding as hard as he could

*What is that, what, what* - Derio sounded confused - sounded scared - and Spike focused and pushed, forcing every bit of the nightmare down and away and gone.

*Initiative.* *That's...thought that was...?* confusion from Oz, and Xander stroked Spike's back, kissing his hair and his temple, kissing his forehead.
Hasn't dreamed that in a while. Love, you all right?

All right, I'm - sorry, sorry... Spike wanted to hit something - wanted to kill something. He hadn't dreamed of the Initiative...in over a year. Fucking hell...it's Glory, it's...fucking 'aftermath' but it's getting WORSE, it's...

"Love, it's all right, shh..." Xander's heart was pounding under his ear, and Spike nodded into his chest, trying to calm himself down - trying not to panic. There was sunlight behind the curtains - low and mellow gold and Xander smelled of wood and varnish and sawdust. Smelled as if he'd just gotten home. There were footsteps up the stairs and the door creaked open and first Oz and then Derio slid into the room. Derio looked thoroughly spooked and Spike winced inwardly.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he mumbled, and Derio and Oz both came closer, settling on the edge of the bed.

"Not your fault," Oz said, his hand finding Spike's foot under the blankets and squeezing gently. Derio was looking steadily down at where his hands were playing with a dread and he'd managed to shut the link down to
almost nothing.

"Derio?" Xander said, and the man looked up sharply, his black eyes snapping with some emotion.

"That's - Oz told me, before, but...Dios mio, he never...told me... Did they do that to you too, mi amor? Did they - fuck -" Derio clamped his mouth shut, shuddering, and Oz pulled him into a tight embrace. *Protect pack outsiders kill them!* from Derio. Fierce but also desperate, because there was no one left to kill - no one left to fight.

*Love you, safe, we're safe, it's all right, pack, family.*

"Bloody fucking hell..." Spike felt as desperate as Derio did but for different reasons. *Can't do this, can't go BACK to that - have to know...what this is.* He'd been spending his time lately going around to different places - demon places - and asking questions. Finding out this and that but none of it made any sense and none of it seemed to have anything to do with what was happening to him. Something bad, building in the Hellmouth but something bad was always happening there, and it wasn't his problem anymore. *Still our problem, always our problem, half of our family is there and we can't*
leave them, won't abandon them -

I know, I know, I know! Just have to get this sorted, just have to - fix this first. No good if I can't think straight... He deliberately took a deep breath, then another, and pushed himself upright, scooting down the bed a little.

"Just a nightmare, fiddler, don't let it bother you." He tugged gently on a handful of dreads - tugged Derio's head over just a little so he could kiss where the fiercely-knit brows made a 'v'. "Just a left-over. Happens sometimes." Derio's hand and Oz's, tight together on Oz's leg, and Xander's hand in the small of his back and he felt the security of their pack as something terribly, frighteningly fragile. "'Bout time for some dinner, yeah?" he asked, and Oz smiled faintly.

"Sure, time for some dinner." Love you, safe here, and Oz stood up, pulling Derio with him, out the door and downstairs. Xander scooted up close behind him and wrapped his arms around him again and Spike sighed and leaned into him.

"Don't hide things, love," Xander whispered. "Tell me what I can do?"
"I don't know, pet. I really - don't know. Gonna find out, though." Spike turned his head enough to kiss and they just did that for a moment, lost in the link and the sensation and then Xander pulled away just a little.

"You be careful, all right? I know what you're doing, you know. Just - watch your back. Or better yet, let me watch it." Spike had to laugh, and Xander grinned.

"Not as clever as I thought, am I? No place for you, love, different as you are. You're still too human for most of 'em. I'll be careful. Been careful for almost 150 years - it'll be all right." Xander studied his face - reached to gently push his hand through Spike's hair.

"Just you make sure of that. C'mon, I need a shower. Wanna wash my hair?"

"Want something," Spike murmured, heated look and his hand creeping up Xander's thigh and Xander grinned and pulled him up and out of the bed.

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Xander puttered around the house, feeling a little bored. Oz and Derio were off doing something at the club Oz worked at - tweaking the sound system to some arcane standard only they knew and understood. And Spike was off...hunting, but not for blood. Hunting for a way to fix things. Xander wished he could be with him but over time he'd gotten to understand some things, and this was one: if Spike said it was too dangerous for him, then it was, because Spike knew he could handle himself - had watched him take on vamps and demons and ignorant drunks and vicious not-drunks and win. So it wasn't something Xander was going to argue about, even if he wanted to. He'd turned on the radio and done a little laundry and cleaned the bathroom. Carved for a while on the figure he was working on. Spike and Derio and Oz, but the way the hyena remembered them from their nights spent on Mt. Rainier. Fluid, animalistic shapes that twisted around each other - became each other. Spike complained that Xander wasn't there and Xander just shrugged. He was making a record of his memories, slowly but surely, in the clean white and green of newly-cut wood and the ashy silver of driftwood and he didn't need himself in the tableaus he was making.
He studied the figures now - about three feet tall, growing upward from a solid base and twining, bending. Oz's wolf-face lean and open-mouthed, Derio's dreads like a ripple of water, Spike's sharply articulated form like a stooping hawk. He needed to clean up the details - take a little more of the base out, because he wanted more of a bowl-shape beneath the figures. But his hands were tired - his fingers getting stiff - and he didn't want to make any mistakes. He tidied his tools away and swept up bits of wood and dust. He moved the figure to the corner where his 'in progress' stuff rested under old sheets. Next to his corner was Spike's desk, and Xander paused for a moment, looking at the notebooks scattered over the surface, and the five heavy, leather-bound journals that were stacked there. Spike had kept journals since before he was turned. Obsessively, as a human, less frequently as a vampire but always a few pages here and there. He'd started keeping a new one soon after Mrs. Kroger's visit, and Xander had seen him in the grey light of dawn poring over his old journals - scribbling feverishly in the notebooks. Trying to remember - to fix it all in his head and let none of it go.
"Come to bed, love," Xander had said, and Spike had looked up at him, his eyes red-rimmed, the link shut down hard but *fear* coming through anyway, like a tiny trickle of ice-water.

"When Red did that spell, wolfling forgot himself - forgot his humanity. What if I... forget YOU, love? What if I forget...my soul or...my - my -"

"Won't happen, Spike. It WON'T." Xander had crossed to him and crouched down beside him - drew Spike's hands into his and held them tight, chaffing the cold fingers between his palms.

"I could HURT you, Xan - I could kill you."

"Not with the link, Spike. Not with the claim. It's going to be all right..."

"Gonna be all right," Xander whispered, stacking the notebooks and putting the pens back in the cup - picking up an empty shot glass and taking it to the kitchen. He
rinsed the glass out, swaying a little to the music on the radio. A singer he didn't recognize, music that sounded like something from Manny's 'war years'.

"If the moon turns green and shadows get up and walk around
And clouds come tumbling to the ground
I wouldn't be surprised...'Cause didn’t you fall in love with me..."

Spike, Oz and Derio were distant hums in the link, pack and safe and love. Xander put the shot glass in the dish drainer - turned to the fridge and got out a bottle of water and had a long drink.

"If the stars turn blue...and willows that weep begin to sing
And winter changes into spring
I wouldn't raise my eyes...'Cause didn't you fall in love with me..."

The radio fuzzed out suddenly into piercing static that made Xander jump. He wiped his mouth with the back of
his hand and hurried over to it, turning the volume down and then fiddling with the tuner, trying to make the music come back. He got nothing but static, all up and down the dial, and he stared for a moment, perplexed. *No storm tonight, just the usual Seattle drizzle... Radio's plugged in although I think it wouldn't make ANY noise if it was unplugged... Antenna broken, maybe?* Xander poked around for another minute but the music didn't come back, so he switched it off. *Weird. Have to have Oz give it a look when he gets home.* He raised the water bottle to his lips and almost drank but at the last minute color, where no color should be, made him really look at the bottle.

"Oh fuck - what the hell?" The bottle was filled with something red that Xander refused to identify as blood. *Jesus, I almost drank that!* He held the bottle out at arm's length - tipped it a little. The contents moved sluggishly, as if half-congealed, and he thought he could smell it - rank and old. Grimacing, he found the cap and screwed it on - dropped the whole thing into the garbage. As he did the lights flickered, once and then twice, and went out altogether.

"Oookay," Xander said softly. He could see fine - there was plenty of indirect light for the hyena from the
streetlight half a block away and the light reflected from the city that lit the low-hanging clouds to a soft pewter. He looked out the kitchen window, his heart beating a little fast now. The lights were on in the house next door. He checked out other windows and got the same story; every house on the block was lit up except for their house.

"Right....check the breaker box..." Xander needed actual light for this, so he opened the junk drawer and pawed through take-out menus and balls of string - rubber bands, screwdrivers, a couple of Spike's long spiral nails and a baggie of guitar picks for the little 'credit-card' style flashlight they kept in there. He clicked it on, keeping his eyes half-shut and averted until he could adjust to the brilliant lance of white-blue light. He went to the back of the house, to the windowless utility room and pulled open the cover of the breaker box. A minute's flipping switches got him nothing and he sighed and considered going outside, to look at the box where the line came down from the pole on the corner. Xander put his hand on the back door knob and turned - pulled - and nothing happened.

*What the fuck? It wasn't sticking yesterday, not after I planed the door down a little...* Xander wrenched a little
harder but the door didn't move. He clicked the little light off and shoved it into his pocket - put both hands on the door and yanked, putting all his claim-bought strength into it. *Nothing. Fuck.* He moved swiftly through the house to the front door, a knot of cold fear blooming in his belly. That door wouldn't open either.

Damnit. Okay - calm. *Spike?* He reached out, feeling for Spike and got...void. That fuzzy blankness of forgetting and that's when the fear slammed into him, kicking his heartbeat up to a gallop and shortening his breath to shallow pants. *Spike - you hear me love? Spike!* Nothing, nothing, and he closed his eyes and felt for Oz and Derio. Again - nothing. A sort of mindless...'we're here' that was the link on autopilot or something, if that were possible. They were alive, but he couldn't reach them.

*Fuck, okay - calm. Be calm. Gotta get out first, in case it's the house -* Xander moved towards the closet under the stairs where the weapons were kept. As he reached for the little door the whole house boomed, shaking and groaning as if it were a giant waking from some thousand-year sleep. Xander reeled and fell backwards in the narrow hall, cracking his head against the boards. The stair-closet door popped and swung slowly
open and the radio suddenly went on again, loud and piercingly clear.

"I can see what the cost will be...You know I don't need you
I just can't put you down...I can see what it all means to me
Honey I don't need you...I just can't put you down
Can't put you down..."

Something he recognized - Alice in Chains at top volume and he froze for one second then darted to the kitchen and grabbed the radio - yanked the plug out of the wall. The music kept blaring, scraping on his nerves. Something white moved in the corner of his vision and he spun, gasping.

"Spike?"

"Nope. What, you forget me already?" The radio died - the lights flickered and then came back on with a low buzz and Xander flinched - stared. Black hair, dark eyes. Pointed chin and long legs. Jesse, exactly as he
was the night Xander had dusted him and he felt something worse than fear - felt the hideous twist of guilt and shame.

"Jesse? Jesse - what -" Xander slowly put the radio down - took a cautious step forward. Spike? Oz! Derio, damnit - can you hear me? This is getting fuckin' weird -

"Hey, Xander. Sorry about all that. Happens sometimes." Jesse grinned at him, and Xander grinned back. He couldn't not. This was Jesse, who he'd shared a thousand secrets with, and every comic he'd ever bought, and his crush on Theresa Hart in seventh grade and his crush on Buffy... This was family, like Dawn and Tara were - like Giles and Ethan might become.

"Oh - god. Jess? How - how did you -" Forgetting Jesse was dead - forgetting that he'd been a vampire before that - Xander took three fast steps forward, his hands going out to touch - to hold - to confirm. They passed through air that seemed to faintly vibrate - to faintly cling in a way that made Xander shiver.

"Oh, you're not -"

"Not corporeal. Bet'cha didn't think I knew a word like
that, huh?" Jesse laughed and Xander stepped back, leaning on the kitchen counter and crossing his arms - hugging himself.

"What are you doing here, Jess? I thought... I saw you die."

"You made me die, Xan-man," Jesse said, his voice flat and a little cold, and Xander nodded slowly.

"I - know. I know I did. Jess, I'm -"

"Hey, buddy, don't sweat it. I was evil, you know? Luring you and Buffy to certain death...except it didn't really work out that way, did it?" Jesse walked over to the table, examining the scatter of things there: a pack of dog-eared cards with a blood-stain on the Ace of spades, a handful of guitar strings still in their little paper packages, sheet music with notation scribbled on it in Oz's scratchy script and Derio's tiny, perfect Copperplate. Xander's tool-belt, a fan of loose change, an overflowing ashtray.

"So, you're up here in Seattle now...left the Hellmouth - left Willow." Jesse looked up from the cards, frowning a little, and Xander nodded again.
"She's not there, though. She -"

"Yeah, I know. She got with the mojo - got all Freddy Kruger or something, huh?" Jesse shrugged - walked back over to stand opposite Xander. "I'm not here to...accuse you of anything, Xan."

"Why are you here? Why not - before? Why now?" Xander reached in the link again and got the same maddening blanks. Damnit! Maybe it's not them - maybe it's 'cause Jesse is here...maybe it's me... Fuck, I hope Spike doesn't freak out...

"Well, mostly I'm here 'cause I wanted to see you. See...how you are. See what's happened with you since, you know -" Jesse mimed staking himself and Xander looked away. "Dude, I told you - I'm not here to accuse you! I needed to be killed - I was evil and had to die." His voice was sing-songy, too light, and Xander looked sharply at him.

"But you might not have been. I've - learned a lot of things since then. I can see things now, Jess - it's amazing..." Xander told him, in the most edited version possible, of his encounter with Jack, and his gift. Jesse
listened, frowning, and when Xander was done he shook his head.

"Now that, see, is why I'm here. What's the deal, Xander? You're a human. Why do you live with a vampire and two werewolves? I mean, I'm not even gonna go into the whole 'gay now' thing, 'cause -TMI! But - why are you taking their side?"

"Side? It's not about sides, Jess! If anything, Spike is taking my side! And you knew Oz just like I did. What were we gonna do - kill him? He's Oz, he's...family!!" Xander pushed his fingers back through his hair, incredulous. "I love them, Jess, and they love me. And we've done - a lot of things - a lot of good. Saved the world a time or two."

"Well, that's true. But you're still making exceptions. Vampire - evil - soulless, remember? That's why you shoved a stake through my heart, Xander! That's why you killed me."

"I didn't know, Jess!" Xander wished he could take Jesse and shake him - hold him - and his hand reached out, but then he pulled back, remembering the wrongness that he'd felt. "I mean - all that happened so fast! We met
Buffy and a week later I'm fighting for my life with - with vampires! Fuck, man..." Xander looked up at the ceiling for a moment, taking a deep breath, calming down. "I see things differently now, Jesse... I'm - sorry."

"Yeah, sorry. I'm sorry too, Xander. Sorry you didn't give me a chance to prove if I was evil. What if I had a soul just like your Spike? What if I could have saved the world?" Jesse seemed to be getting angrier, and the lights flickered, strobing. He was pacing now, and in the stuttering light his movements became jerky and uncoordinated - out of synch.

"It's really too bad you couldn't have waited, huh, Xan? But you just did what you were told, killed your best friend... And now some...freak gives you this gift? This seeing? And you trust it - you listen to its lies and you trust what you see and now you're fucking a vampire!" Jesse was screaming - was right up in Xander's face and suddenly the house shook again, groaning rumble of something massive and ancient reverberating through the air. The bulbs in the ceiling light popped, scattering glass over the floor and into Xander's hair. The lights in the living room did the same and the radio blared back to life; hissing static, overlapping layers of screams, groans, shrill screeching like metal being
dragged over metal. Jesse seemed to distort, wavering in the air like a heat-mirage and Xander darted away, running through the living room to the front door and trying desperately to wrench it open.

*SPIKE! Spike, fuck - PLEASE - need your help - Oz - Derio!* Nothing, nothing, nothing, and Xander stumbled backwards - looked at the window that led out to the front porch. *Go right through it - probably won't get cut too bad -*

"You betrayed me, Xander! You chose those things over your human family - you chose them over Willow!" Jesse was roaring - stretching, warping, becoming something else, and Xander stared, horrified. "Something's coming, Xander - something that's worse than anything you've ever seen - ever heard of! It's coming and it's going to swallow the Hellmouth whole and their blood will be on your hands!" The apparition lunged for him, face distorting grotesquely and teeth lengthening to fearsome proportions as it morphed into a twisted parody of a vampire. Xander flung himself aside and the thing screeched, the house shaking and seeming to settle on its foundations with an audible thump. Then utter silence and Xander lay on the floor where he'd thrown himself, panting, shivering violently.
Fuck, not Jesse, couldn't be Jesse, oh GOD, oh fuck, please - please - There were footsteps, rapidly approaching, and then a splintering crack and Spike was through the door, shouldering its remains aside and swooping down on him - gathering him close. The link suddenly snapped open, flooding him with XANDER! Coming, coming - fucking crazy, coming! from Oz and Pack, family protect protect protect from Derio. But best - most wanted - was Spike.

I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I've got you, love, I've got you, you're safe, it's all right, safe, safe, family all safe...

In the kitchen, the radio came back on, the same song that had been playing when it had all started and Xander knew that it was - something's way - of telling them it wasn't through.

"If the moon turns green and rivers begin to flow upstream

And this is all a crazy dream, I wouldn't be surprised..."
'Cause anything can happen...If you can fall in love with me..."
and Xander reached out and put his fingers on his jaw - turned his head back. "Love? Please tell me. Was your - was it solid? I couldn't touch - Jesse." The hurt and guilt in the link made Spike sigh, and resign himself to telling everything. He hopped up on the counter behind him and pulled Xander close between his thighs.

"No, mine wasn't any more solid than yours - I took a swing and hit a wall, is all. It - whatever it was - looked like Angel."

"Oh." Xander leaned into him and Spike hugged him. "What - did it say?"

"Bunch of lies," Spike said, too quickly, and Xander looked up at him. "All right, pet, maybe not all lies. Seemed to know a bit about me - 'bout my past and what I've been doing..."

*Pack safe,* Derio thought, and there was a tinge of hysteria to that. Oz propped the broom in the corner and crossed to him - pulled a chair up close so he could put an arm around him and kiss his hair.

"Yeah, we're safe. We saw - well, up on those screens at the club? There were all these...images. These..." A
sudden, disjointed flow of pictures through the link and Xander and Spike both flinched. The family fighting and losing. Those still in Sunnydale being hunted down and imprisoned - tortured and tormented and used. The world becoming a pit - a hell - and all of it starting from a Hellmouth that gaped like the maw of Leviathan. A creeping plague of misery and death that rolled out from one place, unstoppable. And their family - Buffy - paraded bloody and broken before the hordes as the bringers of it all - the champions who had lost and doomed the world.

"Jesus Christ," Xander whispered faintly, and they all huddled there in silence. Derio had his head on Oz's shoulder and Oz was whispering - rubbing his neck. Spike felt the fear and despair in the link - the guilt and confusion - and he shook his head, snarling.

"No, no. We're not giving in to this, hear me? This bloody spook wants to scare us and beat us down - wants to make us too afraid to fight. Not going to happen." FAMILY. We're here, we're together, we're STRONG. Pack - family - nest. Love you ALL. Spike flooded the link - pushed the black mood and his own fears - his own nightmares - aside and let his love, his pride, his need and his desire - his wanting - roll over his
family like a wave. Pull them under, inundate them, fill them and send them back to the surface, buoyed up by everything he felt, everything he was and everything they made him. Xander's arms came around him and hugged him hard, and Oz pulled Derio up and they crowded close, affirming the emotion through their fingertips and their noses and their mouths. After a few minutes the desperation went out of them and they just rested there against each other.

"It all seems to be - centering - on Sunnydale. We need to talk to Tara and Buffy," Oz said finally, and Xander nodded against Spike's neck - pulled back a little, wiping his eyes.

"Yeah, you're right. They might have already heard this - might have a handle on it."

"Bit late for calls - we'll do it in the morning, yeah?" Spike wanted close family never leave and the hyena and wolves all wanted den nest safe together. They spent the rest of the night on the pull-out bed, just being together. Strengthening their bond, soothing each other and trying to rest.
Spike paced, smoking too much and feeling like he wanted to gut something. It wasn't helping Derio, who kept shifting a little to the wolf and back, and it wasn't helping Xander, who was trying to find Buffy. Oz just watched, one hand on Derio's back, rubbing in soothing circles, and *calm, we're safe, calm, calm*, like honey being poured over their souls.

"Okay Manny - I appreciate it. Thanks." Xander hung up and shook his head - sighed - and Spike ground out his cigarette and went to sprawl beside him on the couch. "She called in sick today - I don't know what the deal is. Dawn's not answering, but she should be in school so she better not be answering, and Tara might be in class too... Maybe we should call Giles?" Xander twitched ever so slightly as Spike tugged at his arm and then he gave in and slumped over, his head on Spike's shoulder.

"Let's give it a little time, huh Xan? See if she calls back." Oz's voice was as slow and soothing as his mental chant and Xander nodded, closing his eyes.

"Yeah, okay. We'll -" Then the phone rang. Xander snatched it up - turned it on. "Hello? Buffy, thank god -"
"Xander, there's trouble. You've got to come back to Sunnydale." Xander looked up at the others, and Spike saw the dismay on his face - saw the shock and the worry and then saw, with a sinking feeling, the resolve.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Damn pit is gonna drag us back no matter what we do. This had better be something real. Fucking Hellmouth. Not gonna get my family.

__________________________

Paul Whiteman - If the Moon Turns Green

Alice in Chains - Put You Down

17 Discoveries
Spike stood at the back door, watching the sun set. The sun itself had sunk behind a narrow band of clouds and the intervening buildings, and posed no danger. The sky was shifting from azure and crimson and saffron to plum and pomegranate and old, mellow gold. Xander was behind him, warm as the sun, solid; his arms were tight around Spike's ribs - his chin rested lightly on Spike's shoulder. Oz and Derio, in much the same pose, stood beside them and the link - for the moment at least - pulsed with contentment and love and family pack family, heart-beat deep and strong as bone. The van and the truck both stood ready at the curb - the house was shuttered, turned off, closed down. Going back. They were going back.

Love you so much, from Xander, that internal petting that soothed even the demon. We're going to be fine. Going to come home soon.

Promise me, love, promise me... Spike couldn't even finish that thought, and Xander's arms tightened around him - held him somehow closer.

Never leave you, never let you go.

Protect protect protect...love you all, and that was Derio,
whose emotions were stronger in the link than Oz - more volatile. A creature of the heart and he'd already apologized for it again and again, until they'd pounced and held him down and overwhelmed him with their own feelings.

"It'll settle, you'll see," Spike had told him, and he'd sniffed and nodded - hugged the vampire hard, struggling to control what he put through the link - struggling and failing until Oz showed him some of the meditations he'd learned. It helped - enough to make Derio relax and not worry so much about being too loud - too much for them.

The colors of the sky had deepened further - ash and bruise-blue and the sullen red of a banked ember. The moon was to the right of them, new and thin as a sickle-blade, and a few bright stars could be seen against the glow of city lights. Mid-October and the air coming in the open door was edged with frost, heavy with recent rain. The scents of the water - of woodsmoke, wet earth, and the cinnamon-clove spice of dead leaves - was intoxicating and Spike breathed it all in - felt a wrench in his heart as if it were alive.

Won't be like this there, won't be like this at all...don't
want to go, don't want to go... He knew he sounded like a petulant child but he couldn't help it. Even the gaping hole that Dawn and Tara's absence had made couldn't make him want to go. Xander pressed his mouth to Spike's jaw - rubbed his cheek slowly back and forth, murmuring in his ear.

"It'll be all right, love, it'll be all right... Promise we'll be extra-careful."

"Sorry, Xan," he whispered, miserable, and the Oz-Derio huddle shuffled closer, leaning into him - into Xander - adding heat and weight and strong arms, adding safe love you pack pack pack.

"Won't let any sodding thing happen to us, yeah? We'll come home soon."

"Dios travesia protect us," Derio murmured, and don't take them off, never take them off. Xander's fingers went up to the beads Spike still wore, green and black for the warrior-loa. Spike could, very faintly, feel the similar beads Xander wore pressing into his back; creator-loa for his boy, frisson of power that made them that much more, in the link and out.
No, never take them off, Spike thought, and he sighed.

"We should go. Twelve hours to Point Reyes," Oz said, and Derio murmured agreement. They were going to take the coast roads down - stop somewhere in Point Reyes Park as close to the shore as possible and have one more night that was just them, just family. One more night of peace.

Going now...we'll be back soon... Xander thought, comfort for them all and Spike finally turned and took his gaze off the horizon - off the beloved Waterway and the wooded ridges, the miles of shoreline that the family had explored under the silvering moon-light.

Going now. Spike pulled Xander close again - kissed him lingeringly.

"Back in a week or so, Spike," Xander said, sad in the link but hopeful as well and Spike had to smile at him - at his eternal optimism and the stubborn, unflinching loyalty that wouldn't let him abandon his friends. "Say me a travel-poem, Spike. Do you know any?" Xander asked, and Spike thought for a moment, then nodded, finding something pretty for his boy even if his heart wasn't in it.
"There is something in the autumn that is native to my blood - touch of manner, hint of mood; and my heart is like a rhyme, with the yellow and the purple and the crimson keeping time. The scarlet of the maples can shake me like a cry of bugles going by. And my lonely spirit thrills to see the frosty asters like a smoke upon the hills. There is something in October sets the gypsy blood astir; we must rise and follow here, when from every hill of flame she calls and calls each vagabond by name."

The bone-deep disturbance that was the Hellmouth came over them ten miles out and Spike stiffened in the seat beside him - clenched his fingers down tight on his knees and Xander flinched, too. Living on the Hellmouth, you got used to it. He wondered if he'd ever get used to it again.

*Be okay,* he thought at Spike, and Spike sighed and shifted - leaned over into him a little and just rested there. His misery was palpable in the link for all his efforts to lock it down and for the hundredth time Xander wondered if he was doing the right thing. But his
conversation with Buffy kept coming back to him, and he knew he'd had to come. Had to.

"Xander - it's bad. We haven't heard from Giles in two weeks. And all kinds of freaky things are happening here... Dawn and some other kids were attacked at the school - there were these...ghosts or something. And I've been having dreams... Girls are dying, all over the world. Girls who are - who could be Slayers. Something is hunting them down and killing them and I'm SEEING it, Xander, every night. Angel - said he would help. Said he'd look into prophecies, stuff like that. And Anya - she's doing what she can with her demon contacts. But I need you here, Xander. And I need Spike. I don't know what's going on but... It's big. Bigger than I can handle alone."

That admission right there had scared Xander, even if he wouldn't own up to it. Buffy - had never wanted back up. Had always seen her role as the Slayer clearly - a role she had to play alone. And she'd hated dragging her friends into her life of death and danger, and she'd hated not being enough when she'd failed, and people had died. For her to admit she needed help - for her to have
called Angel - called him - and asked for Spike... Made him go cold.

"I talked to Wesley - he can't raise anybody on the Council. It's - all wrong. And these girls that I'm dreaming...they're dreaming ME, Xander. They're dreaming me and they're coming to find me and...I don't know what to do with them! They're so YOUNG, and they're not Slayers - they don't have any power. I'm so afraid - god, I'm so afraid they're all going to die. Please come - please help us. We need all of you, Xander...please."

So back to the beginning, back to the nexus of it all and Xander was hating every mile they put between themselves and their home - was hating every minute that he had to sacrifice to an uncaring universe. And down inside, where he wouldn't admit it and where he refused to let Spike or Oz or Derio see, he was utterly terrified. Spike turned his head a little and kissed his neck - kissed his jaw and then settled again, the link tight-strung and Oz somewhere behind humming his chant into it, doing his best to keep them all calm and together because that flying-apart feeling of Spike's was
getting worse, and the Hellmouth vibe was pushing them all over the edge.

He'd even called Manny, to just ask - to see if there was anything he should know, and Manny had told him they were shutting down - packing up. When the city had begun to rebuild the high school on the old, bombed-out site he'd flatly refused to be a part of it and now he was selling out, and taking every last member of his family with him

"Something's coming, filho. Something bad. We can all feel it, we demons. Everyone's leaving however they can. You shouldn't come back, credo. You should stay far away."

But he couldn't, and even with the soldier telling him to cut his losses and get out, and the hyena so on edge he had to struggle for control, he was going back. Spike put his hand on Xander's where it rested on the gear-shift, slight pressure and slow rub of his fingertips.

My knight in patchwork armor...I love you more than I've loved anything in my long life, Xan, and I will do anything
to make sure we come out of this alive. Anything. Don't stand in my way, love, don't try and stop me. It's down to family now and nothing else.

I understand. I really do, vampire-mine. But you have to help me, love. I can't do this alone.

Never leave you alone, my love, my own. Never.

The 'Welcome to Sunnydale' sign loomed in the headlights and for once Xander gave in to the devil's voice in his mind and he rammed it, full speed. Spike laughed.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Buffy's house was lit like a Christmas tree and they all sat for a moment in their vehicles, just staring at it. Then they got out, stretching a bit, feeling anxious. Spike lit a cigarette and tugged Xander close to him, shivering a little and Xander slipped his arm around him and hugged. Then the door was slamming open and Dawn was pelting down the steps - across the lawn - launching herself straight at them, babbling a mile a minute and hugging Spike, then hugging Xander so hard he gasped
for breath.

*Family pack family home home home,* from all of them, feeling a missing piece slot neatly into place as Dawn once again entered the link, a formless joy coming from her that made them all smile.

"You came! Oh, god, you came! I'm so glad, I missed you so much - I've been going crazy without you guys here! It's been getting really creepy, it's been - Oz, your hair is so cool! Oh god -" Dawn finished off with Derio, kissing him soundly on the cheek and then she stood there, panting, staring at them. *Brothers love happy happy happy* in the link, stronger than before. "Well, come on! Don't just stand there, come in! You're not gonna believe this -" Dawn bounced up the sidewalk, grinning, chattering about sleeping arrangements and grocery runs and they just followed her, bewildered. Went inside and Spike grinned when it was clear his invitation was still in place. Then his grin faltered because there was....something...

*What the hell? What's...* Xander was standing very close, feeling the tension through the link - tension that was seeping out to Oz and Derio and they all just stopped, staring. There were sleeping bags
everywhere. Duffels, backpacks, heaps of laundry. An overpowering girl smell that was fruity and sweet and medicinal and under all tinged with blood. And that tickle - that little twitch...

"Hey, guys," Buffy said, coming out from the kitchen and Spike blinked at her. She was thinner than before - dark circles under her eyes. Behind her was a crowd of girls and they were all giving off the same low-watt buzz that Buffy projected in spades.

"Christ, Slayer, you said... I didn't expect this," Spike finished softly, and Buffy smiled a little.

"Even I can feel it," she said, and walked over to them - reached out and pulled Xander into a Slayer-strength hug, almost lifting him off his feet. "Thanks for coming," she whispered. Xander hugged her back.

"No problem, Buffy." Buffy drew back - looked at Spike for one long moment.

"Don't even think about it, Slayer," he snapped, and her eyes went wide and then she started laughing.

"Oh, god, I've missed you, Spike!" She shook her head
and grabbed Oz and Derio, hugging them too, then she turned to the girls who were hovering in the doorway still. Dawn was off to one side, looking expectant, exuding *amusement* and a sort of smugness.

"Girls - these are... Well, these guys are family." Spike felt the shock of that through the link and glanced at Xander, who was staring at Buffy, smiling

*Family. God...she really...*

*Seems so, pet. Good on her, yeah?*

"This is Xander, and Oz, and Derio..." Buffy continued, pointing. They all nodded to the girls, Derio slipping his arms around Oz, still disturbed in the link from the Slayer-buzz that was too strong in the house. "And that's...Spike."

"And he's a vampire." A girl - dark-haired and intense looking - stepped forward.

"Yup. He's one of the nastiest vamps you'll ever meet." Buffy grinned sideways at Spike, who snorted.

"Why, Slayer. Didn't know you cared," Spike smirked,
and the girl frowned.

"What the hell is he doing in the house?" Spike watched the girl - felt the shiver of energy off of her and he shot a sardonic look at Buffy, one eyebrow going up.

"So - these are the Slayer-wanna-be's, yeah?"

"Potentials, and even if I'm not a full-fledged Slayer it's still my job to dust vamps." The dark-haired girl moved forward, bristling, a stake appearing in her hand and Spike barked a short laugh.

_Fuck. What does this little idiot think she's doing, exactly?_

_I dunno, but Buffy looks like she's about to explode._ Xander leaned back against the door-frame and Oz and Derio walked casually over to Dawn, getting her to sit down on the couch with them. Oz looked - a little baffled.

_They seem pretty tightly wound. Didn't Buffy say - anything? About - us?_

_Guess we'll find out, wolf._ Spike puffed on his smoke,
tracking the girl's slow stalk. The other three girls - all looking about sixteen or younger - watched nervously from the doorway. Buffy had a smile on her face, a sort of 'you're gonna eat crow' smile that Spike rather liked.

*I'm thinkin' this girl is a pain in the Slayer's arse.* Spike blew a stream of smoke at the girl, who flinched a little.

"Your job? Your job is stay out of my way, snack-pak. You've got a lot to learn."

"My name's Kennedy," the girl snarled.

"Don't actually care. Slayer - you need her or can I -"

"Spike vamped, grinning, and there was a collective gasp from the girls. Kennedy's hand flexed around her stake and she shot a quick look at Buffy.

"You just let him in here and then - you're just gonna -"

"You're the one who keeps telling me you wanna see some action. Go on and get some," Buffy said, and Spike snickered at the little twist of utter bitch in her voice.

*Oh yeah, BIG pain in the Slayer's arse.* "C'mon then, sweet. I'll bet you're a real goer, when you get
started...wanna give me a try?" Spike did his best leer - his best bedroom voice and Kennedy screeched and flew across the room, stake raised. *Don't even really feel like playing*, he thought. He neatly sidestepped the girl and snatched her around the throat - brought her up sharply, one arm going up between her breasts and holding her shoulder in a vise-like grip, the other tangled in her hair, yanking her head over hard. Her stake-arm was trapped under his and she was tight against his body, her throat inches from his fangs. He carefully took his cigarette out of his mouth, trying not to singe her hair because god! the stink of that. He lowered his mouth - let the tips of his incisors prickle over the thunder of arterial blood.

"What'cha think, Slayer? Thumb up or thumb down?"

"Hey! Don't! Buffy, please - " A blonde girl turned to the Slayer, her mouth wobbling, and Buffy rolled her eyes.

"Sheesh, Eve. I'm not gonna let him eat her. Much." Spike grinned - grazed the fear-clammy skin with his teeth and held the girl against her buck of sheer, mindless terror. Then he pushed her hard away, dragging the stake from her hand and snapping it in two.
"Your job is to die if you don't get a whole fucking lot better, wanna-be. You've got a job on your hands with this lot, Slayer."

"Son of a bitch!" Kennedy touched her neck and then looked in horror at the blood on her hand. She ran upstairs, followed by Eve and a black girl. Another girl - tall and thin and with a look of toughness about her, stayed in the doorway, arms crossed.

"Wow. So - you're Spike," she said, and Spike looked at her. "I'm Amanda."

"Another wanna-be, I take it." He pinched the butt out and pocketed it, ignoring the little wince that got from the girl.

"Potential is the PC term," Dawn called, and Spike laughed. The tension in the room eased a bit and he reached out for Xander's hand and tugged him over to the couch - pushed Dawn into Oz and sat down, dragging Xander half onto his lap.

"What's going on, Buffy? These are the girls you've been dreaming about, right? I thought - you were gonna send
them on their way?" Xander squirmed around so he could face Buffy and Spike made a low growling noise, nuzzling into Xander's hair.

Stop that, evil undead. Let me talk.

This place is gettin' on my nerves, love.

I know. Sit tight, okay? Xander caught his wandering hands and held them tight and Spike gave in and just hugged him close.

"I wanted to - I tried to..." Buffy sank down into a chair and sighed, elbows on knees. "They just keep coming. One of them...Annabelle... She got really spooked after... Well, after they were attacked. She ran and...they got her."

"Who got her?" Spike asked, and Amanda came to sit on the floor next to Buffy, back straight.

"These nasty little troll-guys," she muttered, and Buffy shook her head.

"They're - they're called Bringers. They're these guys all in black. No - eyes. It's kinda gross. They're the things
that have been killing the girls in my dreams. And - Annabelle. They were around before. When..." Buffy sighed, and looked down at her hands for a moment. "When Angel tried to kill himself, it was the First Evil. It had these - Bringers. They're back. It is back. That's what's been making all this freaky stuff happen and... It was the First that was in your house, Xander. It can look like - anyone dead. It looked like...

"It looked like mom," Dawn said, tiny voice, and Oz slipped his arm around her, hugging her.

"You all right then, Bit?" Spike asked, and Dawn nodded.

"It said some pretty - freaky stuff." Buffy looked at her sister, sympathy and anger warring in her expression. "It was scary but we figured out it was just lying. Trying to trick us. Like it did to Angel. Like Jesse - like the fake Jesse did to you, Xander."

"Fuck," Xander muttered, and Spike thought about the Angelus he'd talked to, down on the docks. The Angelus that had, at first, made sense. Had been so perfect that he'd... Well, nothing to dwell on now.

"So - any clues about how to take it out?" Spike asked,
and Buffy shook her head.

"We were hoping Giles would... But we can't find Giles, and the Council seems to have just - vanished and even Willow isn't communicating. It's like - we're all alone."

"No - not alone," Xander said softly, and Buffy smiled at him - at them all.

"No - not anymore."

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face and trooped out.

"What did you say?" Buffy asked, and Spike smirked.

"Basically, 'in your dreams', Slayer," he answered, and she laughed

"She's doing good with the Latin - she's been keeping up with it. And Greek and couple of demon languages she tells me are the Swahili of the demon world, whatever that means."

"Means most everybody speaks 'em," Spike said, but he wasn't paying attention to Buffy anymore and neither was anybody else. Spike felt the surge of recognition and joy in the link and then the four of them were off the couch and across the room, crowding as close as they could get to Tara, who stood there with a string-bag of oranges in her hands and tears in her eyes.

Greenwitch lightwitch mother Glinda love you love her keep always keep... Spike knew Tara wasn't part of the link but he also knew she could see their auras, and the way she looked at them - the fierce clutch of her arms around them - told him that some sense of their feelings - of her belonging was known to the lovely woman who
made them all feel as if they'd finally come home.

"God, Tara - missed you," Xander murmured, brushing her cheek with his hand. Oz kissed her other cheek, his eyes shining with happiness and Derio hugged her from behind, taking in a deep breath of her scent of nutmeg and clean earth, dill and thyme and lavender. Spike simply gathered her up in a hard hug, lifting her off her feet and burying his face in her hair and he felt her lips on his jaw for a moment.

"Oh - I can't believe - you're really here -" She wobbled, set back on her feet, and wiped at a stray tear and then the Potentials were pushing through the door, loaded down with groceries and Kennedy was scowling at Spike. He vamped, snarling at her then turned his back and they all led Tara to the couch - made her sit down and then grouped themselves around her.

God, missed her - need her back. This has to change, have to fix this - when we kill this First she has to come home with us, Xander thought, and Spike took his hand, squeezing gently.

Do our best, pet, he thought, and there was silent agreement from Oz and Derio.
"Have you been here long? Has Buffy t-told you everything?" Tara asked, smoothing her skirt and taking Oz's hand and Xander's and Buffy laughed.

"You guys look like some old-fashioned family portrait." She cocked her head to one side and a slightly wistful look came into her eyes.

"Family, Slayer. You know what that's like."

"Yeah....I guess I do," Buffy said, glancing over at Dawn who was gathering shampoo and toilet paper and other things to take to the upstairs bathroom. "No, they've only been here a half hour or less, Tara, and I haven't had much chance to -" A knock interrupted her and she frowned - stood up and went to the front door. "Who in the world -" She opened the door and Spike caught a glimpse of two pale, girlish faces and then - glint of steel and glass and Buffy was just standing there, frozen. Then flung herself forward, shouting 'Giles!'
filho - son

credo - loved one

Bliss Carman - A Vagabond Song

Solum in somniis - Only in dreams

18 Plans

They didn't sleep that night. The Potentials, including three new ones that Giles and Ethan had found, were shown the bathroom, introduced and then shooed into the living room where they talked quietly with the others, TV on, shooting looks into the kitchen that 'The Scoobies' ignored. Xander eyed the close quarters and knew something had to be done about it - but later. First, they had to talk. He and Spike and Derio and
Oz hauled in lawn chairs from the porch and Buffy gathered up mis-matched dining room chairs that she'd found at a garage sale so they could all squeeze around the kitchen table, knees bumping and elbows poking. Tara and Dawn were firmly set between the wolves and Spike and Xander.

Dawn had put the kettle on and Giles and Ethan had opened their luggage and were hauling out a huge stash of contraband goodies.

"Jeez! What'd you guys do, rob a grocery store?" Xander asked, shuffling through various brightly colored boxes and tins.

"We were shopping when - when we had to leave... Let's get some tea made and then we'll tell you what happened." Giles sounded tired - depressed - and Ethan stroked his back gently for a moment and then slid something across to Spike.

"Ripper said you liked these," he grinned, and Spike eyed the tube of Jaffa Cakes with barely-concealed delight.

"Ta ever so, Watcher - can't find these here too easy." He was already picking at the end, undoing them,
when Giles opened up a package of tea. The scent of it filled the air - heavy, smoky, and rich.

"What'dja get, Spike -what's that, Mr. Giles, it smells -"

"It smells nice," Tara said, and Giles smiled at her.

"It's tea, Dawn. Souchong, to be precise."

"Bring enough to share, then?" Spike mumbled, his mouth full of cake. Xander snagged one out of his hand.

"Only if you share."

"Oh, plenty for all -" Giles dumped another armful of things and they spent the next ten minutes fixing tea, getting glasses of milk or juice, and sorting through the goodies.

"Wow, one of you has a sweet tooth," Buffy said, opening a box of Cadbury's 'Heroes' and peering inside at the display of mixed chocolate candies.

"That would be Ripper." Ethan was opening some crackers and spreading Marmite with gleeful abandon. Dawn was watching him closely, her new
favorite - 'Kipling's French Fancies' - held close to her chest, out of Buffy's reach. Ethan seemed to be his old self; a little heavier, a little tanned, a sparkle of mischief in his eye. His magic was back, only now it was a fairly pleasant low-grade tingle that you could feel only when you were very, very close to him. Nothing like the out-of-control seething that had so set Spike and Derio on edge and Xander was grateful for that.

"I was just thinking that you girls would like some treats," Giles said, but his voice was still so tired - so soft. He only picked at the lavish spread.

"Oh! Sandwich time." Oz was looking delightedly at a jar of Green's Mango Chutney and another of Branston Pickle. "You'll like this, Derio," he added, holding the chutney out for inspection and Derio read the label with interest. He was nibbling a cracker spread with the strong, salty marmite, trying to decide if he liked it. Dawn, Tara, Buffy, and Oz had all rejected the spread already.

"I got some roast beef and stuff at the store." Tara hastily wiped chocolate off her lips and got up to help Oz raid the refrigerator, and Spike rummaged for his flask and poured a bit in his tea. Xander had tried it before it
was adulterated with whisky and decided he'd like it iced and sugared better. The looks of shocked horror on the three expatriate's faces had made him laugh.

"Okay, so...we've stuffed our faces - and my god this is good!" Buffy crunched her last bit of toast and ginger preserve and licked her fingers. "Now we really need to know what's going on. First, though - where's Willow? Is she coming?"

Giles paused for a moment, tea-cup halfway to his mouth. "Willow...is still with the Coven, Buffy. She wasn't ready to leave."

"They wouldn't let her leave," Ethan chimed in, and Giles glanced sharply at him but nodded.

"So - she's not coming back? Ever?" Dawn asked, and Giles reached out and patted her hand.

"Now, I didn't say that, Dawn. She's simply not able to come back yet. Her magic became very unstable when she -"

"When she killed that guy and tried to kill Xander, yeah. Is she gonna go to prison?" Giles blinked at Dawn
and Spike chuckled, but Xander could feel the tension from Oz - and his own unease - at the thought of Willow in prison.

_Maybe she SHOULD, though...she did murder him -

_Him who'd already killed once and tried to do it again? No, Red-witch got THAT right, if nothing else._ Spike was firm in his opinion that Warren had got what he deserved - had, in fact, lucked out completely because he hadn't suffered anything like what he would have suffered under William the Bloody.

"Be glad she's not here, Bit. She's done enough, don't you think?"

"Spike -" Buffy looked like she wanted to argue - or tell Spike to shut up - but Tara put her hand on Buffy's wrist, stopping her.

"He's right, Buffy. Even if it's n-not what we want to hear. She let it - control her and she thought she could ignore the warnings. H-Here especially - that's d-deadly."

"The coven has, for all intents and purposes, stripped her of most of her magic. Nothing that wasn't done
willingly!" Giles held his hand up to forestall Buffy and she slumped in her chair. "They can't actually take her magic away - it's a part of her, just like your powers as the Slayer are a part of you. But with her consent they bound her ability to use it. She's - going back to the beginning and relearning things the way she - she should have. If I'd had paid attention and taught her." Giles looked down at his tea-cup, defeat and sorrow evident in the slump of his shoulders, and Ethan leaned into him, comforting silently.

"When were you supposed to do that, Giles? When the Master was trying to kill us all or when the Mayor was or when Angelus was? I mean, I can see the huge gaps in your schedule where nothing was going on and you could have spent hours with Willow." Xander was angry but he struggled to keep the anger at a low level, hating the thought of Giles blaming himself for what Willow had done.

*He will NOT feel guilt over this! Willow didn't have to do any of the things she did and I am NOT going to let him think it's all his fault!*

*Probably won't change how he feels, love...*
"I have to try."

"Xander, I... I may not have had - a lot of free time, but I should have paid more attention -"

"Don't do that, Giles. Please don't make yourself to blame. You aren't - none of us think that." Buffy's voice was soft but Giles flinched as if she'd shouted at him and sighed - looked up at them all.

"I'm afraid I shall always feel - a certain responsibility - for what she did."

"Waste of your time, mate, and you know it. You got her out of here and away from the family and that's all that matters." Spike wasn't in the least concerned about Giles' guilt - that was glaringly obvious in the link - but he didn't like Xander's distress - a distress Oz shared. "And natterin' on about it won't help. She's not here, can't help us, that's all we need to know. Why are you two here like gypsies with those girls in tow and about three sets of clothes between you?" Giles blinked and glanced over at Ethan, who raised an eyebrow.

"He's right, really. More important things to talk about, Ripper."
"Yes...all right... Well - you know about the Bringers? And that - they're killing potential Slayers all over the world?" The group nodded, settling in to listen. Xander leaned over into Spike, anticipating the strong arm that came around him and sighing in contentment. Dawn back in the link, and Tara there and not there, as well - some sort of ripple in the air that wasn't quite the same but that was her, without doubt. It felt good - felt right - and even the Slayer-buzz had been pushed to the background as the girls had dropped off to sleep and they'd concentrated on other things.

At least Willow's safe, Xander couldn't help thinking, and Spike pressed his mouth into Xander's hair and kissed him. Maybe Willow wasn't his best friend anymore, but he didn't want another Hellmouth casualty in his memories, either.

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"The Council headquarters is gone and...so are most of its members. I'm sure there are a few, here and there, who survived but..." Giles took his glasses off and
rubbed his eyes tiredly - rested his forehead on his palm for a moment. "We have feelers out, contacts in the occult world and...other places. Hopefully we can find what's left. For all intents and purposes, the Council is no more. Even if we start it again - it will never be the same." He sighed and straightened and put his glasses back on. The rest of them sat in silence, contemplating his story. The Council gone, and so many potentials dead... The Bringers had tried to kill Giles and Ethan, as well, as they'd gathered the three girls they'd known of and fled to the Hellmouth.

_Not bad that the bloody Watchers are gone, though. Bastards have been hounding me and mine for too long._ Spike, of course, would find the blood-red lining in any cloud, and Xander had to smile at him.

"The First believes it will be unstoppable if it kills every member of the Slayer line... And it could very well succeed if we do not find a solution, and soon. Its resources, I'm afraid, are vast." Giles looked around the table and Xander did, as well. Shock and fear and resignation on all the faces, except for Spike who was carefully blank, smoking a cigarette and leaning back in his chair. Ethan leaned over and picked up a battered rucksack and upended it on the table. Several books,
manuscripts and loose papers slid out, mixing with the crumbs of McVitie's Dark Chocolate Digestives and Fry's Peppermint Cream wrappers.

"This is all that's left. Ripper and I - we broke into the Council headquarters two nights before it was destroyed."

"Well aren't you the little Artful Dodgers," Spike murmured, and Ethan grinned at him, his fox-smile swift and toothy and full of glee.

"Oh, since the coven fixed my magic it was laughably easy. We took everything we could find on the First."

"This is everything?" Buffy was poking at the meager pile and Tara had opened a book and was paging through it, frowning. Dawn leaned over to look and smiled.

"Hey! I can read that! In hoc est vera et fidilis fabula... Herein is written the true and accurate history..." Dawn frowned and bit her lip. "...cuius quod non possidit nomen...of that which has no name... Oh...quod antequam veniebat, quod primum erat. Manui sacra scripta... of that which came before, of that which is the First. As recorded by her sacred
hand..." Dawn looked up, eyes wide. "Wow." There was a moment of silence and then Giles cleared his throat, making an effort.

"Very nicely done, Dawn. You've been keeping up with your studies, I see." Giles smiled softly at her, pleased, and she smiled back.

"Yeah. I call Spike and he helps me sometimes and - and Tara and I have been emailing with Wesley and Fred."

"Wesley? How nice of him to help. I don't think I've met this 'Fred' person?" Giles got up and poured more hot water, fussing with the tea-ball.

"No, Fred's a girl. She helps Wes and everybody. She - well, it's a long story but Fred's really smart. Her and Tara chat for hours."

"Do you now, Glinda?" Spike asked, mouth curling up and eyebrow cocked and the four of them could smell the intense blood-scent as Tara blushed behind her hair. Her presence - her aura - rippled around them.

"She was in a h-hell dimension for five years and sh-she's kind of shy so I talk to her. She's really smart - she knows
all about c-chemistry and - and physics and stuff." Dawn looked over at Spike and mouthed 'crush' at him and Spike winked at her.

"You'll have to invite her up, Glinda, once we deal with this so-called First. Have her meet the family." Tara gaped at him and then snatched her own tea-cup and fled to the sink.

_Not nice, vampire-mine._

_Not BAD. You know she'd want us to meet her fancy._

_You don't know that she - fancies - Fred!_ Spike snorted, fishing for another cigarette.

_I think she likes this Fred a lot,_ Oz thought, and Xander sighed, shaking his head but smiling, too.

"Yes, well, perhaps we will get to meet this - Fred person. Someone from L.A. is going to be coming up in a few days and - and they'll be bringing Faith.

"What? But she's in prison!" Buffy hastily lowered her voice after the first loud word, casting a glance into the living room. The Potentials slept on.
"And Angel is getting her out. The First can get inside of there as easily as it can anywhere else, and I believe we need as much strength as possible to fight it. Wesley has...come to an understanding with her, and he was happy to tell me that she very much regrets - everything."

"She'd better," Buffy grumbled, snatching a piece of chocolate-covered honeycomb from the Hero box and biting it in half.

"Now - in further news..." Giles sat back down and stared at the flask that Spike was holding out - took it finally and poured a large dollop into his tea-cup. "Thank you. Oh - Ethan, yes -" Ethan took the flask and did the same, except his tea-cup was empty and he poured quite a bit more. Spike growled.

"Now - you're all right," Ethan muttered. He bent over his suitcase again and pulled out a bottle which Spike snatched with a hiss of triumph.

*Ah! Glenfiddich - and Cask Strength!* "Ta, mage," Spike said, cracking the seal.
"In further news," Giles said, a little louder, and Xander snickered. It was feeling like one of the Scooby meetings from so long ago. The jangled nerves and frayed tempers and fear that had been a part of their lives since they'd decided to come back were all slowly ebbing away.

_We're tired, we're stuffed with chocolate and we're...a little hysterical. But yeah...feels good._ Oz - who was probably the furthest from hysterical anyone could possibly get - smiled over at Xander, his hand unconsciously twisting one of Derio's dreads between his fingers.

_Feels good, yeah. Family,_ Derio chimed in, and Xander nodded.

"Ethan and I have discussed this and we have decided that the best people to help us gather up Potentials and surviving Council members, and deal with the Headquarters, would be Drake's family. In fact - before we left England we contacted Arthur Pembroke - his grandfather - and arranged for him to begin excavating the Council building. With luck they'll be able to salvage...something."

"How are they going to find Potentials, Giles?" Buffy
asked, and Giles smiled slightly.

"The Council had actually found a spell that could locate them and had been using it. It was pure luck that I stumbled across it while we were gathering our information on the First. We used it to find the three we brought with us, and then gave various family members the location of others. They're so widely spread, really, that it's much easier for them to go where the girls are then to send just one or two people shuttling all over the globe."

"Wow. So we've got a whole army of people out there...do they know about the Bringers, Giles? Do they know - they're in danger?" Giles looked at Xander over the tops of his glasses, and darkman was in that stare.

"I made it quite clear what we were up against. They are...prepared. Apparently being an archeologist isn't as - academic a pursuit as you might imagine."

"Hey, don't have to tell me - I watched all the Indiana Jones movies," Xander said, and Ethan snorted softly, grinning. Spike tipped the bottle of Glenfiddich up and took a long swallow.
"So how many more girls you think we're gonna get, Watcher?" he asked.

"Well - we had...seven, right before we left, not including these three. And there may be more. We need to do the spell periodically and make sure we're getting them all."

"Gonna be tight in here," Xander murmured, and Spike sighed heavily.

"Gonna be more than tight. Right...only one thing for it, then." Spike pulled out the cellphone Buffy had given him and dialed a number.  *Gonna be like a bloody psycho ward in here, is what it's gonna be...* he grumbled. Everyone watched him and Xander shrugged at the questioning look Giles sent his way.

*Any idea?* Oz asked, and Xander shook his head.

*None.*

"Know you're not asleep, you wanker - Oi! Batvamp - Slayer needs a favor."

*Angel? Jesus!*
"I know you're gonna be here in a couple of days - that's the point. Bring the keys an' the deed to the house on Crawford Street, yeah? Why? 'Cause we need it, that's why... Can't imagine why you'd want to do that - oh! Except that you're an ignorant paddy who couldn't give a fuck about - You miserable fucking bastard - "  Xander snatched the phone from Spike, glaring at him, and handed it to Buffy, who stared for a moment and then took it, wincing as she held it up to her ear. They could all hear Angel shouting something, possibly in a demon language.

"Angel? Yeah, it's me. Uh - well - what Spike said about the house...?" She looked over at Spike, who raised his eyebrow at her and then took another swallow of the whisky. "Yeah, we need it." Buffy got up and went back to the bathroom, presumably for a little privacy, and Xander whapped Spike on the arm.

"Why did you have to get him all pissed off? He might not let us have the house."

"Don't really need him to bring anything - I've still got keys, and wolfling could rig the electric up in half a mo'. Just thought I'd -"
"Piss Angel off. Yeah." Xander leaned over and kissed Spike hard. "Smart idea, though. We'll never fit seven more girls in here."

"What's this house, then?" Ethan asked, and Giles, Xander and Spike all told him, in bits and pieces, the history of the Crawford Street house. Oz and Derio had got up and were putting various food items away and Tara was washing up cups and spoons. Dawn, who'd been yawning steadily for a half-hour was now asleep, slumping sideways in her chair and Xander caught her and held her, smiling as she murmured something in Latin and made a funny little 'sleep face'. The sky outside the windows was starting to lighten when Buffy came back into the kitchen and handed Spike his phone.

"He'll bring the things we need - he said he'd have Cordelia call and get things turned on tomorrow... They're getting Faith out tomorrow, too - Wesley and Gunn." Buffy smiled at Xander and Dawn and slumped down into her chair. "The house is kind of a mess over there. I look in sometimes...it seems to draw things." She pushed her fingers back through her hair and rubbed tiredly at her eyes - yawned into her hand. "We'll need - god - cots or mattresses or something, and - sheets and stuff..." Buffy yawned again
and then Xander did and then Giles, and they all smiled blearily at each other.

"We'll sort that all later, Slayer. I've got some contacts, and the - and Angel does - we'll get it done."

"It's filthy over there," Buffy said, and Xander laughed.

"This is where my immersion in pop-culture is a benefit. I know the 'wax-on, wax-off' speech by heart and I'll bet cleaning the Crawford house would be a great way to start training the Potentials." Buffy stared at him and then laughed, her thin, tired face losing its pinched look, and Xander had to explain The Karate Kid to Ethan and Giles.

"Okay guys - I'm so tired I'm seeing double. Xander, would you bring Dawn up to my room? Tara - you can bunk in with us, let Giles and Ethan have your room and - uh -"

"The four of us can share Dawn's room," Oz said, leaning against Derio and blinking sleepily. "We can always change and sleep on the floor if we have to - all the same to us."
Or squash into Dawn's bed, Spike thought, and even though the mental picture made a hot little flash of want skitter through Xander's groin he immediately squashed it.

No, no, no. No profaning of Dawn's room or Dawn's bed. Stop that! he added, when Spike grinned and made a lewd little noise down in his throat.

"Okay..." Buffy yawned again and Tara patted her shoulder.

"I'm going to go clean up and - stuff," she said, and went slowly away upstairs. There was a general stirring as everyone got up and Buffy got clean sheets for the beds and Spike lit up a final smoke.

You all right? You didn't hunt...

Be fine. Do it tomorrow - well, tonight, really. Just tired. Need help? Xander nodded and let Spike brace him as he pushed himself to his feet, maneuvering Dawn so he could carry her upstairs.

A half an hour later they were finally settled, the curtains firmly closed and Oz and Derio curled around each other
in a nest of quilts from the van. Spike was on his back, his hand idly stroking Xander's back, unease in the link.

*What?*

*Oh just...* The link flashed with images - Angel, mostly, and Xander caught a bit of what the First had said to Spike in Seattle.

*Want to talk about it?*

*No. But the Watcher's gonna want to drag every last syllable out, isn't he?* Spike sighed and hugged Xander close - closed his eyes. *Deal with it then. Go to sleep now, yeah? Love you...*

*Love you, vampire mine...*

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"So he's a vampire with a soul, but not like your soul, his was a curse from some - gypsy sorceress?" Drake looked fascinated, pen poised over a worn leather notebook, and Spike lit a cigarette and huffed smoke irritably toward the ceiling."
"He's a vampire with a bloody great stick up his arse is what he is. Don't you want to talk about something else? Demon-girl was saying you learned a new trick in the bedroom." Drake blushed beet-red.

"Uh - no. I mean yes, we did but no, I don't want to discuss it. Maybe take Anya out for a drink later, she's dying to tell someone and I'd rather it not be my mother." Cecilia Pembroke and a cousin - some boy about nineteen - were arriving in Sunnydale that evening with a Potential. His great Aunt Portia Pembroke had already come and gone with a Potential from China who had no English, apparently, but had screamed quite nicely when she'd seen Spike - game-face and snarling - facing off with Kennedy. Again. Spike sucked a quarter-inch of his cigarette to ash and contemplated her sourly. The girl had decided her mission in life was to ride Spike's ass and even though it had only been two days Spike was on the brink of killing her - or at least just making her very, very sorry. Xander and Dawn and Giles, of all people, had averted catastrophe so far, but Spike's patience - which was already cobweb-thin - was about to snap. Drake was saying something and he dragged his mind out of a pleasant little fantasy of showing Kennedy just what those spiral nails were good for to listen to the
"...Anya insisted on telling me everything she knows about Angelus and his...well, about everything he did before he was souled."

"Did she now? Tell you anything 'bout me?" If he couldn't do what he was imagining, at least he could talk about it.

"Ummm...yes." Drake looked faintly green and Spike chuckled - slung a companionable arm around his shoulders.

"Don't worry, mate - I'm temporarily on the side of the...bloody angels. So no worries, yeah?"

"Yeah." Drake sighed and capped his pen - tipped his head a little, listening. A car was coming up the drive.

"Well, that's either Anya with more cleaning supplies, my mother, Angel, Buffy..."

"Think that's all that's out," Spike said, wandering over to a window and trying to peer out without getting burnt. Over the past two days the Crawford house had
been cleaned to within an inch of its life, including the windows. Buffy and Dawn had gone to get more blinds and curtains but there were still some windows left unblocked. Most of the Potentials were currently upstairs doing a final cleaning in the bedrooms and the three bathrooms - two up, thank Christ, and one down - and Xander, Oz and Derio were in the garden pulling out three or more years worth of dead plants and storm-debris. 'Fire hazard', Oz said, slipping images from two weeks of wild-fire fighting in Colorado into the link. Giles and Ethan were in the basement; patiently unraveling one of the many spells Dru had left on the house. Most were warding spells - and they shivered over the family like sparks and silvery ice - but they were tangled and messy. Dru's reaction to the new house and to Angelus' goading, and she'd splashed her power far and wide. It made for gaps.

"Slayer it is," Spike mumbled, feeling that twisty little itch in the back of his skull. If he concentrated, he could tune out the Potentials - they weren't nearly as strong. A few moments later the two sisters walked in, weighed down with supplies for the windows. There was a shriek from upstairs and everyone turned their gaze ceiling-ward.

"Guess somebody found something else," Spike said,
smirking, and went languidly to see what was what. The cleaning had unearthed all sorts of things left behind by Angelus, Dru, and himself, as well as the various vamps who'd come with Spike and Dru after the Anointed One had burned, and the other vamps Angelus had made while trying to use first the Judge and then Acatanla to end the world. So far they'd turned up a lot of human remains, some dodgy spell components, a few books that had had Giles running for Holy water and Ethan cackling and rubbing his hands like a mad-man, and a set of vamp-strength manacles that Spike had personally commandeered and had plans for later.

*Thank gods there's room enough for us to be private. Never knew my boy could be so shy.* Xander wasn't actually all that shy, but he knew too many people at the Crawford house and didn't want to have to look Buffy or Giles or, gods forbid, Dawn in the eye the morning after when he'd been screaming for Spike to fuck him now. *Have to ask Glinda to put a little...muffling spell on the room. Ease his mind a bit and then we'll see what we can do with those chains.* Spike got to the top of the stairs and saw Tara coming towards him holding a small trunk in her hands, an expression of resigned horror on her face.
"Oh, Spike! Could you - take this? It's -it's -" Spike took the trunk, the faint stink of corruption telling him exactly what it was. More of Dru's 'doll parts'.

"Anything for you, pet. 'Bout done up here?"

Tara smiled wanly and wiped her hair back out of her eyes. "Yeah, j-just about. There's a store room at the end of the hall -"

"Best not, pet," Spike interrupted, a sudden memory of what was in there springing to mind. "Me and Xan'll take care of that later, yeah?" Tara peered at him and then paled slightly as his words sunk in.

"Oh - yeah, okay. Th-thanks, Spike."

"Course, Glinda." Spike tucked the trunk under one arm and reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind Tara's ear. She looks tired. Think I'll tell the Watcher she needs to do some research...give her a little break. Tara had been taking up a lot of slack - she'd confided to Oz that she felt a little useless, because she wasn't a Potential, her classes kept her from doing a lot research or anything else, and she didn't think her magic was actually strong enough to help. Got enough magic in her to crack the
world in two if she wanted to, but she never would... Keep her safe...

Pack safe, echoed from the garden, all of them in agreement.

"Come down with me, let's get a drink, yeah? Niblet made some lemonade this morning, looks almost right." Tara smiled and sighed and nodded, and they headed downstairs. Spike was going to take the trunk to the back door and let Xander have it - add it to the pile they were amassing in a dry cistern to be burnt later, when the wind died down.

Nearly to the bottom of the stairs and they could both hear voices - footsteps. Someone else coming, and it wasn't Anya or the mother. The Slayer-tingle was suddenly off the chart and Spike went reflexively into gameface, snarling. He dropped the trunk on the stairs and grabbed Tara, shoving her behind him. The front doors swung open and a dark figure stepped through - swaggering, grinning, and looking ready for a fight.

"Faith," Spike growled, and the dark Slayer looked up at him, eyes narrowing.
"William the Bloody - looks like this is going to be exciting after all."

19 Loss

*Just what I need*, Spike thought, *another Slayer that wants to kick my ass.*

There was a flare of panic in the link and Spike watched Faith re-orient towards the garden door as Xander, Oz and Derio all came in fast, Oz with something that looked like a machete in his hand and Xander shirtless and lean and looking as lethal as he was, the hyena making his eyes gleam in the slanting golden light of late afternoon.

"Wow - welcoming committee," Faith said, shifting on her toes a little, angling back towards Spike as he came slowly down the last few stairs. She grinned at him and he grinned back, all fangs and demon's eyes because he saw her in the link - in images Xander was shunting away as fast as he could and Spike had the sudden urge to see if Faith still thought asphyxiation was fun.

*Don't, don't, don't, she's here for a reason -*

*She'll heal*, Spike thought, then hissed as Angelus slammed into the ambient. Derio was fighting the
change, not up to the massive surges of emotion in the link and Oz dropped the knife, turned to him and put his hands on his shoulders - sent the wolf-chant out deliberately loud to all of them.

_Calm calm calm, pack is safe..._ from Spike and Xander both, focusing on family for a moment while Angel ducked into the building under a silvery camp-blanket, looking rumpled and put out, a bag slung over his shoulder. He looked around the room at Faith in 'Slayer' mode, at Xander and Spike in 'protect' mode, and at Oz and Derio locked into the mantra, and heaved a sigh.

"Can everybody just - stand down? We're not here to fight."

"We're always here to fight," Spike said, edging around a little and blocking Tara from getting past him. She poked him in the side and he twitched.

"Stop that, Glinda!"

"Nobody's going to attack me, Spike - let m-me through!" Spike saw Xander's stance relax infinitesimally - saw him smile at Tara and he sighed himself and let her pass. Someone else was coming in and Spike waited,
tense. But then the complicated scent of DarlaAngelfamily wafted to him and he relaxed as well. It was the baby - Connor - in the arms of a thin, long-haired woman and Spike knew that Angel wouldn't bring his son into danger. Connor was fisting a handful of the woman's hair and looking as if he'd just woken up.

"Here, I'll -" Angel reached for him and Connor smiled, reaching back. The brown-haired woman pried his hand open and freed her hair, then looked around with a small, nervous smile on her lips. She was pretty in a doll-like way, with huge eyes and a heart-shaped face and something was coming from Tara - blood-smell of a blush and sudden sweat.

*I think this is the mysterious Fred!*

*Ooh, I think you're right.* Xander turned to Oz and Derio, putting a hand out and touching Derio's back, stroking gently.

*I'm all right, I'm - just startled...everything was so STRONG -

*It's okay, it's fine...pack is safe, safe...*
"So - we're not gonna throw down? Damn - I thought the Hellmouth would be more fun than L.A." Faith seemed to relax suddenly and completely, like a cat that's decided there's no threat. She sauntered over to the big leather couch Angel had left behind and flopped down, legs sprawled and hands behind her head.

"Just keep your distance, Slayer, and we'll be fine." Spike gave up resisting and went over to his pack, touching them all with light, quick touches. Anchoring and reassuring and the last of the tension eased off. Oz nuzzled his cheek against Derio's for a moment - kissed him - and then they turned to face Angel, who was fussing over Connor. Tara had disappeared into the next room and now she came back, smiling nervously at Fred and bringing Dawn with her. Dawn squeaked happily and bounced over to Angel, making a face at Connor and reaching out to tickle the child.

"I told B-buffy you were here, she went to get Giles and Ethan," she said, and Fred perked up.

"You must be Tara! Hey! It's so great to finally meet you! I mean, not that we haven't met because we've been talking online for months but now we actually get to talk and wow, you're more - I mean, hi, I’m Fred,
Winifred, Winifred Burkle." Fred blushed and advanced on Tara, hand stretched out, and Tara blushed as well - took the offered hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

"H-h-hi, Fred, yeah I-I'm Tara."

"You're the witch?" from Faith, appraising stare and Tara blushed again.

"Our witch," Spike growled, and Faith grinned at him again. Tara's blush was epic.

"You know, the whole 'witch' thing is really fascinating, I mean, are the spells really drawing on some sort of vast, occult force beyond our knowledge as mere humans or is it really just an intuitive way of manipulating the basic rules of physics and chemistry? I mean, that's assuming anybody actually could manipulate atoms and molecules at will -" Fred stopped abruptly and ducked her head.

"Perhaps you'll get a chance to do some...research while you're here," Ethan said, laughing as he and Giles came in from the kitchen, cellar dirt on their hands and Giles with a grey tangle of cobweb in his hair. Spike could smell the stale earth, old blood, and fungus-sulpher smell of old, worn magic on them. Buffy was right behind them and
she stopped in the doorway, looking at Faith, her expression unreadable.

"Oh - research? You mean Tara and I -" Fred's eyes got somehow wider and she seemed to lose her voice altogether.

"Fred - could you get Connor some water? Tara knows where everything is." Angel was sliding the bag off his shoulder and holding it out, showing, Spike thought, an unusual amount of tact. And brains.

*Maybe he just wants to make the babble go away.*

*It was pretty interesting babble,* Oz thought, going over to the couch they'd brought from Buffy's house and sinking down, bringing Derio with him. Fred took the bag - filled with Connor's things, apparently - and Tara led her to the kitchen, smiling behind her hair. Connor struggled in Angel's arms, chanting.

"Down, Da, down, Da, down, Da!" until Angel set him on his feet and let him go. Connor caught his balance and then began to toddle straight towards Oz, Dawn beside him with her hands outstretched in case he fell. Oz sat up and put his hands out as well, smiling.
"Well, this is -" Giles started, but Faith interrupted him.

"You got a problem, B? 'Cause you're about to have one if you don't stop with the starin'."

"No, no problem, Faith. Just wondering why you're here." Faith frowned - uncoiled from her sprawl and stalked over to Buffy.

_Girlfight!_ Spike snickered, and Xander grabbed him around the waist and dragged him towards Oz and Derio.

_Don't! Jesus - now I've got hair-pulling and bikinis in my head!_

_Nothing wrong with that, love._

"Everything wrong with it, love. Come say hello to your - nephew. Or whatever." Spike twitched at that, glaring at Xander.

"Not bloody likely," he snapped.

"Sorry if I'm a little unclear on where you stand just now," Buffy said, and Faith opened her mouth to retort
but was interrupted.

"Listen," Angel said, loudly, and everyone turned to look at him except for Connor, who had discovered Derio's dreads and was trying to pull the bells out. "We've had a really long drive and we're kinda - tired. And Fred and Faith were saying they were hungry so - could we maybe get some food and - and just everybody sit down? Talk about all this?" Angel didn't seem his usual self - seemed off, somehow, more than tired, and Spike cocked his head to the side, watching him.

*Something's up with the broody bastard. Wonder if he'll say?*

*You mean, something besides the usual?* Xander hadn't let go of Spike's waist and now he slipped his other arm around and hugged, chin on Spike's shoulder and his lips pressing into Spike's neck. Spike relaxed against him, finally letting his demon-face go, watching Angel and the dark Slayer through slitted eyes. Faith shrugged and went back to sprawl on the couch again and Buffy moved over to the other couch, still looking pissed. She had argued against getting the other Slayer out of prison - had argued that they didn't need a murderer on 'The Team'. Spike had just looked at her, eyebrow up, and
she'd subsided, glaring.

"Yes, I think that's an admirable idea, Angel." Giles bent a little at Ethan's urging and let the mage pick the cobweb out of his hair, grimacing at it. "I think first, though, Ethan and I really need to get cleaned up. The cellar here is -"

"Disgusting," Ethan finished, brushing his hands together distastefully. Angel looked a little apprehensive.

"Uh - maybe you guys should just - avoid the cellar," he said, and Spike chuckled.

"Too late, Angel. They've been dismantling Dru's messes for hours already. And the Potentials have found just about all the...'doll parts' she cached. And - other things." Angel looked appalled and then he sighed, his shoulders sinking a little.

"Oh. Sorry about that, Giles," he mumbled.

Oh fuck yeah, something besides the usual. That should have got more of a rise than that... Flash in the link, of Angel in China when he'd had his soul but hadn't told them. The same then as now - a tiredness that was more
than physical - sadness that wasn't guilt but was something else. *He's losin'- something. Resignin' himself to it. Git. Why won't he ever fight?*

*Guilt, I'd guess,* Oz thought, and Fred and Tara walked back in just then, talking softly. Giles and Ethan strode off in the direction of the downstairs bathroom. Fred handed a little plastic cup with lions and tigers prancing around on it to Connor. It had a spout at the top and Spike regarded it curiously.

*Sippy cup,* Derio supplied, with images of his own numerous cousins using them and Spike shook his head.

*Humans are strange. What's wrong with a plain cup?*

*That,* Xander thought, laughing as Connor grabbed the cup and immediately turned it upside down. It didn't spill, of course, and Spike shrugged.

*Wasn't allowed to walk around with a cup, anyway. Food a good idea, pet?*

*Very good idea.*

"There's about five places that deliver out here," Xander
continued aloud. "Chinese, pizza, Thai, Mexican, and burgers. How about we just get some from each?"

"Oh! Mexican!" Fred said, jumping a little, and Tara smiled.

"Pizza!" from Dawn, who sat cross-legged on the floor making 'grrrrr' faces at Connor so he'd laugh, which he was doing around the spout of the cup.

"Hey! Xander's getting food!" It was a Potential - Rona - standing at the head of the stairs and there were appreciative yells from the second storey and a thundering of feet. The bow-shock of the Slayer energy was big enough to precede them by yards and Angel flashed to game face and swooped down on Connor - picked him up and held him close, fight or flight quivering through him. Spike could see the tension in him and that was one more piece in the puzzle because Angel - shouldn't be that upset. Not over a pack of little girls, Slayer-taint or no. Dawn 'eeped' and scooted closer to the couch, leaning into Oz and Derio's shins and shooting a glare at Angel.

"You'll get used to it, Irish," Spike said quietly, voice pitched for Angel's ears and the older vampire looked
over at him, his expression a little wild.

"Jesus -" he said, and then the Potentials were pouring down the stairs, lugging buckets and mops and rags and bottles of spray-cleaner, combined scents of chemicals and shampoo and girl-sweat and them - the family blood, Florida Water, Rose oil, blood, Dru Angelus Spike. Angel took a hard, hard breath and lowered his head and Spike felt a moment's empathy. It was pretty overwhelming, even when you were used to it. And the memories that came from the stirred-up scents...those were just as hard to deal with.

"Hey - another vampire!" Kennedy, of course, doing her best to look hard and menacing and Spike didn't even have to try - the demon was right there and he shook Xander off and was on her in three long strides - grabbed her by the scruff.

"The only other vampire you can't stake, so fuck right off, Kennedy," he snarled and gave her a shove in the direction of the kitchen. "You lot get this mess put away and get clean - you stink. And be respectful. That's the bloody Angelus and he's had more blood on his hands then you'll ever see in your lifetime." The Potentials milled uncertainly, exchanging looks, then they flocked
kitchen-ward, chattering. Spike didn't pull his punches and they'd learned fast in the last two days not to piss him off - and to hop it when he said hop it.

_Oooh, I think you just might have shocked Angel speechless._ Xander giggled in the link and it was true, Angel was staring at Spike with his mouth gaping open. Faith was looking a little surprised herself, but then she shook back her hair and stood up again, walking over to Buffy and holding out her hand.

"Listen, B - let's just let all that old stuff go, okay? Angel said you needed help - that something big was goin' down. I'm...not the same as I was."

"Pretty close," Buffy said, eyeing her, but she finally reached out and took Faith's hand. "Okay. Let's go introduce you to the Potentials. They need to be whipped into shape and I'll bet you're just the girl to do it."

"You know it. Gimme a whip and see what happens." Faith's grin was full of innuendo and Buffy made a face, fighting her own smile.

"We'll take orders, Xander. And Drake found something
in that room back there -" Buffy pointed past Spike towards what had probably been servant's quarters or store rooms - a row of cramped cells with small windows and no decoration. "You might want to - deal with it."

"Sure, Buff," Xander said, ambling over and wrapping his arms around Spike again and Spike just sighed and nodded, tired of the cleaning already - tired of the past being unearthed at every turn. He'd already smashed the abandoned wheelchair to fragments and it was on the burn-pile outside.

Glad when this is over. Why doesn't this damn First just show itself so we can fight? Sick of all this mess.

Be home soon, Xander thought, but his confidence in that mantra was wearing thin as Giles and Ethan discovered more and more about the First - and Buffy told about Angel's encounter with it years ago in this same house.

God, want to be home NOW...love you, love you... Spike closed his eyes, oblivious for a moment to the Potentials, to Angel - to everything. Sinking into the internal, full-body pet that Xander was doing, into the pack, safe, love you love you that was coming from Derio and Oz. Dawn was also family love brothers, fuzzy but there and Tara's
voice, rising and falling softly as she talked to Fred, was a pleasant, peaceful thing. *Promise, promise,* Spike thought, although promise what he wasn't at all sure. He was just - afraid, even though he wouldn't admit it. He felt as if something was going to swoop out of the sky - or burst up out of the floor - and devour them all. He pushed those things violently away into the dark - back into the recesses of his mind that still held the Initiative, and other things. The same place he'd been putting them since he first started loving Xander, and his William voice was right - it was crowded in there, and getting nasty.

*Don't care. It's not going to get free and I'm not going to fail. Get my family safe out of this, that's all that matters - all that counts.*

*Teeth and claws,* from the demon maybe, or William, and he shook his head.

*You all right, vampire-mine?* Xander asked, and Spike straightened and turned in Xander's embrace, dredging up a smile.
"Never better, love. Food, yeah? And then some talk and we'll have this sorted soon."
"Yeah," Xander said softly, and kissed him.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Food went over well. The Potentials all ate in the living room, cross-legged on the floor, with Connor going from girl to girl, getting hugged, tickled, and fed. He seemed to prefer the pad Thai noodles and the veggie pizza over all. Dawn chose to eat with the Potentials so she could tell Angel/Angelus/Faith stories. Even Miss Kitty and Sinclair - unsettled by the move and the strangers - came out of hiding to beg scraps and Connor paced them around the circle for as long as they would put up with him, grabbing for their tails and saying 'kitty kitty kitty' under his breath. Everyone else gathered at the long table in the dining room, passing around plates and keeping the conversation on the casual side. Angel surprised everyone by taking some egg-drop soup and then looking speculatively at Spike when he refused any of the blood Angel had brought.

*Never touching that foul mess again,* Spike thought, shuddering at the aroma of animal blood from Angel's mug. Derio sniffed and agreed silently that it was
bad. Halfway through the meal, Cecelia Pembroke swept in with the newest Potential - from Australia - and grabbed Anya and Drake for 'family time' at her hotel. The Potential - Donna - ate three slices of pizza in rapid succession and fell asleep against the couch arm, her shoes still coated in the red dust of home. Then they talked.

"Wes hasn't found anything about the First you don't already know," Angel said, looking tiredly over at Connor and then back to the table. "We're doing some research, and we're talking to our people but...there's not much out there."

"The demon community knows it's coming, though," Buffy said, wiping her hands slowly on a napkin. "A lot of them are clearing out, and - Sunnydale seems to be waking up to reality. There are a lot more 'For Sale' signs around than before. I think people kind of...know."

"I wonder how they know? Is it some sort of race memory thing or is it maybe -" Fred started rattling off theories and speculations and Spike shook his head - kissed Xander glancingly on the cheek and stood up.

Gonna have a smoke - go hunt. Be back in a while, yeah?
Sure. We're going to burn that stuff later - we'll be up.

Love you... Spike pulled his duster on and stalked outside, lighting up and taking a deep breath of mingled air and smoke. The garden was dull and stark without the flowers Dru had loved, and the little fountain was sluggish - needed cleaning. The scent of the sea was far off and thin, and he could mostly smell old blood and the rot of things in the cistern. Good thing they're burning that tonight. Can't wait much longer. He pulled out his flask and took a long pull - the last of the Glenfiddich that the mage had brought - and was unsurprised when Angel stepped out into the garden after him. They both stood in silence, Spike smoking and Angel watching him, and Spike finally sighed and offered the flask. Angel took a long drink and handed it back, and Spike tucked it away.

"I'm hunting. You with?" he asked shortly, and Angel hesitated and then nodded.

Downtown Sunnydale was deserted, even though it was relatively early, and Spike headed for the docks. There was always something shady going on there, and he didn't think Angel would have too much to complain about if he took down a criminal or two. They wandered
in silence along the creaking piers, the soft slap and
gurgle of the sea familiar and calming. It was almost like
the Duwamish near their house in Seattle and for a
moment homesickness gripped Spike so hard that the
link flared wide; Xander, Oz and Derio all snatched into
the feeling and buffeted by it before he could get it
under control.

Sorry, sorry my loves, sorry, didn't mean -

It's all right...all right...I miss it too, love, miss it too...
from Xander, heartbreak in that thought, and: Pack, pack
safe...home soon... and love you from Oz and Derio.

"You all right?" Angel asked, staring at him, and Spike
shook himself all over and frowned, going for another
cigarette.

"Just talkin' to my family," he muttered, and Angel
nodded slowly.

"Do you think what you did...hurt Xander? Do you think
it...tainted him?" Angel's voice was so soft - so bereft of
the usual impatience or accusation or sneer that Spike
stopped walking and looked at him for a long moment.
"I can't touch his soul any more than he can touch mine. I might be playin' nice an' all but I'm still what I was - nothing's gonna change that. But I love him and he feels that, every minute. He knows, and -" 

"Accepts," Angel murmured, and Spike shook his head impatiently. 

"The Slayer 'accepts'. Xander - knows. And it doesn't matter. He loves me no matter what," Spike added, so softly that Angel might not have heard, but he did. 

"Do you think -" he started, and then paused, scenting the air. There were people up ahead, and there was blood. Spike grinned at him and flicked his cigarette away, shifting into game-face and stalk-mode as smooth as glass. Three men were attacking a fourth - the fourth was scrabbling for a gun that gleamed dully under the running lights of some ship - and Spike pounced gleefully into the midst of them, dealing out blows that knocked two men cold and broke an arm. He grabbed the fourth man and shook him. 

"What're you doin' out here, mate? Not a good place to be after dark," he growled, and the man writhed in terror. Angel was in game-face also, his nostrils flaring at
the thick scent of blood in the air and Spike snarled a silent laugh.

"Take it! Just take it! Just - don't kill me, okay? Please!"

"Take what, eh? What're you offerin'?" Spike asked, and the man kicked his foot out at a duffle that was lying half-zipped near Spike's feet. Spike poked at it with his toe.

"Oi - Irish! See what's in here." He saw the man with the broken arm getting dazedly to his feet and he strode over to him, dragging the man in his arms along by the throat. The broken-arm man cringed away and Spike grabbed his jacket and flung him towards Angel, who straightened up from the duffle and caught him.

"It's heroin, Spike. A lot."

"Oooh - got a little horse in the bag an' you wanna trade it for your life?" Spike purred. The man nodded frantically, twisting in Spike's choke-hold.

"You can have all of it!" he rasped. "Worth a quarter-mil! More!"

"Sure it is," Spike said, grinning over at Angel who looked
a little confused. Spike wrenched the man's head over and drank, fast, before Angel had a chance to figure out what he was doing. When he'd taken enough to incapacitate - but not enough to kill - he let the man fall to the ground, licking his lips.

"Spike! What the fuck -!" Angel's shock drove his demon away and Spike grinned, knowing there was blood on his fangs.

"Said I was hunting, Angel. You think I live on animal blood - stale human blood fit for the garbage? I hunt. I just don't kill 'em - mostly." Angel just stood staring at him, but Spike knew he could hear the man's heartbeat - knew he was still alive. The man with the broken arm was babbling something now, about money and drugs, and Angel came out of his daze and shook him, shutting him up. Spike picked up the duffle of heroin and zipped it shut - spied another bag half-hidden under a pile of rotting crates and pulled it out.

"Oh look - the payoff." Spike lifted a stack of bills - hundreds - and the man twitched. "Go on, Angel - you can have a taste. You used to, you know. I remember. Only the murderers and rapists. He's close enough, don't you think?" Spike slung the bag of money
down with the drugs and walked over to Angel who looked miserable and furious at the same time.

"You've got to be kidding me, Spike! You - hunt - people. You drink their blood! How - how can... Xander said you have a soul! Giles did!"

"I do have a soul, you wanker! Not callin' Xan a liar, are you? Never lost my soul, unlike some. You think I should be - hidin' in the corner? Crying for the quick and the dead?"

"Humans, Spike! How can you -"

"I'm a vampire, mate, same as you, although you'd like to forget what you are." Spike turned in a circle, arms outstretched. He felt a curious sort of buzzing somewhere in the back of his head. Felt as if he were floating. Memories of past times - hunts with Angelus, with Dru through the midnight streets - welled up and spilled over, and he was lost to the past. "Play-pretend with your humans and hide your face all you like... Xander knows what I am - they all do." Spike looked over at Angel, and at the human who was struggling in his grip and he snarled in impatient fury. Strode over and snatched the broken-armed man
out of Angel's lax hold. He cuffed the man a sharp blow and the human sank to the ground, unconscious. The link was thrumming with tension and question question and Spike soothed his family - shut down, a little, letting them know it was just between him and Angel, for now. That floating feeling persisted, and Spike felt the demon stir and surge and stretch, reaching for the freedom it had had on the mountain with his family - nostalgic for past times and aching for Angel to just be himself - just this once, just for a little while. Cast out and denied and all ties severed but it still wanted...would always want.

"It's wrong, Spike. I don't have to -"

"But you do, you bloody stupid bastard." Spike got up in Angel's face, the demon snarling at him and calling Angel's own to the fore, golden eyes and heavy, ridged brow and they glared at each other. "You fight it every day, Angel - every minute. You ever think that if you let the demon out a bit more that the bloody Angelus wouldn't be madder than Dru? It's like askin' a bird not to fly, Angel!" Spike crouched down suddenly and wiped his finger along the broken-armed man's temple, where blood trickled from the blow he'd dealt. He stood back up and shoved his hand into Angel's face, watching the
struggle - the desperation.

"It's what we are, you ponce. Pretend all day and nothing will change it. Use it! Don't imagine you're better for drinkin' that filth you do and sleepin' all night and hiding - everything you are." Angel seemed frozen, panting lightly, and Spike slowly painted his lips with the blood - put his other hand up and took the back of Angel's neck in a hard grip. "They can take more than you think, Angel. They can - accept more than you could ever imagine. I promised Xander I wouldn't kill 'em. And mostly I don't, unless they want it. The sick ones, they've always come to us, haven't they? I take those, sometimes, and he knows, and he doesn't mind. But I don't hide, and I don't try to fool myself. I'm stronger than you, Angel, because I've never shut the demon out." Angel's mouth was open and he licked, slowly, at his lips. Shuddered violently under Spike's hand.

"There now," Spike crooned, leaning in to rest his forehead on Angel's - closing his eyes and inhaling the rich, earthy, musky scent that was Angel, Angelus...familiar as his own body and triggering a flood of memories that had been hovering for days, dredged up by the house-cleaning and ready to swamp him - drown him.
"Spike - you... I can't -"

"'Course you can. Angel, Angel....Angelus... We were good together, yeah? Were like...one mind. One body. I always knew - where you were, when to move. Always knew you were there, in a fight. At my back..." Angel shifted and his hands came up and gripped Spike's shoulders, kneading through his duster and Spike wanted to laugh - wanted to cry. Images thick and fast and not all of them bad - not all of them full of heartache.

"Wanted to share this with another man and you did...shared it all, showed me so much... Loved you all so much, Angel, wanted you all so much and I - tried so hard..." Spike heard his voice crack - didn't care. Oh, he was cold, and he missed Dru, he missed - Xander and their house, and he wanted... "Why'd you leave us? Why'd you hate us?" That memory, hurtful and bitter, made him catch his breath and Angel's hands were stroking his back now, pulling him into an embrace he hadn't felt in a century. The demon struggled, confused and angry, but Spike - William - just wanted the past to be quiet - wanted to somehow let out the poison of it and family family family family was dinning in his mind, overriding even the demon's anger at Angel's
rejection. *Did want us, but there was something...something... Dru would know, Darla...she'll remember. Mind like a steel trap, that one...have to ask...*

"You always loved too much, Spike. Hurt yourself over and over, loving like that. I could never love like that...Angelus couldn't..."

"He did. You did. Before... Why did you do it, Angel? You tore Dru to bits, leavin' us like that. Broke her right down...gutted me..." Old hurt, old pain - too much - and Spike struggled in Angel's embrace, pulling away and staring at him, knowing there were tears on his face and this once not caring. He was suffocating in the press of memory and emotion and he closed the link down harder, trying to keep the hurt away - trying to regain some control. Things were - coming undone. He felt it - recognized it - but didn't know how to stop it, and awareness dimmed.

"Spike?" Angel's voice, far away, and Spike shook himself and looked around, at docks and sprawled bodies and the thin, curling mist off the sea.

"Where's Dru, eh? Where'd we leave the ladies? Time
to get them and go home..." There was something - calling. Something black and huge and older than anything he knew but it whispered promises - whispered family - told him where to go. Spike reached out for Xander but the link - wasn't there. Or he couldn't find it, and then he forgot what he was doing and looked at Angel again, who was staring at him.

"I know a place; they'll love it, Angelus. Let's find them, let me show you - you've never seen... come on! You don't want to miss this -" Spike turned and ran, heading towards what he wasn't sure but it wanted, and it showed him things he'd forgotten - things he'd dreamed - and he didn't know the difference, now. He could hear Angel somewhere behind him and he shouted to the wind - to the sliver of moon and the sound of the tide.

"Come on - come on! Fast as you can! Can't catch me - " He laughed aloud, and the insistent prick of the link only urged him on. Somewhere was something to explain this, and he was going to find it. Somewhere was family, and Angel was there, missing link, and now he had the chain and he could pull them all back, make them all his, forever and always. Xander, wolflings, Dru...all of them, all of them... Where's my boy? It -
knows. It will tell me...tell me... Running towards, and he didn't notice that he was still crying.

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20 Games

"Man, I hope Spike and Angel aren't gonna fight," Xander muttered, helping Oz shove twisted newspaper into the pile of stuff they were going to burn. The feeling coming from Spike was uneasy and prickly - a little hostile.

"Yeah, don't need that," Oz agreed. He surveyed the pile and nodded his approval - turned with a smile as Derio came out of the house with a box of long fireplace matches. Oz made a small motion with his hand and Xander moved back - watched him light the newspaper. After a minute, when all the paper was ablaze, Oz leaned over the edge of the cistern to blow on the small flames. They flattened and sprang back, making a fluttering noise, and Xander concentrated on Spike. He could scent the blood with him - scent the fight. He felt it in his own body when Spike pounced on
the man and drank him down. He lowered his head, trembling a little with reaction at the tingling rush of it. He could almost taste it in his mouth - fear and anger in equal parts, spice of alcohol and heat. A soft gasp at the sudden and nauseating feeling of floating - of disconnection.

What - from Derio, head to one side and his hand gripping the cistern-edge tight, his eyes losing focus. The link shifted - flared and then warped as something seemed to - scramble it. Xander lifted his head, a chill creeping over him and his eyes fluttering closed. Trying to sort the sudden, bewildering barrage of images and emotions. Oz growled softly, shifting, orienting himself towards wherever Spike was.

What the fuck? The sense of something looming - calling - waiting to devour suddenly intensified beyond all proportion and the link went haywire, mental static shot through with memories that, Xander realized, weren't right. Not all of them.

Oh god, he's - fuck, something's triggered it - he's forgetting - Derio was growling as well, halfway to wolf already and Oz was trembling - Xander was. He felt as if he were being thrust into a violent windstorm; the link
was noise, was anger and fear and longing, and he thought for one long moment that he was going to fall, balance deserting him, vision going to a black-edged tunnel. And Spike wasn't answering - wasn't even acknowledging them. He put his hand down on the edge of the cistern to steady himself and the fire, burning high, singed his knuckles. He didn't even care.

"Xander? What's -" Tara was in the doorway, hugging herself, looking troubled and Xander blinked at her, shaking his head.

"I don't know. Something's - happened, something - " The link flared suddenly, the demon overwhelming all, *darklife chaos malice olderthan* and then it was gone - Spike was gone as suddenly and completely as a TV that had been turned off, leaving only a low, grating hum. A little thread of glowing phosphor - cathode tube cooling down - was the only thing telling him Spike was alive. Xander swayed, feeling that as a physical blow.

"Oh - god!" The looming - the devouring presence was still there - was oppressive and massive and somehow gloating and Xander felt sweat break out over his body and face - felt the hyena surge up and out. And he let it come; opened wide to it and knew his eyes were alive
with that eerie glow - knew the change in his aura had slammed into Tara like a wave when she gasped and staggered back a step. He was dimly aware of Oz and Derio stripping as fast as they could, changing before their clothes were half off, danger danger not pack not pack not pack pouring off them.

"Xander -" Tara took one step towards him and then stopped, and he unclenched his fists - fought the hyena back far enough to uncurl the snarl that was twisting his mouth - stealing his voice.

"Ta-ara...f-fuck..."

"Go slow - what do I need to do?" she said, and Xander shook his head hard, sucking in a deep breath and feeling Oz press into his thigh on one side, Derio on the other. Heat and solid muscle and his hands were on their powerful shoulders, fingers sinking into the fur.

"Get - Giles and Ethan. Ward the house - do it now, Tara, do - whatever you have to do. S-something's coming and Spike - Spike -" He struggled to stay still - to listen - but he only got that feeling of a storm coming. Some rapidly approaching thing that was suffocating him - making him want to fight - to scream. The ragged bit of fire-fly glow
from Spike was still there, flickering; sending jumbled emotions and glimpses of the past too quickly to see or understand.

"Get everything - locked down."

"I will. Xander - go find him." Xander nodded jerkily and lurched forward, the dual control of his body switching suddenly so that he stalked into the house and Buffy leapt to her feet, her face pale.

"Xander - Oz? What -"

"Something's happened - something's coming. Spike -"

"Where is he? Is Angel -?"

"We have to go!" Xander strode over to a chest shoved up against the wall and pulled out two longish knives, shoving them into the waist of his jeans. He snagged a short-handled ax and turned - tossed it to Buffy. "Tara - has the house. We've got to go now." Her face went set and hard, and he knew she understood.

"Faith!" Buffy yelled, hefting the axe. "You're in charge here - Tara knows - guard the girls!"
"You got it, B," from somewhere on the stairs and Faith's footsteps, pounding down. That little tingling pulse that said Slayer was like a knife-point in the back of his head and Xander shivered all over, wanting out of there, needing to get clear of it.

"But what on earth -" Giles, coming in from the kitchen with a comet's tail of Potentials and Xander snarled, patience gone, temper and the hyena taking complete control.

"Shit! His eyes -" Molly backpedaled when Xander glared at her then he turned and ran; out the door, across the courtyard, up the steps; Oz and Derio leaping ahead, Buffy right behind and the night like the wing of a raven, folding over them and taking them in.

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Halfway to - wherever they were going - Angel suddenly pelted out of the blackness, two bags slung over his shoulders, game-faced and growling.

"Can you find him?" he shouted, and Oz let forth a string
of yelping howls that Derio took up a moment later. Xander opened his mouth on a full-throated shriek and they wheeled like a flock of birds, darting down an alley, Angel falling in behind. It was here, here, here, like a hooked line dragging them in, the oppressive want and the tiny glowing spark of darklife pack family that was all that told them Spike was still alive - still conscious.

_Fucking school, it's the SCHOOL, what the fuck - Spike, Spike, SPIKE!_

_Protect, protect - god, HURTS - _ Wolf-Derio whined, running beside him, and it did hurt. The buzz that was the Hellmouth was stronger here by a hundred times or more and it made Xander feel as if ants were crawling all over him - crawling and biting. The string of beads he wore burned against his chest.

_It's worse, it's stronger - fuck! _ A sudden, blood-curdling bolt, and Xander stumbled and almost fell - wrenched himself up and ran on, hearing Angel roar behind him.

"What the fuck was that!"

"Hellmouth! Open or - run, damnit!" They pounded down the sidewalk and then they were on campus and
Xander snuffed the air, tasting for Spike and finding only earth and human-smell, overpowering.

_Alarm? Pack, find him, find him..._ from Oz. There was a light in the school where light shouldn't be, and the door yielded to Xander's shove. _Not locked - Spike - SPIKE! We're coming, hold fast hold fast hold fast -_ Oz and Derio skidded on the linoleum, claws scrabbling for purchase and Xander ran, feeling the tug in the link getting stronger, the stuttering images and emotions starting to overwhelm him. He careened around a corner and almost ran full tilt into a door. 'Basement Access' on a red sign and a wooden wedge shoved under the edge of it, holding it open.

"Fuck - down here -"

"Like with the eggs -" Buffy said, panting, and Xander remembered. That seal was down there - the Hellmouth's front door and that - was where Spike was.

_Fuck, fuck, FUCK, it called him here - Spike! Protect protect protect -_ He practically flew down the stairs - around a landing and down again and then they were running along a labyrinth of corridors. Stuff - was everywhere - old desks and file cabinets and piles of
broken chairs and tables. Over all was that 'basement' smell of must and earth and water, stale air and dust. And a faint, lingering scorched smell that reminded him of the day they'd blown the school up. And Blood, that's blood - fuck - SPIKE! Oz whined, panting, running just ahead, Derio on his heels. Angel's shoes thundered on the dirty concrete and Buffy's boot-heels made sharp crack crack sounds. And something else. Spike. Shouting.

"I did not! I wouldn't do that! Doesn't matter, doesn't matter -" His voice abruptly cut off and Xander pushed himself, extra burst of speed, his lungs burning. A corner, then a doorway and Oz was through, and Derio, Careful, jump! then he was, stumbling and nearly falling over a body lying aslant the door. Dirt was mounded up around the edges of the room and the seal lay exposed - bloody. Spike was against the far wall, crouched down over another body, head in hands.

Blood - Jesus, on him, his hands - the SEAL, god - Then they were across the room, they were around Spike, the wolves pushing up against him and Xander crouching down - reaching for him.

"Spike - hey, Spike - you okay? Are you hurt?" Spike
flinched and looked up at him. Eyes wide, blood smeared on his mouth - his cheek - his hair, from where his hands had clutched and raked the strands into disarray.

"You're not dead," he hissed, and then the link surged - opened wide and Xander almost screamed. Spike did, his fingers clawing at his head and Xander lunged and grabbed him, pulling him up and away from the body that lay at his feet, holding him tight. The seal was closed but the nerve-wracking hum from it still shivered through the air and Xander could feel a headache building behind his eyes.

I'm here, I'm here, you're safe - pack is safe - Spike, love, you're safe, safe...

Pack pack pack safe, love you... Derio and Oz pressed into Spike's legs, heat and solidity and Spike was shuddering, panting.

I saw her, saw her - she told me - Xander, she said you were DEAD, she said - I killed you, killed... She SHOWED me - Xander, Xander - Spike was incoherent - terrified - and Xander mindlessly soothed and whispered and held him, doing his best to shunt the battering emotions away
from Derio and Oz - trying to let them just go through him and drain away. Images - Dru, and Darla, and Angelus, dressed like a movie extra and Xander couldn't tell if they were old memories or new.

Buffy and Angel were still by the door, helping the man there sit up. Youngish black man, suit and tie and a bloody bruise on his jaw. Oz nuzzled into Spike's side and then went to investigate the body that was sprawled over the seal.

_Gonna change_, he thought, brief flicker of modesty with Buffy there, and then he changed and crouched naked over the blond corpse - turned it gently onto its back. The throat was gone.

"It's - Andrew," Oz said softly, and Buffy looked up, grimacing at the blood and cartilage and muscle showing raw and dirt-flecked under the slack, pale face.

"He and that - other boy were down here -" The black man coughed, holding his ribs, and Buffy helped him to stand. Angel stalked over to Xander and Spike, his face set and furious.

"You killed him, Spike!"
"Fuck off, Angel!" Xander glared at Angel over Spike's shoulder and Derio pushed forcefully between Angel and Spike, hackles raised, growling.

"Xander, you can't seriously be okay with -"

"Shut the fuck up," Xander snapped, bending a little to listen to Spike who was muttering something into Xander's neck.

"Spike? What'd you say, love? Tell me again."

"I didn't - I don't - you said no killing and I don't, I hardly ever do, I - he was - there was blood on the s-seal, blood all - down his arm and that - that -" Spike twisted suddenly and stared at the seal - at Oz, who was changing back. "Of course they know! I don't -"

"Spike?" Xander took Spike's face gently in his palms, turning his head. "We know what, love?"

Spike just stared at him for a moment and then he suddenly shivered all over and the link rapidly settled, going from chaotic flood to normal in seconds.
"Xander? What are - fuck, it was opening -"  Spike whipped around to stare at the seal again - lifted his hands to scrub them back through his hair and checked when he saw the blood. "What the fuck is going on?"

"That's what I'd like to know. We need to get out of here. Is - that guy dead, too?" Buffy was looking at the third body, the one Spike had been crouched over.

Oz, is he-?

Alive - hurt. His blood on the seal.

"He's alive, Buffy. He may need a doctor."  Buffy crossed over to where the third body lay and crouched down, gently turning the boy and jumping back a little when he groaned.

"It's Johnathan! Angel - help me -"  Angel glared at Spike for a moment and then walked over to Buffy.  Between them they hoisted the limp body up.  Johnathan's head lollled and he whimpered faintly, his black shirt shiny with blood.

"What - should we do with -"  The black man gestured hesitantly at Andrew and Buffy shook her head.
We'll bury him. Get out of here. Oz straddled the body and took a mouthful of the black turtleneck Andrew had been wearing between his jaws - lifted him up and began to drag the body away, wolf with prey and Xander saw Buffy go pale.

"Oz and Derio can - bury him. He's been missing for months and there was never... No Missing Persons. We can't stop to deal with him," Xander said, gently as he could, and Buffy gulped and nodded. "Buffy - who is - " Xander gestured at the black man, who looked...oddly calm, for being in the midst of blood and chaos.

"I'm - I'm Robin Wood. I'm the principal at Sunnydale High. And I know Ms. Summers - she's pretty infamous around here." Robin brushed half-heartedly at his suit and looked narrowly at Spike. "When I came in here, he was - raving. Had that blond boy by the neck. He - he killed him. I tried to stop him - I think he cracked my ribs. You do know he's a vampire?"

"'Course we know," Xander snapped, ice forming in the pit of his stomach and he felt a shiver go through Spike.

"Had to - had to, Xan, he was - it was opening and she
said - said I'd done it, said I'd hurt that - that boy but I know, I know, I - had to stop him -"  Spike vamped suddenly, growling, lunging forward towards nothing at all. "Get out! Get out - filthy bitch! Angelus, rein her in or I fuckin' swear -"  Xander wrapped his arms around Spike, holding him as tightly as he could, pulling him back from his invisible antagonist. The Hellmouth energy thrummed over their nerves, like being next to a huge, poorly-tuned engine and he couldn't sort it from Spike, from Buffy, from Oz and Derio, who were going rapidly away with the corpse, relieved to be going but Keep him safe - love you, Spike, love you, pack, pack.

"We have to get out of here. Buffy - come on -"  Buffy nodded and she and Angel started maneuvering the boy out of the room, his limp body slung between them.  Johnathan moaned again, his eyes fluttering.

"I think he needs a doctor," Buffy said, and Robin started patting at himself.

"I've got my cell - I'll call 911 and - and then I'm going to want an explanation for - all of this," he said, eyeing Spike - and Angel - and the seal with a tight-lipped expression.
"Yeah, we'll call you, let's get going." Buffy and Angel hauled Johnathan out, Robin following behind, and Xander slowly let Spike go - turned him so he could see Spike's face.

"Love, you all right? What happened?" He let his fingers brush over the dried blood on Spike's cheek and Spike shuddered, closing his eyes and leaning into Xander - leaning his forehead on Xander's and taking a long, hard breath.

"I don't - know, Xan, I - Angel and me, we were - on the docks. And these men - fighting... And I stopped them and I had one...drank from him..." He stopped and Xander slid his hands down Spike's shoulders - slipped them in under the duster and rubbed gentle, soothing circles on Spike's back.

"Yeah. I felt that. Then - you were talking to Angel and...?"

"Was tellin' him - stop being so daft, stop fighting the demon and...try to live with it... He was - he... I forgot, Xander! I thought - we were hunting, I thought we'd go and get...D-dru and Darla and... And I was gonna - show them this, it... Said you were here, said... we'd be family
and I forgot, I just - I thought - Angelus had come back and I wanted you, wanted him, wanted -" Spike wrenched away - drove his fist hard into the cinder-block wall and stood there, head down, blood oozing from under his knuckles. Xander hesitantly touched his shoulder, squeezing gently through the scarred leather.

*Spike, love - it's all right -*

"No it's not! It's not all right!" Spike whipped around, demon to the fore. "I forgot us! Forgot the claim... Xander, I would have - If I'd kept forgetting I would have tried to turn you! Anything to keep you..." Spike's hand, shaking and blood-stained, lifted to cradle Xander's cheek, and Xander felt the sizzle of pain in the link from the broken fingers.

"But you didn't forget me -" he whispered, and Spike shook his head slowly.

"No... Something said - you were mine, had to be...mine. Said I wanted you and needed you and... I did. But - I would have taken you, love, not asked you..." *Forgive me, Xander, please, so sorry, so sorry...*

*Spike - no - nothing to forgive, please, love -*  Xander
pulled Spike into his arms and just held him, murmuring to him, rubbing slowly over his back, doing his best to comfort - to reassure. The link was full of images - of emotions - and Xander saw that it was true. Spike would have taken him, made him over. Would have tried. And Xander...wasn't sure he cared, deep down.

Anything, my love, my own... But he didn't share that with Spike. Not...now. I'm not helpless, love, and Oz and Derio are here - we'd have stopped you, if we'd had to. You'd never hurt me, Spike, never hurt me... Love you, vampire-mine, love you so much.

Scared. Xander, I'm scared, please don't - don't let me... Spike was breathing in jerky pants into Xander's neck, wetting the skin there and Xander knew he was fighting tears - fighting and losing.

Won't. I won't. You're safe, love, safe - promise. Love you...

Love you, keep you safe, pack, pack... Distant but coming closer, Oz and Derio doing their best to reassure as well, and Xander finally pulled back a little - got Spike turned toward the doorway.
"Come on, love, we need to get back to the house. Faith's there, and Tara, but..."

"Yeah. Okay." Spike sniffed and wiped at his eyes - took out a cigarette and lit it - stared for a moment at the blood on his hand. They picked their way around the room, being careful not to stumble over the mounded earth, and then went out and up, as fast as they could. They met Oz and Derio near the front doors and watched from the shadows as an ambulance loaded Johnathan up and took him away. Angel faded out of the darkness when they did, the bags still over his shoulders and Spike laughed weakly.

"Kept the skag then, Angel? Good on you," he chuckled, and Angel glowered at him.

"I want to know just what in hell is going on -" he started, but Derio growled at him, and Buffy put her hand on his arm.

"Let's get back home first, okay, Angel? I don't like leaving everybody alone for so long." Angel looked at her and sighed, nodding.

"Yeah, okay. Let's go."
Meet you there, Oz thought, and he and Derio loped away, disappearing into the darkness.

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The Crawford Street house was in chaos and Xander just shut his eyes for a minute, willing his headache to go away. But it didn't, and he sighed and stared at the milling Potentials - at the wounded ones, lying on the floor. Several of the girls were crying and Vi was hysterical. Faith - bloody but upright - was snapping orders, and Tara, Giles and Ethan looked as if they were recovering from something bad. A ward was up and it sizzled over their skin as they crossed the threshold. Angel flinched from it, looking around, and Buffy rubbed the back of her neck. She had a streak of blood on her arm.

"Glinda - Niblet?" Spike called, darting forward, and Tara put up her hand - smiled weakly as Spike crouched down next to her. A thin trickle of blood was coming down from her nose and Spike looked around for something to wipe it away. Xander's breath ooofed out of him as Dawn flung herself at him and he picked his way across
the floor to Tara as well, hugging Dawn close. Oz and Derio were in the garden, hunting the grounds for -

"Bringers. It was those - Bringers. You guys booked and - bam - they were on us. Didn't even have time for the mojo to go up." Faith wiped her hair back from her face and hauled an extra-large sized First Aid kit closer to her and started cleaning a gash in the leg of one of the girls. It was the Chinese one, and she said something faintly, looking the other way. Dawn hugged Xander one more time and then slipped away, moving to take the girl's hand. She said something haltingly to her and the Chinese Potential nodded, eyes closed.

Our girl gets smarter every day, Spike thought, pride and worry mingling in that thought and Xander had to smile. He knelt down next to Spike, rubbing Tara's knee softly.

"How many were there? What happened?" Buffy moved to help Faith and Angel slung the bags to the floor - looked around.

"There's another kit in the kitchen, Angel," Buffy said, her tone implying quite clearly that she expected him to go and get it and get busy. Angel stared at her for a
moment and then went, glaring. Spike chuckled softly, holding both of Tara's hands in his.

"You all right, pet? You look knackered."

"I'm - I'm fine. We had to put the ward up f-fast. I've never done one without - preparing. Ethan - sh-showed me how and then we m-made it. It was - hard." Tara looked up gratefully as Rona brought her a wad of paper towels. She wiped at her nose and looked over at Giles and Ethan, both of whom were slumped against the wall, pale and exhausted looking. Ethan had a nose-bleed as well.

"Fuck - shouldn't have left, shouldn't have gone out at all, damnit," Spike muttered, and *My fault, my fault, put them all in danger, FAMILY first, never should have -*

*Stop it, Spike! It's not your fault. It's the First and you know it. They'd have attacked no matter what. It's not your FAULT, Spike.* Spike looked at Xander for a moment, and Xander could see the grief and guilt and self-loathing in his eyes, and then Spike was closing the link, turning back to Tara and Xander wanted to kick and scream. This had to be fixed. They had to find a way.
"Please don’t shut me out, Spike," Xander whispered, and Spike's shoulders slumped. He nodded and let his control of the link ease, and Xander hated the sorrow and desperation and fear that flooded out to him. Tara looked unhappy - it was clear she could sense something - and she put her hand out and gently petted Spike's hair for a moment.

_Clear - all clear out here._ Nothing, from Oz, and a minute later the two of them came inside, human again and dressed, shivering under the ward. They both came immediately over, Derio trailing a hand over Spike's shoulder as he settled on the couch next to Tara, Oz crouching down and smiling up at her - leaning into Spike a little, _Love you love you pack_, softly in the link.

"There was only - ten? Only ten. We got four of 'em - they're over there." Faith jerked her chin towards the stairs and for the first time Xander noticed the bodies, stacked haphazardly. Beings dressed in black, their eyes - gone. He shivered and squeezed Tara's knee - looked over at Oz.

_Fire still going?_ he asked, and Oz nodded.

_When they're asleep_, Oz thought, and Xander agreed.
"When they got the wards up, it - hurt them, I guess. The ones still standing ran and we finished off the ones too hurt to get out. Giles can swing a sword like you wouldn't believe." Faith sent a grin over her shoulder at the Watcher and Xander heard Ethan chuckle softly. "Our girls did good, B." Faith finished off the bandage on Chao-ahn and sat back on her heels, looking tired.

"Yeah, they did. Okay..." Buffy stood up, looking around the room at the Potentials. They looked back, and Xander thought that maybe they were - straighter, now. A little more confident.

"You guys did do good, and - well, I'm proud of you. Why don't you go upstairs, get cleaned up and get to bed. We've got a lot of stuff to do tomorrow.

"What happened with you tonight?" It was Kennedy, sporting a black eye and a badly scraped shoulder, and Buffy sighed and shook her head.

"In the morning, Kennedy. Come on - all of you - upstairs." Kennedy grumbled and the other girls didn't look happy, but they eventually trailed away upstairs,
avoiding the pile of Bringer corpses. Angel, who'd done a little bandaging himself, was wiping his hands on some spare gauze.

"I kind of want to know what happened tonight too," he said, eyes on Spike's face, and Spike snarled at him. Xander put a hand on Spike's shoulder.

"Buffy can tell you, Angel. We're gonna get rid of the bodies." Angel eyed him - nodded stiffly and strode to the courtyard. Buffy sighed again and looked over at Xander and Spike.

"You want me to tell him about...the forgetting?"

"If you can," Xander said softly, and she nodded, frowning, and turned and followed Angel out.

Wanker. He needs to go.

Yeah. C'mon - you okay to do this? Spike pushed himself to his feet - patted Tara's shoulder. She smiled at him and stood herself, stiff.

"I'm going to make some tea, something...calming. I think we could all use it," she said quietly. She went over
to Giles and Ethan and got them up, Ethan swaying a little and leaning heavily on Giles.

"I'll - take tea out to Buffy. She may need some help...explaining," Giles said, his voice hoarse and tired, and Tara patted his arm and led the way to the kitchen. Dawn had found Sinclair and was cuddling him on the other couch, watching everyone scatter.

"Hey, Spike - can I have the last of your Jaffa Cakes?"

"'Course you can, Bit." Spike smiled, going over to stroke a hand over her hair and give Sinclair's head a quick rub. She grinned at him and went into the kitchen. Xander pushed his hands through his hair - looked over to Oz and Derio.

"Let's get this over with, then," he said. Spike pulled his duster off and flung it over the couch - went with Xander to the Bringer corpses and the four of them hauled them out into the courtyard where the fire in the cistern was burning hot and bright.

As the bodies slowly dissolved to ash and grease and bits of charred bone, they sat against the wall, watching. Derio and Oz were leaning together, Derio
humming softly under his breath, Oz's fingers restlessly twisting in his dreads. Xander leaned against the wall, Spike between his legs, cuddling him close. Spike had his head on Xander's shoulder - his arms crossed over Xander's.

*We'll fix this, Spike. Whatever it is, we'll fix it. Promise.*

*Love you, Xander. Love you...*

*Love you too, vampire-mine....always.* Xander rested his cheek on Spike's temple and pulled him closer, and hoped, quietly and secretly down in the bottom of his heart, that they could fix whatever was wrong.

*Please - anything. I'll give anything - do anything. Just - anyone that can, anyone that will... Help us...*
Xander stumbled downstairs around eleven o'clock the next day, yawning, squinting against the sun that was coming in through the kitchen windows. He looked blearily around and finally found a clean mug, and poured himself some coffee. It was stone-cold, so he stuck the cup in the microwave and turned to find some breakfast - and nearly jumped out of his skin when he found Faith standing right behind him.

"Fuck -" He pushed down the hyena's instinctive response - not pack! and crossed his arms over his chest, hating to be defensive. But the unpleasant Slayer tingle was worse, now that there were so many, and Faith's in particular was harsher than Buffy - less controlled.

"Sorry, man, didn't mean to -" Faith made a sort of 'backing off' gesture, hands up and open, literally taking a step back, and Xander sighed and forced himself to relax.

"You startled me. And I can - feel you. It's... It's uncomfortable."

"Feel me? Like - how?" Faith leaned back against the counter behind her, pulling cigarettes and lighter out of her jeans - although how they fit in that skin-tight denim, Xander wasn't really sure.
"Like - a kind of buzzing in the back of my head. Listen, Faith, I'm just - getting some breakfast and -"

"Hey, Xander, I just -" Faith looked intently at the tip of her cigarette for a minute and then looked up at him. She looked - serious, and a little angry, and Xander just didn't want to talk about it. "I just - I wanted to say I'm sorry, okay? I was - really shitty to you before and... I wanted you to know... I didn't say anything but I was really glad you tried to...well, tried to be my friend, you know? I just...was in a really bad place." She took a huge drag on the cigarette and for a moment Xander flashed on Spike, and how he distracted himself from unpleasant things, and he sighed.

"Faith - look. That...was a long time ago, okay? I mean, yeah, it sucked and I was pissed about it for a long time. But now -" Xander made a gesture, indicating the house; the Potentials, whom he could hear out in the garden - the situation, really, with a spread of his fingers. "Now is - really bad, you know? And...that's just...done. It's over. I'm...I don't care, anymore. You're here, helping us - Wes says you're okay, and Tara does, so - I trust you. Just - stay away from Spike, okay? 'Cause he...doesn't."
"Feeling's mutual," Faith muttered, and then she shook her head. "I get - what he's doing. Kind of. You two - Wes kind of explained, and Fred did, a little... You know her and your witch are kinda...diggin' each other?" The microwave dinged and Xander turned and got his coffee, cradling the warm cup in his hands.

"Yeah," he said, chuckling, and Faith relaxed a tiny bit, smiling at him. *She's really pretty when she smiles. Fuck. Can't wait for this whole mess to be over. Really wasn't up to confronting the woman who...well..."

"Fred just wouldn't shut up about her - 'Tara' this and 'Tara' that and - it was kinda cute, in a really annoying sorta way." Faith finished her cigarette and moved to the sink, dousing it and tossing the butt into the trash. *Pack pack pack*, getting stronger, and then Derio padded in, pajama pants and the string of red and black beads and nothing else. He blinked sleepily at Faith, a little flare of alarm in the link, and then he went for the coffee as well. While the microwave ran he leaned next to Xander, shoulder and hip brushing, and Xander sighed and leaned back, letting his cheek rest on Derio's head a little, his dreads rough and thick with the scent of wolf
and citrus and woodsmoke. Faith watched them, a considering look on her face.

"Wes said something... You guys are - really close, huh?"

"Pack," Derio said, and Xander could feel the wolf surge in him a little.

"Pack? Oh, yeah - you're a wolf, too... But - Spike's not. He's not -"

"He's pack," Derio said, and he turned and got his coffee and stalked out, his eyes flaring black. Xander grinned a little, moving over to the table to get sugar. Pack pack...don't like her! in the link as Derio went back upstairs.

"Freaky shit, Xander. Why'd you want to link up with a vamp and a werewolf? I thought girls did it for you. Humans, at least."

"You count yourself in that class still?" Xander said softly, and Faith blanched.

"Yeah - more than that guy - a lot more than Spike. Doesn't make much sense."
"Doesn't have to, Faith. It is what it is. I suggest you keep your opinions...to yourself." Xander sugared his coffee and stirred it, angry jabs of the spoon. He tossed the spoon in the sink and turned to glare at Faith. "Last time you saw Spike he still had that fucking - thing - in his head. He doesn't anymore, and he'd rack up his third Slayer in a heartbeat. Don't push it." When Faith's eyes widened Xander knew the hyena had flared to the surface and he grinned at her - threat display and warning and promise - and brushed past, going back upstairs.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Spike was still asleep - uneasy and fretful, but not aware - and Xander had chanced leaving him with Oz for a few minutes. He'd been hungry, but now he wasn't, and he pushed his sweats off and climbed back into the bed. They'd bought two dozen of those tall, self-inflating air-mattresses and until last night, Oz and Derio had shared one in the corner, and Xander and Spike another near the door. Last night they'd all curled up together in the corner bed, dragging all the blankets and pillows over and they'd stayed in a warm knot all night, Spike in the
middle. Now Xander leaned on one elbow and sipped his coffee - watched Oz take a sip of Derio's and then lay back down, his hand on Spike's shoulder. Their radio was on, playing softly, and Xander tried to relax and let the tension ease out of him - tried to put away the fear from the night before, and all his dread and worry about the future. The link was edgy; the wolves and the hyena still in 'fight/flight' mode, but it was family and love and warm more than anything, and Xander felt calm stealing over him. The rich voice of the woman on the radio, singing about love, lulled him into a half-asleep state, and he drifted there, the cup in his hand tilting and tilting.

"We lived our little drama...we kissed in a field of white...
And stars fell on Alabama last night...
I can't forget the glamour...your eyes held a tender light...
And stars fell on Alabama last night...

Xander jerked, startled, as Derio eased the coffee cup out of his hand and leaned off the edge of the bed, setting it on the floor.

"Thanks, Derio..." he murmured, and snuggled back down, wrapping himself around Spike who burrowed back into him, sighing. They'd stayed up until nearly
dawn, making sure every recognizable bit of the Bringers were burned to ash, Oz even raking through the coals to make sure. At some point Tara had come outside and tossed a handful of herbs on the fire - to keep restless spirits from rising, she'd said - and she'd stayed to talk to Spike about what happened when he forgot, clarifying things in her mind.

"I think that the spell that Wu-Willow used to get my...sanity back from G-glory will work on you, Spike. With a little ch-change. We d-don't have Glory to tap so we'll ha-have to get your right memories from Xander."

Spike had protested, but Tara had calmed him, explaining. Telling him that they wouldn't be stripping the memories away from Xander, but making a copy to fill the holes that Glory had left and that the First seemed to be able to fill with its own manufactured memories. Spike had been unhappy - still shaken and keyed up - but he trusted Tara - they all did. She'd gone to find Giles and Ethan and talk about it with them, and as far as Xander knew they were still at it. He'd heard muted conversation from the big room they'd made into a make-shift library as he'd come upstairs. They'll figure it out...they'll find a way... Spike, love you... Oz was
singing softly with the radio and Derio joined him, their voices blending neatly.

"I never planned in my imagination...a situation so heavenly...
A fairy land where no one else could enter...and in the center, just you and me, dear..."

Angel had come outside at one point, as well - wandered into the garden and stood there, watching the fire. Or rather, pretending to. Actually, he was watching Spike and Xander, Oz and Derio - watching and wondering because eventually he came over and crouched down, suffering in silence the automatic growl that Derio couldn't repress and the sneer that curled Spike's lip.

"What do you want, Angel?" Xander asked, never once letting his hand stop its slow stroking of Spike's shoulder and arm and chest.

"I - down on the docks..." Angel ducked his head and scrubbed at his eyes - looked off to one side for a moment and Xander saw, in the reflected light of the fire, the human face of a young man made immortal... made to bear the burden of guilt for a century or more...made
to kill his maker. There were small lines at the corners of his eyes, and a bone-deep exhaustion that made the dark eyes stark and hollow. Something of Xander's pity got through to Spike, who shook his head slowly and heaved a sigh.

"What about the docks, Angel? You havin' guilt now, for tasting the blood? For lettin' me get off scot-free?" Angel had frowned and then sighed himself - shook his head.

"No. For once...I don't feel guilty about anything. You're right, Spike. I think...maybe you are stronger." Shocked silence from Spike - shock all through the link and Xander hugged him close. Spike recovered fast, though.

"Course I'm right. Nothing good ever came from denying what you ARE, Angel." Spike's voice was soft, and it took on a faintly mocking tone that even without the link Xander could tell was a tease. "Look at all the trouble you caused, denying your own all these years." A brief glance at Spike from under his brows and Angel looked away again, but his mouth was curled up a bit at the corner - just a bit.

"If you'd said... If you'd told us, mate... Dru'd have you
no matter what, you know that. She's crazy for you even when you try to burn her up. We'd have figured something out."

"You'd have hated me, just like -"

"What, like Darla? Bitch was always a bit too high and mighty for my tastes. And you forget I've GOT a soul, Angel - didn't know about it, but... It's made things different. It would have made - everything different, if you'd have just...trusted us." Spike fell silent, and Angel stared off into the darkness for a long, long moment. The link - was calm. At peace even, and Xander could feel some long-held tension relaxing, deep in Spike. Something denied finally breathing free.

"We weren't always like this, Angel. Family - is in the blood. Can't deny it - it just hurts. Leave go, why don't you?" Spike's voice was so very soft, and Angel stood abruptly - paced to the edge of the cistern and stood there. They pretended not to see him wipe his eyes and Angel pretended he hadn't done it. After a moment he turned around and leaned on the edge and something seemed to have loosened in HIM, as well.

"Family... I finally have one again and - and it might -
"He cut himself off, his mouth a thin, tight line of pain and Oz stirred, *family pack* faintly in the link.

"Is something wrong with Connor, Angel?" he asked, and Angel laughed softly.

"No, nothing's wrong with Connor. Connor is... amazing. He's so amazing... No, it's - Cordelia."

"What's wrong with Cordelia?" Xander asked, and Angel told them. Visions, the Powers - her pain. And how it was getting worse. And the CAT-scan that showed bleeding - that showed damage that couldn't be repaired - that couldn't be stopped.

"I can't - lose her... Connor can't," Angel whispered, his back to them again, his hands tight on the edge of the cistern. Wes was working on it - they were all doing what they could - but there was nothing.

"Talk to Giles, Angel - talk to Ethan and Tara, they can -"

"No." Angel straightened abruptly from his slump, turning around. He smoothed his hands down the front of his jacket and put his shoulders back. Steeling himself, it seemed. "No, I'm not - there's too much going on
here. The First - needs to be dealt with before anything else. And Wes is smart. He'll come up with something." Angel slumped again - looked at the sky. "I need to get back. I need to - I'll tell Cordy you were thinking of her, Xander. She...still thinks of you sometimes. You were her first real love, you know?"

*Can't believe he said that,* Xander thought drowsily, and there was quiet laughter from Oz.

*Maybe being a dad makes you less...selfish,* Oz thought.

*Maybe...* Angel had left after that - had crouched down one last time and reached hesitantly to touch Spike's cheek. "Take care of your family," and Spike had pushed into his touch for one moment and then nodded, and Angel had gone. And they'd sat for another hour or so, just thinking - drifting - remembering.

"*My heart beat like a hammer...my arms wound around you tight...*  
*And stars fell on Alabama last night...*"
Three days and Tara and Giles and Ethan were still tweaking the spell. And Xander wanted to put his fist through the wall because Spike was worse - was worse every day. The Potentials didn't help - their combined noise and peculiar energy signal had set Spike off more than once, and Xander would find himself dragging Spike off of them, just barely keeping the vampire from snapping necks. Or having to hunt for him, when the link suddenly went strange and static-laden and Spike would find a corner - a bolt hole - and just hunker down, trying to out-talk or out-scream the voices that battered at him - the memories that threatened his equilibrium and confused him into frenzy - or catatonia.

Today was bad, and it was barely past five in the afternoon. Spike was in the front room, curtains drawn and a fire burning in the hearth. He'd tried to burn his journals but Xander had stopped him - sent them off with Oz to a hiding place because he was sure Spike would want them when all this was done.

At the moment he had two spiral notebooks he'd taken from Dawn, and he'd torn out most of the paper - torn
the pages into smaller pieces and was writing on them. Writing his memories but they kept changing - from minute to minute, even - and he was getting frantic. Every time a memory changed, Spike would write it down again, and he was surrounded by a patchwork of torn, smeared paper. Muttering under his breath, his right hand knotted in his hair, his left clutching a pen. Xander was watching him, sitting on the hearth, casually between Spike and the fire, but his heart was pounding. Spike's hand twisted in his hair and he scribbled something, then he looked up at Xander, his expression bewildered.

"It's no good, you know - if you keep changing it I'll never get done. Never get done..." He looked back down at the papers - scabbled in a drift of them and pulled out a crumpled piece, lips moving as he read over it. Xander realized he hadn't actually been looking at him - he'd been looking behind him - beyond him - at some ghost.

*Spike? Spike, I'm right here, love* - Xander thought, and Spike flinched. His whole body arched away from Xander and his hand clenched down over his ear, fingertips digging into his scalp, his eyes wide and fearful.

"Get out of my head, get out of my head, get out of my
HEAD!" He screamed the last, launching himself at Xander, knocking him back into the stones of the hearth. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Spike's hands dug into Xander's shoulders, and his knee was pressed into Xander's hip - into his thigh, holding him down. "Fucking chip in my head, cracked me open like a fucking egg, put your needles and your fire and your fingers in me, in me - did you think I wouldn't remember -!" Spike shook him, hard, and Xander scrabbled at him, trying to push him back, the heat of the fire painful all along his right side, the rough stones tearing his back.

_Oz! Help me - "Spike - it's okay, it's okay, there's nothing in your head, Jack fixed it, remember? Jack fixed it -"

Pounding footsteps and then Oz was crouching down a few feet away, panting.

"Spike? Hey, man - you wanna let him up?"

"What do you want?" Spike let Xander go, but he hadn't, it seemed, heard Oz - he was backing into a corner, his fists over his ears, hunching in on himself with every step until his back hit a wall and he slid down it.

"No, nonono. I didn't kill her, she isn't dead, and he's not
dead - they're not -"

"Spike! Spike, please - " Xander pushed himself to his feet, holding his hands out to Spike, willing him to come back. Out of the corner of his eye Xander could see Potentials gathering like fuckin' vultures! and he was desperate to wake Spike up - get him up and out of there, back to their room.

"It doesn't matter, doesn't matter - family, family's here, you're not family, I know you -" Spike leaped upright, snarling, and then he saw the Potentials and checked, staring. Looked sideways at Xander, holding very, very still.

Xander. What are we doing here? Angelus is here. This was stupid, we need to GO. He'll hurt you love, he will, he will - Spike sidled towards Xander, and Xander held his hand out. Spike took it - squeezed it hard enough to hurt.

"It's all gone to bits and bobs, love - it's all - so much chaff." He gestured at the papers scattered on the floor; turned to Xander with a look of utter desperation. "Help me find it, please love? Help me?" he begged. Xander felt fury and desperation boiling off of Oz - felt it rising in
his own body, enough to make him breathless for a moment.

*Calm, calm - have to be calm* - Oz didn't look calm, and Xander nodded helplessly - wished the Potentials would go away.

"Of course I'll help, love - what are you trying to find? Tell me and I'll help."

"When we danced, Xander, when we - you saw me - you wanted me...." Spike crouched down, sifting through the papers, his eyes streaming tears now, but he didn't seem to notice them. "I remember...I see it... I want the words back, Xan, I want - want the song back... She said it didn't happen but I'm sure I didn't make it up... You're alive, aren't you? Aren't you alive?"

"Course I am - Spike - look at me." Xander put his fingers gently under Spike's chin - turned his head until he was looking straight at him. "I'm alive, love - I'm here no matter what. Oz is here, too." Spike's eyes flicked, glancing at Oz, then back to Xander.

"It's all here, it's all here, I just have to find it -" Spike scrabbled desperately through the bits of paper and
Xander started to help him - just picking pieces up randomly and looking at them, because he had no idea if Spike had written anything down about that night.

_Oz - god - what are we gonna do, it's worse, it's so much worse -_

_Gonna be okay - we'll FIX it, Xander, we will...love you...love you._ Oz was pushing more of the papers towards Spike, his hands shaking. The sound of an engine outside and the slam of a door and Derio was standing in the doorway, dumping a box of mail to the floor and crossing the room in long, rapid strides.

_What happened - protect protect -_

_It's all right, it's - it's the same, Xander thought, and Derio slumped onto the hearth, watching Spike - pushing love family love love with every breath and Spike glanced up at him and smiled._

"Gonna pay the piper, yeah? You can pipe them back to hell, don't you think wolfling?"

"Who, Spike? Pipe...who?" Derio sometimes played a little pennywhistle, and he'd been teaching Dawn some
simple tunes.

"All those - girls. All those - bitches." Spike's voice dropped to a hiss and he moved, faster than any of them could react. Had Xander off his feet, in a choke-hold. His back against the wall and Xander could feel him - feel the change in the link and felt the ridges of the demon's face against his cheek.

"You think I didn't see them? Waiting? Not going to touch me, not going to touch what's mine. You should be mine, love, should be mine -" Spike nuzzled into Xander's neck - bit down on the claim-scar, drawing tiny beads of blood.

"I am yours, Spike - yours already. Can't you feel it? Can't you -" I'm here, love! I'm here - inside you. All yours.

"No." Spike snarled, and his arms tightened around Xander, cutting off his breath for a moment. "Just another fuckin' trick - only one way to make you mine for sure, love. Won't hurt, promise it won't hurt..."

"Spike - please -" Xander couldn't move - couldn't breathe. He didn't know what to do. Spike could bite
him - could drain him. Spike could - would - and he...didn't care. Didn't care. But he was very, very sure that Spike would regret it - would hate it. If only because he wasn't asking, he was taking. Spike - Spike, please - But the link is a void now, only Oz's and Derio's fear and helplessness.

Spike's fangs were in his throat - Oz and Derio were launching themselves, changing before his eyes and Xander felt the silver-needle penetration and then - Spike was screaming, he was holding his head in both hands and Xander was dropping with him to the floor, grabbing him tight and Oz piled on - Derio did - trying to sooth Spike as he writhed, agony in the link like nothing they'd ever felt.

"Spike - what -tell me what's happening! Shhhhh, shhhhh....it's all right, please, please -"

"Xan - Xander -"  Don't let me, don't let me hurt you, please - chains, drugs, something, I can't STOP it, Xander - wolfling, please - Spike was crying - clinging to them - and the Potentials were everywhere and Giles and Tara were rushing in, and Buffy and then Faith and oh god, too many people, too many.
Derio, where's that bag, where's that junk Angel left - The duffle of money had just the day before paid for new tires on Anya's car - she was the official 'chauffer' for the mansion - and another half-dozen air mattresses - and it was tucked safely away into a hidey-hole Spike had used when he'd lived there before. The drugs - were elsewhere - but Derio knew where and he trotted out of the room - brought them in while the crowd of girls milled and asked too many questions and the link was overwhelmed with the misery and terror that had swamped Spike.

Derio put the duffle down - opened it and looked helplessly at the jumble of plastic and tape-wrapped bundles inside.

"I don't - know what to do with it," he said, and Xander could only shake his head. Oz looked worried, thoughtful, but it was Ethan who pushed forward, frowning, a small surge of his signature chaos washing over them.

"So the plan, I take it, is to dope him unconscious?"

"It's all I can think of," Xander mumbled, and Spike burrowed into his chest - clutched at Oz and Derio, desperate to have them close.
"I can - help you," Ethan said after a moment, worrying his lip between his teeth.

"Please -" Xander said.

It didn't take long. A lighter and a spoon and a hypodermic from a bee-sting kit, and Xander watched, narrow-eyed, as Ethan tapped the syringe gently, getting a bubble to move to the top.

"Will this do it, Spike?" he asked, holding the thing up and Spike eyed the three inches of fluid in the hypo.

"Yeah," he rasped, his voice gone. "That'll knock me out for - ten or more hours. Do it, yeah?"

Love you.... Are you sure? Spike -

Have to. I almost... Xander, it would KILL Oz and Derio if I tried to turn them. The wolf and the demon can't live in the same body. We HAVE to. Just until - until Glinda finds the cure.

Love you, love you!
Family, love you, pack, pack, pack... Derio was crying, silent tears tracking his cheeks, and Oz held him close. Both of them had a death-grip on Spike - hand and wrist, tangling with Xander and as close as they could get to him.

Love you both...family, my family, Xan... Ethan was carefully scouting for vein and Spike snarled, vamping.

"Put it in my fuckin' neck, mage. Best place for it." Ethan winced but he did it - slid the little needle in and depressed the plunger and it was only minutes - less than five - and Spike was slumping in Xander's arms. The sudden and incredible burst of pleasure through the link faded to nothing as he slipped into unconsciousness. Xander held him close - buried his face in Spike's shoulder for a moment, crying silently. He looked up at the sea of faces; at Ethan methodically cleaning the hypo and putting it all away - at the Potentials staring and Buffy looking so, so somber, and Dawn crying into Sinclair's fur. Tara was the only one to move - to push forward and join them, her cool energy washing over them, more and more tangible every day.

"Xander - it's going to be o-okay. We figured it out. The ss-spell. We can fix it."
They decided to do the spell as soon as Spike was awake, which would be around three or four in the morning. Xander wasn't sure about it - he couldn't imagine that the lingering traces of drug in Spike's system would help the spell work better - but Giles reassured him again and again that vampiric metabolism being what it was, once Spike actually woke up, he'd be back to normal in no time. The vampire lay unmoving and Xander lay with him, craving the physical contact. The drug seemed to flatten Spike out in the link, so that all that was left was a strange sort of remote humming. There were bursts of emotion from time to time, as if Spike was dreaming, and occasional images as well, but they were scattershot and dim. It took all of Xander's concentration to catch those stray images, and he was pretty sure Oz and Derio didn't catch them at all. He was glad, though - they weren't all...nice.

Sometime around nine o'clock Xander had been persuaded to take a break, and he wandered downstairs looking for something to drink. Everyone, it seemed, was in the main room having sandwiches and soup, talking
quietly. Anya was there, and Drake, and when Xander got to the foot of the stairs Dawn squealed, bouncing to her feet and jogging over to him. Sinclair complained loudly from her arms and Dawn let the Siamese down to the floor. He stalked off, looking offended.

"Xander! Is Spike okay? Is he still - asleep?"

"Yeah. He's fine, Dawn. He'll be fine."

"Yeah..." *Brother love love family* in the link from her, and Xander put his arm around her and hugged her. "Hey! Anya has some news!" Dawn was bouncing again, trusting that he was right, and Xander dredged up a smile for the newly-blonde ex-demon who was cuddled up on the couch with Drake, Potentials on the floor all around her like a Queen and her court.


"Well, we certainly think so. And of course, it's the sort of news that requires a party! With presents!"

"Yeah?"
"Oh, yes." Anya smiled at Drake, who smiled back and curled his hand around hers on his thigh. "I'm going to reproduce, Xander!" At Xander's blank look, Anya frowned a little. "Spawn? Breed? Uh - replicate?"

"We're having a baby," Drake said, rolling his eyes, and Xander blinked.

"You - are? Wow! Uh - congratulations!" Jesus! A baby! he thought, and heard a mental chuckle from Oz.

*Been known to happen, to married people.*

*But - so soon! I mean - Jesus!*

*All of Drake's family must have inspired her,* Derio thought, and Xander had to agree. Anya had been impressed with Drake's enormous family - with great-grand this and that living side by side with second and third generation nieces, cousins, grandchildren. She'd said how wonderful it must be, to have so many people to count on.

*Pack,* Oz added, and Xander nodded to himself.

"You don't seem very excited for us," Anya said, pouting
a little, and Xander had to smile. He stepped over some Potentials and a begging Miss Kitty and bent down to give Anya a kiss on the cheek.

"Course I'm excited, Anya! I was just - a little surprised. I didn't know you were gonna have kids so soon."

"The sooner the better, Xander. I'm a healthy woman but my biological clock is in an irrevocable countdown to old age, sterility, and brittle bones! No time to waste! Besides -" Anya looked over at Drake and smiled, her love for him so plain on her face - so achingly there. "Drake is very good with children and we'll be traveling for years, showing it off to the family."

"Oh, that's so romantic -" one of the Potentials sighed, and immediately a chorus of voices joined in, talking about babies, plans - families. Xander squeezed Drake's shoulder, smiling at him, and made his way into the kitchen. Soup in a big pot on the stove, sandwich things on the counter and he assembled a hasty meal and sat down to eat it. Sinclair came in and jumped up on the windowsill nearby, watching him. He could hear Giles, Ethan and Tara somewhere close, talking.

_Gonna be okay, gonna be okay_, he thought, desperate
for it to be over. He almost wished he was on patrol with Faith and Buffy - anything to break the tension. But he couldn't have left the house - left Spike - if he'd tried. He ate, and went back upstairs, and waited.

"The spell really packed a p-punch when Willow used it," Tara said, so they'd dragged all the exercise mats from the Magic Box into the center of the 'library' room and laid Spike down on them - arranged themselves next to him. Tara had to be able to touch them both, so she was sitting cross-legged by Spike's shoulders and Xander was next to her. He held Spike's hand tightly in his, waiting. The vampire wasn't fully awake yet; he was talking to himself in a slurred mumble, twitching uncomfortably. Giles and Ethan were finishing drawing a circle around them in colored chalk on the stone floor - a circle to keep everything Tara was doing in, and anything else out. Buffy and Faith and Dawn were sitting at the edge of the room, silent, and Oz and Derio were just on the other side of the circle. Derio was fighting the tension - fighting the change - and Oz was trying to calm him down, the wolf-mantra a low hum in the link.
"Now, when he's awake we'll say the word, and the circle will be closed. Then Tara, you may begin." Giles stood up slowly, his hand pressed to the small of his back, and Ethan stepped up close to him, his slim hand going out to rub slowly over the sore muscles. Giles blinked and sighed in pleasure.

Spike moved on the mats - twisted this way and that and suddenly his eyes snapped open and he was staring straight at Xander. Demon's eyes, and nothing in them Xander could recognize.

"Spike? Hey - you awake? Gonna do something here -" Xander squeezed his hand and Spike pushed himself upright, grimacing. The link was confusion, chaotic and unfocused.

"Carpenter..." Spike mumbled, staring narrow-eyed at him and Xander felt himself go cold. "Carpenter on your cross - you always gonna martyr yourself for those that don't give a fuck, carpenter? Die for the world and they won't even remember your name..." Spike pulled his hand free of Xander's - looked around and then winced, clutching his head.

"Fuck...fuck -" Xan? What are we doing? What -why is
everybody here? Xander shivered, hating the shifts of perception and emotion that were dredging up all his old insecurities. That were making him think and re-think his reasons for being there, because nothing they did seemed to have any effect at all on the First - but It was taking them to pieces.

Spell, love - remember? Spell to fix the forgetting. Tara's going to do it. Spike looked at Tara - reached out and touched her cheek.

"You're not dead then, love? Dreamed you were dead..."

Tara smiled softly at him. "No, I'm not dead, Spike. Are you ready?" Spike had smiled back; now the smile faded and he looked around, bewildered. His gaze settled on Xander and he reached out and took his hand again, squeezing hard.

"Is it - it won't hurt him, will it? I don't want to hurt him..."

"No - it won't hurt." Tara nodded to Ethan, and he and Giles both bent and touched a small stone that finished the circle.
"Totus", they breathed, and a sudden, shivery veil seemed to come up between them and the rest of the room. Xander flinched a little; the magic was strong and felt like dust in his nose - sand in his hair - poison ivy.

*That's fuckin' horrible. Xan - love...so sorry-

DON'T, Spike. None of this is your fault. NONE of it. Hear me? Love you - LOVE you, vampire-mine.

Love you too...my own, my always... Xander's hand was almost crushed in the grip Spike had on it, but he didn't care. Tara was taking a long, slow breath. She put the fingertips of her left hand on Spike's temple, and her right on Xander's, and smiled at them. Then she closed her eyes.

"Repleo," on a sigh. And then Xander thought - "Tara was wrong", because it did hurt.

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"Xander? Love - wake up for me. Xan, c'mon - c'mon, pet, wake up..." Soft voice, soft hand on his cheek
patting gently and Xander forced his eyes open. They felt gritty and swollen, and the light was too bright. He blinked and squinted, groaning a little, and felt a cool hand touch his forehead.

"Spike?" *Ow, damn.*

"Throat hurt? Here, love -" Something pressing against his lips, cool and smooth and liquid and he opened his mouth and drank.

*Oooh...* Spice and iron and tingling, bubbling magic, and Xander closed his eyes and drank Spike's blood, feeling it go through him like wildfire. *Oh - Spike - you all right? Did it work? What happened?* Spike's other hand stroked his hair and Xander gradually realized he was lying on his back, his head in Spike's lap. He opened his eyes and Spike lifted his wrist away from Xander's mouth - licked the bit of blood that was still there, smiling.

"It worked, love. Worked a treat." Spike's eyes were so very blue - so vividly alive and full of love and happiness that Xander couldn't help himself - he reached up and pulled Spike down and kissed him, lingering over the taste of Spike's blood, and the taste of Spike; cream and cloves, as addictive as ever - as wonderful. A gentle
clearing of a throat finally made him stop and Xander let Spike ease him upright, grinning sheepishly at Giles who was looking the other way and at Ethan, who wasn't. He leaned there, Spike's arms around him, feeling the rising flush of the blood going through him. In another minute or so he'd want to jump up - go out patrolling or -

*Or? I can think of better things to do with all that energy, pet. Lay you down and make you scream for it...* Xander shivered happily, turning his head to nuzzle Spike's cheek. He saw Oz and Derio a few feet away and Tara leaning between them. She looked -

*Is Tara all right? Is she hurt?*

*Fine, she's fine, love,* Spike thought, hugging him close.

*Xander! Love you, love you -* Oz, smiling over at him and holding Tara up, and Derio grinning, almost laughing.

*Love you too! Familia, mi familia...*

"Oh!" Tara looked dazedly over at them, her expression delighted and amazed. "I didn't know - that's what it's like..." She seemed to realize something then and blushed a brilliant scarlet and Spike laughed, the
vibrations rippling through Xander. The link - felt so good. It felt alive - whole -full, and Xander laughed too.

*What is she talking about?*

*She got the memories, too. I think - she'll forget in time. But for right now, they're all there.*

*She did? Oh... OH! Oh, god...*

*Family, love - you'll live.*

*May never be able to look her in the face again,* Xander thought, and he twisted so he could get Spike tight into his arms and just hold on, face in Spike's neck, chest to chest, hugging as hard as he could and feeling Spike hugging him back, kissing his hair and neck and cheek, laughing again in sheer delight. And it just felt so good.

*Stars Fell on Alabama - Billie Holiday*
*Totus - Complete*
*Repleo - Replenish*

22 Allies
Tell me - what you see. Tell me - make me real, Spike - m-make me real.

I'll make you real... I see you - demonslayer...builder... knight in patchwork armor... oohhh...You are... lover... brother... strong right arm... you are... s-sunlight... hearth fire... oh gods.

Spike arched and swayed over him, his eyes golden and glowing in the dim lemon light of the dawn. His gaze never left Xander's. Their hands were locked together, fingers entwined above Xander's head. Lifting and sinking down, slow, slow climb to the peak - to the climax - and then he would still, and wait, kissing and whispering - remembering.

What are you doing to me, love, what...

"Knowing you. Learning you." loving, loving you...want every inch of you

"Still do," Xander murmured, kissing Spike's face, the so-familiar planes of the demon; kissing his arms where they rested just above his shoulders. Kissing his mouth and not caring if the fangs drew pin-pricks of blood. "Still do, always will, love you - ahh - Spike...love you, love you..."
"My knight, my love...my always..." Spike kissed back just the same, on every bit of skin he could reach, and Xander just wanted to crush him closer - feel every inch - never stop feeling it. Two weeks since the spell and Spike still needed to remember, and Xander still needed to know he was there, and that all was well.

_God, love you so fucking much...never want you not there, love, never want you gone from me..._

_Xander...Xander...always my own... Always always always..._

"Always, vampire-mine... You make me - gods - you make me real, make me -"

"Make you mine," Spike whispered, and his fangs sank slowly into Xander's throat as his body sank slowly down, one more time. Xander arched in blind, silent ecstasy, his own teeth clamping down and the blood was _cool spice darklife magic_ dancing over his tongue, making the link sing, making his body writhe and shudder for long, long minutes. The cool striping of Spike's semen across his chest made him shiver and Spike collapsed over him, burying his face in the crook of Xander's
neck. Slow trail of his tongue over the scar, hands still locked together and Xander's fingers rubbing over Spike's.

"Never get tired of this...of you..." Xander whispered, and Spike kissed his way up to Xander's mouth and then kissed his mouth, slow and sweet and his heart on his lips like always. Gloring in what they had - in how they'd gotten there. Remembering because he could.

"...It's not just because of that. Every time they do something like that - every hypocritical, petty thing - puts its mark on them. They're staining themselves - making themselves less. And for what? So they can lord it over one vampire who can't hurt them. It's - degrading, to both of you. And I won't put up with it any more."

"My knight in patchwork armor..."

Xander had to smile at that memory, and how angry he'd been - how terrified of the Scoobies discovering their secret. And how little he cared, any more, what anyone thought.

Wouldn't give this up for anything in the world, he
thought, and Spike eased himself up and off of Xander -
settled into a tight clinch, sighing in contentment and
letting the purr grumble rustily up out of his
chest. *Who'd give up their own giant kitty-cat?*  Xander
giggled softly at the blast of mental denial from Spike.

*M'growling. Real soft. I keep telling you... Vampires are not cats and we do not purr.*

*But you still look fabulous in a collar,* Xander replied, and
groaned softly as Spike's mental gears slipped and he
sent a flood of highly erotic images, mostly starring
Xander.

*No better than you do, pet... Wear it for me on patrol some time - wear it in the house...?*

*Christ -*  Xander shifted and arched a little, his cock
responding to that suggestion quite happily. *Wearin' me out, vampire-mine.*

*Love to, pet. Have. Will...*  But Spike just settled a little
closer and kissed his neck, soft and slow, and Xander
knew that if anything was going to happen it was going
to take a while. Spike was in that sort of mood.
Love that mood, he thought fondly, and Spike petted him through the link. Oh, yeah...love it.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

When they managed to make it out of bed sometime around three, Oz and Derio were still a tangled lump in their own bed, and the house was still and shuttered - quiet like it almost never was at that time of day. The Bringers - the First - had been quiet too, and Buffy and Faith were both spoiling for a fight. They trained the Potentials hard every day - took them on patrols in groups and Sunnydale hadn't ever been quite so demon-free. Of course, that was also because a lot of demons were leaving Sunnydale - and a lot of humans as well. Something had finally gotten through the collective blind eye most of Sunnydale turned to things of a supernatural origin, and there were 'For Sale' and 'Going out of Business' signs all over the town. It was kind of creepy, and it made them all a little edgy.

Giles and Ethan hadn't found anything new on the First either, and Tara reported no news from the L.A. gang in her nightly online chats with Fred. That was a source of quiet amusement and hope for their pack - Tara seemed
truly taken with Fred, and glowed with humor and good spirits after every talk. They all hoped she'd found someone - a friend or a lover, they didn't care.

"Wonder where everybody is?" Xander asked, shuffling into the kitchen with Spike attached, limpet-like, to his back, pale arms around his ribs and his mouth gently worrying the claim scar.

Don't care. First got 'em, Spike thought, and he made no effort to dodge the half-hearted slap Xander aimed at his ass.

"Stop that." Xander pulled open the 'fridge and peered inside. "Mmm...leftover lasagna. Want some?"

"Too much garlic, not enough pesto," Spike grumbled, finally letting go and moving over to the stove. He shook the kettle and went to the sink to fill it, and fifteen minutes later they were both at the table, Xander scarfing lasagna and Spike drinking his doctored tea. Sinclair and Miss Kitty were both sitting bolt upright on the floor between them, looking upwards expectantly at Xander.

"Don't even think it," Xander told them, mock-
glaring. "You're both getting spoiled rotten and I'm not sharing my food with you." Spike snorted in amusement and pulled his cigarettes out of his pocket, lighting up with a sigh. There was the slap of footsteps and Dawn appeared, four large books piled in her arms. She squeaked in surprise and dropped the books on the table.

"Hey! You guys are up!" She went around behind Spike towards the 'fridge, patting him on the shoulder in passing and Xander smirked at the look on Spike's face, that was a mixture of annoyance and fondness.

*Startin' to act like I'm some kinda house pet, Spike grumped. Need to take her out on patrol tonight, let her get a couple bruises - see a little action.*

*Put the fear of the Big Bad back into her?* Xander was trying not to grin around his mouthful of food and Spike shot him a narrow-eyed look. Dawn messily scooped out lasagna onto a plate and shoved it in the microwave, licking her fingers.

*Bit needs to be reminded that there's nasties out there - they're not all like her puppies upstairs* Xander glanced over at Dawn, who was heating up her own plateful of
food. Then he deliberately remembered several instances of Spike helping Dawn - in particular, Spike helping her with her English - reading out loud to her, snuggled on the couch in Xander's flannel shirt.

'Cause you're not at all...fluffy or cute.

You're just BEGGIN' for a spanking... Spike thought, looking up at Xander through his lashes and Xander didn't believe it was possible but his cock stirred in his jeans.

"So - where is everybody, Dawn?" he asked, loftily ignoring Spike's molasses-dark, too-knowing chuckle.

"Oh! Don't you know? No, you guys were...uh...sleeping." Dawn gave them an eye-roll and something too close to a knowing leer and Xander shot Spike an exasperated look. Spike did his best to look innocent, but sitting there with a tea-cup and a half-empty bottle of whiskey, his cigarette smoke curling around his white-blonde, spiked head, he looked anything but.

"Johnathan called - that guy Andrew almost killed? He was getting out of the hospital this morning and the
ambulance brought somebody in. A Potential." Dawn got her plate out of the microwave and grabbed a soda - settled opposite Xander and Spike, pushing her stack of books aside. "He said she was hurt pretty badly but she was talking and he heard her say to contact Buffy Summers." Dawn stabbed at her lasagna, looking anxious. She'd been visiting Johnathan in the hospital ever since he'd been hurt, and had gotten to like him quite a bit.

"So - did the hospital call here?" Xander finished the last of his own food and pushed his plate away, and Spike lit a second cigarette, making room for Sinclair on his lap. The cat sniffed at Spike's tea and then started kneading, purring loudly enough to make the three of them smile. Miss Kitty came around the table and fixed her gaze on Dawn, instead.

"No - the cell phones aren't listed and we had the old number turned off when we moved here. He called and said he was going to stick around the hospital and - and see what happened. She had to go into surgery - I don't know if she's out or not." Dawn ate a forkful of lasagna and Spike looked over at Xander.

Guess the First isn't gonna be quiet forever, after all.
Guess not... "So - is Buffy at the hospital?"

"Everybody is! Well, not Faith - she went to talk to some guys she knows down at the docks - that's where they found her. She took some of the girls with her. And Giles and Ethan went to some bookstore up in Santa Barbara, they got a lead on something, they think." Dawn gulped her soda - wiped her mouth on a paper towel. "I think some of the girls were gonna - you know - ditch. They wanted to get some down-time."

"Huh." Spike crushed out his cigarette and scrubbed his fingers through Sinclair's fur, then stood up, putting the cat on the floor. "As long as they keep their wits about 'em." Goin' to find Glinda, he thought, and Xander nodded.

"I think I need some more lasagna," Xander said to nobody in particular and got up, heading for the fridge. Good. Don't - freak her out, okay? It's probably nothing.

I wouldn't hurt her for the world, pet. You know that.
I know that. Xander grinned over at Spike, who grinned back and sauntered out.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The mansion was mostly dim - shutters and curtains almost permanently closed so Spike didn't have to dodge sunbeams. Kennedy had made it a practice to leave key ones open, trying to trap him, but he'd ambushed her on patrol three nights ago and wore her out in the name of 'training', and she'd left off. Spike smirked to himself. She was fun to go after, mostly because she didn't seem to ever misplace her snotty 'I am Slayer, bow down' attitude. He was enjoying punching a few holes in her façade. He closed his eyes for a moment, orienting himself and then moved toward the back of the house, to the room they'd set up as a library. Delivery trucks arrived almost daily with books from the old Watchers Headquarters - the Pembrokes were making great headway there, and their skills as archeologists were coming in more than handy when it came to rescuing half-torched books and other, less identifiable paraphernalia from the ruins.

He could feel Tara back there - had felt her more and
more, since they'd come back. Her growing finesse with magic and her growing confidence seemed to feed the subtle aura that surrounded her, and her essential 'pack-ness' made her easy to tune into. Spike could feel warmth from her - joy - a rock-solid, root-deep serenity that was the core of the blonde witch. Unshakeable and capable of carrying a load that seemed impossibly heavy. *Don't want you to labor under a burden though, Glinda. Talk to me now...*

Since the spell - there was something else. A hesitation in her, and a withdrawal. Whenever Spike got too close he could feel a flinch, even if outwardly she didn't show a thing. And it...hurt. He had to know what was wrong. Spike walked quietly into the library, where Tara was reading intently something on the laptop they'd bought. The heroin money had been a godsend, since nobody had a job anymore, and Giles was still wading through red tape to get the greater part of the Council funds released to him. The heroin itself was safely stashed away, a hedge against future need. Something most of the household was ignorant of.

"Hey, Glinda," Spike said, and she turned to look at him, blinking in a dazed fashion for a moment, her mind obviously focused on what she'd been reading. Then she
saw him, and a hesitant smile crossed her lips. But she - flinched. Spike throttled down the anxiety he felt and dropped down cross-legged at her feet.

"Hey, S-Spike," she said softly.

"Glinda... You have to tell me..." Spike stopped and took a deep breath. "Tell me what's the matter, pet? You're - scared of me. Why are you scared of me?" Tara opened her mouth and then closed it - looked down at her hands that were twisting together in her lap.

"I - I'm n-not sca-scared of you, Spike -"

"Love, please - I can feel you - pulling back from me..." Tara shot him a wet, wide-eyed look and then nodded, letting her hair fall forward to hide her face.

"It's - it's my problem, Spike. I'm d-doing my be-best..." Spike reached out slowly and touched her hand and she froze for a moment and then slid her fingers into his, squeezing tight.

"It's the memories, Spike. They're - taking a l-long time to go away and... And I've seen...so much... So many th-things that hap-happened and..."
"Things I did, pet? Is that it?" Spike waited for her reply, his stomach twisting into a painful knot.

"Yeah...." Tara sighed, her shoulders slumping. But then she sat up immediately, dashing her free hand across her face. "It's stupid, Spike. I know that - that you've changed. I know - I remember - how you feel about Xander and - and Oz and D-derio. About Dawn...."

"And you, too. Don't forget you," Spike murmured, and Tara flashed a shaky smile at him.

"And me. I don't want to - remember the past but sometimes it just...." She trailed away, shaking her head helplessly, and Spike leaned slowly forward until his forehead was resting on her knee.

"Glinda - please don't...please don't pull away from me. You're family, pet, you're - part of me. Part of us. I can't - can't lose you -"

"No! No...shhhh...." Tara's body was stiff with tension and then Spike felt her hand rest lightly on his bowed head - slowly and hesitantly stroke his hair. "I won't leave you. I promise. What I've felt is s-so amazing... I
don't understand it all. Just let me... I just need a little time, Spike. Please?" Her voice was thick with sorrow and Spike rubbed his head slowly back and forth on her skirt-draped knee.

"Please, Tara - please don't... I would never, ever hurt you. Never hurt the family. You know that, right? You know that?" He looked up at her, feeling soft encouragement from Xander, and Tara smiled at him - a crooked and sad smile, but a smile.

"I know you wouldn't. I know... I'm working on it, Spike, I promise. I'm - I've been t-talking to..." She stopped, blushing, and Spike smiled a little.

"Talkin' to your sweetheart?" he said softly, and Tara's blush deepened, but she squeezed his hand a little tighter in hers.

"She's - Fred's not... I mean, sh-she... I've been talking to her about - all of this. She...she has some good...ideas. I'll work it out, Spike. I really will. I - I know what you are, inside." She reached and touched his chest, and her fingers seemed to send a tiny sizzle of electricity through him - a tiny jolt of summer-scented lightning. "I know what's in here - demon, and a
soul. And...you never had anybody care about the soul before. Not until Xander. It's - changed you."

"Can't help bein' changed when somebody loves you like that," Spike whispered, and Tara leaned forward and rested her cheek on his for a moment - kissed him fleetingly, smelling of mint and marjoram and dill - of magic.

"I know. And you have. In a lot of ways. I promise...we're still f-family, Spike."

"All I needed to hear, love. Couldn't let you go if I tried, you know?" Spike reached and tucked her silky hair back behind her ear - let his fingers rest for a moment on the warm swell of her cheek. The demon shifted inside, wanting more and better confirmation of family ours pack. But Spike - couldn't appease it that way.

"You - do you be-believe me, Spike?" Tara asked, frowning just a little, and Spike snatched his hand back, knowing that he'd given something away in that touch.

"I - know you won't leave, Glinda. It's the demon in me, is all. It wants -"
"Something else." Tara's eyes had a shuttered look to them, as if she was going deep inside herself for something, and Spike wanted to shake her - call her back. Her fingers were tight in his, not letting him retreat. "I - know..." She looked at him, and suddenly her power was there - was all around him. Warm and rich as mulled wine, complex as the branching pattern of veins on a leaf and as solid and simple as the taproot that anchors the tree. Power that thrummed like a hive of bees, drowsy and somehow furry and lethal if stirred.

"Spike? Will you... Sh-show me it, Spike. Show me the demon." Her eyes were on his like searchlights - like suns. Blinding him a bit, making him suck in a hard breath. He knew Xander was coming, striding through the house, Dawn right behind. He could feel Oz and Derio waking, agitated, and the change coming over them as they shook free of the bedding and bounded out of the room - down the stairs. But Tara compelled him. Called the demon forth and he shivered, a growl coming up in his chest and shattering the thrumming air. The demon rose - and pushed - wanting more, wanting to be out. Heeding the call that was the witch's power and Spike let it have its will. For once and all, let it have full rein. He felt the shift in bone and muscle, his face rearranging to the demon's features. But this time it
happened all over and he knew his spine was sharper - more ridged. Knew the joints of body were more angled, and his hands longer - his nails more like claws. The demon manifesting itself as it never did. It never had the need, but this time - it was Tara that called it. Siren-song of love family please let me see mine ours yours. He heard the stifled gasp from Dawn - the amazement and fascination from Xander. Claws scrabbled on stone and the wolves were there, stalking stiff-legged up to them.

What's she doing? Spike - you... from Oz, wonder and trust in the link, and: Pack pack pack, from Derio, shivers of delight as Tara's aura surrounded them. As Xander got closer - as Dawn did - Tara's power enfolded them as well and suddenly Dawn was in the link like she never had been before and fear surprise awe oh my god, my god, this is family, this is what it means! Tara looked up at them - at Xander hovering over Spike's shoulder, his arm around Dawn. At the wolves who'd book-ended themselves on either side of her, muzzles resting on her thighs.

"This is what it means," she said softly, and her hand went out again, to gently touch Spike's face - touch the demon. And she deliberately pressed the pad of her
thumb against one razor-sharp fang. The merest drop of blood hit Spike's tongue and he felt his eyes fluttering closed - felt the growl becoming a groan as mother sister darklight she she she coursed through the link. Tara's blood was sunlight and spring-water and the sour-sweet of sorrel. Wild strawberries and silver and earth and the taste of it - the essence of it went out to all of them. Dawn was panting softly, and Xander's hand had locked down on Spike's shoulder, hard enough to hurt. The wolves lifted their muzzles, howling out an exultant song and the demon roared.

*Oh - god - she's so beautiful...* Xander thought, and Spike could feel the tears on Xander's face as if they were his own.

"To me," Tara whispered, and her power withdrew, curling back on itself like an ocean wave, coiling and twisting and winding back down, through her and back to the earth and then they were sitting there, and Xander had gone down on his knees next to Spike, and Dawn was hugging Tara and the wolves were pressing close, whining. The demon retreated, satisfied and purring with satisfaction.

*Family pack ours mine always always always,* in the link
from all of them. *Family brother sister love,* from Dawn and *family* faint and soft from Tara. Spike laughed, hugging Xander hard. Family, and she was right; he was changed.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

"So what's the up, Buffy? How's the girl?" The living room was full of Potentials - all 23 of them - and Spike and Xander had retreated to the stairs in an effort to put some distance between themselves and the jangle of the Slayer-buzz. It wasn't really working. Oz and Derio were higher still on the stairs, just as tense. It seemed to get worse when the Potentials were agitated, like they were now. It was going on nine o'clock, and they'd all been waiting for Giles and Ethan to arrive so Buffy could tell them the news. The waiting had been hard and everyone was on edge. Johnathan sat on the edge of the big leather couch, still pale-looking and as nervous as the rest of them.

"Shannon - she..." Buffy was standing in the middle of the room, and she looked...small. There were circles under her eyes, and she was twisting a piece of paper in her hands, crumpling it and uncrumpling it. "She's
dead. She was really hurt -" There was a hiss of shock and fear from the Potentials - Buffy apparently hadn't told them anything. Faith, her arms tightly crossed over her chest, looked up sharply.

"Everybody shut up. This is important," she said, and her voice was sharp as a knife. Buffy looked over at her and Faith nodded once, biting her lip.

*Fuck. Dead? Something new or part of the First? Christ, what next?* Xander felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Spike reached out and put his hand on Xander's knee, rubbing gently.

*We'll figure it out, love. We'll fix it. You'll see.*

"She - was killed by a man who calls himself Caleb. She was running from Bringers, and he picked her up... Than he told her - that he had a message for - for me." Buffy was pacing in little circles now and she pushed her hand back through her hair, grimacing. "He told her - he has something of mine. We don't know what he has - if he really has anything. But - we're gonna find out who this guy is, and what he wants. We're gonna get whatever he has and he's gonna pay for killing one of ours." Buffy stared out over the crowd of girls - looked at Dawn, who
was sitting close to Tara, and looked at Giles and Ethan, who looked back, grim-faced. Buffy looked exhausted and Xander wondered if she was sleeping. She never seemed to, and the bones of her face seemed to be pushing up too close to her skin, making her skull stand out too clearly.

_She's burning herself out. Got to get her to rest..._

_Good luck with that_, Spike thought, lighting up and holding the cigarette away, out of Xander's face. He was right - Buffy seemed to be wound tighter with each passing day and the lull in First activity hadn't made much difference.

"Johnathan - is going to help us. He said that - the girl had a mark burned into her neck. Caleb - did it. So he's going to help us find the mark and maybe - find this guy. So - everybody help him out." Buffy walked over to Giles and handed him the crumpled paper, and he smoothed it out, looking it over. "She said he was dressed like a - priest. Black suit and collar. So - be on the lookout, okay?" Buffy looked around at them all and the silence seemed to oppress her - the weight of their gaze seemed to be too much. "He just stabbed her, and pushed her out of his truck. So - be careful. Once we
find out who he is - he's gonna be history." A couple of
the Potentials raised a cheer at that, and then they all
did, whooping loudly. Xander felt Oz's knee in his back,
and Derio's hand was on Spike's shoulder, and they didn't
join in the cheer. The First - had a new ally.

23 Sacrifices
"So you're, what, just gonna walk around, hoping a
Bringer'll just...show up?" Faith was looking skeptically
at Buffy and Buffy was frowning back, arms crossed and
feet planted wide. Her 'I am Slayer' stance. But Faith
had the same stance and Xander had to stifle the urge to
laugh as they squared off. Faith was the one person
Buffy couldn't hold Slayer-status over.

"I figure if this Caleb really wants me - us - to find him,
he'll send one of the little creeps around. And Giles'
spell..." Buffy looked over at Giles, who nodded, sighing.

"Yes. The spell," he replied, in a tone of long
suffering. Ethan, who was reading something and making rapid, scribbling notes, glanced up at them, his fox's smile quick and toothy. He approved of the truth spell - had, in fact, practiced it on several people in the house until Giles had had a not-so-quiet word with him. The household now knew that Kennedy had a crush on Tara, Dawn and Johnathan had held hands under the dinner table for three nights running, Buffy had called Robin Wood to bring him up to speed and had agreed to go on a date with him, and exactly what Spike liked about sex with Xander. Nothing Spike wouldn't have volunteered - as he'd made perfectly clear on several other occasions - but Ethan had wanted to see if the spell worked on the undead. 'We don't know what the Bringers ARE, really. Have to be prepared,' he'd said, laughing, as the mostly-horrified Potentials, Giles, and Anya had listened to Spike's recitation. Xander was pretty sure Anya had taken notes.

"Yeah, spell," Spike mumbled, face-down on the leather couch, the smirk evident in his tone, his body utterly slack, his t-shirt rucked up around his neck. Xander was straddling his thighs, running knuckles, fingertips, palms and the occasional elbow up and down Spike's back. Everyone else was clustered on the floor or the other couch, trying to plan some sort of strategy. Dawn,
Johnathan, Drake and Anya had taken the Potentials shopping, as training and work-outs and the odd surge of Slayer strength were hell on their limited clothing resources. Actually, the possibility that most of the stores in Sunnydale were closed or closing meant that they were either an hour up the highway in Oxnard, or they were stealing clothes. They'd all gotten remarkably...casual about things like that as Sunnydale had emptied. Even the school was closed now, and Robin Wood had taken to patrolling with them occasionally. He seemed to be - oddly interested in Spike. It gave Xander the creeps.

"So we'll go in teams? Hit the cemeteries?" Oz was sparring with Miss Kitty, flipping her on her back and poking at her belly so she'd rabbit-kick his hand. Sinclair was watching, tail-tip barely moving as Miss Kitty writhed away and then pounced again, biting lightly, her claws just barely scoring Oz's palm.

"That's the plan. Me and Faith, you and Derio, Xander and the amazing boneless vampire." Buffy grinned at him, and Xander grinned back. Spike made a half-hearted effort to flip her off but he could barely lift his arm.
"You try bein' all stick-up-your-arse when these fingers are working their magic on you, Slayer. Actually, a little something up the -"

"Stop that, evil undead," Xander admonished, grinding his elbow in and Spike groaned and somehow sagged even further, practically a puddle on the couch. He'd fought a wayward Fyarl demon the night before; had, in fact, beat it to death with a length of pipe. He'd been in a bad mood - Kennedy's fault - and Xander had been initiating cheer-up-the-grumpy-vampire sex over a tomb when they'd been interrupted. The Fyarl had gotten in a few good hits because Spike had been too pissed to duck. So Xander was working out the kinks in muscles that... well, that weren't sore at all. It was just fun.

"Okay - and if we do come across one of them - what then?" Derio sat up from his sprawled position beside Oz, dreads tinkling faintly. Buffy looked a little uncertain.

"Well - we need one alive so Giles and Ethan can do the spell, so... I guess do your best not to fold, spindle or mutilate.

"Right," Oz said, and pushed Miss Kitty into Sinclair, who immediately grabbed her around the throat with his
paws and tried to bowl her over. Miss Kitty fled, Sinclair in hot pursuit.

"Just - please be c-careful," Tara said, breaking a long silence. She looked up at the group, a small frown on her face. "I just feel like...you need to be careful."

"Do our best, pet," Spike said, propping his head up to smile at her, and she nodded. Faith pushed away from the wall she'd been leaning against and bumped Buffy with her shoulder.

"Let's get this party started, B. I'm itchin' to deal out a little payback."

"No folding, spindling or mutilating! Just - bruising and contusions." Buffy snagged an extra stake and they both strode out, bickering light-heartedly.

"Yup, better plow," Oz said. He stretched hard, arching up and back, hands over his head, and Derio ran an appreciative and possessive hand up his ribs. Oz folded, snorting, and rolled over onto Derio. They scuffled, half-changing and growling and Tara laughed.

"You two are j-ust like Miss Kitty and Sinclair."
Only not as pretty," Spike muttered, and yelped when Oz pounced on him, knocking Xander back.

"Hey!" Xander scrambled to grab Oz and Derio tackled him, rolling them both to the floor with a thump, wolf's-eyes and claws, growling happily.

"Children, really -" Giles started, but there was laughter in his voice and Ethan just hugged him around the neck, kissing his cheek and whispering something that made the Watcher blush. Spike pinned Oz and lightly bit his neck - jumped to his feet, energized.

*Up and out! Let's find this bastard and get it DONE.*

*Yeah - tired of this waiting and wondering crap.* Xander crawled to his feet, hauling Derio with him and letting himself be mauled. Derio snuffled into his neck and then kissed his cheek and bounced over to Oz. Spike was shrugging on his duster, feeling over the pockets for cigarettes, lighter, flask, weapons.

*Pack will win. Pack!* Derio'd gained some control in the link and he felt much better about that - didn't feel as if he were overwhelming them all with his emotions all the
time. It made him - bouncy.

Yes we will, Xander thought, and tucked his arm into Spike's and they went out to find a Bringer.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Spike's cell chirped in his pocket and he yanked it out, glaring at it. Xander had forgotten to charge his. "Bloody thing," he muttered, stabbing the 'on' button. "What!"

"We got one!" Buffy yelled over the line, and Spike flinched.

"Keep it down, Slayer. All right - we'll head home. Reckon we've got some news, too."

"Great! Whoops! Grab his leg!" The phone beeped several times as Buffy apparently hit the keypad, and then went dead. Spike snapped his own phone shut and looked at the derelict winery one more time. The Bringers were swarming it like bees to a hive, and he and Xander were sure there was something of interest there - maybe even this Caleb himself. But there were too many, and it was hard to tell the layout of the building in
the darkness. Better, as Xander had said, to come back in the day and scout it - maybe send Oz and Derio in wolf form.

Beside him Xander was muttering under his breath, the soldier making an increasingly more rare appearance to count visible enemy troops and memorize all kinds of details. Xander had said that for the last few months the soldier was shifting - becoming more a part of him, less a separate entity. Merging memories until Xander wasn't sure what was 'him' and what was the soldier, anymore. The hyena stayed stubbornly separate, much like Spike's demon.

*Slayer's got a Bringer. Guess we'd better head home.*

*Yeah - can't learn much more here, anyway. Oz? Heading home.*

*Home, pack,* faintly from Oz, who was across town. One last look at the winery and they were trotting towards the mansion, rhythmic huff of Xander's breath, the link just a warm hum in the back of his mind.

The mansion was blazing with lights as they came down the stairs and crossed the small courtyard, seeing
through the double doors the Potentials milling around the living room. The Bringer was roped to a chair in the center of the room, hunched and small-looking in its black clothes, its disfigured face downcast. Giles looked up from a sheaf of paper as they walked in.

"Ah - there you are. We're ready to start." Giles gathered up a book and looked around, clearing his throat in his best Old Librarian manner. "Everyone? Everyone sit down and - and be quiet, please." The Potentials slowly sorted themselves into ranks on the floor and Spike and Xander joined Oz, Derio and Tara on the steps. Dawn was sitting beside Johnathan on the couch, almost but not quite holding hands. Anya and Drake were cuddling on the other couch and Buffy and Faith were flanking the Bringer. Ethan dropped a match into a bowl, sending the contents up in a quiet whoosh of greenish flame. Giles read aloud, a short incantation in what sounded like Turkish, although Spike couldn't be sure.

What's that, then? Not the truth spell.

Something else, Oz replied. The Bringer's mute - no tongue. That's supposed to make it able to talk.
"Tell us - what are you doing here?" Giles said, and the Bringer swayed, blind face turning from side to side in slow negation.

"We follow our father - we serve that which came before all others," someone said, and Dawn squeaked and jumped, leaning away from Johnathan. He was staring blankly at the Bringer.

"Johnathan?"

"It's all right, Dawn - it's the spell," Giles said softly, and Dawn nodded, wide-eyed.

"But what do you do? What is your specific task?" Giles asked, and the Bringer shuddered briefly, as if fighting the truth spell.

"We are ants - beneath the surface - we build an arsenal, and we protect that which must be protected. We are everywhere - we are legion..."

"An arsenal - beneath the surface..." Giles pondered, rubbing his forehead, and they all waited, little hissing ripples of whispered talk flowing out from the Potentials. Buffy put her hand on the Bringer's throat
and squeezed, just a little. The Bringer thrashed, straining against the ropes.

"What does Caleb have of mine - is it another girl? What?" Johnathan twitched, his fingers clawing at his knees.

"Hurting us, hurting us!"

"Buffy - please -" Giles motioned with his hand and Buffy reluctantly let go.

"The father has that which must be protected. We build and we tunnel and we kill, kill, kill the girls - end the Slayers, end the line, end the light!" The Bringer made a sort of strangled, rasping noise - laughter - and Faith backhanded it. Johnathan jerked, then sagged a little.

"Maybe it can't say -" Kennedy said, and Giles interrupted.

"The truth spell should overcome that. Perhaps - perhaps they don't know what they're protecting." He walked up close to the Bringer and leaned in - put a hard hand on its shoulder, squeezing. "Describe what you protect." The Bringer writhed, mouth opening and
closing, a rasping sort of gasp coming out of its mouth. It wrenched at the rope that bound it to the chair. "Tell me," Giles barked, darkman rippling out over them, and the Bringer shrieked, a strangled, tea-kettle sort of noise.

"Light! The light, the light - all power, all souls, for all time - they made it, we hide it - hide it!" Johnathan's voice was shockingly loud and panicked. The Bringer shook its head violently, jerking in the ropes, and Johnathan was shuddering, curling down in on himself.

"Giles, is it hurting him? Johnathan?" Dawn hovered, her hand on Johnathan's shoulder, and Ethan leaned over the back of the couch, stroking a light hand down the boy's back.

"He's all right, Dawn. He's only talking for him." Johnathan sat up abruptly, his lips curled back in a snarl.

"We are everywhere and we take you down - chew your bones - hollow you out! We will cut your throats and suck your marrow and drink from your skulls! The Slayer-line is finished and the father will bless us - that which came before will bless us -!" There was a choked gurgle and a snap and Faith stepped back from the
Bringer. Its head lolled, unnatural angle, and Johnathan took in a sharp, gasping breath, his hands flying to his neck.

"My - my - god, that was - that - my god -" He looked dazedly around at them and Dawn rubbed his shoulder, consoling him. The Potentials were whispering louder now, darting frightened looks at the dead Bringer - at Johnathan - and Spike could smell fear and despair and anger all moiling up from the crowd on the floor.

*Nice show by little Miss Penitentiary but it's not gonna be pretty in here, in a minute. Wanna break in with our news, divert them?*

*Good idea. Fuck - what in hell could they have? What did it mean - 'they made it, we hide it'?* Spike shook his head slowly, tapping a cigarette out of his pack and lighting it.

"Dunno, pet. We'll see what Glinda and the Watcher make of all that mess." Behind him on the steps Tara stirred and he and Xander both glanced back at her.

"I don't think I make - anything of it. At least - n-not yet." Uncertainty came from her, echoed ever so faintly
in the link with a question question question feeling, and Oz bumped her shoulder a little, smiling.

"You'll figure it out, Tara - you guys are smart." Tara ducked her head but smiled back, and Spike turned to watch Faith and Buffy drag the Bringer - chair and all - out of the room to the back garden and the cistern.

'Nother fire tonight, I guess, he thought, and Xander sighed and stood up.

*I could do without the odor of charred flesh again, you know? Maybe we can just bury it.* Xander went to the bottom of the stairs and waited until Buffy and Faith came back in, wiping their hands on their thighs, wearing matching looks of disgust.

"Hey guys - when we were out, we followed some Bringers - they went to this old winery out east of town. There were a lot of them there - more than me and Spike wanted to take on." All eyes were on Xander now, and Spike felt currents shifting again, curiosity and a lessening of fear in the air.

"Did you see this - Caleb?" Giles asked, and Xander shook his head.
"No - we just looked it over from the outside. They were coming and going - really busy. We figure we can go look again in the daytime - see what the building is like. I'd bet anything that's where he's camped out."

"We should go check it out now," Buffy said suddenly, a look of determination crossing her face. "Strike while the - the iron is all - irony! Or whatever." Spike snorted laughter and Buffy shot him a sour look. "Don't start, Spike. You know what I mean. The advantage of surprise."

"Not much surprise, if you ask me, since he's all but sent an engraved invitation. Now's not the time, Slayer." Spike leaned back, dragging on his smoke and Buffy's expression darkened.

"Exactly! He's - he's teasing us! Dangling himself out there - he probably expects us to be scared and unorganized! So if we go in now - hit him hard - he won't know what happened!"

"I think -" Giles stood slowly from where he'd been sitting on the couch, glasses in his hand and thumb rubbing over and over his forehead. "I think Spike is
right, Buffy. It's - too soon. We should know more about the winery - about what it is he's hiding. Running in unprepared will only put us at a disadvantage. And I don't think -" Giles stopped and looked around the room at the Potentials - just little girls, really, Spike thought, seeing that look on the Watcher's face - that look of weariness and the desire for no more death - no more pain.

"I don't think we should risk - anyone."

"I'm not saying we just tear over there - I'm saying we get a plan, get our weapons - but go, tonight!" Buffy looked hurt that Giles hadn't backed her.

She's always lookin' for the easy way. Not her neck that's gonna get cracked if she sends all these children in there.

Didn't know you cared, Derio said, sly sideways glance at Spike and Spike huffed out smoke.

DON'T care, but the more of them between me and mine the better. I want to END this - I don't want half our - army, or whatever you wanna call it, on their bloody backs because she can't keep her stake in her pants! We're doin' this right - gonna burn 'em to the
ground and sow with salt. Spike felt the demon surging up and he let it go - let it come out, snarling a little. Family - pack - that's the first and ONLY thing I care about.

Love you...pack pack pack, back from Derio, a contrite tone in the link and Spike turned and reached up the scant inches between them - took Derio's ankle in his hand and rubbed the bone with his thumb, looking at the boy.

"Love you too, hermano. Anything for you - all of you... Don't doubt me."

"I don't," Derio whispered. Oz leaned into Derio from the other side and Spike felt Xander climbing back up the few stairs he'd gone down, settling back down and touching - completing the circuit. Tara - above them on the stairs - suddenly reached out and put a hand lightly on Oz's shoulder, and Derio's, and the circuit jumped. They all shivered, lost in the feeling for a long moment until a sharp exclamation from Buffy made them all turn and look.

"Are you guys even listening? This is important!"
"We know it is, Buffy," Xander said, and *tired, tired, tired* from him, heartsick and so weary of the fight that Spike wanted to snatch him up and take him out of there - go far away and never come back.

*Won't have a world to be in, if we can't stop this,* Xander thought softly, and Spike shook the demon away and lit another cigarette, knowing Xander was right but not caring - just raging at the hurt he could feel from his love.

"Giles is right, and Spike is too, Buff - we really can't go in there tonight. You didn't see - how many there were. We need to do a recon in the daytime - see what kind of defenses they can mount, if the building is solid - lots of things. Can't just -"

"Don't tell me can't, Xander. I'm so sick of - standing here! Sick of just reacting. We need to act!"

"You're right, we do! But not like this. Not without knowing more." Xander crossed his arms over his chest and stood there - solid as the wood he shaped. Buffy looked as if she were on the verge of tears, maybe, but suddenly she just slumped - turned around and ran her hands through her hair. The Potentials were all frozen in place, staring wide-eyed, looking like they were scared to
move. Dawn and Johnathan and Faith had gone into the kitchen with Ethan - he could hear tea and maybe hot chocolate being prepared - and Anya and Drake were just holding each other, close as they could get. Giles had slumped back down on the couch and now he looked up at Buffy again.

"We do need to act - and we will. But not - in haste. Not without more knowledge."

"I'm so tired of being on the defensive," Buffy said softly, her back still turned. "I'm so sick of - running scared. Please find something, Giles - find something and tell me because I don't -" Buffy stopped and shook her head - walked slowly out of the room, out into the courtyard, aimless and hopeless. Giles looked as if he might get up and follow her, but they all clearly heard the tone of her cellphone, and then her voice, saying "Robin? I'm sorry I woke you -"

"I think - I'll have some tea, and go to bed. Girls - time to go up, now. We'll work out a patrol for tomorrow - a reconnaissance of the winery. All right? Good night," he added, not waiting for questions. The Potentials gathered themselves up slowly, talking, looking alternately spooked or angry or determined. Anya and
Drake got up as well, talking softly, sketching a wave to them up on the stairs and going kitchen-ward to say their goodnights. Spike scooted over close to Xander to clear a path as the girls filed by, saying muted goodnights to Tara and Oz and Derio - avoiding the vampire altogether and Xander by proxy. Only Kennedy stopped and stared at him for a moment - flicked her glance over Xander and shook her head.

"Fuck off to bed now," Spike growled, and she flinched and headed up, two steps at a time. Beside him, Xander yawned, stretching a little and then leaning heavily against Spike, burrowing his head a little into Spike's neck.

"Let's go to bed, huh?" Xander whispered. "Let's go to bed and worry about all this tomorrow. Just wanna..." Spike hissed in pleasure as Xander's fingers burrowed under his shirt and scratched lightly over his belly.

"You're the smart one, pet. Bed it is."

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The daylight patrol hadn't told them too much more than they already knew. The building was old but not decrepit - it wasn't falling down or missing parts of the walls, and Xander had the feeling that Caleb could barricade himself inside for as long as he liked. And he was in there, this not-man of god. They'd seen him once or twice, inspecting some project the Bringers were working on - strolling slowly along an avenue of overgrown grapevine, spurning the half-rotted fruit that littered the weedy aisle. And after waiting for two days, Buffy didn't want to wait any more.

"We'll never know any more than we already do, Giles," she'd argued, and Giles had finally given in. At sunset, then, they were going to go in. Faith was drilling a dozen or more girls in the courtyard, and Johnathan and Dawn were sharpening swords and axes. Tara had decided to do a spell - a sort of 'locator' spell. She had a hair from each girl, wrapped in a twist of paper. She was making an oil to put on the paper and the girls, so that if they went in, and someone got hurt, or lost, they could be found. The paper would glow until its owner touched it, and it could be used as a divining rod or a calling charm, Tara said, if someone was trapped and unable to get free. She'd gone to the now-closed Magic Box to get a
last few essential herbs to add to the oil that was steeping on the stove downstairs. She'd taken a 'guard' of five Potentials and Ethan with her. Buffy was in consultation with Giles in the library, studying the sketches of the winery Xander had made and plotting what she would do.

Xander turned over in the bed, stroking his hand down Spike's back, watching and not watching Oz and Derio curled together across the room, talking softly between slow kisses. The link was soothingly thick with love happy mine yours, and Spike arched into his touch and tilted his head a little, so Xander could kiss him. Which he did, quite happily. Until there was a squeal of tires outside, and a voice shouting - shouting about Tara, Bringers, took her! and Xander hadn't ever gotten a pair of jeans on that fast. The four of them tore out of the room and down the stairs, to see Tara's 'guard' - disheveled and bloody - standing in a growing circle of shouting, hysterical people.

"Shut it!" Spike bellowed, and the Potentials fell back, leaving the five standing, huddled. Dawn was staggering in with their big First Aid kit, and Buffy and Giles also appeared at the run.
"What happened? Where's Tara and Ethan?" Xander demanded, and Amanda stepped forward, blood smeared under her nose and a set of bad scrapes all down her arm, showing under the torn sleeve of her shirt.

"It's - they - it was the Bringers! They were there - at the shop. They - did some sort of - of spell. We couldn't see! They grabbed - Tara and Mr. Rayne." There was a muffled exclamation from Giles, and Xander glanced at him, the ripple of darkman demonkiller crackling over him like static electricity.

"Where were they taking them?" Oz asked, his voice urgent, and Amanda swallowed and flinched a little as Dawn tried to get at her arm. Johnathan was holding a pad of gauze to Rona's bleeding forehead.

"We - we chased them. When the spell wore off. We - killed wa-one. They looked like they were going to that school? The high school?"

"Fuck," furious and vehement from Spike and Xander felt a chill go over him. The Potentials were milling, whispering, and someone ran upstairs.
"What the hell -" *Why the school? Why not the winery?* Xander thought, and then horrible suspicion blossomed, confirmed by Giles a moment later.

"Johnathan -" Giles snapped, and the boy jerked around to face the Watcher. "Why was Andrew trying to kill you at the Hellmouth - what was he trying to do?" Johnathan paled - swallowed - then handed the gauze off to a Potential and stepped closer to Giles.

"He - he said something about opening the gate. About - calling the old ones? The - Tur... Tur..han...something...."

"Turok-Han?" Spike asked, and Giles turned to face him.

"Those are a myth - aren't they?"

Spike shrugged, doing that thing with his hands that meant he was looking for his cigarettes. "Angelus mentioned them once - something the Master used to rave about. They're - different."

"They're your race's...precursors, actually, if memory serves. The Neanderthal of vampires. Strong, fast - animalistic. I wonder if that is the army the First is
preparing for..." Giles' expression began to go blank as he turned inward, searching his memory, and Xander clapped his hands sharply together.

"Focus, people! We need to go and get them back! We need -"

"Clothes - here -" Vi and the Australian Potential - Donna - were shoving boots, shirts, and Spike's duster at the four of them and Xander couldn't help but grin.

"Thanks, girls." They pulled on their clothes while Buffy grabbed weapons, talking rapidly to Faith.

"This might be a trick - the First might be sending more Bringers here - anything. Just - stay alert. We're counting on you to protect the house." Faith nodded, hefting an axe.

"Yeah. Don't worry, B, I got your back. We'll be fine."

"Giles - you better - you better stay here. The wards -" The wards were a permanent fixture now, but they would need to be bolstered if the Bringers or anything else started flinging themselves against them. Giles looked agonized but he nodded sharply.
"Yes, I... Just find him, please," he said softly, and Buffy touched his shoulder, nodding.

"Everybody in the van - bloody bastards would pick the middle of the bloody day -" Spike yanked his duster on and Oz took off at a run, heading for the back door and the keys that hung there. The rest of them followed, silent and grim.

_She'll be okay, she'll be okay_... Xander thought, and squeezed Spike's hand hard when it slipped into his.

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__This fuckin' basement is starting to piss me off. Maybe you need to blow it up again, _ Spike thought, and Xander snorted in agreement._

_I think you're right. Maybe that'd fix the First._  The school at just after noon was eerily deserted, with trash and graffiti marring the halls.

_God - Sunnydale really is shutting down... _ It gave Xander the creeps. As they ran, they could feel the energy of the
Hellmouth shuddering and pulsing like a live thing, and the dreadful certainty that they were *too late, oh fuck, too late* crashed through them all. As they leaped down the steps, Buffy in the lead, blood-scent slammed into them, making Derio and Oz shift halfway to the wolf, making the demon rise, snarling, in Spike. The hyena rose as well because it was Tara's blood thick on the air - Tara's pain and terror and Buffy almost tripped in startlement at the chorus of howls that were torn out of them.

*No, no, no! God damnit, god DAMNIT we are not too late - Tara, fuck -hold on!* They burst into the room that held the Hellmouth and for a moment Xander was too confused to really sort the images that were assaulting him; images that jumped and wavered in the flickering light of several torches. Then it all became clear and he was launching himself across the room at a knot of Bringers and a scaffold of wood and iron and rope - a great wheel, where Tara hung naked and bleeding.

The Bringers crumpled under them, falling like flies, and Oz was climbing the wheel, claws scrubbling and scoring the wood, tearing at the rope with his teeth.

"Guys! Help me!" It was Buffy, in the shadows at the far
side of the room and suddenly she flew backwards, crashing into a wall and crumpling down. Something pounced after her - a wizened, grey-skinned creature - a hideous caricature of a vampire, and Xander felt his blood run cold. The creature had fresh blood on its mouth.

*Jesus. Is that it?*

*Turok-han. Fucker's ugly. Let's put it out of its misery.* Spike launched himself, growling, and Derio hit the creature from the other side at the same moment, full wolf now. Oz was cradling Tara, severing the last of the rope and lowering her gently, gently to the ground.

*Oz? She okay?*

*Passed out - fuck, they cut her - she's all right, I've got her!* Xander nodded and whirled back around, watching Derio latch onto the Turok-han's stringy calf and shake his head viciously, a ham-stringing maneuver that seemed to be working. Spike was hacking with the small axe he'd brought; blows that were driving the other vampire back but weren't doing the damage Xander expected. He readied his own weapon - a long, wide-bladed knife - and waded in. Buffy joined them a minute
later, her eyes snapping with anger, the torn sleeve of her coat flapping down around her elbow.

"This bastard's gonna pay for that - this is the only nice coat I have left!" Buffy swung her own axe, crashing it into the Turok-han's head, and it reeled and growled, clawing Derio's flank open, sending Spike flying with a hard kick and snapping Xander's knife off at the hilt.

Fuck! Too strong - what are we gonna do?

Take the fucker's head off! Spike staggered upright and darted over to the wheel - snatched up a length of rope. He made a loop and ran back to the fight.

Derio - distract it for a sec, grab its leg again! Spike directed. Derio leaped and fastened his mouth on the torn flesh below the other vampire's knee and the Turok-han howled, sinking its clawed fingers into Derio's ribs. The howl of pain that went up made them all cringe, and then Spike was looping the rope around the creature's throat, dodging a kick.

"Slayer! Grab on!" he shouted, tossing the rope-end to Buffy. She caught it, winding it around her fist, and Xander grabbed up Spike's axe and chopped hard, sinking
the blade into the Turok-han's chest. It howled, wrenching at the axe, and then -"Pull!" from Spike and he and Buffy leaned backwards, pulling with all their might. The rope tightened - sank into the stringy, grey neck - and the Turok-han scrabbled at it, tearing its own flesh. The rope tightened further and then disappeared and suddenly there was nothing - there was a collapsing cloud of dark ash and the rope snapped out straight between Spike and Buffy.

"Fuck!" Xander leaned on the axe for a moment, panting, then jerked around at a moan coming from the shadows. "Ethan?" he hurried over, peering into the darkness and almost stumbling over the mage who was lying in the dirt, arms and ankles tied. "Jesus, you okay?"

"For almost - almost being an appetizer, I'm - all right," Ethan said weakly. Xander hauled him upright, wincing at the bloody wound on his neck where the Turok-han had apparently started to feed. He worked quickly, undoing the ropes and getting Ethan to his feet, and they both made their way back to the Hellmouth seal, and the wheel. Derio was whimpering, licking tentatively at jagged wounds down his ribs and back. Buffy was standing helplessly, looking as if she wanted to help him but wasn't sure how. Spike was on his knees next to Oz,
gingerly wrapping his duster around Tara's limp form.

Tara - god - is she all right? What did they -

"She's - been cut. They carved - marks - into her..." Oz snarled, his eyes flashing to black and back, and Xander saw the marks etched into her chest and stomach - runes that were still bleeding sluggishly.

"God. Oh my god -" Buffy was pale, staring at Tara, and then Spike fastened up the front of the coat and gently, gently lifted her.

"Let's get her the fuck out of here. You able to walk, mage?" Ethan passed a shaky hand over his face and nodded, jaw's clamped tight. They went out and up, settling Tara gently into the van that Oz had parked right against the doors, so Spike wouldn't have to run through any sunlight. The ride home was silent, and Xander cradled Tara's head on his knee, stroking her tangled hair back out of her face, his fingers trembling. Spike was close beside him, holding Tara's hand and leaning into Xander's shoulder. The smell of blood was thick in the air - blood from all of them - and the link was a tangle of emotions; fear, pain, despair - fury and guilt. It built around them, spiraling upwards until Oz broke it,
humming the wolf-chant out loud and forcing it into the link, overriding everything else. Ethan, in the passenger seat, closed his eyes, humming scratchily along. Buffy sat on the van floor, Derio's head in her lap, carefully stroking the bloodied muzzle and ruff of fur around his shoulders.

"That's nice, Oz, that's...really nice," she said softly, closing her eyes, and Xander noticed the huge bruise and scrape that was down her jaw and neck for the first time.

"You okay, Buffy?" he asked, and she opened her eyes for a moment and looked at him.

"I'm...fine. That - Turok-whatever, it was really strong. If the First has an army of those..."

"Have to get to the Hellmouth to get 'em out, though," Spike murmured, eyes closed. "What we need is some C-4 and Sergeant Rock, here; bring the bloody house down once and for all."

"Oh - I like that. Fire pretty..." Buffy grinned crookedly at Xander and gingerly touched her jaw, then settled back with a sigh, closing her eyes again. From his seat Ethan made a small sound, weak chuckle, and Oz reached
over blindly and patted his thigh. They were all quiet after that, letting the soft words of the chant wash over them and through them, lulling them until they could be safe at home.

24 Losing

A wave of Potentials spilled from the side door of the mansion as they pulled up, and Oz eased into the converted carriage house, not even getting the engine turned off before the doors were being opened. Amanda and Rona were first in line, tear-streaked and anxious, with the other three of the 'guard' right behind them.

"Is she okay? Please, is she - oh god!" Rona reeled back, covering her mouth with her hand as Spike gently lifted Tara and the duster opened a little, showing a bloodied shoulder. Tara's face was pale as paper, streaked with blood and dirt. Ethan crawled weakly out of the van and stumbled straight into Giles' arms, his skin colored a sickly greenish-grey.
"Ethan! What - how is Tara? What happened?" Giles asked anxiously, slinging his arm around Ethan and all but lifting the slighter man into his arms.

"Ethan got attacked - one of those Turok-Han bit him. He needs some juice or something, Giles. Tara's..." Xander didn't know what to say about Tara, and he followed Spike towards the connecting door that led to the house proper, wishing he could help.

"S-spike, wait!" Ethan was holding out his hand and Spike turned toward him, snarling.

"She needs help, mage -"

"I know! I know." Ethan urged Giles forward until they were closer to Spike and Tara. "She's - it's the earth that helps her. She needs to be in the garden. She needs to touch the earth."

_Fucking hell! Damnit, Xan - you think?_

_He's probably right, he and Giles know more about that -_

"Giles, is that -?" Xander turned anxiously to Giles,
putting out a hand to touch Ethan's shoulder, apology for doubting him.

"Yes, he's right Xander. If she's hurt, there is a spell - healing from the Earth. That's - where her power originates."

Take her - take her, love, hurry, Spike thought, and Xander carefully accepted the limp form of the *lightwitch mother pack pack pack pack*, wincing when he saw the deep cuts in the shadowy area below the duster's lapel. Derio limped up to them, whining softly, and Oz knelt down next to him, hugging him around the neck and stroking his fur.

*We'll be there, take her. Have to clean these...* Xander knew what Oz meant - he had to change, and help Derio clean the gashes left by the Turok-han. Just like their mundane counterparts, the wolves would lick the injuries clean, and their magic would speed the healing faster than any antiseptic.

*Derio...god -*

*I'm all right. Go on, we'll be right there.* Xander nodded and strode away, going through the house rather than
around, heading for the garden. Spike crouched down next to Derio as well, anger and frustration in the link because he couldn't follow Xander out into the sunlight.

*Pack...oh Glinda...be well, love...*

Xander went as fast as he could, the Potentials milling around him like moonlets around a planet, Amanda beside him and Rona crying softly right behind. Buffy quietly asked Faith to get the First Aid kit and sent Dawn scrambling for a sheet and blanket. Johnathan was sent off next for juice and a muffin for Ethan and they all arrived in the garden about the same time. Buffy and Dawn spread the doubled sheet on the ground and Buffy helped Xander to ease Tara down, straightening her limbs and arranging her arms, her face tight with worry.

"Is she...god, she looks -" Rona looked utterly spooked and Xander frowned up at her.

"She's going to be fine. She lost a lot of blood. She's just unconscious. Ethan - what do I do?"

Ethan had collapsed onto the edge of a concrete planter, gulping orange juice. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and looked up at Giles, nodding once. "You
need to get that coat off of her, and let her hands touch the ground." Xander nodded and Buffy knelt down, helping him roll Tara from side to side, stripping off Spike's duster. Dawn was ready with the blanket but they all stared in shock for a moment at the symbols carved so cruelly deep into the palely tawny skin of Tara's chest, ribs and belly.

*Oh god, oh FUCK, those bastards, gonna PAY for this -* Xander let the others see, showing them the wounds, and there was a roar of fury from inside the house as the extent of Tara's hurts came clear to Spike. Xander looked up and saw him in the doorway, demon-faced and teeth bared, *KILL them, kill all of them, no mercy, none left, kill them not pack not pack* sluicing like lava through the link. Dawn tucked the blanket up around Tara and then Xander and Buffy carefully got Tara's hands out from under it and laid them palm down on the leaf-littered floor of the garden, bunching the sheet out of the way.

"What - what next? What do we do?" Xander asked, and he could hear Rona and another one or two potentials crying - could hear whispering. "Shut up! She's going to be fine! Giles - Ethan, what next?" Ethan held his hand out and let Giles haul him to his feet. They both came over and knelt on either side of Tara, looking grave.
"She must do it herself, I'm afraid," Giles said softly. "We must - wake her up a little." They all looked down at her unconscious, too-pale features, and Xander felt a wave of helplessness go through him.

*Be all right, she'll be all right, she's strong,* from Oz, and he looked up to see both wolves on either side of Spike, leaning into his legs, Spike's hands knotted in their fur. Just inside the margin of safety, in the shadowy edge of the doorway.

"Oh! Here -" Dawn dove for something in the kit and handed it to Giles - a small vial of something that Giles immediately opened and waved under Tara's nose.

*Smelling salts,* Spike supplied as Xander caught a whiff and recoiled. Buffy was wrinkling her nose as well at the acrid reek. Tara stirred, turning her head a little, and she coughed weakly. Giles waved the vial again and her eyes snapped open, pain and fear in wide green eyes. She coughed again, harder, and moaned in pain. Giles capped the vial and Xander carefully brushed a strand of hair back from Tara's cheek - smoothed that same cheek with his palm.
"Tara? Tara, you're safe - it's Xander and - and Buffy - we've got you, Tara." She blinked - licked her lips, looking dazedly at the faces that ringed her.

"E-ethan?" she rasped, and the mage shifted into her view.

"I'm here, child. We're all here." Tara managed a tiny sort of smile - grimaced as she tried to move.

"Don't - Tara, you're really hurt -"

"The girls -"

"We're fine, Tara - we... God, we're so sorry!" Amanda wiped her eyes, trying not to cry, and Tara slumped back, nodding.

"Oh-oh-okay, glad..." Her voice faded to a mumble and her eyes were fluttering, trying to close.

"Tara - you must not sleep. You need to heal yourself." Giles leaned over Tara, gently patting her cheek. "Can you remember the invocation? Call to Brigit, Tara..." Tara blinked again and again - finally nodded faintly.
"I can - do it, I can..." Her fingers pushed weakly at the ground, burying the tips a little into the thick loam.

"Everyone get back - back up," Xander said. The Potentials stepped away, forming a wide ring, and Buffy stood up and grabbed Dawn's hand, backing away. Faith picked up the First Aid kit and moved away as well. Giles helped Ethan up and away but Xander couldn't move - didn't want to move - and he reached out and put his hand lightly on Tara's.

"Come on, Tara - come on, you can do this." Tara smiled wanly up at him - closed her eyes, frowning. Then she began to whisper, soft words in a language Xander wasn't familiar with.

*That's Irish. Brigit's Irish. She's calling her...* A touch of awe in Spike's mental voice, and Xander closed his own eyes, listening to the rhythm of the words; the soft, musical sound of the language. He felt heat and fur and *Derio* and the wolf settled with a pained sigh beside him. The call went on, lulling and soft, and Xander slipped into a blank place, where Tara's voice was like the wind or the sea, and the sunlight was a cocoon of warmth around him - the earth under his knees the only
point of solidity. A soft gasp from the crowd around them and he opened his eyes. A delicate light - palely silver-green, dancing like the sun reflecting off water - surrounded Tara. It seemed to come from the earth and the air and from Tara herself, and it rippled and shivered with every breath - every movement of Tara's lips. The light was over Derio as well, tipping each hair with a speck of witch-fire and making his eyes spark gold-green. Xander watched as the tail-end of a cut over Tara's shoulder slowly knit itself together, not noticing he was crying until he felt Derio's muzzle nudging his hand.

All right, it's all right...

She's doing it, love...god, look at her - Oz made a low, whining sound, happiness and excitement, and the moment went on and on, until finally Tara's voice died away, and her eyes fluttered open again. The green light seemed to glow that much brighter for a moment, and then it was sucked back and down, flowing into the earth and fading away and Tara pushed herself slowly upright, clutching the blanket. Xander wiped his face, impatient with tears, but feeling - lighter, somehow.

"Tara! God - that was - that was amazing, that was..." Xander didn't know what to say - reached out
hesitantly and Tara folded gratefully into him, shaking.

_She's fine, she's perfect, she - god -

_It's all right love... Bring her in, please bring her in -

Spike was desperate to touch her - confirm that she was there, and safe, and healed, and Xander nodded into Tara's shoulder, sniffing.

"She'll be - very tired," Giles said gently, and Xander looked up to see everyone crowding close, smiling through tears or, like Dawn, bouncing with ill-suppressed glee.

"Man, I need some powers like that," Faith said, grinning, and Xander had to grin back.

"Want to go inside, Tara?" Xander asked, and Tara leaned back a little and nodded. There was still blood and dirt on her skin and she looked down at herself with a grimace.

"Yeah, I would. I r-really need a shower."

"A bath - you'll fall and knock yourself silly," Ethan said, and Tara sighed - nodded reluctantly.
"I do feel k-kinda - weak."

"My dear girl - you called Brigit to you, and called her power of healing out of the Earth itself. It's a wonder you're not comatose." Giles' voice was full of pride and delight and Xander got his arms under Tara and carefully lifted, Derio bracing him on one side and Faith on the other. Dawn got the blanket tucked up right, making sure Tara was covered and she rested her head on Xander's shoulder, her arms around his neck. Xander went carefully inside, the Potentials parting like the red sea - went straight to Spike and Oz. Derio pushed past, human again, the dirt-streaked sheet around him, healed by the light, also. He held the sheet just so and Oz changed as well, winding the rest of the sheet hastily around his hips as Xander brought Tara up to them. Spike just stood there, staring at her, then he reached out and slowly stroked her hair, his face shuttered but the link crowded with joy and awe and the undercurrent of rage that they all shared.

Xander was aware, sort of, of Buffy sending the Potentials away, back to drilling or chores or something - of asking Faith to start a bath in the downstairs tub and shooing Johnathan to the kitchen with Giles and Ethan,
telling him Ethan wasn't the only one who needed food. Then she faded back, and Dawn slipped up close, and they were all there, just there, sister brother family faintly from Dawn, love family from Tara even fainter - more emotion than clear thought, more a warm breath through their souls than anything else.

Safe, pack is safe, family is safe, the hyena crowed, wanting to roar joy and challenge to the rafters, but Xander shushed it.

"Thank you f-for coming for m-me..." Tara whispered, pushing a little into Spike's hand, looking at them all with eyes glittering and wet.

"Always come for you, Glinda. Never doubt it," Spike murmured, and she nodded, smiling at them.

"C'mon, you need to get cleaned up," Xander finally said, when he saw Faith wandering back from the bath and Buffy starting to look a little impatient.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell him. Right after you get cleaned up and into bed." Buffy's smile was strained but Tara nodded gratefully, laying her head down and sighing, worn out. Xander carried her to the bathroom and left her in Buffy and Dawn's gentle hands, and joined his pack on the steps.

We can't fight that many, he thought. Not if they're all strong like that...

Won't have to. We'll figure a way, love. We WILL.

Maybe if we figure out what this Caleb has... Oz thought, speculating, and Derio leaned into him and sighed, looking as worn-out as Tara. You should sleep, me amor, Oz chided gently, and Derio closed his eyes.

So hungry. Eat then sleep. Are we still going tonight? The winery? They all thought about that for a minute, and they all knew what they wanted. Revenge.

We'll go, with or without the Slayer. Can burn the bloody thing to the ground if nothing else, Spike concluded, and they all agreed. Something would be done, one way or the other.
"Okay, so - what's the signal?" Oz asked, and Buffy looked impatient.

"Lots of yelling. Everybody ready?" There was shuffling and a murmuring and Buffy took it for assent - squared her shoulders and nodded. "Okay. Spike. We're trying to find something that he's got. Something hidden, maybe. So we may need to talk to him. Is this translating into English for you?"

"Fold, spindle and mutilate, no killing, check," Spike muttered, sucking hard on the last inch of his cigarette, demon-face all but vibrating with suppressed rage. Xander felt the same - felt it from Oz and Derio, as well. A seething cloud of red-tinged fury, boiling up like ants from a nest. Biting, pinching, urging them all on. Relentless. Spike had left his duster - his duster - at the mansion. Left it folded in Tara's lap with a 'don't let this get lost, eh Glinda?' and a kiss on the cheek. In the link had been scenes - some memories, some just fantasy - all so gory that it made sense. Spike didn't want his precious coat covered in...stuff. *Too much work to clean*
off THAT much blood, he'd thought, mind straying to something that had happened in Potsdam in 1889. It had only stoked their own fire, and Xander had wondered, distantly, when Spike's history had ceased to be an issue for him in any way. Xander watched as Buffy and about half the Potentials - and Oz and Derio in wolf form - slipped away through the scrubby trees and bushes that crowded the old winery.

Gotta stay calm - can't go nuts. Nobody can get hurt - Xander thought, edge of rationality threatening to slip away as the hyena bullied itself up and out and the world became curiously flat and almost colorless.

Calm, calm...not pack not pack not pack. Kill what touches mine, kill it, was the less than rational reply from Derio and Oz, ringing synchronicity in their mental voice. The demon had long-since lost its ability to form words and the fury and malice spiraling out from it - from Spike - made Xander's breath come hard and fast - made him clench his fists until his nails cut into his palms. They waited, the Potentials in a huddle stinking of fear and nerves; Spike standing stock-still, a nearly sub-sonic growl rattling up out of his chest. Faith stood uneasily beside him, dividing her attention between the winery and the vampire. The link from Oz and Derio showed the
colorless world-view of the wolves, moving along at hip-height to the Potentials. The vegetation thinned and then they were trotting across a packed-earth courtyard, past stacks of cut, dead vines and heaps of fresher earth, the rich fungal scent thick in the air.

_Digging...under the earth. Digging a lair or a...hiding place..._ Wordless agreement from Oz, and then Buffy was kicking in the doors - leaping into a space lit by dim electric light. The Potentials flooded in, Oz and Derio bounded forward, down a shallow, short flight of stairs. They could smell Bringers - a sharp, acid, rot sort of smell, and then black-clad figures boiled out of every space and the fight began.

"Let's go!" Xander shouted and "Fuck yeah!" from Faith and they ran, Spike like a fire-pale arrow shooting straight ahead, the Potentials crashing heedlessly through the brush. Xander felt the hyena's voice struggling in his throat and he tipped up his chin and let it out, ringing shriek of challenge and hate. It was answered by the wolves - by Spike - and beside him a Potential cried out and almost tripped. He yanked her upright - grinned nastily into her shocked face and flung himself forward, plunging through the doors a second or so behind Spike and into a whirling wind-mill of activity.
Some of these girls are going to die, was Xander's last real thought, and then there was just the satisfying crunch of bone and the wet tearing of flesh.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

"Is that it? Is that all?" Buffy was panting, standing with legs braced, looking warily around. Spike felt the demon retreat a bit - looked around himself at the room they'd been fighting in. It was some sort of cellar - a storage room - with fifty or more huge, wooden vats of wine in rows against the walls. The thick, ripe smell of the wine was everywhere in the room, as was the smell of freshly turned earth and blood.

Family - insistent, and Xander was right there.

Family, we're here, we're safe -

Pack pack from Oz and pack from Derio. All accounted for. Bringer corpses were scattered like jack-straws over the dirt floor, and Spike grinned fiercely at the carnage.

Did good, did good, he praised, knowing that his pack
and the Slayers had accounted for most of the deaths. There were so many he wondered if that was all of them, if they'd wiped out the nest. He dragged his hand back through his hair, pushing stray locks off his forehead and grimacing at the stickiness. He knew he was spattered in blood - he could taste it, and it was sharp with fear and magic. Everyone else was in a similar state, although Buffy, he noticed, had escaped the worst of it.

The air seemed to crackle with something - with some further thing yet to happen - and Spike nodded in agreement as Xander and Faith got the Potentials who were still standing busy gathering up the wounded. He counted eight that were hurt - two badly enough to be unconscious - and three dead. As he watched the bodies shimmered and disappeared. Part of the spell Tara had done. The corpses were tied to the talismans Tara had made, and each talisman would bring its 'owner' straight to it if the 'spark' left it. Giles' own twist on the spell because he couldn't bear the thought of sending a telegram to someone's family, and giving them nothing to mourn over and bury.

_Nasty surprise for them, when those show up,_ Spike thought, and felt a moment's pang for Tara, who would
be upset.

"Where is he? Is he even here?" Buffy asked, watching the last of the injured girls straggle out. Kennedy, Chao-ahn, Amanda and Rona stood at the top of the steps, waiting. Rear-guard while the hale helped the injured to the van Johnathan had waiting down the road.

"You must mean me," a voice said - smooth and amused - and something stirred in the shadows at the far end of the room. Then he stepped out into the light - Caleb; his priest's costume immaculate, the grin that split his face superior and sharp-edged. "And you must be the Whore of Babylon - and Mary Magdalene, eh? Sluts, all." Caleb stood with his hands loosely at his side, studying Buffy and Faith. Spike felt the instant urge to kill from the wolves - from Xander - and he himself held back with difficulty, letting Buffy run the show. Caleb glanced up at the four Potentials near the door, a sneering look of dismissal.

"And your little followers - other dirty girls who think they can escape their fate."

"The only person with a fate here is me," Buffy said, low and measured tones, and Faith bumped her with an
elbow. "Oh, and Faith, too. And you - you're fated to die. Now hand over what's mine so we can get on with it."

"You tell 'em, B," Faith said, chuckling, and Caleb narrowed his eyes at them.

"You should both be begging my forgiveness. Not that I'll give you forgiveness. There's no absolution for the foul creatures that you are. Polluted with darkness while you pretend to the light."

"What are you talkin' about? 'Cause tell the truth, I'm kinda bored now," Faith said, and Caleb let out a short bark of laughter. Spike could feel Oz and Derio slinking around the edges of the room, looking for anything hidden - looking for something because the room seemed to be a dead end.

A trap? Maybe - Xander started sorting possibilities in his head, coming down the stairs to stand by Spike, who was a few feet behind the Slayers.

If it's a trap we've sprung it - don't think he counted on us killin' off all his little workers. There was a muted chirrup from Xander and he snapped open his cell. Spike could
clearly hear Johnathan on the other end, but he was pretty sure no one else could.

"They're all here - we're going. Clem's going to wait. Be careful."

"Go," Xander said softly, and shut the phone - put it away. Johnathan was taking the girls back to the mansion. The hospital was as abandoned as the rest of the town, and they'd raided it for every conceivable medical supply. The Watcher, the mage and Glinda had strengthened the wards on the house to near impenetrability, especially for this night. Just in case. Knowing the rest were safely out of the way made Spike feel - looser - and he pulled a cigarette from the squashed pack in his back pocket and lit up, blowing a stream of smoke towards Caleb.

"I'm with you there, Slayer. Bored."

Caleb sauntered a step closer, grinning still. "Oh, the vampire. And the one who sees." He frowned at Xander and Spike stepped in front of him, growling, the demon just there without thought. "Oh, don't flash your fangs at me, half-breed. I've seen the true demon, and you - don't measure up." Caleb turned back to the Slayers and
Spike sucked in smoke and watched him, tense. Ready to leap.

*Thank god you're nothing like the Turok-han - can't really see me getting' down and dirty with ole' Batface.*

*What's his game then? All this talk...wolfling, anything?*

*Some digging here. There's something UNDER here - but it's blocked. These vats -*

*We'll move 'em once we clear this mess out. Find his secret.*  Caleb was still prattling on, and Buffy looked annoyed.

"It's no surprise you consort with this kind of - rabble," he said, waving a dismissive hand at Spike and Xander. "Considering your beginnings, it's a wonder you don't join them. I suppose we have those Watchers to thank for that."

"Look - is there a point to all this? 'Cause I gotta say - not really interested in the Mr. Evil psychobabble. I just want what's mine."  Buffy looked up as Caleb got a little closer.
"Oh, that's right. What's yours." Caleb laughed. "Glad you got my message, by the way. I admit to being a little heavy-handed there. Touch and go for awhile if you'd get to hear what I told her before she gasped her last. Sometimes -" Caleb stopped and gazed beatifically upwards. "Sometimes the spirit just moves me, you know?"

"How 'bout havin' this move you?" Faith said and leaped at him, a high, hard kick flashing towards his face. He took the blow with a rock backwards of his head and then he had Faith by one arm, twisting it up hard behind her back.

"Little girl, you should know better than to interrupt your elders. Down on your knees like the little slut you are." Caleb forced Faith to her knees, his other hand fisted in her hair and yanking her head back hard. He jerked her arm up higher and Spike heard the crack as something broke and Faith went utterly white.

"One good twist and there'll be only one again. What'dya think about that, Slayer?" he purred.

"No!" It was Rona, charging clumsily down the stairs and straight at Caleb, a nail-studded baseball bat in her
hands. Caleb half-lifted Faith and threw her, and she crashed into a wall and slid down, limp.

_Oh fuck!_ from Xander, and the wolves bolted forward, heading in. Spike did the same, watching with fury as Caleb easily avoided the wild blow Rona aimed at him. He snatched the bat from her and spun it like a majorette - swung - and the nails buried themselves in Rona's skull with a meaty thud. She fell to her knees and then her back and then Oz and Derio hit him, snarling. He threw them off, the back of his shirt torn open now, and Spike snarled at the yelps of pain when they smashed into the floor. Buffy ran forward only to meet Caleb's fist. She flew backwards into a vat, cracking it, and wine started to seep out, pungent in the close air. Spike plowed into the quasi-priest, clawing and trying to get in one good bite to the jugular but Caleb put a fist like a hammer into his gut and then kicked, sending him reeling. Xander ran forward as well, axe swinging up and then down and Caleb darted away and flung Xander across the room, half up the stairs. Kennedy, Chao-ahn and Amanda had been frozen at the top of the flight and now they tumbled down over Xander and moved in and Caleb swatted them away, laughing. Chao-ahn hit the broken vat hard enough to snap her neck and the wine gushed out over her,
washing her body to Caleb's feet even as it faded away as Rona's had.

"Come on - is this all you've got? Is this really all the Chosen One has to throw at me? Strumpets and half-breeds and abominations?" He waded towards Buffy and Faith who were both struggling back to their feet.

"Buffy! There's a trap door!" Xander yelled suddenly, and Spike whirled to look - saw that there was, a door set flush into the floor where the broken vat was, half-visible in the splintered wreckage.

"Oh, that was supposed to be a secret," Caleb said, and he was frowning now. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" he yelled, and the door heaved and opened and Bringers flooded out; five, ten, more.

Fuck - too many - wolves are hurt, Faith is -

Get 'em out, love - hurry! Spike thought, and he threw himself at the Bringers, claws and fangs and bone-cracking blows.

"Buffy, let's go! We gotta go!" Xander shouted. Spike was aware, through Derio and Oz and Xander himself, of
Kennedy grabbing Amanda's hand and yanking her up the stairs - of Buffy pushing Faith that way as well, and Derio limping after her, pain in the link from what might a broken leg. Oz darted in and swiped at Caleb with his teeth, getting a glancing, painful kick to his ribs in return.

**Out! Hurry!** More Bringers were coming up from below and Spike saw Xander wading in, axe flashing, and Buffy joining him. Caleb seemed to be thinking, standing there glaring at them.

"Slayer - get out! Xan -" Spike whirled and kicked and killed, and Buffy sprinted for the stairs, Xander going more slowly behind, taking out the Bringers who surged after him. Spike grabbed another Bringer and wrenched head from neck - spun, kicking, making a clear space so he could follow Xander. And then he was on his knees, he was howling as white-hot pain lanced through his head and someone was screaming and he staggered to his feet, utterly confused, the pain like fire and acid, ten times worse than the chip ever had been. Caleb had Xander in his grip - had one hand around his throat and one on his face and the link was agony, was a nauseating, lancing throb. Spike thought he might vomit - might collapse - but instead he roared and he leaped for Caleb - sank his fangs into the bit of throat visible above the
priests' collar and bit. Caleb reeled backwards, dropping Xander, beating at Spike with his fists. Spike drank faster then he ever had, feeling the man's heartbeat stutter and lurch and then he was wrenching his fangs free in a gout of arterial blood; taste of rotting tin, belladonna, fire in his mouth. Xander was on the floor, both hands clutched over his left eye, curled into a shivering knot. There was blood - so much blood.

*No, Xan - love, please -*

*Hurts hurts hurts get me out out Spike!* Spike staggered and locked his hand around Xander's wrist - hauled him up and then scooped him into his arms, heading for the stairs.

"Guess he won't s-see so damn much, now," Caleb rasped somewhere behind him and Oz was a blur hurtling past him. There was a choking gurgle and silence. Spike half ran up and out, heading for the van, Caleb's blood making him reel. Power, in that blood, more power than the Slayer in China and he could barely see - couldn't feel his feet or his arms or Xander...

*Love, love - please - Xander - what did he do, what did he do!* Stutter of images - Caleb's face, his hand on
Xander's throat, throttling him, his other hand covering his face, his eye. Something hard against his eye, pushing, pushing, oh fuck no, no -

*Nonono Spike, Spike - help, hurts, it hurts SPIKE!* Xander was writhing in his arms, moaning in a horrible, guttural tone and Spike staggered into a bush and then a tree, his sight dazzling and darkening and his head singing. Arms came around him - Oz, naked and blood-streaked and whimpering in pain, his eyes black and wild.

"Oh god, god, Xander - we're here -" Oz' hands feverishly stroked over Xander's arm, over his ribs, but Xander was lost, sinking into unconsciousness, blood still seeping down his face and the pain like a spike, like a shard of burning ice all through his head.

"Xander!" Spike dropped to his knees, jolting him, making him cry out, bringing him back and Spike did the only thing he knew to do. He tore his wrist open and pushed it hard against Xander's mouth, willing his boy to drink, willing the magic and the demon's blood and the claim to do something - anything - to help. "Drink, love, drink it, please, it'll help, please please please -" Xander choked, coughed, and then he was drinking as fast as he could. Spike let him - let him drink until his own head
cleared, until the dizzying power that had been in Caleb's blood had ebbed enough for him to see - to think straight.

They were barely twenty yards from the winery and Spike struggled to his feet again, Oz still there, Oz bracing him and holding on and *fuck hurts breathe* from the wolf, broken ribs stabbing into his muscles.

"Wolf - go -"

"No -come on, Spike!" Oz gasped, a thin, choked sound of pain rising up and escaping between his teeth. "Clem's there - hurry - too close." They half-ran, staggering, a steady moaning whimper from Xander at every jolt and jounce, a tea-kettle hissing from Oz and his fingers hurtfully deep in Spike's arm. Something crashed in the bushes and Buffy was there, panting, getting her arm around Spike from the other side and half carrying him, struggling over roots and clumps of grass. The van came into view finally, looming up in the thin moonlight, headlights blazing and Clem behind the wheel, one sagging-skinned arm waving frantically out the window.

The back doors were open and Buffy and Oz heaved, getting Spike up, Oz crying out. Spike sank to his knees,
pulling Xander close, *hurts hurts hurts Spike please hurts* as Xander gained some awareness.

"Goin' home, love, we're goin', you'll be fine, you'll be fine, Xan..." *Be fine, please, fucking hell, my boy, my own, you'll be fine we'll fix it, promise, promise.* The van lurched into gear and sped away, Buffy hanging half out to slam the doors and then there was only darkness, and pain.

25 Winning

The wards sparked like a firework as they stumbled through them and Spike staggered a last few steps and was on his knees again, Xander cradled close to him and Oz folding up beside him, so much pain in the link he could barely think straight. Oz struggled to shut it down - Derio, across the room with a bandage tight around his leg was doing the same, wide-eyed and blood-splattered. But Xander -

*Love, stay awake, stay HERE, you can't sleep now, Xan, please -*

*HURTS hurts hurts, make it stop make it stop make it stop stop stop stop -*
"What do you need, what happened?" Johnathan, crouching down beside him, streaked with blood, heart pounding but doing his best.

"Something for the pain - bandages - fuck, I don't - I don't know -" Spike felt lost - felt utterly helpless. He made things break and bleed, he didn't fix them, and he had no idea what to do. Johnathan scrambled to his feet, quick pat of his hand on Spike's shoulder.

"Be right back," he said, trotting away, and Derio was talking urgently to a tear-streaked Potential who nodded and fled upstairs. Buffy was across the room, saying something to Giles who was strapping up Faith's arm and he looked over at them, concern on his face.

Don't know what to do, what to do - Something flickered in his memory - some momentary image and he seized on it - drew it out. Knowledge crashed through him as the soldier woke up and he closed his eyes and remembered. Johnathan came back, spilling sealed packages and boxes of supplies from a basket. Hospital gear that they'd scrounged when they'd realized just how much had been left behind.

C'mon, tell me what to do - show me - come ON!
Hurts, oh fuck - hurts...hurts... Need to clean the - wound, need - bandage, need - Images, information, procedures cascaded through his mind and Spike scanned the pile of supplies - looked at Johnathan's weary, dirty face.

"I need gauze, I need - saline, and some kind of - morphine, something, I -" Wolf, can you hold him? Can you -

I'm here, from Derio as he hobbled to them, wrapped in a towel. He got down on the floor, his injured leg stuck out to the side and took Xander's limp weight into his lap, cradling his head against his shoulder. Oz was breathing in short, painful hitches, hunched and unmoving and Spike spared him a second's agonized look and then reached for the supplies. But his hands - his hands were filthy; covered in blood, in bits, in dirt, and he wanted to howl his frustration.

"Here - just -" Johnathan had towels and he folded one on the floor - cracked open a plastic bottle of alcohol and held it out. "Wash, here -" Spike stuck his hands out and Johnathan poured and he scrubbed hard, hurts hurts god, sorry, Spike - hurts hurts hurts, mindless drone that
made tears blur Spike's vision.

*Love, don't be sorry, not your fault, I'm here, almost done, gonna fix it, love please, you'll be all right -* He felt something wet on his face and he ducked away, snarling. It was Dawn, a wet towel in her hands, and she bit her lip.

"Bit - it's okay - sorry, didn't know -"

"Just wanted to get the blood off, you don't want any to get on - on Xander -" Dawn scuttled away, tears on her face, but Spike couldn't spare another thought for her - could barely think at all. A steady moaning noise - endless and ragged - was coming from Xander and Spike wanted to stop it, oh god, he wanted it to end. After a minute his hands were better and he took the latex gloves Johnathan offered, pulling them on.

"I need - a pot, a bowl - something -" Spike leaned over, getting a tall bottle of sterile saline and opening it - shredding open packages of gauze. The Potential was back, dumping a blanket on Oz and nodding frantically at Johnathan's hurried words, darting off to the kitchen. Spike opened the saline and wet the gauze - hovered over Xander, biting his lip.
Let me see, love, let me see - got to move your hands -

Hurts! Spike - please, please, please -

I know! Shhhh... "Shhh, love - I'll fix it, I will, but I have to - to see what's there, please move your hands, love - " The guttural moan went on and on and Xander was rigid with pain; his skin sheened with sweat, his heart-beat too slow and his breathing erratic. Shock was the word and Spike looked frantically around.

"I need something for pain, damnit, didn't you steal any fuckin' pain meds?" he snapped and Johnathan scrabbled in the basket - came up with a vial and a syringe and then looked over towards a knot of people - Giles, Ethan and several Potentials.

"Mr. Rayne! I need your help now!"

"Coming -" The mage pushed himself to his feet and hurried over and Johnathan held up the vial and syringe. Ethan knelt down and felt after Xander's pulse - looked at Spike.

"This could be dangerous -"
"He's gotta have it - I've got to see -" Spike wanted to shake the man and after a moment Ethan uncapped the syringe and drew a tiny measure of liquid into it. Johnathan swiped at Xander's arm with a piece of alcohol-soaked gauze and Ethan carefully injected the drug and then waited, his fingers on Xander's throat, his gaze turning inward as he concentrated. Spike heard Xander's heartbeat steady - heard it drop a little lower and then settle into a rhythm and Xander let out a long, long sigh.

*Thank you, thank you, better, Spike, you there? Better, better -*

*I'm here, love,* Spike thought but Xander was silent now, unconscious, and Spike took a deep breath. With the pain and the awful, awful moaning finally gone he could think, and he ordered his thoughts, remembering as hard as he could - picking apart the soldier's knowledge and seeing what he had to do. The Potential - *Kennedy, that's Kennedy* came back just then with a big pot from the kitchen and Spike took it with a single, lingering glance.

"Wolf, we have to - to hold him on his side so I can wash the blood off and see - see what's under there." Derio
nooded, shifting, and pain flared in the link. He hastily shut it down but not before Ethan saw him flinch.

"Let me do this - Derio, you're hurt, let me- " Derio snarled, the wolf flashing up in his eyes but then he reluctantly nodded, easing Xander over so Ethan could take him. Xander's hands fell away from his face and Spike stared at the mess of blood that was there - blood and tissue and Xander's eye-lid, horribly not right.

_Fuckin' get it done, don't THINK, just -_

_Be all right, be all right, fuck -so much blood - _Oz shifted, making room for Derio and looking ill, and Spike took another hard breath.

"Hold him so I can - can get this on his face -" He wetted a handful of gauze and then carefully, carefully poured more saline over Xander's face, watching Ethan snatch more gauze to cover Xander's nose, watching the blood sluice away into the pot, so much blood and bits of tissue; dirt from the winery floor. He wiped and poured and wiped and poured until the pot was halfway full and then he steeled himself and carefully, carefully peeled the eyelid back. Ruin gaped up at him - welling blood and emptiness and he froze for a moment, shaking.
No, no, NO, not my boy, not -

Clean it out, just - see what's there - Oz was holding Derio's hand so hard Spike felt it in the link and Buffy was there suddenly, crouching down and looking at Xander, her face white and set.

"Is - is it - god - is there -"

"Don't - know, I don't - fuck - I need more of this -" Spike tossed the empty saline bottle aside and Buffy snatched a full one up - cracked the seal and opened it and Spike carefully, carefully poured a thin stream of the fluid into the damaged socket.

"Johnathan, I need that light -" A shifting, and then Buffy had a penlight in her hand and was shining it into Xander's face and they all saw it. Saw the empty socket, and the pulped bits of flesh that were washing out with the saline and Spike knew, he knew. Ethan drew in a hard breath but kept his hold gentle - tipped Xander's head a little more so the saline wouldn't wash over his face.

Gone, fucking gone, it's - oh fuck, there's -
Sure, be SURE, so much blood - Derio's voice in the link was frantic and shaky and Spike closed his eyes - opened them and poured and wiped and washed - gingerly inserted a twist of gauze that came out bloody but the socket was clean, now. Blood seeped slowly from the damaged tissue but there was nothing - there.

NO, oh love - fuck - what do I... Spike braced his elbows on his knees, his hands shaking, sorting the memories. "Is there - is there Betadine? Red - liquid, not soap -" he asked, his voice hoarse and hurting in his throat and Johnathan pawed through the supplies - came up with another bottle. He read the label swiftly and then opened it, handing it over. Spike soaked more gauze and then carefully, carefully packed the wound, pressing lightly until the horrible, empty socket was filled in with the red-stained cloth. He stripped off the fouled gloves and carefully positioned Xander's eyelid - took a fresh gauze pad from Buffy and laid it over Xander's face. Johnathan had more bandaging and slowly, slowly, Spike wound it around Xander's head, gentle tug and twist, making it secure, not too tight. When it was done it was neat and smooth and utterly awful, and he motioned for Ethan to let Xander go. The mage carefully shifted Xander over so that he rested in Spike's arms
again and Spike curled down over his boy and wept. He felt Oz leaning on him - Derio - felt their pain as the link shuddered open and they tried to comfort him - comfort each other. Xander slept on, free of the pain, and Spike simply held him. He was sure that his heart, dead as it might be, was breaking.

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Moving, he's waking up, it hurts, my fault, my fault, should never have come back, don't, love, I'll do that -

Routine, now - the careful, careful lifting of his boy - the twice-daily changes of bandages and gauze packing, the bathing with warmed water and a washcloth. Coaxing him to eat, monitoring the link so he'd get another dose of the pain-meds now because Xander was trying to tough it out, trying to wake up and endure it so he could...

I'm useless like this, Spike, PLEASE, let me get up, let me go downstairs and help with SOMETHING!

"No!" No, love, you're HURT. You just stay here, let me take care of you... It's only been three days, love, it's... MY fault, my fault, you just stay right here, we're all
taking a break...  Which wasn't a lie. Giles and Ethan were grimly executing the task of getting the dead Potentials back home. Drake and Anya were helping - were getting family members to escort the bodies and to explain, and there was a constant flow of people in and out of the house. The wounded had been taken to Tara and she had exhausted herself with the healing spell. Enough to speed everyone along, but not enough to fix it all right away. Spike had carried Xander's limp form to her, out to the garden where she was sitting and healing Faith's arm. Instead of weeks in a cast Faith would be mended in days and Spike had laid Xander down so, so gently, and looked desperately at Tara, surrounded by the scents of jasmine and damp earth, blood and clove-scented candles and lemonade.

"Oh - no... Spike?"

"Please, Glinda...please, can you -" Spike shudders, ignoring the tears that just will not STOP, ignoring the aches of his own hurt body, and the blood that's stiffening - stinking - in his clothes and hair. So focused on Xander he can barely think straight and Tara puts her hands on him and he jerks away, startled. Fighting the flood of energy and well-being that surges from her hands to him, healing his magic-driven body instantly.
"NO, don't waste that on me, give it to Xander! He needs it more, damnit!"

"I know, Spike, I'm doing it," Tara says softly, and Spike sees that Xander is shrouded in that silvery green, dancing light and he slumps, watching, hoping - BEGGING the universe to let it work, let it work, let it work.

"Will he -?" But he can't say it - can barely think it - and Tara touches Xander's face - the bandage - so gently.

"It's gone, isn't it? Caleb - took it," she says, and Spike nods, gasping after breath he doesn't need, aching so deeply in his chest that he wonders if it's his soul, crying.

"This magic only does what...what his body does naturally, Spike. Makes it go a l-lot faster, but it won't... His body CAN'T grow an eye back. This won't - do th-that. I'm sorry, Spike, I'm so sorry..." TARA is crying now and he can feel misery and pain and helpless rage from the wolves and he just can't STAND it anymore, he just CAN'T and he curls himself around Xander, trapped in this nightmare. His throat is raw and his body aches and all he can think is that he should have been watching, taking care, looking OUT... That he never
should have brought his family back here, that he never
should have let Xander within a hundred miles of the
Hellmouth and the Slayer ever, ever again. He doesn't
know what to do with the fury and the hurt and the
horror that are welling and breaking in him like a tide of
black, shattered glass and he screams to the sky - to the
earth. Xander's body under him, Xander's heartbeat in
his head and the scent of his blood and his skin
surrounding him and Spike has never felt so desolate - so
utterly, utterly alone. It's an hour before he can get
himself together and get Xander upstairs and into
bed. Two hours later he's getting water and the pills
Giles found and he's giving Xander his first dose and
smoothing his sweat-limp hair and doing whatever he
can to make it all right.

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anything when you're this hurt. We're all just... resting. I promise you, okay?" Xander looked at him - single dark eye mazed with the drug and with confusion, and his hand went up to his face - to the thick bandage.

"Tell me what - happened," he said and Spike cringed. He'd told him - over and over - but the drug and the shock kept making him forget.

My fault, my fault, oh love, I don't want to do this to you again, please please... "It was Caleb. Do you remember him?" Hesitant nod and Spike bit his lip - cuddled Xander closer, feeling the wolves coming up from downstairs.

Love you, love you, be all right, we're coming -

"He - grabbed you, he - he was stronger than me, love, and stronger than the Slayer -" No excuse, doesn’t mean a thing, still should have STOPPED him... "And he - he hurt you, love. He - pushed his...he took your eye, love," Spike's voice had dropped to a whisper and he felt the shock of what he said go through Xander - felt him put his hand up again, and felt him shiver.

"So it's - there's nothing there? My eye is -"
"Stop it, Spike, stop it -" from Derio as the wolves come in the door and headed straight for them, tucking up on the bed like they've done every time - surrounding him and Xander both with warmth and love and family pack nest.

"Don't do that, Spike. Hey, Xan," Oz said, small smile, and Xander reached out and took his offered hand - took Derio's, and leaned back heavily into Spike.

"I'm...blind, then. I mean - I just..." Xander was pushing fear and loss down so hard that the link almost closed and they all worked to gently soothe him - to pry the link wide and comfort him. A half-hour later he was asleep again, tears tracking just one side of his face and the morphine haze making the link surreal with dream-images. Oz scrubbed his hands back through his hair, looking so tired. Spike ached for him - for Derio, who'd gone silent and furious, as desperate as Spike.

"Spike - they've been talking. Tara has an idea. To get him - to get Caleb. And that - Wood, that principal? He's got something, too - he's going to be coming here in an hour." Oz's eyes looked bruised and Spike nodded
silently, gently stroking his fingers through and through Xander's hair.

Oz's own hand was on Spike's knee, rubbing slowly. "Come out with me, Spike. Me and Derio. Come hunt. You're getting thin."

"Can't, love -" The denial was automatic but the wolf flared up in Oz's eyes - in the link - and Oz was snarling at him.

"Can. Don't do this, Spike." Pack must be strong, pack leader must be STRONG. The wolf wouldn't take this - wouldn't stand for it. Won't let Spike just bury Xander and himself up here and exist. Spike knew the hyena wouldn't allow that, either, but the demon - the demon just wanted to *protect protect family mate mine mine MINE!* 

"I know, Spike. I know." Oz sighed - leaned forward far enough to rest his forehead gently against Spike's. "But you have to take care of yourself, you know you do. Don't..."

"Don't make it worse," Derio said, his fingers curling into Spike's. He crowded in next to Spike and Oz as close as
he could - touched as much as he could - shivering and desperate for the family to be whole. "It'll hurt him, when he's better, if you're all...starved. Don't do that to him." Spike took a hard breath, love you love you so much, love you all and finally, reluctantly, nodded. Derio hugged him and went to get Tara, returning with her and Dawn. As they left, Sinclair slinked into the room, jumping up on the bed and curling into Xander's belly, and Spike felt that Xander would be all right, for a little while.

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The hunting felt good. There were still humans left in Sunnydale - a lot, really. But they were the ones who hadn't had as much to do with the day-to-day running of the place, and Spike knew that a number of them had moved in as the legitimate residents had moved out. It made for a very strange atmosphere, and the Bronze was, for once, not crowded with kids but with outsiders and on-the-fringe types and junkies, and Spike drank his fill and more. Then they roved over three cemeteries, taking out a few Bringers, getting into a tussle with a small, scruffy pack of werecoyotes who'd moved in from somewhere near Oakland. They wanted to make the
Hellmouth their new base, but Oz convinced them otherwise. It was strange to see someone else who could shift halfway to their were-shape, and they spent a little while just talking after the threats and the snarling were done. The Oakland pack revealed ties to the American Indian community and a spell that gave them control over their form. They compared the wolf-chant to their Lakota spell and parted on friendly terms, satisfied.

Spike was feeling - settled, finally. Feeling a little more clear-headed, since Xander's pain and his drug-induced confusion wasn't right there, in his head. Oz told him about Robin Wood - that his mother had been a Slayer and that he had some artifact of the Slayer line that he'd hidden for years. Something that Buffy and Giles had examined, and gotten some sort of information from.

"They've got an idea of what Caleb might be hiding," Oz said, walking between Spike and Derio, contemplating a small stone that he turned again and again in his fingers.

"What do they think, then?" Spike asked, patting his duster over for cigarettes and lighting one up with a sigh of pleasure.
"Some sort of weapon. Something made just for the Slayer." Oz sped up a little and got ahead of Spike - hopped up onto a tomb and sat there, his heels drumming faintly on the cracked granite. The link was uneasy - was too closed - and Spike just looked at Oz - looked at Derio, who had joined him on the tomb.

"Sooo...what's goin' on, exactly, pet? You're not sayin' something."

Oz sighed and tossed the stone away - looked up at Spike. "You're right. They wanted you out of the house while Wood was there." Spike took a long drag and waited and Oz sighed again, the link still uneasy.

"You remember the Slayer in New York?" When Spike nodded, Oz continued. "You remember she had a kid?" Spike had to think about that for a minute. Remembered, just vaguely, a small form in the darkness - soaked to the skin and sitting small and quiet as a mouse while he and the Slayer danced in the rain.

"Yeah. Didn't think about it much... Thought about grabbin' him, you know -" Spike made a gesture, his intent in the link - hostage, leverage, whatever I might need, and Oz nodded.
"He - recognized you. Got pretty worked up about it, from what Buffy says. Threatened you, I guess." Spike snorted softly, grinning at the memories.

"She was a bit of all right, that one. She danced the dance...made it so pretty... So, what - they thought he might come gunnin' for me? I can take care of myself, pet." Oz shrugged, slipping his arm around Derio and resting his head on the other's shoulder.

"I know. Just - he had something of hers - some artifact. Wouldn't show it unless..." The argument - which had happened sometime on the second day, when Spike had been oblivious upstairs with Xander - played out in the link and Spike had to laugh.

"He can keep his precious 'artifact'... I've no interest in it." The idea that Spike might, for some reason, swoop down and steal or destroy the thing was just too funny, and Spike felt a little better for the unintentional entertainment. The link was still tense, though - Derio in particular seemed upset about something and Spike watched him pluck nervously at the seam of his jeans.

"What else then, eh? Somethin' else here besides
"They've worked out what they're going to do about Caleb," Oz said softly. "They're going to do it tomorrow - right after first light." Spike just stared at him for a moment - turned his back and smoked until his cigarette was gone.

"Why would they do that, then? I want to gut that bastard -" Oz hadn't killed him - he'd shown Spike that in the link. Even half-drained by a vampire, Caleb hadn't - wouldn't - die.

"I know you do. But you can't go, Spike. This is on us. Xander needs you safe." Spike started to say something and Oz held up a hand, so serious, so not-Oz that Spike just shut up, *My fault, god, protect family*...

Oz shook his head, frowning a little. "Just...deal, man, because I can't fight about this, okay? I can't." The exhaustion they were all feeling broke through and the link flared with it - with the soft *please* from Oz and the *pack, protect, love you* from Derio. Spike closed his eyes for a moment - reached for Xander and felt only the drug-induced sleep; inarticulate dreams. He opened them again and walked to the tomb - leaned there
between the wolves, taking comfort in touch and heat and two sets of arms winding around him and holding him close - keeping him there and grounded and sane.

"I won't fight you, love. I won't. Tell me everything, okay? Tell me about Wood and his mum - about this weapon - all of it." Oz nodded into Spike's shoulder - kissed his neck and pressed his cheek into Spike's for a moment. Derio laced their hands together, thumb stroking over Spike's knuckles, pulling him close while Oz told him everything.

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Spike leaned against the headboard, pillows stuffed behind him and the blankets pulled up snugly. Xander lay between his legs, head pillowed on Spike's shoulder, hands interlaced with Spike's and crossed comfortably on Xander's belly. The heat and weight felt good - the scent was home; honey-sweet, salt, clean sweat, the musk of the hyena. Xander was on the edge of needing more pills - his head hurt with a dull, stabbing throb with every heartbeat. But they were enduring it, because Oz and Derio, Giles, Tara, and Buffy were at the winery, taking care of Caleb. The link was thick with images - snatches
of conversation - emotion. Spike and Xander both lay with eyes closed, focusing on the act of retribution that was playing out miles away.

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"There's Bringers in there, but I don't think they come out in the light much," Oz says to Buffy, and she nods, her eyes scanning the building, the scrubby bushes and trees that surround it, the littered courtyard. Restless movements that are not echoed in her body, which stands still and relaxed - ready. Tara and Giles are together on a small rise about thirty feet from the winery, and they are chanting. They are calling on the earth, they are calling root and vine to them. Calling power older than the First, maybe.

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"These old men - Shadow men - they created the First Slayer. Chose a girl and forced a bit of demon into her. Made her more than she was so she could fight the enemy." Oz sits cross-legged on the tomb, telling Spike what they saw - what the shadow-play told them, and
what Buffy saw in her journey to the past. "They made her, and forced her to fight, and they made sure what she was passed on when she died. They became the Watchers." Spike lights another cigarette and has to shake his head at that, because it's the basis for everything the Watchers have ever done; that arrogance, that selfishness and that near-sightedness that has brought about their undoing, thousands of years later.

"Sounds like the Council we all know and love," he mutters, and Derio shivers, remembering through them Glory, and what the Council tried to do.

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As the chant grows in intensity - in volume - the silvery boards of the winery building begin to shake - to creak and groan as an intangible force tightens its grip. As they watch, the building begins to rise up. Up and up on a bubble of earth, like some sort of boat on a black sea. Giles and Tara are frozen, hands tightly clasped, voices demanding - cajoling - summoning. The shiver of magic - of power so deeply rooted in the bones of the earth - hits Oz and Derio like a silent, leaden wave. In a moment they are deaf and dumb, pressed close to the
earth, the air like syrup in their lungs. On the bed, Spike and Xander shiver and gasp, held as well.

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"So the old men made her, and these women - Guardians - they...remembered. And they made a weapon that killed the last true demon on Earth." Oz tilts his head a little, picturing it in his mind - sharing the shadow-play that had danced across the walls of the mansion and held the Potentials and Faith spellbound. Buffy's return from INSIDE the play - from the past - had ended it, and she had told them the rest. Told them of the Guardians and told them that this weapon could be the thing to turn the tide. All their hopes...rested on it.

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As the bubble of earth grows, it GROANS - it heaves and writhes and suddenly bursts, sending the walls of the winery tumbling down and spewing out Bringers and an immense, half-hewn stone. And Caleb. The Bringers fight to flee - to attack - but the earth churns and swirls - sucks them back. Caleb - who is pale and hunched in
pain, his priest's costume tattered - struggles to the edge of the whirlpool of earth, his eyes lit with a zealot's unquenchable fire. The stone turns and tilts and they ALL see it - a double-ended weapon, stake and blade and long, carved haft, and Buffy leaps down into the maelstrom - rides suddenly-docile heaves of the dirt to the stone. She reaches out - hesitates - then grasps the haft and PULLS. Still held immobile by the force of the magic, Oz and Derio feel the wave of secondary power that flows back from that act. Like Arthur freeing Excalibur, Buffy has set something in motion that they may never see the end of. But it's done, and she turns to Caleb with the weapon - the scythe - held easily in her hands.

"You've lost, Caleb. Time to pay for what you've done."

Caleb's look is demonic - frenzied - and his eyes are utterly black. "Don't fool yourself, girl. The power that's massing against you is a hundred-thousand times stronger than anything you can conjure with your witch and your Watcher. A million times stronger than the pitiful handful of dirty little girls you've managed to save."

"I wouldn't count on that," Buffy says, in a tone of utter
conviction. Then she's stepping lightly over the earth that flattens at her feet - obedient servant to the magic-user's will. Caleb, still half-mired, sneers at her and then his sneer freezes - flinches - and is gone as Buffy brings the scythe down and around in one perfect, deadly move. His head lifts cleanly from his neck, spinning and falling, rolling across the earth. Buffy steps up, out of ground zero and the earth begins to heave again - to churn and stir itself like a giant cauldron. The Bringers that have floundered and faltered are now sucked under, as Caleb is, as the rock and the ruins of the winery and the torn-up bushes are. All of it, pushed and pulled and folded back under - pushed down hard and fast and then the earth settles. Like a pond, the magic ripples out to the edges and then the surface is still, and the chant ends. Giles and Tara are sweat-streaked, pale, gasping for breath. They fold slowly to their knees, clinging to each other. As the magic ends the pressure is gone, and Oz and Derio move to help them. Of the winery - of all of it - nothing is left but a huge circle of roughly tumbled earth. And Buffy lifts the scythe to the sky - to the sun. Her lips say 'thank you', and the gleam of triumph makes her eyes sparkle. She SHINES, and the palpable sensation of joy - and hope - is like a kiss.

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"Buffy thinks the weapon can change everything. She thinks - it's the answer. I guess we'll find out." Oz finishes his story - looks up from Derio's hands, that are clasped in his. Spike regards them both, quiet in the link for the first time in days. Only what he IS - chaos malice olderthan love love love going out to the wolves. Then Xander flares in the link - waking and wanting and wondering, reaching out for Spike - for the wolves - and the moment is over.

*I*X

"I think she's right, love," Spike says softly, stroking his hand over Xander's belly - pulling him close and pressing his face into Xander's neck. Tasting the sweet-spice of Xander's skin and relaxing, just for a moment.

I think so too. Love you, Spike. Love you so much...never leave me... Xander thinks, and for a moment the pain is lost in the tide of emotion that fills the link. Hope...joy. Warm as the sun.
26 Preparations

Thirteen days. Seven, since Spike had grudgingly allowed Xander to be up and walking about. The pain still took him at odd moments; Spike would watch, gritting his teeth, as Xander would clutch at his head if he bent down too far, or turned to look too fast. Oz and Derio had argued the both of them into going to a clinic - the only one of its kind left open in Sunnydale. The staff had been harried - snappish - but thorough, and Xander's succinct 'Fight', had been enough to explain his eye. The doctor had made a swift examination - had exclaimed mildly over the swiftness of the healing and said they could leave off packing the wound. He'd given Xander a scribbled phone number for an office in San Diego and told him he could think about a prosthetic in a few months, once the socket had settled. And then they'd left.

Now Spike watched as Xander haltingly worked on a piece of sculpture, his hands shaking a little, his eyebrows drawn down in a fierce scowl. There was only a small square of gauze over the socket now, and Xander
wore a dark leather patch over it. The band annoyed him.

*Damnit!* Xander's frustration boiled up in the link and Spike crossed over to him, crouching down and putting his hand on Xander's thigh. Depth perception was still a bit of a problem, and his remaining eye got strained a little, doing all the work. Spike could feel the headache building.

"Leave be for a while, eh love? Come sit with me and let me make that headache go away." Spike rubbed small circles over Xander's knee and Xander poked one more time at the wood - sighed in resignation.

"I just - I really wanted to work on this," he said softly. He was *tired*, in the link, and unhappy - sick of hurting and feeling useless, and struggling to suppress it all.

*Love - don't hide. It's all right,* Spike thought, and Xander put his knife away - turned a little on his chair and hugged Spike to him.

"I'm sorry, Spike... I feel so -" *Useless, damaged, what the fuck can I do now -*
"Stop, love. Stop." Spike stood and made Xander stand up, too - drew him over to the couch and tugged him down, arranging them both until they were curled together, Xander's back to Spike's chest, his head resting on Spike's shoulder. Spike slowly and gently rubbed his fingers through Xander's hair - rubbed small circles at this temple beside his eye and matching circles on Xander's sternum. Gentle pressure and no noise - nothing else - and after about ten minutes Xander heaved a sigh and seemed to finally relax.

Better, love?

Yeah. Better. M'sorry -

Stop it, pet. No 'sorry'. Nothing to be sorry for. Not your fault your head hurts. There was a long silence after that, and then Spike felt the tiny tremors that grew quickly into the shakes, and he scrambled to twist around - to see Xander's face. Xander's fist was pressed to his mouth and tears were tracking down a face twisted in silent agony. Tears that were clear on one side, slightly pinkish on the other and Spike could feel the stinging pain in the socket from them - could feel the guilt and despair and wanted to howl. Instead he pulled
Xander close - tucked the dark head under his chin and just held on tight until, slowly, the storm subsided and Xander's warm, hitching breath against his neck was all that remained.

*Please don't, please, love... Please tell me what to do - I don't know what to do, pet, I don't know how to fix it -*

*There's no fixing, Spike! We came back, and the Hellmouth...got its revenge and... Fuck, I - I don't know what I'm gonna do, I don't... So fuckin' tired of being...*

"Being what, Xan? Tired of being mine? Tired of being a bloody hero to Dawn? Tired of being the one who - who fixes things? The one who -" Spike cut himself off, but not in time, and Xander laughed rather hysterically against his neck - sat up a little and wiped at his face, flinching when he pressed too hard against the wounded side.

"Being the one who sees? I don't really see now, do I?"

"Yes you do!" Spike didn't know how to fight the unhappiness that welled up in Xander at odd moments all through the day - didn't know how to fix it, didn't know what to do. Sex - which fixed most things, as far as
Spike was concerned - didn't help; the increase in blood pressure made Xander's head pound and the wound ache like a broken bone, and Spike was missing the physicality of their relationship almost as much as Xander's usual optimism. And the grief was too deep - was mixed up with something else - and Spike didn't know what it was - couldn't get Xander to tell him.

"You still see! Damnit, Xan, you can't -"

"I can! I - will. Fuck, Spike, I get a little moping time, don't I? Aren't I entitled?" Xander was struggling to pull away and Spike fought him - growled in sheer frustration as the headache crashed back and Xander flinched and sagged on the couch-edge, head in hands. Spike just sat there for a moment, leg crooked around Xander's hips, one foot braced on the floor, fists clenched in a fit of helpless rage.

"Xander, stop it. It's something else - you're not telling me something, pet. You have to! Stop hiding from me -"

"Fine!" Xander shouted, jerking halfway around and skewering Spike with a wild, tear-bleared stare that was part anger and part desolation - too much guilt and Spike wanted to hold him and kiss him and just make it be
better. "Here, here's what - just -" Xander opened the link wide - let it all out in a crashing wave, and Spike shut his eyes and shuddered. Guilt, that was foremost - the overriding emotion. Guilt because Xander didn't want to be there - because he was regretting coming back - was wishing they never had come back. And then was upset with himself - was guilty for wishing he could abandon his friends and just run and hide. He wanted desperately to take his family and just go. And that made him hate himself - made the words coward and useless and traitor din in his head until he thought he might scream. Resentment, anger, loathing of himself. Loathing how helpless he felt - how crippled - and loathing how pathetic that was when he wasn't dead like Rona - like Molly; wasn't dead, wasn't thousands of miles from home, wasn't alone... The spiral of grief and hate, anger and sorrow and helplessness was building - growing - churning in him until he was sick. And somewhere, deep, deep down was the worst thing - the thing Xander struggled to hide and that Spike pounced on and dragged to the light - ruthlessly exposed because he had to know, or he could never fix it at all.

_Ugly, god, everything else but it's fucking UGLY and you have to look at that mess every day for the rest of fucking time and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry for_
"Xander - stop -" The rage was building out of proportion, fueled by frustration and despair and Xander pushed Spike sharply away - jumped to his feet and paced across the room, snarling. Letting the hyena come because he didn't know what else to do, hating the pain that bewildered and maddened it - that made it feel too vulnerable.

C'mon then, love - let's go - Spike rose also - stalked to Xander and took his shoulder in a hard grip - spun him around and was unsurprised at the fist that came at him. He ducked enough to save himself the worst of it and let his mouth stretch in a mocking grin - let William the Bloody come out and sneer, coolly unimpressed in the face of Xander's rage.

"That all you got, Harris? That's pathetic, that is." Xander growled - his eye was a burning mote of green witch-fire in the dimness of the shuttered house and he launched himself forward with barely-leashed fury. Stinging, furious blows fell on Spike, and he backed and dodged and taunted - got in his own well-timed hits, goading Xander into more, and harder, and faster. He could feel the wolves - knew they were there, in the
garden, watching and waiting and holding their own grief at bay. Knowing what Xander was doing was what he needed to do; willing to let it play out but ready to help, if they had to.

Xander's blows were becoming more erratic- his balance was going - but he managed to bloody Spike's lip - split his cheekbone - and suddenly he was retreating, snarling but confused as Dawn flew out of the library room, eyes wide in horror.

"Xander, stop it! Stop it, you're hurting Spike! What's wrong with you, stop it, stop it!" No no no no no - denial and grief in the link and her fists pounding at Xander's chest and Xander backed off, panting - crying; choking sobs that hurt, everywhere.

Oh god, oh god, Spike - Spike, m'sooory - Xander's knees cracked painfully on the stone of the floor as he went down and Oz glided in from the garden, his eyes suspiciously wet. He gathered Dawn into a hug.

"Dawn, it's okay - he's not... It's really okay. Come on, come out here, let me talk to you -" Oz shushed her - tugged her away - and she went with a pleading look at Xander, clutching for a moment at the hand Spike put on
"It's all right, Bit - you go on and let the wolfling tell you what's what, yeah?"

"Okay -" Dawn whispered, and they went back out to the garden and to Derio, and the link just ached.

"Xander - please love - Xan?" Spike went to his knees as well - pulled Xander close and held him tightly - stroked his back and his hair and kissed his temple and whispered to him. Crooned nonsense into his ear and rocked him until the second wave was over - until the hysterical, breathless sobs - the agonized groans - finally eased off and died down. Until Xander was limp in his arms, aching and breathless, shaking all over. Spike just pulled him in closer.

"Don't, love, don't - please don't. You didn't make us come, you didn't force us - we all came, we all - had to. Can't abandon the family, can't ever, you know that." Inarticulate mumble from Xander, and Spike hugged him harder - let his grip loosen a little bit when Xander flinched. "You're not to blame for anything, love... And I want to run, too - I want to get out of here and never fucking come back. Want to pack up the Bit
and Glinda and just go, and to hell with the bloody Potentials and the First and all of it, love, all of it." The truth of that was in the link - the fierce ache to go and never come back.

*Then go! Let's just go - just take them* - Xander's mental voice was almost hysterical - the tension was coming back into him and Spike made him sit up - shook him, even though that hurt Xander's head.

"No! We can't do that. Don't you get it, Xan? We could never do that."

"Why not!" Xander cried, but it was more a whisper - hoarse, broken voice panting out the words - his expression a mixture of desperation and hopelessness.

"Because, love, it's family... Niblet would never leave her sis - witchling wouldn't leave the Watcher and the mage... It's a fuckin' bloody knot that we can't undo, love - can't ever untangle this."

"I don't care -" fierce whisper, but Spike shook his head - gathered Xander close again, so fucking glad that the Slayers and the Potentials were all out of the house - that research and study had the magic-users oblivious in the
"You do, love. That's the bloody irony of it all - that's the sand in the gears, yeah? You do care, my love, my own - you care so bloody much." Demonslayer, builder, strong right arm...brother, lover, hearthfire, my love, sunlight and laughter, my one, my own...

"My knight in patchwork armor, love, forever and always. It would kill you, Xan, you know that. You'd give your other eye - you'd give your fucking life for your family, you know you would." Xander shivered in his arms, crying again and hating that weak, sick feeling that washed over him. It was all too much, just too much, and he clung to Spike and let his soul empty itself of everything - let it all wash out in bloody tears and heaving pants until Spike's t-shirt was wet and Xander could barely see straight - couldn't breathe through a clogged nose.

"God - fucking disgusting... Spike, I love you, I love you so much -"

"Hush now, shhhhh..." Spike whispered. "Just hush. I love you. Love you always, Xander...you're so fucking beautiful, you're so damn beautiful..." Xander shuddered
- barked out a harsh, strangled laugh.

*Love is fucking blind, isn't it -*

You tellin' me I don't know a good thing when I see it? You tellin' me I'm LYING to you? You telling me you're not good enough? *Don't fucking doubt me, love, don't EVER.* Loud enough in the link to get a distant flinch from the wolves - to make Xander take in a sharp breath and finally, slowly, sit up, wiping his face again and again on the tails of the flannel shirt he wore.

"No. You don't lie to me, Spike. Thank god, you don't lie to me." He sat there in a heap of limbs, his legs sprawled like a child's, his face blotched and red. He sniffed and then coughed - wiped his mouth. "I feel disgusting."

"Yeah. Me, too," Spike plucked at his soaked t-shirt and Xander laughed again, this time a softer, more natural thing, and Spike smiled at him - pulled him back in. "We're not gonna die here, love - I promise you that. We're not gonna lose. We'll go home yet. Promise."

"Yeah?" Xander whispered, and Spike kissed his forehead - hair - whatever he could reach.
"Yeah. You're the good guys - good guys always win, right?"

"Good guys always win," Xander echoed, and his hand crept under the edge of Spike's shirt - rested possessive and warm on his belly. "You're good, too - you're one of us."

"M'not. M'only playing along, like. Soon as we kick the First back to some hell m'gonna go back to evil twenty-four-seven, just you wait."

"Okay," Xander mumbled, and snuggled closer - turned his face enough to kiss Spike's neck - kiss the scar that bound them so very, very closely. "I love my vampire big and bad..."

"Loves you too, pet," Spike murmured, and they sat that way for a long time, the link gradually smoothing out - the emotions from Xander calming and settling and going back, finally, towards normal. Healing some of the awful hurt, and Spike sighed in relief - in happiness at getting his Xander back, even a little. He looked up once to see Tara, just watching, and she smiled softly at him and faded away back into the library. Not so oblivious, after
Knight in patchwork armor - don't you EVER forget.

Not with you to remind me... Xander ached all over - felt sticky and sweaty and gross - and after a while they made their way upstairs and took a long bath. Afterwards, Xander took a pain pill and fell asleep, curled tight around Spike. Spike lay in the green-gold, filtered light of late afternoon and hugged his boy close, and hoped for something to make it all come out - right.

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"What's the matter, vato?" Spike asked, and Derio shook his head - stood in the doorway to the garden, looking out with a preoccupied air.

"I'm not - not sure. Something..." Feels like something's coming. Something...powerful. Unconsciously, he plucked at the string of beads that showed in the 'v' of his shirt, and Xander found his own hand doing the same. Spike's hand twitched towards his strand of beads but he stopped himself, snarling a little. Oz just grinned at him and pulled the long strand out of Spike's shirt,
rattling it.

"Go ahead and worry them - we all are," Oz said, and it was true - his own fingers were twisting in his gold and yellow strand and Spike just shook his head, letting the snarl go and giving a quick caress to the beads around his neck.

"Yeah, okay. Is it the First, wolf?"

"I don't think so," Derio said. He stood stiffly for another moment and they could all feel the knowing stretching out from him - could feel it twanging and shivering like a plucked string on a violin. Then the feeling faded and Derio relaxed, shaking his head. "I dunno. We just - we should just be careful, hermanos." He shook himself and came back inside, settling cross-legged on the floor with the rest of them where they were passing the time sharpening weapons and playing poker. So far, Xander and Derio owed Spike pretty much anything he wanted. Oz, whose poker-face was phenomenal, was in the black. Spike owed him a brand-new Les Paul.

Fifteen days since they'd killed Caleb, and the last two nights, the Bringers had come back - had thrown themselves against the wards like moths into a candle
flame and died just the same. The perpetual magical hum of the wards was a peculiar and irritating background to everything they did - even the Potentials were affected - but they didn't dare let them down. Clem and his clan were still in town - although leaving by the weekend - and Spike had got the demon to find a back-hoe and come out to the house with it. In an empty part of the lot away from the house, Clem had dug a trench and the Bringer corpses were being dumped there. They'd dusted them with lye and a thin layer of dirt, and it hadn't started to stink yet, even to the wolves or Spike. It was a grisly solution but better, Spike pointed out, than corpses putrefying in the courtyard. Xander refused to burn any more of them - he hated the reek of burning flesh and fat.

The sun was setting on the far side of the house, and cooking smells were getting strong in the air. Tonight they were having a small party - a send off, really. Anya and Drake had been convinced to go to England to help find a new location for the slowly-reviving Watchers Council. Anya - nearly two months pregnant - had been the source of whispered 'talks' between Buffy, Tara and Giles for days, and the whole house had unanimously agreed with them when they'd announced that it was too dangerous anymore for a pregnant woman in
Sunnydale. The deserted campus was depressing for Drake, besides, and they'd both felt as if they could contribute more elsewhere. The Pembrokes had fervently agreed and round-trip tickets were waiting at LAX. In the morning, Anya and Drake would be driving a 'borrowed' moving van full of books and other paraphernalia south. A couple of crates were for Wes, and the rest were being shipped to London. The library was echoingly bare, but Giles and Ethan both felt that the time for research was over. There was nothing new to discover, and the only thing left was to fight. The how of that - still eluded them.

"They're here!" Dawn called, trotting out of the kitchen and toward the front door, and the poker-game ended on a laugh as Xander disgustedly threw down his only good hand of the day.

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The dinner was slow and relaxed but melancholy. The original 'Scoobies' plus Spike told stories of the early days - told about blowing up the school, killing the Master and the Anointed One, bringing down the Judge and the Initiative. Johnathan shyly told the story of Prom and
the 'Class Protector' award, and Buffy sniffled into her napkin. Even Ethan's costume trick was remembered fondly and Ethan was amazed to learn that the soldier influence had lingered for so long in Xander. The Potentials told their own stories; how they had come to be in Sunnydale, what they had left behind, what they hoped to go back to. Around midnight a toast was made to all the ones they'd lost to the Hellmouth, and tears glittered in the guttering candlelight. Despite the sadness of it, Xander felt...right, saluting Jesse and Ms. Calendar and the kids who'd followed him into battle against the Mayor. Even Ampata, who'd only wanted to live, and Harmony who wasn't actually dead but was somewhere in L.A. (according to Cordelia via Fred) and that was nearly the same thing, or so Spike said. After that the Potentials went up to bed, and Anya and Drake made their goodbyes.

"I can't believe I...care so much," Anya said, standing with her hand on the barely-there bulge of her belly, her eyes far away and sparkling with an inner delight. "I thought it wouldn't matter until it was born. But...I love it." She sniffed and smiled over at Drake, who slipped his arm around her and hugged her close.

"I love it too...and I love you..." They shared a small kiss,
and then Drake looked up at the rest of them, smiling shakily. "I feel a little bit like - we should be staying. I hate the thought of leaving you all here."

"You'll be doing more good in England, Drake," Giles said warmly. "We need the Council to be back in working order no matter what happens, but especially if - if things go badly here." Giles hesitated to say that - Xander could see an almost guilty look on his face - but it had to be acknowledged. Even if they won, it could cost them - everything - and they had to be ready. Xander brushed his fingers fleetingly over his patch.

*Know all about that. But if this is the worst thing then... I'm okay, I guess. I can...live with this.*

*Live and love and be happy, pet. You'll see.* Spike rubbed his head on Xander's shoulder, their hands linked over his belly and Xander kissed the arch of his cheekbone - nibbled on an earlobe for a moment, feeling Spike's pleasure in the link.

*Happy already, love already....not dead yet. We're all right. Love you...* 

*Love you always...*
The kisses and hugs goodbye took too long, but not long enough, and Dawn broke down and cried, watching the van pull away from the house and disappear into the night. Buffy and Johnathan took her away to the table to console her with the last of the cake and the rest of them settled on the couch and the rug-strewn floor, basking in the fire Oz had lit in the fireplace.

"I can't b-believe it's almost Christmas," Tara said, and there was a murmur of agreement from the others.

"I guess we won't have any kind of - celebration," Dawn said, wandering over with her plate and slumping dejectedly at Tara's feet. The witch's hand came out to stroke her hair, automatic and soothing, a very faint sad sad sister from Tara in the link. Johnathan settled on the back of the couch with a cup of tea, and Giles stirred, but Ethan tugged him back, settling the Watcher firmly into his embrace.

"Not this year, maybe, but we'll ma-make it up at New Years, how about th-that, Dawn?"

"I - guess..." Dawn sighed and ate some cake. "It's just...Christmas, you know? It just feels so...wrong."
"Christmas isn't Christmas without any presents," Buffy said, standing close by the fire and they all looked up at her, surprised. "Hey! I'm just quoting - someone... It's a book!"

"It's Little Women," Tara said, laughing, and quoted the book again. "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents, grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. It's so dreadful to be poor! sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress. I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all, added little Amy, with an injured sniff." Tara got a far away look on her face. "We don't have a father and mother here, like Beth says, but we have each other..." She looked at them all staring at her and ducked her head, flushing crimson, but Derio got up on his knees next to the couch and kissed her cheek.

"We do, gatito, we do. We'll be fine." Tara nodded - looked back up and smiled at him. Her essence - her self, intangible and gentle - swept gently over them, pack family ours in the link from all of them.

This feels - strange. Like the end. Like we're just waiting for someone to walk through the door. Xander glanced
towards the door and shivered, because - Hellmouth! He didn't really want to see anything there, but he couldn't help looking.

*Never know - maybe we are,* Spike thought, and readjusted his head on Xander's thigh, pluming out smoke and tossing the cigarette butt into the fire.

"Yeah but, here - that's not a good thing," Xander said, and shot a mock-glare at Buffy when she prodded him with her toe.

"Stop doing that! Half your conversations are in your head and then you just blurt something out and it makes me think I missed something! You're making me crazy!" Buffy laughed.

"Couldn't possibly do any harm, Slayer -" Spike drawled, ready to launch into one of their verbal sparring matches. But they all froze - went silent - as headlights swept across the windows and the crunch of tires on gravel sounded loudly in the calm.

*Who the fuck is that? It's almost one in the morning.*

*Maybe it's demon-girl and her Dr. Honeydew - had some*
trouble with the van...

Maybe - and I can't BELIEVE you watched *The Muppet Show!* Everyone was scrambling to their feet and heading for the door, and Xander poked Spike in the ribs, grinning.

*Oi! Stop that. Dru liked it, didn't she - couldn't say no.*

*I think Dru is a good excuse,* Oz chimed in, and Xander laughed out loud.

"I think so, too!" he said, and suffered a tackling hug that turned into a brief, hard kiss. Then Buffy was opening the door and Spike stiffened in his arms.

*Bloody hell -*

"Angel?"
"They told us...they'd cure her. They'd make her a - a higher being if I...did this." Angel was cradling an amulet in his hands - large and ugly, with a dull-yellow stone in its garish, goldish setting.

"An' you believed 'em?" Spike drawled, lighting up, and Angel shot him a frustrated, exhausted glare.

"Yeah, I did. They've been sending the visions - they've been - keeping me on track. They sent Whistler, so I could help Buffy, and they sent Doyle -"

"And they send killer migraines that are turnin' your Cordelia's brains to mush. And we all know how you and the Slayer worked out..." Spike grunted when Xander's elbow jabbed into his side and he hissed, turning his head to scowl at his human.

*Stop it, evil undead. You're not helping.*

*Don't particularly WANT to help -*

*We can't let Cordy die! If he's willing -* Under the concern for Cordelia and the empathy Xander was feeling towards Angel and his plight was the faint, hastily squashed 'thank god, this will end it, mine will be safe,
we can go home, go home, go home, thank god' Spike grinned nastily and looked back at Angel, who was sitting in a slumped posture on the edge of the couch, suffering with eternal forbearance Tara's sympathetic clucking, Buffy's silent grip on his wrist, the murmured words of Giles and Ethan discussing the amulet, the Powers, the possibilities that this was it, the one thing that would save them.

*Miserable brooding bastard* - He settled himself more comfortably, arm around Xander's waist, both of them sprawled on pillows on the floor by the hearth.

*I thought you two kinda - made up*? from Oz, and Spike rolled his eyes, pluming smoke towards the fireplace.

*He's still an utter git. Who'd believe such tripe?* But Spike subsided, leaning against Xander and stretching his bare feet towards the fire. Stroking his hand gently through Xander's hair and snarling silently when his fingers touched the band of the patch. *I'll believe it if it'll get you out of here, pet. Anything...*

*Love you.*

"So what - what does the amulet do?" Oz asked quietly,
and Angel shook his head.

"I don't - know. They wouldn't tell me...Cordelia said they didn't know, but... They just said it would destroy the First's army."

"An army of Turok-Han..." Giles murmured, and Angel sighed.

"I don't know what could destroy an army of those things... I think - whatever it does - I'm not going to survive it."

*I think he's right*, Derio thought, and Spike looked over at him in surprise.

Why d'ya think that, wolf?

I don't - know. I feel...something. There's - Derio was sitting in the corner of the couch and he pushed himself to his feet suddenly, head cocked as if listening. The link was quiet except for what Derio could feel - the knowing thrumming like the plucked strand of a spider-web. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere, and Derio circled the room uneasily, pausing often to listen, his eyes flashing to black and then clearing, again and
again - his anxiety like fever-shivers, creeping over them all. Xander and Oz both tensed, wolf and hyena rising up. Spike could feel a headache starting in Xander's temple - in the back of the empty socket - and he rubbed his knuckles lightly up and down Xander's neck, hoping to stave it off.

"But - you can't leave Cordelia and Connor all alone... There has to be another way, Angel." Buffy said, plucking the amulet out of his hands and glaring at it.

"I don't want to do this to them but...it's just the way it has to be," Angel replied, and his voice was very, very soft - full of pain and sorrow and Spike snapped, Derio's unease getting to him as well as Angel's misery.

"Why don't you ever fight, damnit, Angel!" he snapped, and Angel pushed himself to his feet and stalked over to him - stood there staring down at him, his expression haggard and tense.

"Fighting this means Cordelia dies. That's not going to happen, Spike," he said, and Spike shook his head. He untangled himself reluctantly from Xander and the pillows they were propped against and stood up, reaching to put one hand on Angel's shoulder, squeezing
"How do you know? How can you just...give up? Give her up, and Connor?" God - wouldn't do that to you, pet, wouldn't...

You'd do whatever you had to, Spike, just like I would. Love you... Let it go - he feels bad enough. Xander stood up as well, getting an arm around Spike and rubbing his hand slowly up and down his side. Soothing and reassuring and Spike leaned into him and sighed.

"Yeah, okay. Okay, love. I'll let it go." Spike let his hand slip off Angel's shoulder but the other vampire didn't move away - simply sagged, head down, and Spike felt a moment's sympathy. Xander hugged him, and they stood there in silence, 'listening' to Derio. Faith had gone up to bed already, taking Dawn and Johnathan with her in an unusual display of tact, muttering something about 'old lovers' and getting a glare of disapproval from Buffy. The fire in the fireplace was burning low, radiating comforting heat and the good smell of burning apple-wood. Giles and Ethan were still deep in conversation and Tara was watching Derio with a worried look. Buffy was examining the amulet with squinted
eyes, as if looking for a secret or a hidden catch. Derio stopped again, listening, then resumed his pacing - stopped right beside them and Spike could see his hands shaking - could feel the strange twisting of the knowing as something pinged it again and again. Angel eyed Derio uncertainly, looking unhappy to be so near a nervous werewolf.

Spike's beads burned faintly against his chest and he reached into his shirt to pull them out - to touch them. Angel tipped his head quizzically, glancing up at Spike with a question in his eyes. Derio morphed further towards the wolf and whined low in his throat and Angel looked up from studying the strand of Spike's beads and turned to him sharply, frowning.

"Can you stop that? Jesus -" Oz was up and on him in a flash, snarling, more than half wolf and right in Angel's face, and Angel recoiled.

"'uck ov," Oz growled, and Angel put up a hand, placatory gesture that Oz ignored. Derio lifted his head suddenly and was just as suddenly human again. Whatever it was was closer - was strong. The link was buzzing like a downed wire, cresting wave of power and it began to feel - horribly familiar.
"What is that?" Angel said and then Buffy made a small squeak of surprise as the wards suddenly flared, dancing sheets of pale green fire up the doors and windows. Ethan grabbed Giles' hand - grabbed Tara's and they stood, drawing together, concentrating, *light light no harm shall pass* faintly from Tara.

"What the fuck -" Spike muttered, and the beads thrummed in his hand, their power in the link as well, adding to the overall chaos of energies that were swirling through the house.

"It's - something trying to....get in..." Xander was rigid under Spike's arm, and they both felt the strange, roiling energy that they'd felt before. Stronger, this time - mixed with something else.

_Not pack not pack not pack_, from the wolves - from the hyena. The demon was silent, but its energy was so malevolently furious that Xander actually flinched away from Spike for a moment.

*Sorry, love - sorry. God, it's - is it? Why...*

*It is - Jesus, who ELSE is there?* Oz and Derio were both
growling, sing-song wail that was getting louder and louder.

"Anybody have any ideas?" Buffy said just as the wards by the front door sent up a fountain of sparks, white-hot and roaring. Tara, Giles and Ethan all cried out, flung apart and stumbling, Ethan going down to one knee. Blood trickled down from one side of Tara's nose and Spike felt the demon's roar rattle out of his chest.

"What is it?" Giles cried, loud and angry and suddenly the wards fell - flared and sank away as if they'd never been and - Jack strode through the door.

"It's uninvited company," Spike grated, staring at the Sidhe with the demon's furious gaze. Jack stood there smirking, still in his leather bomber jacket and ragged jeans, ancient and raveling backpack hanging from one shoulder.

"Now, that's not very hospitable, is it, vampire? Not hospitable at all." Jack grinned, and his eyes sparked red behind the fall of messy, feather-starred hair. Something was with him - something lurking out of sight still, and Spike pushed past Angel, who was game-faced and growling but unmoving. He put himself carefully
between the others and Jack and felt Xander at his shoulder - felt Oz and Derio come up on the other side, and finally saw Angel come to stand beside Xander, human again. Spike didn't bother with human - he had nothing to hide. Buffy pushed in front of Angel, scowling.

"Who the hell are you? How do you know Spike? What -"

Jack held up an elegant hand, fingers spread, his ring glinting dully in the light. "All in good time, Slayer," he said, and Buffy's mouth snapped shut in surprise.

"Tara, are you all right? Giles -?" Xander asked, and there was a murmur from behind them, and then Giles' voice, a little shaky.

"We're all right. But I - we all - would like an explanation for...what happened."

"This is Jack. Remember? I told you about him," Xander said, and Spike could hear the Watcher's heart kick up a notch, and Glinda's, too. Fear in the air, a little. From the mage was something else - excitement. Spike wanted to turn around and shake the man but he took a deep breath and tried to calm down instead.
Not pack! was screaming in the link from all of them and Xander's calm, calm, c'mon, calm down - was making the demon snarl, confused and angry.

"What are you doing here, Sidhe?" Spike grated, and he saw Angel react to that - heard the intake of breath from Ethan and Tara

"Oh, I'm here for lots of reasons....but only one to do with you..." Jack cocked his head to one side, his eyes sparking red and his otherness like a waver of heat around him, scraping on all their nerves. "As for what happened... Your wards tap energy that we - were born controlling. You can't keep us out with that." Jack surveyed the room and his gaze lit on Xander. His eyes narrowed in what looked like surprise as, Spike was sure, he noticed the patch. Spike bared his teeth, daring the Sidhe to say anything and Jack shrugged, looking away. There was something else, though...

"What's skulking in the bushes, then? Tell it to show itself," Spike snapped, and Jack grinned.

"He's afraid, is all," Jack said, and there was a huff of explosive breath-sound and the scrape of something
hard - stone? - over the stone of the courtyard.

"I'm not afraid!" a voice called, and Jack laughed softly.

"Come in here, then! Come see," Jack said, coaxing voice, and something stirred in the darkness by the door - some further darkness that Spike's eyes couldn't penetrate. Then it separated and reformed and came inside. A young man - or something that looked like a young man - with Jack's dusky skin and foam of tangled hair; red-glowing eyes like coals, nothing like the faded spark in Jacks. He was whipcord-muscle and bone, long fingers and smirking mouth, dressed in the same street-dweller rags of worn jeans, raveling sweater and cracked, sprung boots. He stood for a long moment in the doorway and then glided forward, pure predator in every step and Spike took one step forward, growling. Angel did the same, although he looked confused as well as protective. The link seethed with furious emotion and Derio was shifting again, losing his hold on the wolf.

"You've added another wolf to the fold, then," Jack said, eyeing him. "And another vampire. You do collect odd friends, Xander." Beside Spike, Xander shrugged, his eye as green as sour apples, glinting eerily.
"I pick and choose the best," Xander said, and his voice was harsh as he struggled against the hyena. *Wasn't this bad before, why is it so STRONG? God - what the hell does he WANT...?*

"You're upsetting our hosts, pooka," Jack said suddenly, and he turned and laid his hand on the other's shoulder. "You need to ward that." The other shot him a sullen look but shrugged, and suddenly the air seemed to move around him and the *other outsider wrong wrong wrong* of him eased off - went away almost entirely and it was just Jack's peculiar, thundery energy left.

"Pooka," Angel breathed, and the pooka looked at him and grinned, showing small, very white teeth. His canines were very sharp.

"Heard of me then, have you?" he said, and Jack made a clucking sound.

"No time for that nonsense, pooka." Jack took the backpack off his shoulder and eased it to the floor - took up a stance that was relaxed and easy, as if trying to prove his harmlessness.

"If you've any of that beer, Xander, I'd take a dram or
"Is this something social?" Spike snapped, and Jack shot him a laughing glance.

"This is the saving of the world, vampire - what better way to start then with a drop of beer and maybe a bit of that cake?" He pointed with his chin at Dawn's abandoned plate and Spike wanted to leap on him - wanted him out and away from his family.

"Look - what the hell is going on? I want someone to explain all this right now." Angel looked furious, as did Buffy beside him, and it was Tara's soft voice that startled them all.

"If you'll sit and share a bite with us, we'll talk. Will you be our guest?" She was suddenly right there, much too close to Jack and his pooka, standing easily in her long skirt and cardigan, her hands held out in a gesture of greeting. Derio moved fast to her side, and Oz did, and Jack made a small bow in her direction.

"You are the lady of the house, that much is plain. We would both thank you for your hospitality, chovexani." Tara blanched at that word and then
bowed her head a little.

"Please sit, then, and I'll bring you something," Tara's voice was calm - she was calm, and she half-turned towards the rest of them, her head high and her gaze going sharply to Giles and then to Ethan. "Please make our guests welcome," she said softly and turned and walked towards the kitchen. Spike took a step after her and hesitated for a long moment, torn. Xander touched his shoulder.

"I'll go with her. You stay out here, okay?"

"Yeah," Spike said, relived that Tara wouldn't be alone. *Find out what in hell she's doing, love, yeah?* *Fuckin' bastard knows something -*

*We'll figure it out. It'll be okay.* Oz was calmer now - was deliberately pushing the wolf down and away, the wolf-chant in the link like a faint heart-beat. As Xander hurried across the room to catch up to Tara, Spike made a wide gesture with his arms, finally pushing the demon aside.

"Come and sit, then," he said, scowling at Angels' abortive attempt to intervene. "And why didn't your
bloody fire-work display attract any attention?" He'd half-expected the Potentials to have come thundering down the stairs after the commotion.

"Oh, you mean the girls upstairs?" Jack asked, looking pointedly up and Spike hissed. "They're sleeping a little extra-hard tonight. No harm," he added, holding up his hands. They walked forward and settled on the hearth, the pooka turning and warming his hands for a moment. The Watcher and the mage resumed their seats on the couch - Angel went to stand at one end of the mantle and the Slayer went with him. Oz settled cross-legged in front of the couch and after a moment Derio joined him, not fully human yet, but trying. Spike just stood where he was, arms crossed and legs planted wide, ready for a fight if came to that. They waited, silent.

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"It's pretty quiet out there," Xander said softly, nervousness fluttering in his stomach like prickly butterflies.

"It'll be all right. Can you get two of the green p-plates
down?" Tara asked, her voice serenely calm and even. Xander had to smile at that and stretched to reach the top of a tall cabinet, lifting down two white plates that were painted with a design of morning-glory vines and flowers. Something Buffy and Dawn had brought from the Revello Drive house - something not much used.

"You're really going all out, here. What's - what're you doing, exactly?" Xander asked as Tara carefully cut two slices of cake and placed them neatly on the plates.

"I'm...invoking something. If we make them our guests - give them food and drink - it invokes the l-law of hospitality."

"Never heard of it," Xander said, getting two of Spike's imported beers uncapped and onto the tray Tara had unearthed.

"It's...old. Very old. It's one of th-the few things they'd respect. We give them this, and that makes them our gu-guests. We have to protect them from any harm that might come at them under our r-roof and -" Tara raised her voice just a little and Xander grinned, shutting his mouth closed over the indignant remark he had just been
going to make.

"And?"

"And...in turn, they have to keep any harm that might have followed them away from us. They can't h-harm anyone under the roof that has taken them in, and they can't tell any l-lies that might harm us while they're our guests."

"Oh!" Xander was impressed, and he relayed it to the others, feeling an easing of the tension in Oz and Derio and a mental snort of disbelief from Spike. *Sounds like a good thing.*

*We'll see,* Spike grumbled. *They're not to be trusted.*

"Oh-okay. Ready. Can you carry this, Xander?" Tara wiped her hands on a towel and pushed her hair back, and Xander reached past her and grabbed the salt-shaker off the table and put it on the tray.

"Sure I can, Tara. Ummm...what was that word? The word he called you - cho-ves -?"

"Chovexani. It's a R-romany word. A gypsy word," she
clarified, when Xander gave her a puzzled look. "It means wu-witch."

"Oh." Xander picked up the tray - did a small double-take and looked at Tara. "So, you - you're -"

"I'm...mu-my family is Romany. Yes," Tara said quietly, and all Xander could do was nod.

_No wonder her dad wanted her back so bad_, from Oz, and Xander resolved to think about it later. Right now, they had Jack to deal with, and that was quite enough.

"Okay. Right. Let's go." They both walked back out to the living room and their guests.

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"That was really quite delicious," Jack said, tipping his beer up to drain the last drops. Beside him, the pooka was idly picking at the label on his own bottle. He'd finished off the cake in quick, wolfish bites and drunk the beer down just as fast. Jack had verbally restrained him from getting up at least three times and now the magical signature that he'd tamped down earlier was starting to
build back up, making hackles rise all over the room.

"Th-thank you," Tara said from her place in the armchair and Jack nodded to her - turned an expression of pure exasperation on the pooka.

"All right, then! Go!" he snapped, and the pooka bounded to his feet and started to move over the room, examining books and weapons, cracks in the walls and the shadows in the corner. His energy jangled along their nerves but it was still more subdued than before, as if the simple physical act of going and doing kept it from building up too strong.

_Fairy with ADHD, _Xander thought, and Spike made a sort of snorting noise.

"Can we please get to the point now?" Angel looked ready to blow, and Jack looked up at him, pushing hair and feathers back out of his face.

"Patience is a virtue, my good Angelus," he said softly, and Angel recoiled a step, staring at him.

"My name is Angel -"
"Your name is Angelus, and the blood you shed and the magics you toyed with are like a dark smoke all around you, to those as can see it. As Xander most likely can see it..." Jack shot Xander a sly look and Xander frowned at him.

"I've never looked at - at Angel."

Jack's eyebrows went up in surprise, and the pooka laughed from his place near the library doors.

"Told you," he said, and Jack looked angry for a moment, then shrugged.

"To each his own. I'm here to talk about the First - and about that...weapon you so were so fortuitously given."

"What do you know about any of that?" Giles growled, darkman darkman rising up and rippling out, and Jack looked at Giles appraisingly

"I know that the First is...taking liberties. And I know that the Powers - as they call themselves - are being..."

"Being the same as always. Lords of the Manor," the pooka said, and picked up a sword from its place in an
open duffle - swung it easily through the air, making it sing.

"Leave it be," Spike snapped, and the pooka grinned at him.

"Want to make me?" he purred, and Spike was across the room - on him, fist in the laddered front of his dusk-blue sweater, his other hand gripping the thin wrist, forcing the sword down.

*Jesus, Spike! Don't -*

"Jack tasted damn good - what do you taste like, pooka?" Spike hissed, demon to the fore, and the pooka tipped his head back - he was about four inches shorter than Spike.

"Dunno - wanna try? Call me Scavenger, eh vampire? We should be friends." The pooka was too close - one long-fingered hand stroking too intimately along Spike's chest and Xander felt the growl in his chest - strode over to them just as Spike was stiff-arming the pooka backwards.

"Fuck off, Scavenger. You'll get no scraps."
"Too pretty not to try," Scavenger said, grinning, his eyes like burning coals.

"Enough!" Jack barked, and they all swung around to stare at him, jolted by the whiplash of power that had flared through the room. Scavenger hissed and slunk away, going halfway up the stairs and huddling down over his knees. "We've things to discuss. The First - has overstepped itself, and the Powers - are being stubborn. It will not be tolerated." Jack uncoiled gracefully and his glamour was gone. He stood there in the coat of maybe-velvet, maybe-leaves, his angular face longer and his limbs too thin. He was frowning.

Xan, love - can you... Can you still SEE? Can you look at him?

I - don't know. I haven't tried, since... They both shuddered at the brief flash of memory, and Derio and Oz both immediately moved closer, soothing unconsciously through the link.

Be all right, love, Spike added, answering pressure of his arm around Xander and Xander nodded - shut his eye for a moment.
"Taisbean," he whispered, and looked.

_It works...still works..._ he thought, with a little upsurge of relief that caught him off guard. If it hadn't worked...would it have really mattered? Jack looked the same - coat flickering between velvet or brocade and whatever it really was - leaves and flowers, maybe, or the thin skin of birds. There were more feathers in this hair than before, and a thong tied around his left thigh, with beads and feathers and what looked like a bone hanging down. He noticed Xander looking and nodded, flashing a sharp-edged grin; his face and body stretched and thinned and then settled again into the angular not-quite-humanity of the brocade coat-self. The sparks still danced and swirled, and the amusement was still there - the casual malice of the stalking cat. But no real harm.

_Truth. He's not lying, unless he can hide that. But I don't think so._ They went back towards the fireplace, gathering in a loose circle that included the couch. Jack stood there, his hands clasped loosely behind his back. He nodded to Xander once, the spark in his eyes, and then he turned to the group.

"We're...from outside. We see things. We know
things. That - amulet - will defeat the First's army, but at the cost of the life of the bearer." Jack looked down, then up again, his smile lazy and razor-edged. "Normally, we wouldn't care. What's one less vampire? Or human - or anything else? But this time... Something's different. Angelus - you cannot wield this."

"I can and I will. I'm not going to let Cordelia die, and that's final."

"She'll die anyway, if you do," Jack said mildly, and Angel growled. Xander stared at him - and stared again, feeding his image into the link. Angel's demon was in the arms of his soul - held so tightly it could barely move. Both of them looked ill - exhausted - sick at heart. Ready for the end. But there was something else. A delicate line of mist and sparks, barely there. It flowed out from Angel's heart, and away up into the air. Exactly the same as Buffy. A tether. A line - straight to heaven. The gold and deep blue sparks that swirled and flowed around Angel flowed up that tether, and back down, slow dance of light.

*No wonder. He was - he was in heaven. Like Buffy. No wonder it was so awful, to have his soul returned. And every time it's been lost and brought back -*  Xander
shuddered. God - how horrible it must be. And Angel must know. Must feel it, like Buffy felt it.

*What's the matter with him? He looks* - Derio was wide-eyed, contemplating the images that Xander was showing them. *Spike's demon doesn't look like that.*

*Mine's not been kept locked up in some mental box for a century and a half,* Spike thought.

"If this amulet will kill the bearer then you're right, Angel must not bear it. We'll find some - other way of dealing with the First." Giles spoke quietly, but his voice was inflexible - his look hard. Jack tipped his head in acknowledgement but then shook it, the smile fading a little.

"No - it must be borne. It must be - used. Used by someone not-human. Someone stronger than a human, and someone with a soul." There was dead silence at his words, and then Buffy made a small noise, stepping forward. Her eyes were huge in her thin face, and her hand was shaking as she held the amulet up. Tara moved up with her, hand on her arm and Buffy looked at her for a moment before turning to Jack.
"It's for me then. I'm - I'm supposed to wear it. That - makes sense -"

"Buffy, no -" Giles said, anguished, and Jack held up his hand.

"No Slayer, not for you," he said softly. Scavenger had come down from the stairs and sidled up behind him - stood there now, frowning up at all them from behind the tangled hair that hid half his face.

"Just get to it, Jack," he said softly. In the seeing he was a swirl of black energy - of deep-red and crystal-blue sparks. A horse's shadowy outline hovered around him, tossing its head. Xander felt a growing sense of panic - of inevitability, and he pushed it sharply away.

No, no, no. Fuck no. Oh god -

Xan, what -

"No," Jack said, not looking at Buffy - not at all. "The Powers are quite...adamant that the amulet be worn by..."

"No! No. Jack, stop it -" Xander felt like he might be
sick - like he just might go over to the Sidhe and hit him - or take the amulet and smash it on the stone of the fireplace. He was shaking, he could feel it, but he didn't know what to do about it.

Love -

NO. Not human, with a soul? That could be me. Or Oz or Derio. But they sent it to ANGEL. They want -

"Some things can't be changed, Xander," Jack said, and for the first time Xander saw his smile waver - saw something like uncertainty in the narrow face.

"This is going to be changed! This is not going to happen!" Xander felt Spike's hand on his arm and he groped blindly for it - clung with a grip that would leave bruises. Behind Jack, the pooka was looking - angry. He made a snarling sort of face, and stepped forward.

"Jack - tell them."

"You overstep yourself, pooka," Jack grated, and Ethan glided up to both of them, his eyes shining with a manic light.
"We're all instruments of chaos here, gentlemen. But I've got some favors owed me that you may not like. Explain yourselves, or you will be very, very sorry.

Infinite ending beginning chaos cold cold cold cold, that was Ethan's power, revving up against Jack's and for a moment everyone was simply frozen. Then Jack lifted his hand and pushed the air, gently, and Ethan's power - Giles' - even the link, for one awful moment of time was dead. Jack looked at Xander - looked at Spike, and his eyes were sorrowful and dark as pits.

"The amulet is for a vampire. The amulet is for Spike," Jack said. And all hell broke lose.

28 Solutions

Xander had no conscious knowledge of the hyena rising - of Oz and Derio shifting, or Spike. All he knew was Rage boiling up hot and fast and utterly overwhelming. He was going to kill Jack. Stop him. Something - anything - to undo what he'd just said. As he launched himself he saw, with a sort of detached alarm, that Scavenger was changing as well. Blackness and sparks swirling up - higher, denser - seeming to pull more of themselves from the air around them. Before his hands even touched Jack, a wall of lightless black sateen rose between them
and a horse was standing there. Xander hit it hard, knocking himself back and knocking the breath out of himself. Spike grabbed him, yanking him close, *protect pack DAMNIT Xander, gonna get yourself hurt!* slamming into him from the vampire. Xander hadn't ever considered a horse even marginally frightening before but this one was. It was amazingly tall, a solid expanse of black hide and smoky-black hair; feathered hocks over hooves like dinner-plates and behind the thick spill of the forelock the eyes glowed with a fire as deep and bloody red as a ruby. The horse - Scavenger - shifted, head lowering, lips drawn back to show sharp, ivory teeth. He shook his head, making a squealing sort of sound and suddenly lashed out, bunched quarters flowing and lengthening as the lethal hooves swept through the air, millimeters from Oz's head. Oz danced aside, snarling, as the horse's head swung after him, hooves scraping on the stone of the hearth and one massive shoulder swinging into Angel, sending him stumbling and sprawling into the couch. Tara 'eeped' and jumped out of his way, her eyes huge with fear. Derio was snarling - was poised to leap - and Xander caught sight of Jack, somewhere behind Scavenger.

A profound sadness showed on his face - a hopelessness and weariness and Xander stopped - just stopped still.
Grabbed Spike's arm and pulled him closer.

_Derio! Stop. Just - stop. Wait, okay?_

_Not pack not pack not pack!_ Derio's eloquence had escaped him and Oz shouldered between horse and wolf - pushed Derio back and back, whimpering low in his throat.

_Calm, please, mi amor, safe, we're safe..._ Derio retreated finally, whuffing displeasure deep in his chest, both wolves at bay between Tara and the Sidhe. Buffy had hauled Angel to his feet and was dusting him off and he looked furious and a little shamefaced. Ethan had dashed aside from Scavenger's shift and now stood with Giles, who had wound an arm around the slighter man and was holding him, whispering in his ear. It looked like Giles was trying to calm Ethan down, or at least talk him out of something.

"Jack, I... I won't accept what you're telling me. I will not." Xander held up a hand to forestall Jack, who had opened his mouth to speak. "But I'll listen to whatever explanation or story or...prophecy you think you know. We all will." Xander caught Tara's gaze with his - Giles and Buffy - and they all three nodded minutely.
Christ, love, now's not the bloody time to be the white hat!

I have to know WHY he thinks this is the only way, Spike. If we know - what he knows, we can change it, or - or figure out something else. We have to KNOW. The demon's fury was still so strong in the link Xander's heart was pounding like a drum, and Spike snarled, snapping his fangs at the pooka. But he stepped back, one reluctant step, and Xander saw Jack relax just a fraction.

"Let's all just - calm down. And can - can we go back to...something more human?" Xander gestured at the pooka, who had planted itself squarely in front of Jack. Jack leaned under the heavy, arched neck and slapped it roughly, his face grave.

"We can and we shall and we must, Xander. I don't need protecting, pooka," Jack added, his tone gone to coaxing again, and the horse lifted his head and let out a pealing, throat-extended roar of a sound, bell-like and reverberating and they all flinched from it. Then the reversal - the swirling black and sparks of the essence of the pooka flying apart and leaving a dark-skinned, dark-haired youth, naked and scowling. He glared at all of
them, but gradually the flare of red faded from his eyes and he snorted and tossed his head, as horse-like in this aspect as the other. Jack touched his shoulder and said something, low, and he hissed. But after a moment his homeless-guy clothes faded back into existence and he went with studied slowness to the fireplace and crouched down, watching them all.

"'ice 'rick," Oz slurred, only half-way to human, as naked as Scavenger but not as comfortable. He accepted a ratty tartan throw from Tara and a moment later he and Derio were both sitting on the couch, laps covered. Tara moved closer to them, making room for Giles and Ethan, who perched on the edge. Ethan's magic still skirled around him, under control but evident, and there was a faint not pack from Derio, and then nothing. Angel and Buffy both stood in a kind of 'ready' stance, as if they would need to fight in the next few minutes. Everyone's energy - everyone's soul - was agitated - alert and spoiling for a fight. So much color, so much motion that Xander whispered the ending-word, his head starting to pound and the empty socket aching. He rubbed briefly at the patch and then settled cross-legged with a sigh, tugging Spike down with him.

You all right, love? We can do this later, we can -
No - I'm fine. I want to know, Spike. I have to.

Yeah. Love you.

"Where to begin?" Jack mused, tipping his head to one side, studying Xander and then Spike and then Angel, brows drawn down. "I told you once about the Seelie Court. And that I am not...of them. I am of the Un-Seelie court. And we have been charged, for all the long ages of the world, with a task..." Jack shifted a little, and behind him Scavenger reached into thin air and pulled out a small, leather pouch. He began, methodically, to roll a cigarette.

"You cannot carry this amulet, Angelus, because you are needed elsewhere, at another time, in a battle that will be equal to this one." Jack raised a hand as Angel started to speak, and the vampire subsided. "Your fate is set in this. The Powers That Be not only do not have the scope to see beyond their own petty whims, but they are ignorant of many, many factors."

"How do you know this? How can I - can we - trust you?" Angel snapped, and Jack shrugged, tiny smile slipping across his face.
"We are not of here, not in the way you and your kind are. We are the olders - the outsiders - and we see...oh, much further than any of you. This place - this time - is a meetpoint for many, many times and places. Losing it would cause more harm than can be imagined. In any other world, Glorificus opening a portal to her dimension would not have caused the destruction of all things." There was a small gasp from Buffy at that, and both she and Giles looked alarmed. "Only here - at this place - is there such danger - and such possibilities."

*How in HELL did he know? Has he been watching us?*  *Fuck* - "How do you - do you watch us?" Xander could hear the incredulity and the anger in his voice, but what he felt was a cold, paralyzing fear.

"Of course we watch, Xander. You're marked, you know - gifted." Jack actually grinned, this time, and Xander felt Spike stiffen under his arm. "We don't let your kind out of our sight, ever."

"His kind? What the fuck does that mean?" Spike growled, and Jack brushed at the hair that fell across his eyes, brushing his finger down a blue-jay feather.
"His kind. Fey. Different, vampire, and you knew that long before you knew of his gift."

_Bloody bastard. HE didn't make you special -

_It's okay...

"I want to know why you think Spike should carry the amulet. We're not simply going to turn him over to you and watch him be - become dust." Giles spoke in a low, measured tone, but _darkman_ was there as surely as Ethan's ice-crystal chaos, and Scavenger's eyes widened as he looked over at the older men. He took a hard pull of his smoke and tossed the butt into the fireplace, where it sent up a tiny shower of green-blue sparks.

"Not even if he wanted to? Not even if he agreed?" Jack asked, silky-low voice a purr and a threat and Ethan made a choking sort of laughing sound.

"William the Bloody voluntarily giving up his - life - and his family? You must be utterly barking," Ethan wheezed, and a flash of humor and grudging affection from Spike shot through the link. Oz grinned over at the man and nodded.
"Have to agree with him. Spike's..."

"He's not me. He doesn't have a - destiny. He's not the champion." Angel looked outraged, but also slightly desperate and shrugged off Buffy's placating hand with a frown.

"Such certainty! Perhaps you'll change your minds." Jack looked down at his fingers where they were twining in the frayed edge of a hole in his jeans. When he looked up, his face was grave again - almost frightened - and Xander wanted to scream - wanted to make him stop - make this stop, right now.

"There is a prophecy... It tells of a champion of the people. And how he will sacrifice his life for them, and how, as his reward..." Jack sighed, and shook his head minutely. "His reward will be to return to this plane of existence as a human. A pure, souled human; and all his deeds from the past will be forgiven forever."

"Bugger that," Spike growled into the moment of shocked silence that followed. "If wearin' that means I turn human I'll take it and smash it to bits right now. I like being a demon, mate, and I won't fuckin' do anything to change that."
"Angel?" They all turned at Tara's soft question, and Angel was standing there looking - looking as if he might cry, actually. Or rip someone's lungs out.

"That's - that's Shanshu, that's... Wes read about it, he told me -"

"Told you it was for you, mate, and that's obvious. Only you'd want to give up...everything and be human again." Giles made a strangled sound of protest but Angel ignored him.

"Only I would want to be free of centuries of torture and murder and blood and pain..."

"You're a demon, mate. Cope and move on, as the Niblet says." Spike looked at Scavenger, eyes narrowed, and made a little gesture and Scavenger grinned and tossed the little pouch toward him. Spike opened it and took a sniff and started rolling a cigarette with nimble fingers. "Looks like Angel's still your man, Sidhe," he said, and Jack slowly shook his head.

"I'm - afraid not, Spike. This amulet...truly won't work for him." Spike had stilled, and now rage was building in
him again - one that Xander matched.

"What does that mean? What'd you do to it?" Xander felt his voice rising and tried to throttle it back, but not very successfully. "Did you just come here to - to torture us with this? I will not let Spike die, Jack! Find another way!"

"Oh, but we have, Xander! We have."

"Then tell us, for fuck's sake! Stop torturing my boy, Sidhe, or you're gonna be damn sorry."

"You're talking in riddles! Just say it!" Derio echoed, agitation and fear, anger and pain in the link from all of them - from Tara, because she was close enough, and even Buffy's Slayer-vibe seemed to be going out of control.

"Tell them, Jack, you tuili," Scavenger muttered. Spike finished making his smoke - tossed the pouch back to Scavenger and lit up.

"We talked about the tithe to hell, vampire. Some hell, some time... You remember?"
"Course," Spike said, pluming thick smoke towards him.

"If you agree - if you carry the amulet... We can see that you don't die. We can - we will - take you...elsewhere. Keep you safe. In return, you will stay with us for...a time." The pain in Xander's head was like molten iron being poured over his brain, and he leaned forward, head in his hands, eye clenched shut.

"Tell us in plain fucking English, Jack, swear to fucking god -" Spike's cool hand on the back of his neck made him gasp and he fought tears of rage and frustration, waiting for Jack to explain. Looking up through his hair at the Sidhe who flinched a little from his desperate gaze.

"The Seelie Court made the bindings and the bargains that make the tithe...necessary. It has always been the duty of the Un-Seelie Court to find the tithe. Easier, in times past. Not so easy now." Jack muttered something to the pooka who bared his teeth at him but stood up, sullen, and threaded out through them, retrieving Jack's ratty backpack.

"They are getting jaded. They are getting bored. And they want something new. Something different." Scavenger let the pack down into Jack's hands
and retreated back to the fire. Jack opened it, rummaging for a moment and coming up with a bottle - not the drink he'd shared with Xander and Spike and Oz so long ago, but a tall, dusty-looking bottle with what looked like Gaelic writing on the label.

"Demon-kind rarely has any truck with us, and vampires almost never." Jack pulled the cork and took a long drink and sighed. "They heard about you, Spike. A souled vampire isn't as rare as you might think, but one that voluntarily takes a human - stays with a human... One that has such different and...varied experiences... That was intriguing to them. And you are a position to be...persuaded."

"Not bloody likely," Spike snapped, and Jack held up his hand.

"If the amulet is not carried by the champion - 'stronger than any human, souled where soul should not be, willing and consenting'... Then the amulet won't work. And the First will win, and there will be an age or so...several hundred, in fact - where the First and its ilk rule. And for them to rule this place - this crossroads... Would be very, very bad. We might not ever be able to dislodge the First from this place, once it
gets a taste of the power that is here." Jack took another drink, and Xander slowly sat up, Spike's hand slipping down his back. He felt as if his lungs were being compressed by the weight of Jack's stare, and he had to work lips and tongue for a moment before he could speak.

"You can't prove any of this. You can c-come in here and say wh-whatever you want and you can't prove it -"

"I can though, Xander. You know I can." Jack's eyes were black, lightless holes in his head, and Xander felt dizzy - felt as if he were falling. He watched in a kind of numb revulsion as Jack pressed his too-long thumb-nail into his wrist and gashed it open, the blood welling out thick and deeply red. Buffy and Tara both made some noise of protest and Angel was suddenly crouching right in front of Jack, game-faced and snarling, his hands shaking.

"If I don't carry the amulet... If I give it up, and fight and win this other battle... You're saying Cordelia will still be - cured, and I'll - I'll -"

"And Shanshu will be yours. Yes. Taste, Angelus. Taste and know the truth." Jack's aspect was shifting to his other self - not the homeless man but the fey creature
dressed in leaves and tag-ends of velvet, and Angel stared at him for one long moment and then yanked Jack's forearm up to his mouth and drank.

_He can't be telling the truth, he can't, he can't..._ Xander was shivering and Spike wrapped his arms around him, cheek pressed to cheek, the rusty purr breaking into a growl and then softening again as the vampire tried to comfort him.

_I'll know, I'll taste it, love - I'll know, he can't lie with his blood, love, no one can -_

"Oh god!" Angel had pulled sharply away from Jack and now he shot to his feet, pacing off a couple of steps and then spinning back around, his eyes wild and his fangs stained with blood. "It's true? How can you know - ?" Angel stared at Jack and then shook his head, throwing off the demon's face like water. "It doesn't matter. You can't - can't force Spike to do this. Fuck your tithe - fuck hell. Let the Seelie Court send the tithe!" Shocked silence, and Jack's eyes wide and a little scared, and Spike was incredulous - fiercely joyous at this sudden and unexpected support.

_The old sod's got a pair of bollocks after all! Never_
thought I'd see the day -

Can they do that? Why NOT send one of their own? Ask him, Xander - Oz's voice in the link was hopeful, and Xander took a deep breath.

"Can you send one of you own, Jack?"

"It's what She wants," Scavenger muttered, and Jack's head whipped around; his mouth hissed something and for a moment his features were even more alien - even darker. Scavenger hissed back, flinching a little. Jack's patchwork-self came back a moment later and he ran his fingers back through his hair - fingered the cork of the bottle but didn't take another sip.

"Who is 'she'?>< Tara asked, and Buffy murmured a quiet 'yeah'.

"The Queen of Air and Darkness, isn't She?" Ethan murmured, and Scavenger smiled. A grin of pure malice and unholy glee.

"That is She, and She is That. And She says - send one of the lordlings, send one of the maids. Send Her Most Royal self, and have done with this nonsense of tithes."
"That they cannot."

"Why not?" Giles snapped, and Jack made a frustrated gesture.

"If a member of the Seelie Court were to become the tithe - they could never be released. They would belong to that hell for all time. The Queen will not. She cannot. To let one of the Court into their hands would give them too much power. You know this, pooka!"

"And you give the Seelie Court too much credit. Still wanting back into the fold, after all this time? Even Lucifiel made Hell his home, eventually."

"You know what it would do to all of us, to have the Court so weakened," Jack hissed, and Scavenger turned that mad, feral grin on him, his eyes glowing as red as fire.

"Yes - weak enough for She to reign, and take what is Her due." 

"Enough of this fuckin' shite! Give me your arm, Sidhe," Spike growled, pouncing forward and snatching Jack's
forearm to his mouth. He sank fangs into the dark flesh and Jack flinched and then bowed his head, shuddering. Spike drank, and the otherness of it flooded out through the link. It was as if Spike was drinking fire and ice and honey -pepper -chocolate - was drinking sunlight and moonbeams and life, and a keen of pure pleasure rose up from the vampire's throat.

*God, that's - that's incredible, that's - The wolves were shivering under the assault, want and run and hunt and mine all muddled in the link. Xander wanted to yank Spike away and just go. Just run, back to the mountain and back to that - never live in the human world again. He got up on one knee, reaching for Spike, barely seeing Buffy doing the same, or Angel's concerned face. It was Scavenger who broke them apart - who made a growling noise in his throat and wrenched Jack's arm free, pulling him away, arm around his shoulders. Spike shuddered visibly and lifted his head - roared aloud. And Xander wrapped his arms around him and held him, hard, and let the tears come because:*

*Truth, it's the truth, it's all the truth, love, oh god, all the bloody truth, every word, every word...*
"Go through it again," Angel said, and there was a slight groan from Buffy and Ethan. Oz and Derio were curled together under the throw, both dressed again but feeling the need for contact and warmth. Tara leaned against them, heavy-eyed with fatigue. Giles was pacing, avoiding Angel who was doing the same, and Xander was sitting pressed up against Tara's legs, watching Spike. Spike stood with his forearm on the mantle of the fireplace, his head resting against it, smoking slowly. Xander kept getting up and going to him - holding him - and then going back to the wolves and Tara, needing them all, hating the fear and the exhaustion and the growing dread - growing acceptance he was feeling from Spike.

*Not giving you up, love, I'm not, I won't.*

*Won't let you die, Xander. Got to be something...* Jack took another drink from the bottle he had - it didn't seem to ever run dry, and he didn't seem to get drunk. He was standing near the front windows, watching the sun come up; watching the pearl-grey of the early morning fog slowly flush lemon and tangerine, saffron and rose.
"They have told us, if we can persuade Spike to be the tithe, that we need not give a tithe again for seven times seventy years. This is...unprecedented. And may never happen again. It would give us time to - try and free ourselves of this bargain."

"But Spike would be gone. He would be...gone."

"Yes," Jack said, turning back to the room and walking over to Xander - crouching down and gazing at him. One long and long-fingered hand reached up to gently, delicately touch the empty socket. Xander had taken off the patch over an hour ago, irritated beyond words by the chafing strap. He didn't flinch from Jack's touch, but Spike turned his head, demon-faced, and snarled at Jack's presumption. Jack slowly pulled his hand back.

"Yes, he would be gone. But only for one year, Xander. A year and a day of your life, and then he would be back with you, the same as when he left. That's not such a hard thing to do, is it? One year."

"But it's seven years for Spike! Seven years as a - a slave to them!"

"Not a slave -" Jack started to say, but Angel interrupted
him with a growl.

"As close to as makes no difference. Damnit, there has to be something -"

"No, there isn't." Spike had stood away from the fireplace and now he turned and surveyed the room - looked slowly from Angel to Buffy to Giles - to Ethan, who was drinking the dregs of a third pot of tea. To the wolves, who were tense under his gaze, and Tara, who had shed her sleepiness in a blink and was now sitting up on the couch, hands twisting in her lap. Jack stood up and moved aside, leaning against the wall by Scavenger as Spike walked to Xander and held out his hand. Xander stared at it - at him - for a long moment. At the trembling that shook the long, white fingers and the wide, frightened eyes. Spike had shut the link down hard and Xander put his hand in Spike's and let himself be pulled to his feet.

"Spike, no! There's some other way, there's something we can find, or - or do -"

"Shhhhhhh...." Spike pulled Xander in close, arms wrapping around, his forehead leaning gently on Xander's. "Hush, love. There's nothing else. Nothing at
all. I have to do this, Xander. I have to do this."

"No you don't!" Xander wanted to scream it, but his voice wouldn't work - his throat was too tight, too dry, too sore from hours of talking and yelling and fighting back hysterical sobs.

"Yes I do. I do. I'm the only one that can. Should never have stayed here, love - should never have let you come back - let you get hurt -"

"Spike -"

"Shhh, shhh, shhh.... I failed you, Xan... Failed you so many times... God - failed you so badly -" The link cracked open, sending images one after the other: Xander getting hurt by Glory's minions - by Warren and by the First - by Caleb... His pain when Spike and Willow couldn't get along, and the wedge it drove between them. The men he'd killed in Oxnard, the soldiers of the Initiative and the soldier in Barstow. So much grief, with those images - so much regret.

*Never wanted to hurt you, love, never wanted to make you sorry* -
I'm NOT! I'm not sorry, never sorry, Spike! You can't do this because of...those things are done and OVER and they don't matter anymore -

Spike leaned back with a jerk, his face set and furious but *fear fear fear* in the link. "Don't matter? This will always matter, Xan -" a feathering of a trembling hand over Xander's empty socket. "I failed you. You're mine, the one I chose and claimed and... I was supposed to protect you no matter what! Was supposed to put you first, love, and I didn't, I put revenge first, I -" Spike's voice choked off and Xander clutched at him frantically, pulling his head in close so he could kiss him, kiss him, all the fear and desperation and horror he felt twisting in him like barbed snakes.

*No, no, NO. You didn't fail, you didn't let me down, you did everything RIGHT, you saved my fucking LIFE and you gave me - you gave me -* Images again, emotions, from Xander this time. Flooding through the link, catching Oz and Derio up in them as well as Tara, because she could see the colors of their emotion sparking through the ether and it made her own tenuous place in the link that much stronger. Images of the two of them: laughing, patrolling, defending each other. Finding Oz, and gathering in Derio, and becoming a family. *Together,*
together, family, GOD Spike, look what you gave me, love, look what you did for me, to me, with me - Tangled in bed, lying comfortably in front of the TV, up on the roof of the Magic Box and every touch, every kiss - the claim, the link, the postcards that were stuck in the mirror upstairs.

"You gave me everything, Spike! Gave me yourself, gave me your memories and your life and your secrets and your promises. You promised you'd never leave me, Spike! You promised, you promised me, Spike, you promised, please, please, please -"  

Don't leave me, don't leave me, Spike - Xander couldn't control it anymore, and he sagged slowly to his knees, bringing Spike with him, crying as he had as a child - hard, hurting sobs that made the socket of his lost eye throb and flare - that made him choke and cough and retch, shaking like a leaf in Spike's arms. Oz and Derio slipped down and crowded close, holding them both, drowning out Xander's pleas and Spike's guilt with whatever love, whatever comfort they could, the link a raw wound that bled sorrow all through them.

"I have to, I have to," Spike whispered - thought - crying himself now, snarling and choking with a grief he didn't know how to contain. "You'll die, love - the family will
die! I can't do that, I can't let that happen, not if - not if there's some way to stop it! Xander, I have to stop it, because he's telling the truth, love, he's telling the truth..." Spike couldn't talk anymore - Xander couldn't - and the wolves simply held on - did what they could. Tara took Oz's outstretched hand and joined them. Knotted together in sorrow and pain, in horror and denial and budding resignation. Pain like the ending of the world, and Xander held onto Spike tight enough to bruise.

Oh love, hold fast, hold fast, hold fast. Don't let go, Spike, don't let go, never let go...

29 Descent

Three days, he said three days, how can it be three days? Don't waste it, don't waste it... Xander was trying not to sleep - was contemplating if maybe a wet fingertip full of that grey-white powder, still hidden in the attic, would keep him awake. He'd never done a drug like that
but fuck it, if it would work -

"No, love, put you right out," Spike said softly, and his hand swept up and back, up and back, slow caress that had gone on for ever and Xander wondered if maybe Spike could wear his skin away in three days. Jack gone three hours and the Potentials all tiptoeing around; being told, being told to shut up, and get on with their day.

_Get on with it, just get through it..._ But Xander kept remembering, and it fucking hurt.

"It is Yule in three days - Solstice. The longest night. That is when the tithe is given - that is when you must go down into the Hellmouth itself and defeat the First and its army. At dawn of the longest night, you must be there, and the first rays of the new sun will be your weapon." Jack sounds eerily like Giles, standing beside the fireplace and lecturing them and Xander felt hysterical laughter bubbling up - threatening to spill over and if it did, oh god, if it DID, he might be screaming instead of laughing - might ALREADY be screaming. Spike's arms come around him; bands of iron and the scent of cloves and spice and lemon. Comforting
even as they tremble around him because that same hysteria is in Spike - that same impulse to just RUN, run, run, and never come back. Oz there, wolf-chant his anchor as he struggles for his own control, hand in the small of Xander's back. Derio running the beads around his neck through his fingers like a rosary and clutching Spike's hand so hard it actually HURT, unable to get a single word past clenched teeth.

"Three days?" Tara whispers, and her voice is thick and throaty and oddly beautiful, rough with tears. Giles and Ethan are arguing something in the corner, faces hard and tense but Ethan's hand on Giles' forearm, Giles' foot nudging into Ethan's. Buffy is standing with Angel, both of them looking lost, both of them looking...like just people, tired and sad, and Xander feels a moment's affection for Angel, for him finally being on Spike's side. But...three days, three days, three days swamps it and he just can't shake that loop in his head.

"Love, please don't, please don't..." Spike pushed himself up on one elbow and got Xander on his back, looking into that so-sad gaze, that scarred and beautiful
face. *My scar. I should carry that scar and EVERY scar...*

"No, Spike. No. My scars. Don't - don't do that. You've got enough of your own."

"Don't have any scars, pet, but the one she gave me," Spike said, fleeting image of the Chinese Slayer and her sword, arcing through the air. Xander reached up and touched it - traced his eyebrow and then his cheekbone - down to his jaw and the edge of his bottom lip.

"You've got scars, Spike. On your heart...on your soul... I can see them...feel them...I'd take them for you..." Xander tipped his chin up and Spike dipped down, slow, slow kiss.

*What fools we are, love...wishing to be hurt for the other...*

*What love is, vampire-mine. What it's always been.*

*I don't want you to hurt, love -*

"Then stay, please stay, please..." Xander's voice caught and shattered and Spike pulled him close again, every inch touching that could, Xander's mouth under his warm
and salt-sticky with tears.

**Oh god I want to, I want to, love, but you felt it, you know...same as I do, same as the wolves do...** *Fuck, even the Irish bastard knows, this time...* Spike felt Xander's heart beating against his own chest - felt the pulse of it as if it were his own. Felt the anger that threatened to spiral out of control from moment to moment because Xander did know, he did know, but he was going to fight it with every breath and every drop of blood in him.

*Love me, Spike, just love me, hold me, don't let go, don't let go -*

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"We should go hunt," Xander said, sometime in the first night, when the house was finally quiet again. The Potentials had woken none the wiser from their charmed sleep but Faith, apparently, had crouched at the top of the stairs and heard it all - who knew Sidhe magic didn't work on Slayers? - and now she was sparring with Buffy, looking like she wanted to kill something. Looking like Xander felt, and the demon surged up in Spike, wanting that. They'd hidden out in the bedroom all day, locked
together and trying to come to some peace. Now there was one, a fragile sort of hold that Spike was doing his best to maintain and that Xander wanted to smash into a thousand pieces. He didn't want to accept, but everyone was fraying apart under the stress and he was keeping himself calm with only a monumental effort of will. A hunt was just what he needed - what they needed.

Giles and Ethan were in the kitchen; late night pot of tea, phone calls to the various Pembrokes and a pregnancy update from Anya, who was practically a walking encyclopedia of baby 'facts'. Tara and Dawn were in the garden, because Dawn had taken the news hard and had a sort of tantrum and now, ashamed, she was trying to do one of Tara's grounding routines. Trying to act the adult she insisted she was. Her hurt had been like a knife, in the link.

"Yeah, hunt. Kick some ass," Faith said, getting up off her own from a solidly-delivered roundhouse kick and shooting a glare at Buffy.

"You two think you can keep up with us?" Spike said, flash of fangs. Oz and Derio were coming in from the library, shedding shoes and shirts, eyes already flashing black.
Hunt, run, hunt, us, our, family pack pack pack, the need and the savage urge like a bolt of blood and fire through all of them.

"Just you wait and see," Buffy said, tremulous smile, and it was a moment's thought in the link and then a stop and turn and run. It took Buffy and Faith five blocks to catch up. Oz and Derio had settled into that half-stage between man and wolf, loping in an easy and ground-consuming stride. Xander felt the same rhythm settle into his bones, and he let the hyena up and out, catching lime and sweat and patchouli, White Diamonds and leather smell from the Slayers. The more familiar musk of the wolves was there, and the spice and blood of the demon. The city itself smelled different. So many Sunnydale residents were gone - and so many demons had moved in - that the smell of magic and otherness was always in the air. They roamed over the old places - over the cemeteries familiar from years of patrol, the streets from childhood. They investigated Spike's crypt, which was empty for once, and trotted past the house on Revello, which was dark and abandoned, a forlorn 'For Sale' sign in the yard like so many other houses. Xander's old house was dark, too, and he felt a momentary pang. His parents were gone - for good and all - but pack
*pack love you, and family, Xan, always... chased away any longing he might feel. He hadn't spoken to them since he'd moved out.*

*And found you, love. Found my one and always.*

*Sheer bloody luck, eh pet? My own...*

"*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The Alibi bar was the same, and a group of six or seven vamps were loitering outside, laughing and talking. Posturing. The link bristled with challenge - the pack regarded the whole city as their own, anymore - and they plunged into the group, ringing howls of challenge and excitement echoing off the walls. Of course they drew attention, and a dozen or more demons joined the vamps before the fight was over. Buffy panted, leaning against a wall, and Faith was bent over, hands on thighs.

"Damn, you boys play rough," she said, grinning up through strands of sweaty hair, and Spike tapped two cigarettes out of his pack and lit them - handed one to Faith with a flourish."
"Rough as you like, pet," he purred, and Faith laughed.

"I'll bet," she said, going to lean by Buffy, drawing in smoke with a pleased little smile.

Buffy waved a hand in front of her face but didn't move. "You guys are like - like watching something on the Discovery Channel. Just - scary."

"We're a Discovery Channel Special," Oz said, and they all laughed. But the moment was broken, and the restlessness was still in them - was still stirring their blood.

*Need to go, need to run, pack, family, run...* Derio and Xander both, and Oz yipped in quiet agreement.

"We'll go it alone from here, ladies," Spike said, flicking his butt away and vamping, scenting the night air.

"Be safe," Buffy said quietly, and Xander nodded. He turned his back and pulled the patch off - stuffed it in his pocket. He didn't want that there. Just wanted to be himself, nothing hidden, nothing held back. Spike's hand reached out and fleetingly touched his cheek on the bad
side, and then they were running again, harder than before. Running like they had on the mountain - running as a pack, with the wolves shifted all the way and Spike letting the demon have full rein. They ran through Breakers Woods and along the river - ran up to Kingman's Bluff and then to the beach, loping through the waves. They followed the coast up to their old house - abandoned now, like so many others - and went inside. Sand gritted under foot, and a window was broken, but upstairs was the bedstead and old mattress that they'd left behind as too worn out and they lay down on it. Tangle of limbs and hands and mouths; mapping known flesh and discovering new. The link open wide and wider until there was no distinguishing one from the other and all sensation was shared sensation, and sliding into this body was sliding into all of them. Surrounded by the scents of the sea and the sand, the eucalyptus tree by the back door and old candle wax. Surrounded by their own scents; old and faded but still there, and this was home, this was discovery, this was the blood and tears spilled that had started everything - the claiming that had gathered in Oz and the long days and nights that had made Derio a part of them, as well.

Xander had Spike's hand in his, clenched tight, palm to
palm. Had Oz's mouth under his and Derio's knee in his thigh - heaving press of ribs to his arm and it was good, it was right and it was all he wanted, forever.

*I'd make a wish right now, if I thought anyone was listening.*

*So would I, love,* Spike thought, his fingers clutching hard. *Hold fast, Xander...hold fast...*

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The second day was as strange as the first - as unsettling - and Xander felt dizzy from lack of sleep, but he didn't care. Spike had hunted on the way home, glutting himself so he could share sips of blood with Xander - help him stay awake. Every time the sizzling draught of blood filled his mouth it was like the first time - breath-taking and heart-pounding, and Xander felt fear wash over him, again and again.

*Jack said they had magic - Jack said...us being apart...it'd be okay even with the claim but... HOW? Seven fucking years, Spike, seven years, what if you're sick? What if -*
No, love. He said he could, he told the truth. Promised we'd be all right and he has to keep that promise, doesn't he? They've got magic that...that's nothing like we know. You'll be all right, pet.

Not me I'm worried about and you KNOW it. Fuck, fuck, hate this, I hate this so much... Spike just held him, kissed him - made him eat the sandwich Dawn had constructed and delivered, teary-eyed but calm. Oz and Derio wandered in, joining them on the bed, touching where they could and just sinking into the link; sharing memories and stories, sharing their past since the link and sharing the parts that had been separate. Scenes of Derio's life in Puerto Rico before his family had moved to California; Oz's trip to Tibet and Spike's first glimpse of New York from the bow of a ship, Dru on his arm and whole of the New World like a giant toy-box open before him. Xander's memories were bitter-sweet, tinged with fading grief for Jesse and still-hurtful glimpses of the old Willow from childhood. But it was good, to do that - to revisit fond memories and to learn new ones. It was calming and comforting and it soothed hearts seemingly too broken to carry on.

They went downstairs later for more food and to find Tara and Dawn and came in on an excited discussion. All
the Potentials were in the living-room, crowding around the scythe Buffy had taken from Caleb. Faith and Buffy were sitting on the couch nearest the fireplace looking amused and a little troubled and Tara and Giles and Ethan were scribbling notes and talking in urgent voices. Dawn and Johnathan were half-heartedly sparring in the foyer, swinging blunt practice swords. The four of them wandered over, settling on the floor, Spike nearest the fire that someone was always stoking.

"What's the up, Buff?" Xander said, raising a small smile and Buffy grinned back.

"Oh, Willow called! She and Giles have been keeping in touch and he told her about the scythe-thing and she had this idea - it's really neat. Tara's going to do this spell, it's going to take the Slayer power and give it to all the Potentials!"

"Wow - all? So there'll be - eighteen new Slayers? At the same time?"

"Yeah. Boggles the mind, doesn't it?" Faith lit a cigarette - offered one to Spike, who took it with a smirk.
"Sounds like a nightmare, if you ask me."

"Nobody did," Buffy snarked, flash of her old fire and Spike blew smoke at her, grinning.

"Willow had it made up originally to - uh - 'wake up' all the Potentials all over the world, but Tara thought that might not be a good idea." Dawn bounced over and snuggled down between Spike and Oz, leaning into the vampire and smiling when he put his arm around her. "Oh, and Willow says hello and she misses everybody," Dawn added. *Happy family happy,* from her, heartbreaking and pure. Spike huffed smoke above her head, his opinion of Willow clear in the link. Xander just poked him a little, resigned to it now, and a little sad that his own reaction was less then enthusiastic.

"She's going to do the spell tomorrow before - before the fight," Buffy said, losing a little of her enthusiasm, and Xander sighed, his own mood - so briefly lightened - plummeting as well.

"Yeah. I'm - gonna get something to eat," he said abruptly, pushing himself up and walking fast to the kitchen. Trying to get there before he lost control.
Hate this, HATE THIS. Can't be real, god, please, make it not REAL... Xander leaned into the wall, forehead on his arm, struggling with the link and his own emotions. Trying to be calm for the rest, trying to be halfway sane. He'd asked Jack, before he left, if he could go as well - be part of the tithe, be with Spike. Jack had reached out to him, squeezing his shoulder gently with his long fingers.

"I'm sorry, Xander. You would die there. You cannot." Xander was willing to test that - willing to pit himself against any hell and any devils who reigned there. But - My death is his death and what if I DID die? Couldn't do that to him, couldn't...god...doesn't feel like I can live anyway - god, god, can't be real, this is just a...

Nightmare, love, and Spike was slipping his arms around him - turning him and holding him so gently - kissing him with the lightest of touches and Xander shivered, holding Spike hard.

 Fucking nightmare...make me real, Spike, please? Make me real... Make me real like you did before, make me real with your mouth and your cock and your love and your soul, Spike, please, see me and make me real and
wake me up...

"C'mon, Xan, come upstairs," Spike whispered, and they crossed the too-quiet living room and climbed the stairs, comfort in the link and then quiet as the wolves gave them what privacy they could.

***

You are, you are, you are...my own, my love, mine, mine, mine...always, love, always...hearthfire and builder and the one that SEES, love...brother and lover and artist...laughter and all things good, all things good... I see you, love, I see your soul, I see my knight in patchwork armor and love, love, we will survive this, we will survive this and then we will have the long ages of the earth, my love, my own, we will have all of time...forever and a day, my love, my Xan, Xander, Alexander, protector, strong right arm, saved me, saved me, love me...mine, always, forever, mine, mine, mine... Spike thought that Xander would shatter beneath him, he was trembling so hard. Fingers and hands and arms and legs wrapped around him tight enough to make him glad he didn't need to draw breath. Mouth on his - on his face, on his throat over the
scar and Spike moaned and bore down, pressing harder into Xander's body - pressing deeper and moving slower, slower. *Draw it out, make it last, make it last forever...*

"Spike, Spike..."  *God, love you, LOVE you, want you so much , wanted you so much, so fuckin' beautiful, Spike, so beautiful, so perfect...you make me safe, you make me happy, god, so happy...never let you go, never leave you, always mine, always, vampire-mine, poet and hero and my best friend and my true love and my...my...mine...you give me, love, everything...everything...  "Taisbean," Xander whispered, and the link flooded with the image; with Spike's soul glowing as white as a star and the demon a pure, clear tongue of golden flame. The gold and red and black sparks shivered, shimmered - whirled around Spike in a frenetic dance. The demon was folded tightly around the soul, and the soul...the face of William Sinclair...was like the face of a saint - of a god. Agony and ecstasy and sorrow...too much to bear and Xander was crying under him. Silent, shuddering sobs and Spike stopped moving, stopped thinking - just looked down at him and Xander pulled him closer - tried to.

"Please, Spike d-don't stop, don't...please just...it's okay, it's okay, please -"  *Please...have to see you, have to remember...remember...remember...god, how can I live,
how can I do this without you, Spike, Spike, you're the only thing...only thing...

No, love. You're stronger than that - you're so fuckin' BRAVE, love, so brave - Spike slowly, slowly moved again, sinking into the heat and lush, silken grip of Xander's body - tasting his flesh and his tears and his mouth - tasting his blood in tiny sips from the scar. Xander's voice, whispering in his ear, making him shiver.

"You...are inside me...in me...my heart, my...soul...every day...waiting for you...wanting you...never let you go again, Spike, never, not for anything. Fuckin' world can go to hell next time - go to hell this time, god, Spike..." Xander sank his teeth into Spike's neck, gasping out a wordless cry of pleasure as his body clenched tight around him.

Ohh...love you, love you, love you... Spike shivereded into his own orgasm, biting deeper than before - re-claiming what was his, and the link flared, almost too much in that shared, looping feedback of sensation and emotion. They were both gasping - shaking - crying, now, and Spike just held on tight, face buried in the warm and sweet-musk-salt of Xander's neck. "Love you," he
whispered, and Xander just clung to him, *hold fast, hold fast, hold fast*... 

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Hours later they went downstairs again, unable to bear being alone - wanting the wolves and Dawn and Tara. Wanting family for as long as they could and feeling the sadness in the link - desperate to do something - anything - to ease it. Giles and Ethan were preparing the last few things needed for the Slayer-spell, and Tara was sitting in the plum-dark twilight of the garden, just breathing - preparing herself. Oz and Derio had gotten a fire going in the cistern and she was lit by the glow - soft, ruddy light making her hair spun gold and her tired, unhappy face almost serene. Spike stood in the doorway for a long moment before going quietly out to her and settling at her feet - leaning against her knees and closing his eyes. After a moment her hand came down and slowly, slowly, stroked his hair. Hesitantly at first, Tara spoke to him - told him a story about Tam-Lin, and the Faery Queen. And how Fair Jenet rescued her love from the jealous Mab. Soft voice and soft touch and a story spun out of firelight and darkness and Spike buried his face in her lap and cried, because it was like
his mother, it was like Dru, it was like late nights with Xander, telling him stories of Shakespeare and Angelus, both full of comedy and tragedy and blood.

_Brother, sweet, sorrow, love you love you_, from her - overwhelming anger and despair and Spike shivered in the aftermath - lifted his head and looked at her, and the wet tracks that crossed her cheeks.

"Don't let him be alone. Tara - please don't let him be alone."

"I promise I won't," she whispered, her thumb gently wiping his face, her mouth quivering and smiling and trying to be brave.

"Knew I could count on you, Glinda..." Spike closed his eyes, and let her go back to her slow petting, and after a while Xander came out and settled with him, wrapping him in warmth and the sweet scent of clean wood and rosemary. Slowly, the rest of pack joined them and they sat in silence for almost an hour, just leaning together - listening to the link. The moon - waning crescent - finally cleared the trees and shone down into the garden and then the rest of the house came out, Buffy carrying the scythe.
"Tara - it's time," Giles said softly, and she stirred and nodded - bent down and kissed Spike's cheek. Her hair fell around them, a tent of saffron and bronze, and her scent of rue and thyme, wormwood and sweet bay.

"I love you, Spike. Love you," she whispered and he clutched her hands fiercely in his for one long moment, and then let her go.

"Love you too, witchling..." he murmured after her, and she smiled at him.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The scythe lay on the ground and the Potentials gathered in a compact arc around it, each touching it with a fingertip. Tara sat cross-legged on the opposite side, and Buffy and Faith knelt at either shoulder. Tara's voice was whisper-soft as she began the spell and it rose slowly, gradually building until her final words rang across the garden, sharp and strident with command. The scythe was glowing brighter and brighter with each word, and as Tara intoned the final syllables it flashed sun-bright, a shock-wave of light and magic like the leading edge of an
explosion. The Potentials cried out, rocked backwards - some sprawling onto the ground. Buffy and Faith were both pushed away and Tara - glowed. For one moment it was as if her bones were alight, and the light from within lit her to a dazzling brilliance. Then it was gone as abruptly as it had come and she slumped a little, panting - grinning.

"That was - amazing," she murmured, and Buffy struggled up to her knees, one hand on Tara's shoulder.

"Are you all right? Did it work?"

"It did somethin'," Faith said, shaking her head. Kennedy was staggering to her feet - flexing her hands - and she took a deep breath and whooped.

"Oh yeah it worked! Oh - my - god! Spike! Hit me!"

"With pleasure," Spike drawled, stepping forward and a moment later Kennedy was sprawling in the leaves.

"That - almost didn't hurt! That was awesome! Do it again!" She bounced to her feet, grinning, and behind her the other Potentials were grinning - bouncing as well. They looked - different. More confident. And the
Slayer-vibe was near overwhelming. Tara was laughing softly.

"You okay, Tara?" Oz asked, skirting the Potentials to get closer to her, holding out a hand. She took it and was pulled to her feet, swaying just a little.

"Oh, I'm - that was a rush. Wow." She took a deep breath, shaking her hands out, and Spike could have sworn he saw little sparks of residual energy spattering from her fingertips like water drops.

"C'mon! I wanna test this!" Kennedy was dancing around Spike and Xander, fists up and a look of manic glee on her face.

"No time for that, now," said a quiet voice, and Spike jerked around, growling.

"Scavenger. What are you doing here?" Everyone turned towards the pooka, who leaned casually in the doorway, ragged jeans and an old dress-shirt open over his bare chest.

"Came to tell you some things Jack didn't. Some things about tomorrow." There was a muttering of confused,
angry voices, and Spike strode towards the pooka - got up close, letting the demon out.

"What things?" He could feel Xander at his back - the wolves to either side - and the Slayer-vibe like the whine of an industrial turbine, shivering through his bones. *Hope* in the link from all of them, because he might tell them...something else.

"Like the Hellmouth being destroyed means - so will the town. You must all be ready to leave when the amulet does its magic. There will be - nothing left." Scavenger looked pleased at this, and Spike felt pleased - was, in fact, manically pleased at the idea of this mis-begotten town becoming - nothing.

"You mean - the whole town?" Buffy asked, and Scavenger grinned at her.

"The whole town and then some. Better run far, run fast."

"We need - cars. Or trucks - something..." Johnathan mumbled, and Giles stepped up as well, frowning.

"Yes, we do - vehicles big enough for everyone
and...clothes...supplies... Girls! Girls, listen -" Giles issued swift commands to go upstairs and pack - everything they wanted to bring with them, one bag each. The Potentials - still high from their empowering - darted past the pooka and the knot the family made and raced upstairs, bouncing and chattering, leaping four steps at a time, laughing aloud

"Damn. They're on magic crack. I'm gonna go supervise. And I won't have to pull my punches anymore," Faith said. She sauntered after them, and Spike pulled out a cigarette, watching Scavenger.

"Why didn't Jack tell us that?"

"Oh, Jack." Scavenger laughed. "He's too busy anticipating the Seelie Court taking him back. He cares little for what becomes of the demon killers."

"Does he care what becomes of the demons?" Xander grated, his anger flaring in the link, and Scavenger laughed again.

"He only cares about one demon, Al-ex-an-der. That's why I'm here. I'll get you down there, and see that you get out safe."
"I don't need protection -" Xander snapped, and Spike put his hand out, touching his arm.

"Love - you don't. But you'll go with him, and you'll let him help, yeah? You have to be here when...when I'm through, Xander." Ripple of negation - of anger - at that thought, and the too-familiar rush of sorrow. Xander glared at Scavenger for a moment and then deflated, slumping dejectedly against Spike, slipping an arm around his waist.

"Of course I'll be here... I'll...let him help."

*Thank you, love,* Spike thought, kissing his temple, and Xander nodded miserably, silent.

"My blood will open the seal - open the Hellmouth." Scavenger's look faded from amusement to solemnity, and his eyes sparked red, glinting madly. "The army of the First will be there, just below. You'll have to battle your way in - and stave them off until the sun clears the horizon. Only when the sun is free of the earth will the power of the amulet be free. And then..."
"And then what, pooka?" Giles asked, and the pooka looked up at him, his face wiped clean of all emotion.

"And then they will burn. And then you - all of you - must run." They were all silent after that, thinking, until Giles stirred, clearing his throat.

"Buffy - I know you had plans to include Robin in this final battle. Call him, please, and tell him he needs to pack his things. And tell him to meet us here in an hour, we're going shopping."

Buffy stared at Giles, her hand held poised and motionless over her cell-phone. "It takes the end of the world for you to get on the shopping train. If I'd have known..." Giles smiled at her and she smiled back - hit the speed-dial.

"What kind of sh-shopping, Mr. Giles?" Johnathan asked quietly, and Giles turned toward him, a contemplative look on his face.

"We need...buses? Vans? I'm not sure. There are very few people here I would trust driving a vehicle of any sort, and we must think of possible injuries..."
"Perhaps caravans? Is there a sales lot?" Ethan murmured, and they both went inside in search of the Yellow Pages. Johnathan hesitated and then followed, muttering to himself.

"I've had my license for four years, I can be trusted..." Buffy was across the garden, speaking softly into her phone and the pooka looked at the family, head to one side and his eyes glowing now like twin scarlet candles.

"You did a powerful magic here tonight, chovexani. It shook the roots of the trees."

"It did no harm. It was - consenting."

"Aye, all consenting as the Sun King went, to make the fields rich with his blood. Some will die, you know."

"Some always die," Tara said softly, and put a comforting arm around Dawn, who was shivering.

"Some do, aye." Scavenger looked at Dawn for a long moment, only looking away when Derio snarled softly. "Oh, no fear, shifter. She's grown into her soul like a rose to the vine, all blown petals and thorns. She's
one of you, now." There was an instant's shock and fear through the link, and then anger, and Spike stepped up closer to the pooka - close enough to be swamped in his scent of smoldering fire and earth, water and grass and old, old stone.

"Don't speak of her," Spike said, very low, and Scavenger widened his eyes at him.

"Shall I not? Well, if you say." Fast, feral grin, and a toss of his head, and Spike growled. "We've six hours, my doves. Six hours. Surely there are better things to be doing then jousting with me?"

*Six hours, six...no...* and Spike turned and pulled Xander close - held him tight.

"Yeah. Lot of better things. We - Glinda, we're going to go up."

"Dawn and I have to pack," Tara said, nodding and Spike could still see the magic she'd done thrumming through her, making her voice in the link louder and clearer then ever before. *Love you all, protect you, sorrow sorrow sorrow.*
"How come the wards didn't do their Vesuvius act?" Derio asked, and Scavenger laughed shortly.

"I'm not Jack. He's all jackdaw vanity and self-importance. I'm...more tricksy."

"You're a guest here," Tara said sharply, and Scavenger bowed.

"'Deed I am, chovexani. I do remember." Tara frowned at him - put her hand out suddenly.

"Xander - do you have that little knife?" Xander lifted his head from Spike's shoulder - blinked at her in surprise for a moment.

"Uh - yeah, Tara." He bent down and pulled the leaf-shaped knife from his boot, the one Spike had convinced him to practice with and carry at all times. The one Spike had re-taught him to use after...Caleb. Hilt-less throwing knife, the tang and blade all darkened metal, the edge silver-bright and razor sharp. Tara took it and weighed it in her hand - looked at Scavenger and they all felt the thrum of her power.

"Pooka - I want your oath. I want your oath that
Spike...will return to us, unharmed, at the end of seven years and a day. Return to us as he left us. You know better than us what's going to happen, and we have to know." Scavenger was scowling now, and he opened his mouth to reply but Tara held up hand - held the knife out. "Touch iron and swear, Scavenger." He went very still, then reached slowly out and closed his hand around the blade of the knife. His hand was shaking - his arm - and a thin, white smoke rose up from his clenched fist.

"I swear by iron and the earth it was born from," he grated out, and he looked - different. He looked...darker, smaller, twisted somehow, and Dawn stepped back, gasping sharply. Oz caught her hand and held it, and then Scavenger jerked away, flashing to the homeless man, his hand cradled against his chest.

"You're tricksy too, Lady," he said, his voice shaking and his eyes flat black, and Tara handed the knife back to Xander, looking a little guilty.

"Let me see," she said, and Scavenger held out his hand. The shape of the blade was branded there; raw, bloody and burned, and the blood-scent was the sea - salt and copper and hidden, damp green. Spike wanted to taste it, and the wolves whined softly, stirred as well.
"Come on and let me...let me give you something for it. Thank you, for that," Tara added, gesturing for the pooka to walk to the kitchen, and Scavenger grinned, his eyes sparking bright again.

"As you wish, Lady. I am not...your enemy."

"No. You're not," Tara said, and they went to the kitchen, taking Dawn. Spike snagged Xander back close - held a hand out to Oz.

_Six hours, my loves. We've things to do._

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

In the end Giles and Ethan found three RV's and loaded the meager possessions of the Potentials onto two. Of the rest of them, Buffy and Dawn had the most and spent the remaining time winnowing their belongings down to the things they couldn't possibly live without - mostly pictures and a few keepsakes. Larger items - some antiques they'd inherited from their grandmother - had been shipped a month or more ago to the new Headquarters in England, mostly at Giles insistence. He'd
wanted the girls to move there, after the First. Buffy, who'd been fighting it halfheartedly, was now resigned - even a little excited, something she was feeling bad about. Xander watched the last-minute preparations - watched Oz carry the hold-all of heroin over to Ethan and murmur to him, and Ethan nod slowly and take it, heading out to the RV's with a little frown on his face. Spike knew someone in L.A. - a cousin of a cousin of Clem's, actually, who would pay top dollar for that. Xander had felt a moment's pang, but Spike had said it would mostly go to the demon world, where it was prized but not nearly as harmful as it was to humans, and Xander just...didn't care. It didn't matter, anymore. Spike was behind him, holding him close, and Oz came up on the stairs and settled with Derio one step down.

*You promise me, wolfling - both of you,* Spike thought, fifth time in as many minutes, and Oz just nodded, turning and reaching up - touching Spike's arm where it curved around Xander's chest.

*Promised you, Spike.* *We will,* Derio replied, and his fingers wandered up to the fresh bite-mark on his throat. Flash of that in the link, of Derio on his knees and Spike behind him, in him, slow loving that was as
precious as it was heartbreaking. Spike trying to imprint every moment - every touch. Bulwark of memory against the coming darkness and they would deny him nothing, now. Oz lying, panting, bitten as well and exhausted but doing the same - storing up each touch and look and scent. Xander had simply knelt behind Spike, as close as he could because he couldn't bear to lose the touch of skin-on-skin, no matter what.

*Keep me warm, that will. Keep me happy,* Spike thought, but his arms were clenched so tight around Xander it would have hurt a normal human, and the fear, sorrow, sorrow was never far away. Eventually, everyone was ready and the household was slowly gathered in the living room, and Spike sighed.

*Time to go, my loves. Time to...go.* They stood up slowly and went down, and Spike took the amulet from where it had been laying on the mantel and put it on. It rested large and ugly and...sinister to Xander; gaudy against Spike's black t-shirt.

*Look a right git, with this on. Look like some Liz Taylor wannabe.* Xander smiled tiredly at that, but it hurt - felt like little hooks, yanking at his mouth, so he stopped.
"Everyone is clear on the plan, yes?" Giles said, and even though there was a soft chorus of 'yes' from the Potentials and nods from the rest, he went over it again. "Robin, Johnathan, and Tara will be driving. We will park one block from the school and all of us will walk to the campus. Scavenger has said he will be opening the seal, and the Hellmouth." Everyone looked at the pooka who was leaning casually next to the fireplace, his shirt still flapping open around him but a long and ornate silver knife now hanging in a sheath at this side.

"When he does, Buffy and her group will go down with - with Spike and Xander. The rest of us will stay in the school itself, to keep any Turok-han from escaping the campus. When - when the amulet is...activated and Buffy and her group...return to us, we leave. Scavenger...will see to the rest."

*It sounds worse every time. Spike, Spike please -*

*No, love. No. We can't. I love you...love you...* Everyone stood silently for a moment, and then Kennedy stirred and came forward slowly until she was standing in front of Spike.

"Spike, I..." She closed her mouth - shook her head -
reached out and touched the amulet. "Good luck, okay? Good luck." Spike looked taken aback, but then he grinned, all fangs and glowing eyes, and Kennedy grinned back.

"Remember to duck," Spike said, and Kennedy nodded and turned sharply - walked out. One by one, the rest of the Potentials did the same; touched the amulet and wished Spike good luck. The last girl, Amanda, gave him a tentative hug and fled, tears in her eyes. Johnathan touched Dawn's shoulder and smiled at her - walked over to Spike as well, and touched the gem.

"Be careful, Spike," he said, and Spike reached out and snatched him close by his shirt-front.

"I imagine the Niblet'll still be a blushing virgin when I come back," he hissed, and Johnathan blanched.

"Of - of - of c-course she w-will, of course!" Johnathan squeaked, and Spike gave him a shake, and let him go.


"Uh - yeah. Yeah. I - will." Johnathan smoothed his shirt
and then nodded and darted out of the house.

*Still evil,* Xander thought, rubbing a hand up his back, and Spike tested the tip of one fang with his tongue - let the demon-face go.

*Always evil, love.* Spike looked up at where Robin was standing in the doorway. The man stared at him for a moment and then nodded once, and turned and left. *Guess I got his seal of approval.* *Wanker.*

*We'll keep him in line,* Oz thought, the wolf rankled at Robin's continued hostility, the man trying to be forgiving. Faith pushed away from her spot near the stairs and walked over slowly - reached and touched the amulet as well.

"Guess you're the good guy, this time. Pretty trippy, Spike."

"From this side, too," Spike said, and Faith nodded - punched his shoulder lightly.

"Five by five, Spike," she murmured, and turned and walked out fast, nodding to Giles, who looked anxious, and Ethan. Ethan urged Giles forward, arm around his
waist, and grinned at Spike, fox-face merry but his hands shaking.

"You're a creature of chaos, Spike... Janus protect you."

"Mage," Spike said, slight inclination of his head, and then a head-tilted look at Giles, who was looking at his feet. "You got something to say, Watcher?" Giles started and blinked up at him.

"I - I have...learned - so much from you. And this -" Giles made a helpless gesture towards the amulet, frowning. "This - thing, that you're doing. This act of -"

"Don't get soppy, now. Doesn't suit you."

"This selfless act...humbles us all. Good luck...William." The demon flashed out for an instant and then was gone and Spike lifted his chin.

"Thank you, Rupert," he said quietly, and the two older men gathered up a last bag and walked out, holding on to each other.

"God, this sucks." Dawn pulled away from Buffy and flung herself on Spike, hugging him around the neck and
wrapping her long legs around his thighs, squeezing him hard. "It's like you're never coming back and you are!" Her voice choked on a sob and she shuddered. "You are - you promised and I - I hate feeling like this! Spike -" Spike hugged her back, stroking her hair - taking a long, long breath and then carefully setting her down and prying her off. He wiped the tears off her cheeks and pushed her hair out of her face - picked up his duster from where she'd dropped it on the floor.

"I did promise, and I am coming back - never lie to you, Bit. You hold on to my coat for Xander now, yeah? Get it out of this hell-hole. You know I'll be wanting that." Spike gazed at her, his hand cupping her cheek. "Counting on you, Dawn. Family, yeah?"

"F-family, I know..." Dawn sniffed, straightening her shoulders and hugging the bundle of leather close to her. She smiled shakily at Buffy, who came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Go on out to the RV, okay?" Buffy said softly, and Dawn nodded.

"Yeah. Love you, Spike," Dawn said. She hesitated and
then touched the amulet with a small frown. "G-good luck."

"Love you, too, Niblet. Be safe." Dawn nodded, gulping, and then turned and ran and they could all hear her crying.

"God - she's right. This sucks." Buffy wiped at her eyes - shifted the scythe to her other hand. "You...are the strangest vampire I've ever met. And...the only one I...I trust like...family. Thank you, Spike." Buffy put her hand flat on the amulet for a moment, and then let it drop.

"Watch out for my boy down there, Buffy."

"Yeah. Yeah, I will," Buffy said softly. She smiled wanly at Xander and then walked quickly out, and there was only Tara left, looking lost and lonely. She wrapped her arms around Spike and hugged him hard, shuddering, and when she pulled back Spike bent and kissed her, soft and light. Her mouth trembled under his and then she caught the back of his neck with her hand and kissed back. Pulled away, finally, and rested her forehead on his.

"Goddess go with you, Spike. Love you," she whispered,
and he nodded, eyes closed, struggling for control.

"Love you, Tara." Tara kissed his cheek, fast, and then turned and ran and the house - felt utterly empty. The link was raw with pain, and they all just stood there for a moment, huddled together and hurting - hating the finality of it all, hating the hurt but feeling a moment's happiness for the love that Spike...

Deserve it all but don't deserve THIS... Spike...Spike... Scavenger startled them all when he spoke.

"Time to go, my doves. You must have this." He reached into the air and pulled out a cloth-wrapped package and opened it to reveal a small, flat cake. It was honey-gold, with an uneven, dark-red stain over the middle of it. He broke it carefully, one piece larger than the other.

"That's Jack's blood," Spike said, hugging Xander to his side, and Scavenger nodded.

"Aye. It's to keep you well, when you're apart. To stop the claim from killing you. Hurry, now - dawn's coming on fast as Phoebus can whip his chariot aloft." Scavenger held the cake out and Xander stared at it - reached out
finally - slowly - and took the smaller piece. Spike did the same and they lifted them to their mouths and ate. Smoke and honey and salt-iron tang - sweet and sour and then...nothing at all. Xander shuddered, feeling like he'd swallowed poison, and Scavenger tossed the cloth aside. Oz and Derio were shedding the sweats that was all they'd put on and shifting, wolf-chant and wolf-thought in the link.

*Family. Love. Always, always...run, run, run.*

*Is it already dawn, Spike? Is there a poem for going away? Is there anything...?* Xander thought, blackness like a tide welling up in him and Spike tipped his head back and roared - grief and love and hate and sorrow - fear all surging through him and all of them.

*There's only fare-thee-well, my love,* Spike thought, and unbidden, words came to him - words that Xander caught out of memory and said softly with him.

"*Look, love, what envious streaks do lace the severing clouds in yonder east. Night's candles are burn out,
and jocund day stands tiptoe on the misty mountain*
"It's now, love - it's now..." Spike whispered, his voice cracking and his hand like a vise around Xander's and they ran - up and out and into the palely grey-green morning, the wolves coursing silently beside them. There was a humph of breath and the pooka was there, running with them, his hooves striking the road in a shower of sparks, his head lifting to trumpet a ringing challenge to the deserted city. The RV's had gone on ahead and they ran to the sound of their own heart-beats and the drum of the pooka's hooves - to the wolf-chant and the dawn-chorus that sounded out from every bush and tree. It felt like the last morning of the world, and Xander ran blinded by tears, his only anchor Spike's hand his voice in the link.

Love you, now and always, love you, love you, love you...

*\**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The school looked - wrong. It looked as if it were
warping down in on itself and the energy of the Hellmouth was screaming into the air, invisible poison that made them all cringe. The Potentials and the Slayers - everyone - was waiting as they arrived and Scavenger shifted blindingly fast, naked man in moments and his eyes gleaming blood-red.

"No time for anything but to go, now," he panted, and Spike turned to where Derio and Oz were shifting as well - grabbed Oz and pulled him close and kissed him, hard and deep.

*Wolf, wolfling, god - please keep him safe - keep yourself safe - need you, need you -

*Promise, Spike, I will - I will -

"Oz - love you, Oz, love you -" Spike didn't let him go - pulled Derio to him and kissed him as well and Derio was shuddering - crying.

*Love you, fiddler, oh GOD - be safe, be HERE, please - please -

*Know I will. Don't take it off, Spike - don't EVER -
"Won't - won't - love you, Derio -" Spike hugged them fiercely, his face sheened with tears and then he turned and grabbed Xander's hand and they ran again, Scavenger behind them and Buffy and her group of twelve Potentials. The wolves howled - desperate longing - and the demon roared reply - the hyena did, and then they only ran.

The seal had been uncovered again and Scavenger snatched the silver dagger out of nothingness and sliced across his palm - held it over the seal. His blood hissed as it fell and the seal moved - twisted - irised open, revealing stairs lit by a distant fire.

*Oh fucking HELL, oh god, god - Spike -*

*It's NOW, love - please - please -* Spike was terrified - the demon was, and the human. The demon wanted to run, wanted to take Xander and get out and Spike fought it grimly and plunged down the stairs, the amulet clutched in his hand. Xander followed, not letting go, and the pooka leaped past them, snarling something, looking mad and strange in the flickering glow.

"Oh - my god -" Buffy breathed, as they came to a wide ledge and looked down. An army was below them - a
hundred-thousand, a million strong, or more. Turok-Han, a seething black mass that stretched on and on and they lifted their heads and howled. And then - the fight was on.

*\*'\*'\*'\*\*'\*\*\*\*

The scythe sang as it winnowed the ancient vampires, and the Potentials whirled and kicked and beheaded with swords blessed by Giles and baptized in holy water. Standing by the stairs, Xander did his best to protect Spike, who was frozen in the grip of the amulet's power. Something was happening, but what, he wasn't sure. The amulet was glowing - a shifting, murky light - and Spike was shaking.

*What is it? What is it?* Xander asked, slashing and stabbing and seeing two, three, five Turok-Han slip past and up the stairs. *Oz! Some are coming! Be ready*

*Ready!* faintly, and Spike shot an agonized look at Xander.

*Don't know! Don't know, it's - it feels - horrible.* Whatever it was, was in the link - stabbing
flashes of something - some magic that seemed to twist Spike's very bones - made his head sing. Xander shook his own head, dizzy, and lunged at another Turok-Han. The pooka was killing bare-handed, snapping necks and ripping off heads and snarling, and the Turok-Han were giving him a wide berth.

"Xander! Xander - the sun!" Spike yelled, and Xander turned in dismay. Oz and Derio could see it - Spike could feel it and suddenly the amulet flared, white-hot light that seared Xander's eye and blinded him for a moment. There was a hideous wailing all around and when he could see again Xander saw the Turok-Han falling away from Spike, shrieking. Burning.

_Oh, fuck - this is -this is it, this is - Spike! Spike - god - _

The link was open wide, the images flowing both ways and the pain, and Scavenger was screaming at Buffy, telling her to get out! Now! The remaining Potentials - Xander thought maybe eight - ran past, up the stairs, and Buffy ran with them - looked back for one moment, agony and tears on her face, blood across her body and spattered up her arms.

"All for nothing," someone said, and Xander turned to see Jesse standing there, smiling a leering sort of smile.
"All for you, you fuck. You're dead!" Xander watched the First swell and simmer and scream and turned away, not caring. The amulet was dazzling-bright, rays of light shooting out of it and the cavern they stood in began to shake - began to collapse, the Turok-Han still fighting and still burning. And Spike - Spike was burning and Xander leaped towards him in horror, only to have Jack stop him - Jack come between them.

"He's with me now - we have to go!" Jack pointed frantically behind him and Xander turned and saw - something. A hole - a pit - greenish-yellow, lifeless light, shadowless nothing and he shoved Jack away and grabbed Spike's hand, wincing as the fire burned him.

"Spike! Come on -" 

"He can't!" Jack shouted, dodging a chunk of falling rock and Spike's eyes were wide - the link was screaming - and he looked at Xander and tried to smile.

"Run, love. Please, please - just run - run -" Get OUT, love, you've got to, got to live, got to wait for me, please wait for me - Xander, PLEASE, can't stop now, can't, can't -
Love you - love you - "Vampire-mine, love you forever, wait for you forever -" Xander put his hands on Spike's face and kissed him, the fire searing in his lungs and prickling along his body and Scavenger was yanking him away, hauling him away and their hands - slipped apart.

Then he was running again - always running and the pooka was hauling him up the last stair and then shifting, changing - knocking into him, one foreleg curling under and his shoulder dipping down. Xander stared for a moment and then scrambled up on the broad, warm back - sank his fists in to the mane that was like raveled silk and the pooka leaped, flying, running - pounding up and out of the school. The ground was shaking - the school was collapsing, the air was full of the shrieking of tortured metal and the deep, groaning sound of the earth tearing itself apart. A shower of glass rained over them and Xander felt it cut him but it was nothing, nothing to what Spike was feeling and Xander screamed for him.

Spike! Spike - please, take it off, take it off -

Almost done, it's almost gone, I can see it, I can - FUCK, Xander - the sun, the sun - The link was white with
Spike's vision - white with the sun he hadn't seen in over a century and it dazzled and burned and tore at him. Xander could feel Jack's hands on Spike's shoulders, pulling him away - toward the doorway into that hell and the pooka's hooves churned, spurning the cracking, shifting earth and carrying them away, away, away. From Oz and Derio he saw the rest - all safe but the four who'd died in the pit, the RV's driving frantically out - nearly past the city limit, engines screaming. Dawn huddled over the wadded duster, Faith bandaging a wounded Potential.

*Spike - they're safe, they're safe - we're out - Spike - I love you, I love you, always, forever - Spike!* The pain of the burning abruptly ceased and Xander knew they were into that hell, now - knew Spike was beyond his reach even if he turned back right now. The pooka ran, and leaped, and suddenly they were on the highway past town and the pooka was skidding and stopping and turning - the RV's were there, crooked across the road and the doors opening, everyone spilling out. Oz and Derio leaping out, racing towards them. Xander slid clumsily off the pooka's back and felt him changing somewhere behind him but his eye - his focus - was on Sunnydale. It was - a pit - a crater - a collapsing heap of debris and churned earth and rising dust, and the edge of the destruction
raced towards them and then faltered - stalled - stopped. They stood on the edge, and the roar of destruction continued as the center fell further and further away.

*It's cold, it's cold - god - that hurt - Xander, I love-* And the link went dead.

____________________
Shakespeare - Romeo and Juliet, Act III, scene v

30 Counting

Xander never actually remembered...what came next. The drive to L.A. was a timeless nothing, with brief, sun-lit stills of people, or things. Oz crouching beside him with a bloodied towel. Spike's duster, lying over the back of the built-in seats. Tara turning from the steering
wheel to look at him, tear-tracks on her face. One of the dead Potentials fading into existence on the floor, and Dawn snatching her feet away from the body.

But mostly he simply sat, and reached for Spike. Reached through the link, over and over, until his head felt like it was splitting and the empty socket of his eye wept pinkish tears. The little cuts from the broken glass stung and added to his misery but he couldn't spare a moment for them - found out later Oz had taken the glass out of his shoulder and back and arm, and he hadn't flinched once.

*Cold, he said it was cold, he doesn't like the cold...Spike, Spike, I love you, I love you* - The silence that came back to him hurt. Oz had tried, so softly, to soothe him through the link and he'd cut him off, frantic and furious.

*Shut up! Shut up, I can't hear him if you're talking to me just SHUT UP!* Later - days later - he would find Oz and hug him tight and tell him he was sorry, so sorry. But just then he didn't care, because he had to hear Spike. And he couldn't.

At the Hyperion, he gathered up Spike's duster and held it, and it was warm from the sun and that was wrong, so
very wrong. He stumbled over the dead girl on his way out of the RV, ignoring her - ignoring the wounded Potentials that staggered out onto the sidewalk, ignoring the wolves, who circled anxiously, not quite touching. He made his way into the dimness of the hotel, his head hurting so badly he could barely see. He just wanted quiet, just wanted someplace he could go and try to hear Spike and not be interrupted by all these...people. He stumbled across a wide, marble-floored lobby towards a staircase and ran abruptly into something - something that moved and held him and he looked up into Angel's face.

Angel...weeping angel, like that one on that tomb near Spike's old crypt 'Heaven's loving arms enfold her and the angels weep for those left behind'...creepy fucking thing...don't cry, don't cry, only makes it real, Angel, fucking stop it - "Stop it, Angel, just fucking stop it," he shouted. But it was really just a whisper and Angel curled his hand into the duster Xander was hugging and just stood there, head down. Xander watched a tear fall on the leather and brushed it hastily away, not sure whose it was - not wanting it on the coat.

"He'll be back -" Angel said, and Xander shuddered all over.
"Fuck you. Don't, Angel." Exhaustion made him sway - exhaustion and pain like twin hammer-blows that were driving him to his knees, right there in the lobby and Angel just got an arm under him and lifted and they went up. Third floor, corner room, morning light struggling around the edges of the heavy curtains, not even noon yet, not even fucking noon, Spike... and a made-up bed. Xander sank down onto it with a sigh - curled himself into the middle of it. He pulled the coat in close, inhaling leather and smoke and cloves blood lemon whiskey...Spike, Spike...please... I love you, I love you, Spike...

*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*``*

He didn't know - how much time passed. He was asleep, and there was something cool in his arms and a touch on his shoulder. He lifted his head abruptly, gasping in a sharp, startled breath.

"Spike?" His throat hurt and his lips were cracked, stinging and sore.

"It's Oz, Xander."
"Oh, I -" Xander hunched down again and there was a low, growling sound - there was something pushing at the link and Xander fought it but he was so...tired. Weak and hurting and hungry but... Spike...Spike...

"Xander - damnit -" Stop, Xan, PLEASE, you can't do this, please let us back in, we need you, Xander, please...

Pack pack pack love you please, pack... Derio, a shadow in the doorway and Xander moaned, pushing his face into the duster, squinting his eye tight shut.

No, no, no, can't, gotta wait, gotta...listen...can't hear him, can't hear him...

"Xander - please...you can't - you won't. He's not... He's gone, Xander..." Oz's hand was stroking his hair and he twitched away - tried to - but he hurt, god, he hurt all over and he needed...needed something, needed...

"No," he rasped, and coughed, and that hurt too, and Derio moved over next to Oz, both of them on the edge of the bed, both touching him now and....he ached.

But if he calls, if he calls...have to wait for him, have to
LISTEN -

Querido, please...

"Xander - he can't. You know he can't."  Please let us in, Xander, love you, love you, let us -

Pack, need you, we need you - Xander felt the heat of them - of hands on his back and in his hair - knees pushing at him, and someone's lips on his forehead and it was all too much, too much. With a sob he turned over, pulling them both in tight, the duster crushed between them. The tears came then and he cried until he felt as light and empty as a husk - as the discarded skin of a snake.

We're here, we're here, never leave you, never leave you, oh, love you, we're here...

Pack, pack, never leave, always, love you, love you, love you...

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flanking him. The cuts from the glass stung under his old thermal shirt but he didn't care. The burn was keeping him awake, and he had to try. It was dark outside - blue twilight and the sparkle of L.A. lights and he stared in confusion around the lobby where the remaining Potentials - where everyone - was gathered. A Christmas tree was in one corner, with many small packages heaped underneath, and on a chair next to it were a glass of milk and a plate of cookies. Connor was standing there, in little sweat-pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt, moccasins on his feet.

"What - what's - going on?" For some reason it just wouldn't connect, in his head, and Xander knew in a detached sort of way that it was because he hadn't eaten - had barely drunk anything. That he was in shock, still, and that was why everything seemed to be wrapped in layers of cotton.

"It's Christmas Eve, Xander," Oz said, and Xander realized with a small shock he'd been upstairs for three days.

_Three days, three days, we had three days..._

_Don't, Xander - please - _ Xander shook his head - let Oz put an arm around him, holding him against a surge of
dizziness.

"Okay, I'm okay."

"You are not, querido. You need to eat."

"Yes, abuela," Xander murmured, Derio's Granny flashing in the link and Oz hrummf'd down in his chest, wolfish laughter.

The kitchen was deserted, with the remains of a turkey and a ham on the counter and pots and pans of things all over the stove-top and table. Xander sat wearily in a chair and let Oz and Derio get him a plate, pushing his wet hair back over his shoulders and rubbing tiredly at the empty socket. It still ached a bit, and he hadn't bothered with the patch.

*You look thin. And you're all...pale. Can't just...can't just sleep...* There was fear in that, from Derio - fear and a quickly-hidden thread of anger, because losing Spike was bad enough - he couldn't lose Xander as well. They couldn't.

*Sorry. I'm sorry, Xander. We need you, we have to... You have to stay here with us.*
"You really do," Oz said, putting a plate down in front of Xander and settling into a chair - pulling it up close. "Xander?" Oz's face was serious - was drawn with pain and fear - with misery as keen as what Xander was feeling and he reached out and gripped Oz's hand - felt Derio behind him, hands on his shoulders.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...it hurts so much -" he whispered. Can't bear it. How can I bear it? I can't just... He's not HERE and I...miss him, I miss him, I can't just go...on...

HAVE to! You have to. He's coming back. You have to BE here for him. You - we all do, we all have to...

"Live, Xander. We have to. We can't...can't just hide. He's coming back; he's going to be here and we..."

"Have to be ready for him," Derio said, and in the link was the idea that Spike's time away might...bring changes. That they might have a hurt Spike to deal with, or one who had...suffered. And they had to be strong.

"Oh," Xander said, shuddering, and Oz pulled him into a hard hug.
He'll be BACK. He will, he will, and you'll be here and we'll all be all right. We have to be, Xander.

I....know. I know. God...hurts so much... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...to make this so hard for you -

"Don't, Xander. Don't. You're hurt more than any of us. Don't apologize." Derio was crouching beside him now, rubbing his knee, looking up with tears in his eyes and Xander cupped his cheek gently - sighed, finally, and then drew in a long, hard breath and sat up a little straighter.

"I am sorry. I'm... Yeah. Gonna try. Okay? I'll...have some food and -"

"Need more cookies, Uncle Oz." Connor was in the doorway to the kitchen, looking speculatively at Xander, chocolate smeared on his mouth. Xander could see Angel in the dark, wide eyes, but Connor was blond and slim, and Xander remembered how small Darla had been.

God. That's weird.
"Do you? You sure?" Oz said, smiling, and Connor nodded.

"Da ate the ones for Santa!" he said, his little voice filled with outrage and Oz gave Xander's shoulder a squeeze and stood up, crossing over to the pantry and getting out a package of cookies.

"Okay, how many?"

"Da says three is 'nuff."

"Three sounds good." Oz got out the cookies and held them out, and Connor slowly crossed the kitchen - stood there for a minute, staring at Xander. Xander tried a small smile back, and Connor ducked his head.

"Who's that?" he whispered, and Oz knelt down, pointing to a picture on the refrigerator.

"That's Uncle Xander. Remember? We looked at the pictures yesterday." And there were pictures, all over the front of the 'fridge, and all of them down low so Connor could see them easily.

*Who put - pictures up? Can't see Angel...* Xander took a
bite of ham and Derio snorted softly.

Nah. *It was Wesley. He said family is too important and Connor was gonna know his.*

*He's right...* Xander thought, frowning a little. Family...was all. And Connor had a lot. *Lucky kid.*

"See, there's Uncle Xander right there," Oz was saying, pointing, and Connor gravely studied the picture. "Remember?" He nodded slowly.

"Yeah. And Uncle Will." Xander felt his heart skip and then pound, and he carefully took a drink of the milk in his glass - set it down with a hand that shook.

"You call him Uncle S-Spike, okay, Connor? He doesn't like Will." His voice was still a rasp, and Connor looked at him for a long moment.

"Uncle Spike," Connor said, and grinned, and then he turned and ran out of the kitchen, clutching the cookies in his hand. The picture on the 'fridge was one Dawn had taken with her digital camera when she'd visited them in Seattle. Xander in a chair, a piece of wood in his hand and shavings all around him, Spike leaning over the back
of the chair, hands lightly on his shoulders. Casual - smiling - and Xander closed his eye and tried not to cry all over again.

*Okay, I'm okay...god...pack, pack, need him, need him...*

*We're here, Oz thought, and they were, and Xander nodded and slowly, slowly finished his Christmas dinner.*

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Three weeks later all of the Potentials were gone. A few had gone back home - determined to finish school, get back on track. The rest went to England, to learn about Slaying and to become the newest part of the old, old Council. The Pembrokes already had a building somewhere near Wimbledon Common for the Academy, as they called it. Anya had been on the speaker phone for a half-hour, detailing the building and the new Council headquarters and then, on the private line had asked Xander if he was all right. Xander hadn't been able to say much more than 'no' and 'I'm trying', and Anya had, for once, and surprisingly, left it at that.

Giles and Ethan were gone as well. Giles was eager to
get the new Council organized, and Ethan was eager to throw a wrench into the proceedings. They'd argued for days about what to keep and what to get rid of, and Xander had silently agreed with Ethan that most of the old Council ways should go right in the trash. When they'd left, on a morning of rare rain, Xander had hugged Giles hard and just leaned into him for a moment, memorizing the scent of Souchong tea and dust, musky after-shave and the faint, sweet scent that reminded him of hash. Giles' scent and Gile's faded blue eyes and hard grip on his hand, and then they were gone, and Xander went away upstairs and lay silent and shaking in the bed for hours.

He felt useless, roaming around the Hyperion - felt numb, and half asleep. They'd all stayed on mainly to be sure the First was really gone, and to fill out forms and paperwork for government Disaster Relief checks. Sunnydale was going down as the biggest sink-hole in history and the government - whether prodded by horror or guilt - was paying up fast and big. And now that things were slowly going back to normal, Xander wanted to simply go. Wanted to buy another truck - he'd left his in Sunnydale with Oz's van - and get back to Seattle - back to their house. He ached to be alone with his family. Dawn - had decided to come with them. She
couldn't face high school - not after everything that had happened. She was so far ahead in some areas and so far behind in others she wanted to just get her GED in Seattle and start at a community college. She was sixteen-going-on-seventeen but her eyes were ageless and Buffy only fought her half-heartedly before giving in.

And the Hyperion - the A.I. team - made Xander twitchy. Cordelia was so different now - so very much not Queen C. The Sidhe had given her something - some small bit of their own magic - and now the visions were more like a psychic trance. A little work-around of the Powers' 'gift', one that Cordy had embraced whole heartedly. There was one hitch - she had to have a garden, with trees, and she had to sleep overnight in the garden once a month - full moon - to 'recharge' her magic. Angel was busy directing a crew that was ripping out paving stones and concrete in the hotel's courtyard and meeting with a landscaper so that Cordy would have the best garden his money could provide. The profits from the heroin sale had turned out to be superfluous and after some discussion - one Xander had barely participated in - they'd turned it over to A.I. To help the hopeless or helpless or whatever it was Angel was doing. Connor was a filthy mess every night, covered in dirt and cement dust and Xander would track that small
blond head with a wary, bemused eye, never quite getting used to the 'Uncle' or the 'Da', either. Or that he called Cordelia Mommy, and that Cordy...loved it.

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"Oz - we really need to go. Get back home," Xander said, sitting down in the lobby one evening, watching Angel read to Connor on the couch; something about dogs and circles, and Connor was making little dog noises.

"Yeah." Oz was slowly winding a piece of copper wire into one of Derio's dreads. It had green and black beads on it, and Xander put his hand onto the white beads around his own throat - thought for a moment, with a lurch of sorrow, about the beads Spike had been given. *Ogoun is your protector,* Derio had said. Green and black beads and Xander reached out and touched the ones in Derio's hair.

"I'm - finding a truck tomorrow. Calling Manny. I can't - be here. I want to go h-home." The waiting on this and that was over - ennui had kept him in this small orbit for the last three weeks. Now he felt awake, at last - felt ready. So very ready.
"Okay. That's okay," Oz said, small smile and Pack, love you, home, home, home. The desire in him was as strong. The city was too much - too many demons and too many humans and there was no place quiet, it seemed - no place that was just theirs. Derio looked up from tuning his fiddle and smiled as well, Pack, go home, need to go home. As tired of the city as Oz was, and happy to see the first flash of real want from Xander. Welcome back, hermano.

Yeah...back for sure, Derio...I am. "We got so much money...let's build. Let's - add to our house. Dawn needs her own room, and...and maybe a place for carving... I want...I have to have something to do," Xander said quietly, desperate, and Oz nodded. Outwardly calm, joyous in the link and Xander felt relief and a strange sort of fluttery happiness wash over him. Didn't screw this up. Still here...still family.

"Yeah. It's okay, Xander. We can." ALWAYS family, Xander. Never doubt us. Xander drew a shaky breath and pressed a fast kiss to Oz's temple - got up and wandered away, trying to calm down. Buffy and Faith were out on patrol with Wes and Gunn. The rest of 'the girls' were out shopping for a cold-weather wardrobe for
Dawn. And Johnathan and Robin were sparring downstairs, Robin trying to teach Johnathan the basics of self-defense. He had decided, with Faith's encouragement, to move to Cleveland where apparently another Hellmouth had opened. And they were taking Johnathan as a fledgling Watcher, which Xander found...fitting. They were just waiting on the finalization of paperwork - the Council had bought them a house, but the 'closing' was taking forever by fax.

Xander went behind the counter and stared at Cordy's desk - stared until his eye watered and then something clicked - an idea suddenly formed - and he walked over. A calendar lay there, a new calendar for the year, one from a bank or store because it was cheap - plain black printing on white paper, generic scenes from around L.A. Xander stared down at it, and remembered what Jack had said.

*Seven years. Seven years to one, so that means...* Xander grabbed the calendar and a pen and found a piece of scrap paper. *Three-hundred and sixty-five days in a year, so that's...five and...* He scribbled hastily and then looked at the number. Fifty-two. Solstice on the 21st of December, and thirty days in December so that was.... *That's...twenty-one days to*
today, and fifty-two days is... He counted silently, and then circled February 11th with his pen. That day. One year for Spike is that day. Two years is... After ten more minutes he had seven circles on the calendar - seven days. Seven years in his one and he had something to count, now. Something to look forward to, something to give the days a purpose, instead of the formless, endless daze of nothing he'd been existing in.

One year in... thirty-one days... get through a year... Spike, Spike... I miss you, I love you, I love you... He wanted to show the wolves and he got up, clutching the calendar close, heading back to the main area of the lobby. Derio was on the couch now with his fiddle, playing something that sounded... folksy. Spike would have made fun, but listened all the same. Angel was holding Connor on his lap and his face... He looked content - he looked happy - his eyes shining in the lamplight, moving his legs a little so Connor swayed to the beat.

"What for should I sing you of classical fun, Or of games, whether Grecian or Persian? Sure the Curragh's the place where the knowing one's
done,
And the Mallow that flogs for diversion.
For fighting, for drinking, for ladies and all,
No time like our time, o'er was made, O,
By the rollicking boys, for war, ladies and noise,
The boys of the Irish Brigade, O!"

"Hear that, now? That's us, Connor. We're Irish and that's us," Angel said, pride and love in his voice, and Connor giggled, watching Derio's deft fingers and the rise and fall of the bow - mimicking him with his own little hands. The song ended and Derio made a small bow when Angel clapped Connor's hands together and then he grinned, wolfish and sly, and started another tune. After a moment Angel recognized it and groaned.

"No! Not that one!"

"It's Irish too," Derio said, laughing, and started to sing. Angel growled but Connor was laughing and Oz sat up from his sprawled position on the floor and started singing too, in a ludicrously exaggerated Irish accent. Xander felt a reluctant smile tugging at his mouth and then suddenly memory, flooding into his
consciousness. Memory decades old, of Spike singing this same tune to Angelus, wicked grin on his face and Angelus howling and chasing him - trying to catch him and Spike nimbly skipping away, staying one step ahead and singing the whole time. Teasing and torturing until he fell down laughing and Angelus pounced on him and squashed him to silence. The words were right there, and Xander wiped at a sudden tear and looked out at the late-afternoon sun that was sifting, thick and golden, through the front door. And softly sang along.

"Mush-a ring dum-a do dum-a da... wack fall the daddy-o, wack fall the daddy-o... There's whiskey in the jar..."

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Leaving L.A. felt good. Xander had never been happier to watch something disappear in the rear-view mirror. Beside him in the truck, Dawn listened silently to
music on her iPod. Trying to be a grown-up, even though three days ago Buffy had flown out of LAX to England and Dawn was feeling more than a little lost. But she was adamant that she was going - that she wanted to stay with her "other" family, and the link sang softly with her sorrow and excitement and love. It was soothing, to have her in there - distracting, so Xander didn't have to think about how sad Buffy had looked under her veneer of cheerful adventurism. How she'd held them all a little too long, and how she'd looked so small and so alone, walking away down the concourse.

Oz had found another strange old van - a VW one that was painted sea-green and pale pink like some monstrosity out of Miami Vice. Derio called it the pimpmobile and had threatened to hang beads in the windows and put down shag carpet. Oz had laughingly agreed to get a paint job 'soon'.

*Home...home in two days, home...the Sound and the sea and the mountain looking over us... Going home, Spike. Waiting for you. Thinking about you every day...every night... Missing you so much. Love you so much... Spike, my Spike, my love...*

Tara was staying in L.A. for a while longer. She wanted to
learn some things from Fred - from Wesley. Magic and science in equal measure, and she promised to come visit in a bit, when they were settled. Leaving her had hurt - a tearing ache that had shivered in the link and made them all cling tightly together, doing their best to reassure each other.

Tara's going to come and stay. We'll talk her into it. Can't have her gone...miss her too... Spike, Spike...vampire -mine. Waiting for you. Just waiting... Trying to be strong... Hold fast, my love. Hold fast.

The Boys of the Irish Brigade - traditional - Sung by David Kincaid

Whiskey in the Jar - traditional

31 Coping

The eleventh of February came and Xander felt an odd sort of surge - excitement and defiance in equal measure. He'd survived it - got through fifty-two days without Spike and Spike was one year done - one year down. Less all the time - one year gone... Miss you, Spike, miss you so much. It had rained on and off for most of the week and the eaves dripped on them as he and Manny stood on the back porch, making notes. The
construction was getting underway in a day or so - tearing out the back wall and adding three bedrooms upstairs, making the kitchen larger, adding a room for Xander to carve in - maybe making it large enough for a piano, something that Dawn had been quietly yearning for. She was keeping up her singing practice with Derio and she hummed or sang softly around the house while she studied and experimented in the kitchen and tried to find a part-time job. She was so different here, out of Buffy's shadow. A more grown-up - more capable girl - who was the Queen of the house. The three of them would spoil her endlessly if they could, but Dawn had quietly said no, in various ways, to their indulgences. *We'll leave it for Spike. He can spoil her all he wants when he - when he comes home. She won't say no to him...never has.*

Manny had been angry on Spike's behalf - angry and relieved and worried about the Sidhe. They weren't trusted in demon circles, and he'd questioned Xander closely about what Jack and Scavenger had said and done. In the end he seemed satisfied, but Xander knew the story was making the rounds of that other Seattle, and he also knew that several groups of demons had gone to view the Sunnydale crater. It was all quiet there, Manny said - truly dead and gone and Xander hoped that
Faith and Robin and Johnathan weren't having to deal with too much Hellmouth craziness in Cleveland. On Valentine's Day he finally hung Spike's duster in the closet, instead of having it lying over the empty side of the bed. It hurt, but it felt good, too.

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Emails came two and three times a week from England and Xander mostly let Dawn handle those. He was locked into what he was doing - concentrating so hard on just surviving, that he didn't want to fend off questions or have to muster the energy to show interest in anything. He was interested - he just... Just couldn't bring himself to get involved. He listened to Dawn talk about the doings of the new Council, and what the Pembrokes and Giles and Ethan were building was good - was better than the old Council by far. Grey was seeping into the Watcher's black-and-white view of the world and every demon sect, clan, species or individual - driven by curiosity or a desire for peace - that approached the Council transported the Pembrokes into raptures. Some of the demons were amazingly literate and historically oriented and already human history was gaining new facets. Apparently the younger Pembrokes envisioned a
time when demons would be citizens, just like humans, but Xander silently doubted that many demons would care for that 'privilege'. But it gave them something to do, and it made Dawn delve even deeper into her language studies. Xander even found her poring over history books, and her half-formed notion of going into one of the sciences was rapidly being subsumed under a growing fascination with archeology and anthropology. 'Indiana Jane', he teasingly called her, and wished desperately that Spike were there to tell her stories and help her with her Greek. And probably buy her a fedora and a whip.

Tara's emails and phone calls were easier to deal with; she spoke about her own studies and related snippets of Connor's doings and the most recent battle or demi-apocolypse the A.I team had averted. Wesley's magic skills were much along the lines of Giles' own, and she was learning a more formal and regulated kind of occultism from him. And he was learning about 'kitchen' magic and proving to have a bit of a knack. She talked about Cordelia-as-Mommy and about Gunn and how tough he was - and how loving with Wes - and about Fred, in a kind of cautious way that said to Xander she was still being careful of her heart. Xander sat down once a week to laboriously two-finger-type a message to
her; mostly details of the house and what had gotten built in the past few days. He pressed her for her own ideas about what she wanted the house to be like and cheerfully added space for a still-room when she talked about making her own soaps and teas and essential oils.

February blew out and March came in no warmer and just as wet. Construction carried on under tarps and whispering, rustling layers of plastic, and Oz and Derio started a kind of patrol. Mostly it was a desire to establish their territory - make boundaries that any demon would respect. After a week of them going out and coming in, spangled with mist all along their fur and the link singing with water, run, hunt, good pack pack pack Xander gave in and went with them.

Running along the sandy margin of the Duwamish, breathing in wet lung-fulls of sea-salt air and the thick, sharp smells of earth and wet wood and winter-dead grass felt good. He let the hyena stretch out - let it shriek up at the low-riding, gibbous moon and play a rough game of King of the Hill with the wolves. The link was full of happiness and Xander realized how much the wolves had been missing him - and how much he'd missed them. He realized with a wince of guilt that he'd been cutting them off - tuning them out. Because he
didn't want to push his sadness onto them, and because...

_It hurts. Hurts to hear you and not...him. Hurts to have this when he CAN'T...shouldn't have it if he...can't._

_No, no, Xander. You can't do that. Can't leave us like that and we won't leave YOU. Won't. We told him we'd take care of you, told him we'd be here. Promised. We won't break that promise._ Oz-wolf shouldered him roughly, making him sit down hard on the cold, wet ground and Xander pulled him close and hugged him; warm, rough fur scratchy on his face, thick wolf smell and the smell of apples.

_Pack, family, OURS. You're ours as much as you're his and we won't let you go. Lean on us, hermano, let us help, don't be afraid...Hurts, to not have you..._ Derio-wolf pushed in for his own hug, cold nose in Xander's cheek and the pepper-lemon smell of his fur. Xander clutched at them both, holding on tight - shuddered for a moment with tears. But then he stopped and wiped his face - lay back on the grass and sighed as the wolves curled close under his arms. _Let the link open wide and just sank into it; stayed there for long, long minutes, reconnecting. Reaffirming._ When they finally stood up
and began a slow walk home, Xander felt - almost normal, again. The ache of Spike's absence was still there, but the love and delight and want from the wolves eased it - soothed him - made him feel part of a family again.

*Sorry. I'm sorry. I won't - hide, anymore, he promised, and the wolves yipped soft 'thank you's.*

April the second was year two, and Xander stood in the kitchen, a bottle of water in his hand and a fuzz of sawdust covering him. Remembering, in a rush of bitter-sweetness, Spike on the phone to him.

"So, pet...what are you wearing?"

"About ten pounds of sawdust."

"Mmmm...all furry and sweet-smelling, I'll bet..."

"I gotta go, Spike. I'll be home - around six... I promise I
won't chop off or ventilate anything. Love you."

"Love you, pet. Hurry home."

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Xander drew in a deep breath and crossed the day off on the calendar. Getting there. God I miss you, love. Miss your voice so much, telling me things...telling me you love me, telling me you want me... Miss your hands, miss your laugh... Miss you reading to me, miss fighting over the remote and the radio and dinner... God, Spike, Spike...

The missing was like a funny little tide that ebbed and flowed differently each day. Sometimes there was almost nothing, like when he was working. Up on the scaffold, hammering, sawing - creating - he could push everything away and just exist in the radius of a saw-blade or the numbers on a tape measure. Sweet new wood smell, mud and rain and the Duwamish. The smell of the skinny little black cigars that Manny smoked, and
the hot tea and coffee the crew drank. And then - some small thing... A line or two of a song - a glimpse of a black-leather coat in a crowd - an accented voice coming from the TV and he was drowning in it - lost in it. Pain like a knife to his heart and he had to stop and just breathe. Reach for the wolves in the link and let them help - let them soothe and calm. Worst of all, probably, was feeling that hurt from Oz or from Derio. Raw ache that only made his worse and they'd got themselves in that loop once or twice. Gotten it from Dawn, who would fight it and fight it and then give in and look through her computer files at all the pictures she had of Spike. Look at her archived emails from him, or open a notebook and see his precise and beautiful handwriting; notations in her Latin homework or a line or two about a book. Then they would huddle together, doing whatever they had to, laughing at how horrible it was even as they cried themselves hoarse.

Xander had his postcards still, tucked into the mirror's edge. And the picture Dru had taken, that was Spike and was not Spike. Was something out of time and memory and almost didn't hurt. But the picture from this house - their first night there when they'd nested on mattresses in the living room floor and Derio, getting up early, had captured Spike and Xander curled around each other,
Spike's head on his chest, Xander's arms holding him close... That made him catch his breath and shiver, every time. Some mornings he went without aid of his mirror, and fled the room before he saw.

April and then May, and Dawn was graduating from her GED classes and they all went to see. Tara up from L.A., almost completing them, and Dawn shining like a star in her class of older women and work-worn tradesmen and tired-looking girls with mothers and babies cheering them on. She'd already signed up for classes in the fall - was impatient to get the 'required' work out of the way so she could move on to bigger and more interesting thing. Derio took dozens of pictures, because Dawn wanted to be sure Spike would see this moment as if he'd been there. It was a long day, with a celebratory dinner atop the Space Needle and a long, slow walk all over the parts of Seattle they liked best, just being together. A good day, and a happy one, but there was something in the air, and Xander felt uneasy until they were all safe home.

He woke with a gasp, his hand curling for the stake he didn't have under his pillow anymore - groping for the body that wasn't there. Something - was shivering through the link - twisting through the air like a subtle
perfume. Something familiar and not at the same time. Xander held his breath - closed his eyes - concentrated on it. And felt his heart lurch painfully in his chest.

Not, not, not. It ISN'T. Fuck, I'm asleep, I'm - what the HELL? Oz - you there? Oz, Derio - Sleepy grumble from the wolves but Xander was already up and yanking on a pair of sweats - stumbling out of the bedroom and down the hall - down the stairs. Soft sound from Dawn's room, and Tara asleep on the fold-out couch and Xander almost ran to the front door. Pulled it open and stopped dead, the screen door mesh cold and yielding under his hands. Something...was there, in the darkness. Someone. There was a candle burning by the door - Dawn insisted - and its flame cast a feeble circle of tired gold light onto the porch.

"Spike?" Xander called, and his voice was cracking - strained and hoarse - and he was gasping for air, shivering. When the hand came out of the darkness - pale and slim and tipped with long, red nails - he nearly screamed.

"No, oh no, oh no," Drusilla whispered, and Xander recoiled, the air hissing out of his lungs in something like
a sob. "No, not my prince, not my love..."

"He's not yours," Xander growled, and Drusilla came closer, her face fading in out of the blackness. Her hair was swept up and pinned with long, Chinese-red sticks, and tendrils of it hung down beside her ears and on her throat. Some sort of black shirt that showed pale, muscled arms and her collarbones - the upper swell of her breasts. Modern, and so different than anything he'd seen before. She had on a choker of black and white and silver - onyx and ivory, and very old-looking.

"No? No," she echoed sadly, and put her hand up to the screen. "Always this between us, this fish's net. Sieving out your intentions and your passions and leaving me with cold comfort..." Her palm flattened against the house's barrier and the wards Tara had made a part of the very foundations sparked cold green fire. Drusilla hissed, and pulled slowly away.

"What are you - why are you here? Spike's not...he's not..."

"Not there, I know. Not anywhere in this world... Did you think I wouldn't feel that? Think I wouldn't feel everything he was being torn down - burned up - turned
to ashes? To ashes, to ashes and he fell down, but you didn't - you didn't." Drusilla's eyes were gold gleams in the darkness and her mouth snarled, and Xander flinched from that - from the wash of pure guilt and misery that overcame him. Behind him he heard Tara waking up - heard the quiet tread of the wolves' upstairs, coming closer. And - fuck - the creak of Dawn's door that he couldn't seem to oil out.

*It's Dru, she's here, please - be careful, I don't - don't know what she wants -*

*Fuck* - Oz thought, and wolf-sense shivered through the air, he and Derio both shifting minutely, scenting the intruder on their door step.

"Xander?" Dawn asked, sleepy-soft voice, and he closed his eyes for a moment, just breathing.

"It's okay, Dawn, it's just..."

"You tell her. I'm the fire that burnt the phoenix and brought it back to life - the womb, little boy, the seed - " Drusilla seemed abruptly hysterical - furious - and Xander took a step back.
"Xander?" Tara now, and he could feel his family at his back - wall of living heat and *pack, family, brother, love love protect love.*

"It's - this is....this is Drusilla. She - she made...Spike into a...vampire." Sharp gasp from Dawn and Oz's shoulder pushing into him - Derio on the other side, gentle pressure.

"And you're all here, all here in the nest, cozy as little birds all agreeing. Changeling-child and moon-drinkers and the good Witch of the North, though she's got a tinker's dam in her blood, hasn't she?" Drusilla crowded up close to the screen door again, ignoring the St.Elmo's fire that crawled over her. "And you, sweet beast. You, you, you..." She put her hands flat on the barrier and growled and Xander finally shook off his shock and paralysis and glared back, letting the hyena up and out, so that her scent of blood and licorice and church incense was suddenly strong in his nose. He knew his eyes were the same cold fire as the wards - watched the otherness of the hyena call Dru's demon up. And then gone again, and she leaned back, making a low moaning sound.

"Why? Why, why, why did you do it? Why did you let it? The olders, the others, they're not to be
trusted! They're not to be seen! Let him go off with Jack, Jack, Jack -"

"I tried to stop him," Xander whispered, feeling suddenly cold, and small. "I tried. Dru - he...he wouldn't be stopped. I tried." Xander blinked, tears slipping from his eye and stinging in the empty socket and Drusilla cocked her head to one side, watching him.

"Does it hurt, to cry that bone cup full of tears? Do you have the seeing still, Wodin Alfadur? Or did that wight take it from you?"

"I - still see. I...Drusilla. What - do you want?"

"He's gone, beast. Winked out like a candle...out, out!" She crossed her arms over her chest and put her nails to her biceps - drew them down her arms and lines of scarlet sprang up behind. Blood welling in the furrows and there was noise somewhere off to the left; a hiss, quickly muffled. "Gone and not mine and there's no one left of what was before...no one left..."

"Angel's still here," Xander said, and Drusilla licked her nails, her eyes opaque and far away. "Oh, daddy's got a new family, hasn't he? Monkey see, monkey do; he
couldn't bear to not have what my Spike had and he infected Grandmummy with his nasty soul...now her get sits on his lap and he won't take away that innocent's toys, will he?"

"Spike has a soul," Xander said softly, knowing that Dru knew that and wondering why it was different from Angel's.

"Yes - yes he does. Soul of fire and starlight, and the burning...burning fish..." She laughed softly. "His soul is not like to that soul - his soul loves and takes in what it can't kill. Daddy's soul hates and only wants the darkness to end. He can't see, can he, that the darkness is the only thing that makes the light so pretty."

"Do you have a soul, Drusilla?" Xander asked, and he took a step up to the door and leaned there, and her hands came out and touched his, palm to palm through the barrier and the screen and the wards. Cold hands, strong as bone.

"Oh no, sweet beast. No, no, it was stripped from me - split me open and pulled it out; milkweed silk on the wind, all drifting away. I felt it go with my blood, and blessed it as it went." She leaned even closer, until
Xander could see clearly the color of her eyes. Or, the color they were at the moment because they shimmered with the demon's gold and that made the actual color uncertain and shifting. "I never missed it, but I was cold, wasn't I? Until my poet came to me; until my William, my Spike..."

"Mine," Xander whispered, and Drusilla laughed, soft and deadly.

"Yes, yes, yours, little boy - little toy. The soul that was born to die for you... I whistled him to me but he dies for you now. When Angel's gotten his Grail and you've made your peace with that devil in the red dress, you tell my love I've found a new boy to keep me warm. Tell him...tell him...we're counting crows. 'One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a funeral, four for a boy...''

"Five for heaven," Tara whispered, and Dru smiled at her, her eyes huge and wet and suddenly very human.

"Six for hell," Derio said, shivering against Xander's side, and Xander slipped an arm around him - around Oz, who was holding Dawn's hand.

"Seven for a secret, never to be told." A new voice,
accented in something unfamiliar and Dru stretched out her hand and pulled a young man into the dim light of the guttering candle. Taller than she was, hair a burnished copper that fell in wisps and locks to his shoulders. Huge green eyes, and a slim, ringed hand slipping into Dru's. Utterly unlike Spike, and somehow exactly like him, and Xander shuddered - leaned back into Tara's hand, that had settled at the small of his back.

"Sinjan," Drusilla sighed, and smiled at him. "I've killed my Christmas wren, and now it's to take him on procession. You, beast...Al-ex-an-der..." Dru pressed her hand to the screen again, pushing, and the wards flared up high and bright. "You, mind your book and mind your heart and take the Slayer's skin when you're called to go riding. That's the only way you'll see your love again." She pulled back abruptly and she and Sinjan turned and walked away. A moment later they all heard the rattle of a motorcycle's engine, roaring to life and then dying rapidly away.

God, what the hell was that? What did she mean? "Everybody - everybody okay?"

"She's scary," Dawn said, and Xander turned around and looked at her and started laughing, pulling Dawn to him
for a hard, hard hug.

"She's fucking terrifying, Dawn, and don't ever forget it. God -"

We're here, we're here - from the wolves, and Tara was stroking his back and he kissed Dawn's cheek and sighed - let her pull away a little.

"Fuck, I - would rather not have talked to her," Xander said, and Oz took Dawn's hand again, smiling at her a little.

"Maybe it's for the best, though. She left, and she pretty much...gave up any claim. One less thing to worry about."

"Fuck, I guess." Exhaustion suddenly swamped Xander - exhaustion that was jangled and tense and he knew that even though he felt as if his bones were made of lead, he couldn't sleep now. "I'm gonna make some hot chocolate. Anybody wanna join me?"
"I'd love some," Tara murmured, still stroking his back, and he reached for her and put his arm around her as well.
"Yeah, me," from Dawn, and assent in the link from the wolves. After a while the kitchen was full of the sweet scent of chocolate and the Souchong Tara had brewed, after all, and Xander let the soft pack, family, pack soothe him.

*Slayer's skin and going riding...*  
*God. I don’t need more riddles and I don't need...  Don't need more otherworldly CRAP.  Three and a half years, four in July, that's past the halfway mark...  Spike, I miss you...so much.  Waiting for you, love, waiting for you forever and a day, if that's what it takes.*

______________________________

"The soul that was born to die for you..." is from A.E. Housman's More Poems. Spike also quoted this poem to Xander on one of the postcards from Chapter Ten.

The Xander/Spike phone dialogue is from Chapter Eighteen.
June was hot - not Sunnydale hot, but hot enough that the last week or so of construction was done shirtless and sweating, hair pulled back with rubberbands and Dawn marching outside with sunblock and ice tea. The house was finished on June twenty-eighth and that night they had a small party. Tara blessed the new rooms and they all took turns sweeping the 'bad' energy out with a broom. Then they burned the broom in the fire Oz had (illegally) built in the back yard, because that was part of it - send the bad all up in smoke. Derio had a new broom and they made a small and silly ceremony of it - passing it through the smoke of the fire and 'blessing' it, much like Sleeping Beauty's fairy godmother's had blessed the infant. They went to bed giggling, and Tara went back to L.A. the next day. And Xander walked into the new studio, feeling a tingle of anticipation in his hands.

Ever since Drusilla's visit he'd had nightmares - some just
an uneasiness that persisted through the day, some screaming horrors that prompted Oz and Derio to sleep in the bed with him, curled up close and shushing him when he shivered. The bad dreams were tapering off, but Xander's head was full of images, now - images of Spike. Dru had stirred up all the memories that the claim-spell had given him and now he wanted to make those images of Spike concrete. First was William - bookish, retiring and so very unsure. In love with love, in love with romance - in love with beauty. He didn't even really know how he was going to make this - how he was going to put all that was William into a piece of wood - but he was going to try. A few miles away there had been a lot being cleared for construction and an old, lightning-blasted oak had been cut down. One section of fire-scarred trunk had simply looked right and Xander had paid the men to haul it to his house and dump it in the yard. Now it stood in his studio, stripped of its bark - waiting. Xander flexed his hands, and began.

*Going to carve you, Spike - make something beautiful. Nothing as beautiful as you, but as close as I can get. Thinking about you every day, love...waiting here for you. The house is done... I think you'll like it. We put new facings on all the doors and windows so they match, and new floors down... Sanded them so smooth,*
just for you. Never have to worry about splinters... Love you, Spike. Love you...

For a while Xander had tried to hide how much he talked to Spike. Like Oz and Derio would think he was crazy. But Derio did it, too, and then Oz confessed to it, and he'd felt better, then. He didn't know if Spike could hear them or not, but he couldn't not do it. If Spike could hear - how much would he hate it if they went silent on him? And if he couldn't... Don't care. Talking anyway because.... Because I miss you, and at least this way I'm... I'm trying, love. I hope you can hear me. I hate being here alone. I hate being HERE, and you're there, and I don't know what's happening to you... Hold fast, love, hold fast...

He worked for hours the first day - until his hands cramped and he had to either quit or risk ruining something - or hurting himself. Oz had soup on the stove, still warm, and bread wrapped in a towel, and Xander sat wearily down in the kitchen and ate - felt in the link for the wolves. They were downtown at a club, working. Doing a fix for the sound-system and staying to check and be sure it was right. Getting a reputation with bands and clubs that if you wanted to sound good, those two were the ones to call, because they could balance
the music and the voices so that the bass didn't drown everything out, or the singer cut across all others. It was the sort of work that suited them both - odd days and hours, musicians and music talk and days spent lounging at home or loafing all over the city. Dawn called them slackers, but did it with a smile.

Dawn was, herself, out at the movies with a cousin - or a niece, or maybe an aunt, it was hard to say - of Manny's extended family. So they knew she was safe. Dawn's own views on demons had always been more flexible than Buffy's, and Dawn had friends all over.

Xander drank the last of the good beef soup and put his bowl and cup into the sink - went to stand in the studio doorway. The last rays of the setting sun glinted off the Duwamish, gold-red gleams on the choppy water. Sedge and cattails were thick right below their house and a heron rose up suddenly from the dense patch, winging away towards the north. Upstairs, he and Spike's bedroom also overlooked the water, as did Oz and Derio's, and they'd built a deck up there, for late-night moon watching. Dawn and Tara now had their own rooms, plus a guest room and a 'music' room that was rapidly filling with instruments and strange, cast-off sound equipment. The still-room for Tara was off the
kitchen and encompassed part of the now-screened in porch, and it was already thick with scents and living green. Tara had a ledge-ful of herbs in little pots all along the back; mostly for cooking, but some for medicine, and some for magic. A small wood-burning stove and a refrigerator were in one corner, but the center of the room was taken up by a long, long table that was littered with pots and bowls and beakers, mortar and pestle and a stand of thin, sharp knives. Dawn had volunteered to keep things in order while Tara was gone, but everyone wandered in from time to time; to clip rosemary for cooking, or pinch off some sage for a little home-made incense, or to nibble the mint that grew sweet and sharp by the door.

The form that was emerging from the oak trunk was long and sinewy, and Xander wondered if it would convey what he wanted it to. A man whose every moment and breath and word was aimed towards finding the beauty in everything around him - even to the exclusion of some hard truths. A dreamer, whose heart was bared proudly for all to see. A swooning figure, head on hand and eyes turned towards heaven, a spill of books and papers and pens all around. Xander could see it so clearly; the blocky shape that reclined under the sheet didn't begin to hint at what he dreamed of. But he was confident.
Making this for you, love. You'll tell me I'm a git - tell me William was nothing to be proud of. But he was you - IS you - no matter how hard you want to deny it. Xander thought of his postcards upstairs - of Spike whispering Shakespeare and Byron and e.e. cummings in his ear when they made love. He's you and you're him and I wouldn't have that without him... Spike would understand even as he pretended offense.

*

The fourth year ended on July sixteenth and Xander spent it in the studio, making the progressively smaller and smaller cuts and grooves that added details to the statue. It wasn't a portrait - Xander didn't have the skills for that, and he didn't want it to be a copy. It was an...impression, with the boldest features highlighted, and the rest done in smooth, sweeping lines. Only the books and pens were detailed, and the folded pair of wire-rimmed spectacles that Xander - grinning to himself - had half hidden under a drift of paper. The high cheekbones and curve of Spike's lips were the same - that real smile that was one of Xander's favorite things to see. But the body was more androgynous than male,
and the wide-open, sky-turned eyes were...different, somehow.

"It's beautiful, Xander. He is," Dawn said, leaning on his shoulder as Xander slowly burnished the wood with sandpaper, making it as smooth and perfect as Spike's own skin - working around the charred edges of the lightning strike that had, somehow, ended up in the center of the figure's chest.

"You think? Not half as good as the real thing," Xander said, small smile and small shrug, and Dawn whapped him gently.

"Don't act like it's not good - you know it is. It's... It makes me feel..." Dawn stopped for a minute, chewing her lower lip and glancing at Xander with a small frown.

"What?"

"Don't be mad at me. It's like - it makes me sad." She glanced at the statue and then at Xander again, and Xander just nodded. "I'm not sure why... I mean, sad because I miss Spike, but...this isn't really him. It's like...what he was. I don't know why that makes me sad."
"I'm not mad, Dawnie. It makes me a little sad, too. It's okay." Xander carefully smoothed the silky black-grey of the charred wood, thinking about William and about Dru. She said she saw his soul - that it was burning bright. Effulgent. Burning right out of you, love. It seemed important, somehow, that the burned part be a part of the whole - that it be just as beautiful. Because Spike, in the seeing, did burn. "I think I'll be done in a day or two," he added, and Dawn walked over to the corner where the twisted roots and smooth trunk of a piece of silvery driftwood lay.

"Do you know what's next?" she asked, stroking it, and Xander nodded.

"Yeah. Next is...when he was turned." Dawn's eyes got wide, but she nodded slowly in return, looking at the driftwood with her head a little to one side.

"That'll be...kinda scary."

"Yeah, I think so too," Xander agreed, and went back to his sanding.
By mid-August he had three pieces finished and a fourth started, and Dawn was starting to complain that he never left the studio - that he looked pale and didn't talk to her anymore. Xander objected that he did leave - he patrolled with Oz and Derio at night - took his turn at shopping for groceries and randomly drove around the city, looking for wood for his next project.

"But that's all you do, Xander! You don't - go to the movies or come shopping with me if I ask or - or go to the clubs with Oz and Derio! You just...do this." Dawn gestured angrily at the statues and the one that Xander had just begun - a figure stretching up, face turned to the sky, another figure nestled in its arms, but also part of it. The demon and William, the souls. Xander stopped with one hand upraised, holding a mallet, chisel in the other braced against the wood. A cedar tree trunk, and he'd planned it so the red core would show through in places - the red was the demon.

"I just...need to do these, Dawn," he said finally, not knowing what else to say. There was hurt fear sad love brother love from her, and Xander slowly put the chisel and mallet down. "Dawn, I... I just... Spike -"
"I know you miss him, Xander but - but you can't just hide! We all miss him." Xander stared at her - reached up and rubbed at the empty socket, because his head was starting to hurt. He didn't wear the patch inside anymore.

"It's not the same, Dawn," he said quietly, and she opened her mouth to say something else - turned abruptly and walked out. After a moment Xander picked up the mallet and chisel again and made another cut, then slowly set the tools aside. He looked at the rough shape in front of him and then got up, restless suddenly, to pace around the studio. He went to the finished pieces, hiding under their draping of old sheets - pulled the sheet off the last one. Spike killing the Slayer in China. It was a figure frozen in motion - a twisting, whirling shape that somehow danced. One arm back, the other extended, fingers open. Turned at the waist so that the torso was at ninety degrees from the feet. One leg bent, as if preparing to leap, one pushing off, elongated, the muscles sharply defined. Sense-memory of long hair curling into his eyes and across his neck, so the figure had that, as well, fanning over its shoulders. Xander ran his hands slowly over the sleek lines of it - over shoulder and hip and thigh - over the clean, curving line of a buttock.
Seeing Spike in his mind, fighting - seeing the graceful, vicious dance never failed to make Xander's heart pound.

*Spike, Spike...so beautiful when you fought... You loved it, and you were like - like the ocean. Like a bird... God, loved to watch you. Loved to see your power and know I could have it in my hands - I could surrender to it or I could master it... You'd let me own you - possess you - move you like a doll but all the time...all the time... I knew you were the stronger one - I knew the power that was in you and you let me...*  Xander shuddered, eye closed, leaning against the oiled flank of the figure, his hand tight on the silky-smooth bulge of a calf. Images flooding him, of Spike - up on the mountain, running through the night. Lying under him, that body of steel cable and bone flexing to his will. Of Spike bending Xander to his design, hands and mouth and tongue and teeth making Xander his willing slave.

*Oh fuck...fuck...*  Xander pulled away with a jerk, his body tingling with desire and frustration, his erection uncomfortable and desperate.  He went back to the new piece - picked up the mallet and chisel and tried to make his hands stop shaking.
Oz sidled in, leaning in the doorway for a moment before coming over and crouching down beside him. "Dawn's worried about you," he said, pack, love you, what is it, what can we do?

"I know." Xander put the tools down again - leaned his head into his hands and just sat there, unwilling to tell Oz the truth. Ashamed. Spike's alone... There's no one... And I'll wait, I can wait, I won't pretend he's here when he's not... Knowing that was stupid but feeling...feeling that somehow he would be indulging himself, when Spike... When Spike might be in torment - in pain. After a few moments Oz's arms came around him and he turned and burrowed into the warmth and almond-musk-wolf scent. Clutched fiercely at the smaller man, trembling.

Oz, I... Can't say it...can't tell her...it's like somebody hacked part of me away - like somebody cut my legs off and every day she's asking me to take her dancing. I have to do this, I have to have some part of him here...under my hands, I HAVE to, I just...CAN'T, I can't stop, Oz...

I know, I know... I'll talk to her. It's all right, Xan... Come to us, let us help. You're...pulling away, again.
"I know," Xander whispered. He sniffed - took a shuddery breath. "I know, it's just... I hate it. I can't stand him not being here, and... When I do this it's like... It's like I'm touching him again. For just a little while. Oz -" Miss him, miss him, miss him, I can't stand this, please...

Shhh...shhh...it's all right... Come on. Come upstairs. Oz got him up - out of the studio. It was dark outside and Xander realized he had no idea what time it was. It had been light when he'd gone in. Dawn was on the computer, typing rapidly and scowling and sister love scared in the link - the feeling that she was talking to Tara, because 'sister' for Buffy was totally different.

Upstairs there were candles burning, as always, and the scents of bay and rose and citrus, lemon oil and cloves were heavy in the air. Derio came out of the music room, loose cotton pants and his dreads still dripping a little water down his chest from a recent bath.

Xander? What is it? It's all right, it's all right, family, pack...love you... Xander couldn't answer him - couldn't make his brain work well enough to form words. Just struggled for a moment and then let it go - let the link
flood with what he was feeling. Anger, pain, frustration, fear, anger, anger, lonely lonely lonely WANT him, want him, miss him, Spike, Spike... They were in Oz and Derio's room now, on the bed, and Oz was holding him and Xander could feel his throat getting tighter and tighter - his chest hitching as he fought for breath.

*It's the only way I can touch him, the only way...not so alone...I'm sorry, I'm sorry* - The dam of misery that the carving had built broke suddenly and he curled into Oz and cried - harsh, racking sobs that hurt, but didn't hurt enough. He wanted - needed - so much more, and Derio was on the bed, too, getting behind him and holding him tight and Oz's hand on his back, mouth on his cheek, on his temple, kissing and whispering and telling him it was all right, all right, Xander, it's all right. But it wasn't and Xander cried until he was coughing - until his head was pounding and the empty socket was weeping thready tears. Derio got a warm towel from the bathroom and he gratefully mopped himself up - sat there hunched and exhausted and still so damn sad. Oz maneuvered him with deft touches onto his feet and out of his clothes - got him into the middle of the bed and then he was surrounded by the wolves - blanketed by their heat and the weight of them, by the wolf-chant in the link and by Derio's hand on his hip, slowly stroking, and Oz's in his
hair, soothing him until his headache gradually eased and he fell asleep.

He woke with a start hours later. A lone candle guttered on the dresser, and the house was silent and still. He could hear the faint sounds of the water in the Duwamish - the distant, echoing honk of a tanker churning towards open water. The ever-present wind that softly rang Tara's wind-chimes, and made the limbs of the chestnut in the yard sigh and rustle. No rain, but the sharp scent of ozone and the sea, and there would be rain by morning. Derio was tight against him, leg over his and arm over his ribs, and Oz was half over him as well; his face pushed into Xander's neck, his arm across Xander's waist and on Derio's hip. Xander lay there, slowing his breathing - trying to remember the dream that had woken him. Because it had been a dream... The details were hazy, but the feeling remained. Spike, holding him - Spike kissing him and touching him, and Xander's body ached - ached with desire too-long denied - a need that seemed to grow stronger every week despite Jack's magic. He wanted, and he couldn't have, and he trembled with the wanting - was painfully hard, his erection trapped under Oz's hip. He began, slowly, to disentangle himself - to get away, and Oz's head lifted sharply, his eyes luminous and wide in the dim, golden
light.

"Xander?"  What, what is it?

"Let me up," Xander whispered, hurting and desperate and somehow ashamed, but Oz stopped him, hand on his cheek.

"Why? Xan -"  It's all right. I know, I know... Let me help. Let me help you. Love you...

No - Oz, I'm not - Oz, I can't -

Yes you can. It's all right. Just...flesh, isn't it? Nothing you haven't shared before...please, Xander, it's all right... Xander wanted it... The physicality he no longer had with Spike was as hurtful as the closed-off link; the empty place in his mind where Spike always had been, whispering and laughing and loving him.

Hurts, it hurts -

I know...it's all right... Just lonely, and we're here, we're here, Xander. Pack, pack, love you,

Love you, sleepy echo from Derio and a slow caress of his
hand and Xander gave in and let them. He lay shivering under their touches - under soft kisses and lightly scratching nails and teeth that never broke the skin. Slowly turning and touching them back - tentatively at first and then greedily - desperately - so starved for skin-on-skin he felt almost sick with it. Harsh breaths, gasping for air - slickness of tongue and lips on his body, slickness of arousal and the taste of Oz and Derio in his mouth; salty-sweet, pepper and lemon and almonds. He moaned softly, spread wide under them, drinking their touch as thirstily as a desert plant and Oz, fingers deft and clever and all right, is this all right? Will you let me, Xan, let me, querido...

And then Oz was pushing slowly in, heat and pulsing heartbeat that was so different - so alien - and Derio pushing belly to belly, his hands sliding over both of them, his mouth on Xander's. The link wide-open, full of love and comfort and want - full of the bonds of the family - the pack - that were like the most insubstantial of spider webs, but would never, ever break. Xander panted and groaned and clutched at them - cried wordlessly into Derio's shoulder when Oz moved harder - faster. Shuddered at the feeling of orgasm moving through the link - through the three of them - impossible to tell where it started or ended, and who was first, who
was last. Afterwards he felt lighter then he had in days, and he slept dreamlessly between the wolves, secure in his family. But he woke to guilt, and lay there in the tangled limbs and sheets for a long time, trying to puzzle it out.

*Spike...I'm sorry. It's no excuse, being lonely. Should never...not without you. You're alone... Spike, Spike...forgive me, love...*

___________________

querido - beloved

33 Homecoming

The phone was ringing and Xander groped for it, his heart pounding and his hands sweating already. *Three in the damn morning, can ONLY be bad news* -
"Hello?" he croaked, and distantly, he could hear the phone in Oz's room ringing, too. *Oh, god, WHAT?*

"Xander? Xander, is that you?" A reedy voice - static-riddled and tired sounding, and Xander propped himself up on one elbow, trying to figure out who it was. Plummy 'Giles' sort of accent.

"Yeah? Who -"

"Oh, Xander, it's Aunt Portia!" Static drowned out the next words, and then her voice came back, loud and strong and Xander winced. "...seven pounds and four ounces, tiny thing!"

"What? A-aunt Portia -" Drake's Aunt! Right...*what in hell?* "There was some static on the line, what did you say?"

"I said -" Portia bellowed - and a woman who'd worked in the sun and wind of Egypt and the Sudan for forty years, directing hired help to dig up the desert could really bellow - and Xander almost dropped the phone. "Anyas had her baby! A girl, seven pounds and four ounces, two weeks late!"
"Oh. Oh! Oh, that's great, that's - congratulations! Is Anya okay? Is -"

"She's fine!" Portia continued at the top of her lungs and Xander glanced up to see Dawn in the doorway, eyes half-shut and her own phone to her ear and Anya's had her baby, in the link from a muddled-sounding Oz. "They've named the poor thing Alice Magdalena Sunny - Sunny for Sunnydale and all her good friends there, Anya says. Daft thing. D'ya hear me, Xander?"

"I hear you, Aunt Portia! That's - that's great, tell Anya we love her and - and to call us soon -" He could hear Dawn telling someone to email a picture and then Portia had to 'ring off and call the twins, somewhere in Malaysia, should be awake -' and the phone went dead. There was a thump and then Oz was in the doorway as well, grinning sleepily, leaning against Derio.

"Who'd you get?" Oz asked.

"Portia," Xander said, wincing and rubbing his ear. "Who'd you get?"

"Grandpa Arthur. He was babbling. Dawn?"
"Huh?" Dawn blinked and jerked her head up, looking dazed. "Oh - I got that cousin - the one that was here before? Tad. Or Tod...some - ahhhhhh - thing." Dawn yawned hugely and shut her eyes.

"Jar of moonshine in the kitchen from that guy with the guitars," Oz said thoughtfully, and Dawn's eyes popped open.

"A toast to Alice -?" Xander paused, trying to remember.

"Magdalena," Derio mumbled, rubbing his chin through Oz's tangled shock of purple hair.

"Sunny," Dawn said, and they all looked at each other for a few seconds and then started to giggle.

"I'll get the glasses," Xander said, shoving back the covers. The moonshine was as sharp and biting as liquid fire and Dawn coughed for two whole minutes. But the baby was wished long life and much happiness on the first day of September.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*
November was a cold and windy month - a blustery month, Oz said, and Xander liked that word - blustery. He spent most of it carving and wood-scouting, and the eight statues in the studio were like a strange garden that he wandered through. Sometimes by sunlight but more often by candle-light; unless he was working and then he sweated in the glare of a halogen light. His single eye, he had discovered, got strained in dim light more quickly then two ever had. When he was too stiff to carve, and the wolves were busy - and Dawn was in class or growling at him from her desk, surrounded by mounds of books and papers - he'd go for long walks all along the edge of the Duwamish, or all over Downtown or Discovery Park. A couple of times, unable to sleep, he'd taken the first ferry up to Victoria and walked around on Canadian soil for a day, some tiny part of himself marveling at the city-boy that now had a need for earth and open sky, water and wind and no other people. The wolves' sensibilities creeping in maybe, or that night on Mt. Rainer, that came back to him often in his dreams. Making the hyena restless until he found a bit of open space and could breathe free. The ache of missing Spike seemed less, out there - as if the hyena could cope with it better, or transform it. Remembering...didn't hurt as much. So he indulged
himself and came home in the dark, wind-burned and chilly, his mind eager to get back to his carving but his body, sometimes, too tired.

"You're thin, Xander," Derio said, frowning at him - standing behind him in the bathroom while he shaved. Looking critically at the ripple of rib-cage and the sharp wing of shoulder-blade and hip-bone above the towel. "You're too thin."

"I'm all right," Xander said, rinsing the razor out and putting it away - washing his face off and looking in the mirror, too - seeing nothing different but the socket of his eye and the length of his hair, that was past his shoulder-blades now and gleaming with dark-red highlights from all the sun he was getting. No tan on his face because Dawn had drilled sunblock into him all summer and it was habit, now - plus it helped with the chapping wind that blew in and in off the sea.

"You're not. Xan - c'mon down and have some breakfast. Oz made French toast and bacon, even." Breakfast at one in the afternoon, but that was how this household worked.

"Sure," Xander said, smiling - dressing and cinching his
belt down tight, layering a wife-beater under a thermal under a flannel because he was chilly, sitting in the studio. And the fluffy, wooly socks Dawn had got that he had to use the shop-vac on, because they tended to attract every twist and flake of wood off the floor.

The kitchen was steamy with tea and coffee and bacon-grease - good smells and good flavors, but Xander barely finished one piece of toast and only nibbled at the bacon, not as hungry as he'd thought. Derio watched him, hawk-like and _Xan, please, it's good, c'mon_, in the link. Dawn was half-hidden behind a textbook and Oz ate slowly, one hand rubbing up and down Derio's thigh, his own eyes flickering from Xander's plate to his face again and again, until Xander finally stood up, pushing his chair back harder then he intended.

"I'm just not hungry right now, okay?" he snapped, and Dawn's head came up as if on a string and her eyes fixed on him, narrow and angry. "Are you ever hungry? That's not going to help, Xander!"

"Jesus, what the fuck? I'm not gonna shove food down my throat if I don't want it, Dawn." Xander took his plate to the trash and scraped it clean - stuck plate and fork in the sink and retrieved his coffee-cup. It was only
lukewarm now and he grimaced and dumped it, not wanting it. *Just want some water, just want - some fresh air, gonna go for a walk -*

"Stay in today," Oz said, just there next to him, faded-violet hair contrasting oddly with his eyes, his skin porcelain-fine and nearly translucent in the mellowing mid-afternoon light. "Come watch a movie with us - we were gonna revisit the wonderful world of Willy Wonka." Oz grinned, and Xander had to smile back - had the sudden urge to hug the werewolf so he did. The hug just...lasted, and after awhile they were on the fold-out couch, the four of them in a puppy-heap of plaid throws and pillows, cheering on Charlie and Grandpa and yelling out Veruca Salt's whiney 'Daddy, I want -!' lines along with her.

*Better than a walk,* Oz thought, hugging him a little closer.

*Yeah, okay...better,* Xander thought, and *love brothers love love,* like a ray of warming sunlight from Dawn. He ended up falling asleep and woke to Derio curled, wolf-form, at his back, keeping him warm. Oz in the kitchen, cooking again, Dawn off to class and he ate this time. Not enough for Derio but enough. His fingers were
twitchy, though, and he was in the studio until patrol-time. That night, as he did about every ten nights, he went to bed with the wolves, and shuddered and writhed guiltily - desperately - under their coaxing, gentle hands.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Six years gone for Spike, seven coming fast-but-not-fast-enough. Xander stood staring at the calendar in the kitchen, where December sixteenth was circled in thick, bright red. Will it be midnight of the fifteenth or midnight the sixteenth? Dawn or - dusk? When, when, when...and WHERE? Not the Hellmouth, it's gone, so... Damnit, Jack, didn't tell us enough... Five days until Spike came home. Five days until this was all over, and Xander's nerves were fraying fast - his hands were stiff and sore from clutching carving knife or sandpaper, and the wolves were both on edge. Dawn was nervous, too, but she had finals as well as Spike coming home and had resorted to headphones and flannel pajamas in an effort to both comfort and distract herself.

Oz and Derio had gone out early on some sort of elusive equipment-finding trawl through the pawn shops of Seattle and Xander was contemplating going out and
getting dim sum - there was a place not six blocks away - when the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside made him go to the front door. A pale blue sedan was parked there, with a U-Haul trailer behind it and - Tara - getting out of the driver's side, stretching hard, Cordy getting out of the passenger side, waving and smiling. Xander darted outside and jogged down the walk, feeling a grin stretching his mouth wide.

"Tara? What are - what's going on?" Xander asked, meeting her at the hood of the car and grabbing her into a hard hug.

"Hey, Xander -" Tara hugged back - smiled up at him, her blonde hair wisping into her face from a messy ponytail. "I just... I'm m-moving back." Xander stared at her and then he hugged her, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around, laughing.

"You are? Is everything okay? Did Angel do something? God - I'm so glad!" He finally put her down, reluctant to let go, love you brother family rippling out from Tara, warm and sweet.

Oz! Derio, Tara's back, she's back home!
What? Why? We're coming - Oz, faint but there, and Xander laughed.

"The wolves are coming. Tell me what the deal is." Tara looked nervous and Xander squeezed her shoulder a little.

"The deal is there's luggage," Cordy interrupted, straightening up with Connor in her arms and a carry-all slung over her shoulder.

"Uncle Xan, Uncle Xan!" Connor was wiggling - struggling - and Xander held out his hands, taking him from Cordy and swinging him around before setting him on his feet. Connor grabbed his legs and hugged. "Missed you! We drove all night! Wanna drink - Uncle Xan, we drove all night!"

"You did?" Xander asked, stroking the bright blond head and looking at Cordelia, who looked - tired. She nodded and turned back to the car, saying something quietly to Tara, who was pulling a bag out of the back seat.

"We did! And Auntie Tara sang songs about woods and stuff and me an' mommy played Slug-bug an' we ate Jack in the Box two times!" Connor was leaning back now,
fists in Xander's pant-legs, swinging wildly as he chattered. Xander leaned away a little, bracing himself, smiling down at Connor and swiveling his leg a little so Connor got maximum swing.

"Wow! Two times! Better go tell Auntie Dawn."

"Auntie Dawn's here?"

"Of course she's here, she lives here!" Cordy swooped down and grabbed Connor, kissing his neck noisily and Connor shrieked and squirmed away - ran up the walk and up the steps, yelling for Dawn.

"So what's going on, ladies?" Xander asked quietly, taking a bulging string bag from Tara's hands and another from Cordy.

"Lots of stuff. Can we - let's talk inside, okay? Are O-oz and Derio almost here?" Brother still in the link, but worry too, and a little fear, and Xander nodded slowly.

"Okay, sure... Inside. The wolves..." Where?

Ten minutes - oops! Didn't want that drink, anyway. Eight minutes. Mental laughter and a
cranberry juice stain on the atrocious upholstery of the van. Xander grinned at Tara.

"They sacrificed juice for you. They're almost here."

"What?" But Tara was laughing, because it just felt good, to be standing there - family again, almost perfect. He shouldered the bags and Tara pulled a pet-carrier out of the car, cooing softly to Miss Kitty, who looked pissed off.

"Hey, Miss Kitty," Xander said, and she said 'mwuuuuur' in the most pitiful tone imaginable. "Sinclair's missed you," he added, looking straight at Tara. She nodded sadly and they went inside, tension layering on tension because why would Tara be afraid? Connor was squealing, on his back on the couch with Dawn alternately tickling and squashing him.

"Help! Uncle Xan, help!" Connor yelped, breathless, and Xander swung the bags down, ushering Tara and Cordy towards the kitchen.

"Nope! I'm skeered of Auntie Dawn!" Dawn growled and pounced again and Connor rolled off the couch, he was laughing so hard.
"If he pees his pants, you have to clean him up!" Cordy yelled, then walked into the kitchen with an exclamation of pleasure. "Oh! Wow, it really looks nice! Where's Tara's room? She's talked our ears off about the herb room."

"Here -" Tara showed off her still-room, her hands touching lightly at bowls and plants and the many-drawerled cabinets Xander had made for her, the link settling and her whole self becoming more relaxed. More...at home. She's home... And that felt so good.

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"So - what's he going to do?" Xander asked, slowly eating a last mouthful of rice, watching Cordy wipe Connor's face off. They'd gotten dim sum, after all, and everyone had crowded around the big kitchen table, eating and talking - catching up. Listening to Cordelia's story about L.A. and a law firm called Wolfram and Hart, and the lengths they were going to to get Angel to join them. Or to kill him.
"He..." Cordelia stopped wiping - kissed Connor on the nose and he blinked sleepily back at her, smiling. "I don't know. He's running Wes and Fred ragged, researching - trying to find out - anything. And he and Gunn are all over the city, every night, trying to make deals. To find..."

"Allies?" Oz asked softly, and Cordy nodded. The Sidhe gift, that allowed her the visions without the pain showed through more clearly when she was tired. A certain angularity to her features that hadn't been there before. A certain fey aura that Xander didn't need the seeing to detect. Her eyes had a moon-beam sheen to them in the candle-lit room, and she moved with a fluidity that was beautiful to see. But there were still tiny lines of stress around her eyes, and her knuckles were chapped from washing up after Connor.

"Yeah. I wanted to ask... Do you think Mr. Giles would help? Do you think...the Council?"

"Course they will," Dawn said, and there was steel in her voice. "The Pembrokes are different than all those old bastards that attacked Buffy. We'll call 'em right now - Giles is always up." Dawn was up and out of her seat, grabbing her cell off the charger and Cordy just grinned.
"I knew there was a reason I liked you better than Buffy," she said. Connor wiggled out of his chair and trotted over to Derio, who scooted back and held his hands when they went straight for the winking beads and trinkets in his dreads. He made Connor clap his hands and sock himself in the chin, light as a feather, while Connor giggled and struggled.

"Uncle Der-o, be the wolf! Wanna play with the wolf! Please please please Uncle Der-o?"

"What? You're not scared of the wolf?" Derio asked, and Connor shook his head hard.

"No! Please?"

"Dawn's right," Xander said, watching Oz catch Connor up and hug him while Derio stepped into the laundry room to strip. "The Pembroke's are...really cool. I'm sure they can help." Cordy sighed, her chin on her fist, watching Connor with an almost desperate gaze.

"You know - when I first met Angel he was just - this gorgeous guy, you know? This different guy. And all he saw was Buffy and...all I saw was him." Cordy smiled a
little - laughed softly as Derio trotted out of the laundry room, wolf-form, and Connor squealed in excitement and slithered out of Oz's arms, running full-tilt into the wolf. Derio sat down and let Connor - whose head came just to his shoulder - hug him and step on his paws. After a moment Derio stood up again with Connor triumphantly astride his back.

"Hold on tight, Connor - hold on to his fur!" Cordy called, and Connor was grinning like a jack-o-lantern, eyes locked on Derio's ears.

"I'm riding him! I'm riding the wolf! Mommy, look! Uncle Xan, look! I'm riding the wolf!"

"We see you, baby boy," Cordy called, as Oz opened the kitchen door and Derio strode serenely out into the back yard, Oz following behind and Connor bouncing now, kicking his heels.

*Expect a looong massage, later,* Derio thought, and Oz laughed, pulling gently on the heavy, fringed tail.

"Anya, that's great but I need to talk to Giles, okay?" Dawn walked through, snagging a fortune cookie, rolling her eyes. Anya always had baby news - more than even
the most tolerant of baby-lovers could absorb, usually, and Xander grinned in sympathy and then turned back to Cordelia, who was slowly stacking plates and gathering silverware together.

"Yeah, I get that you...had a crush, Cordy," Xander said, stacking empty containers, and Cordy shook her head slowly.

"It wasn't so much a crush as... I just wanted to have something, you know? Somebody. I mean - I was Queen C and I had my...court, but... I didn't really have anybody - not anybody that cared about me more than they cared about my dad's money. " Cordelia stood up and carried the dishes to the sink - got some water running and Xander cleared the rest of the table, stuffing the little white and red boxes into the big paper bag they'd come in and shoving it all in the trash - going over with cups and glasses and showing Cordelia where the dish soap was.

"And then there was you -" Cordy looked over at him and smiled - the old smile, that she'd given him once or twice when they were dating. That fond and happy smile that, once upon a time, Xander had lived and died for. That now only reminded him of the same smile on
Spike's face, and made his heart twist painfully in his chest. "I really screwed that up, Xander," Cordelia said softly, and Xander stared at her in surprise. "I didn't realize - until it was way too late - how special you were. How special you made me feel." Xander didn't know what to say to that - leaned over and kissed her cheek, softly, smelling witch-hazel and saffron and rosemary.

"Always be special to me, Cordy," he said, low, and Cordy sniffed and smiled - nodded her head and stuck the forks and knives into the soapy, hot water in the sink.

"Yeah. And now - Angel is...that. Angel is the one that makes me feel...so special and Connor... God, Xander - if anything happens to Connor I don't - I don't know -"

"Shhhh - Cordy, hey -" Xander grabbed her and hugged her hard, and for a moment Cordelia just clung to him, shuddering.

"Cordy, I've got Giles on the phone - come on and tell him what you told us!" Dawn called from the other room and Cordelia slowly pulled away - took the dish-towel off Xander's shoulder and dried her hands.
"Thanks, Xander. I -"

"Yeah, I know. Go on," Xander said. He wiped the tears off her cheeks with the towel and shooed her towards the living room and she took a deep breath and lifted her chin - so much herself, and strode into the living room.

"Giles! Have I got a story to tell you..." Xander smiled after her, and found the dishrag, and started washing.

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"So why'd you really come home, Tara?" Cordelia and Connor were tucked snugly into the spare room, and Dawn was passed out on her books downstairs. Xander and the wolves had got the last of Tara's things upstairs and now they were all piled on the bed, worshipful court at their Queen's feet. The cats were running in and out, still a little skittish of each other. Tara smiled tiredly at them and ran a finger down Xander's arm to his hand - curled her hand into his.

"You know I really...like Fred. I think I - love her." She glanced up at them, curtain of blonde hair and quickly lowered eyes and Xander squeezed her hand
encouragingly.

"Yeah? That's - isn't that good?"

"It's good," Tara said, then took a deep breath. "But...I don't love her, not like..." Like Willow, all unspoken. "And I don't like living in L.A. I really m-miss you guys." There was a moment's silence and then Xander was hugging her, and Derio was trying to, and Tara was laughing a little, confused. "What?"

"I'm sorry Tara but...we're glad," Oz said, getting his own hug.

"Missed you," Xander confirmed, not letting go. "We wanted you home. Is it - awful?" Tara was smiling - bright smile and wet eyes, and she hugged them all back fiercely.

"No - it's not awful. And I w-wanted to be here for - for when Spike comes home," she finished softly, and there were small noises of agreement from all of them.

Family now, pack pack pack, all good, love you all, love you, Xander thought, and he felt - for the first time in
that long and awful year - as if things were finally going to be all right.

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The sixteenth came - and passed - and Xander hadn't eaten, hadn't slept. The whole household was silent - frozen - just waiting. The link was a wordless ache, and Dawn - finals done - spent her time going from the wolves to Tara to Xander, doing her best to comfort and begging, silently, for comfort of her own. The knowing was over them all, and Derio was pale, with dark circles under his eyes and he never stopped pacing, pacing, pacing.

*What is it, what's coming, where IS he? Spike, Spike, Spike...* The constant thrum and friction of whatever was stirring was wearing them all down, and Xander knew if something didn't happen soon he was going to snap. And something was stirring - he could feel it - they all could. He could feel the hyena waiting; so tense and ready that it hurt. The eighteenth came and then ticked over midnight into the nineteenth and suddenly Derio stopped, lifting his head. A storm had been working its way inland all day and now it broke over them; rain and
wind and thunder - lightning blue-white and dazzling. The few lights they had on went off, between one shock of thunder and the next and the candle-glow was eerie and confining - threatening. Sinclair was yowling like a lost soul - like a banshee - and Miss Kitty was under the couch.

"Dawn -" Xander said, holding out his hand and she hurried to him - got behind him when he pushed and the wolves were already half-changed, circling restlessly. Tara was chanting softly, pouring power into the wards and they sparked up bright all around the house - will-o'-the-wisp glimmer around every door and window - around the whole foundation, new and old.

"It's close, it's close, it's -" Not Jack, not Scavenger, what, what-? Derio whined, wolfish bewilderment and the wind gusted; rain like pebbles battering the house. And something else, flying at the front door, solid weight like a bird or a cat. It clung there, outlined in the ward-fire - strangely elongated and making a hissing noise as tiny fists battered at the screen.

Jesus, do I -?

Let it in, it's all right, it's - Derio was rigid, watching it,
and Xander moved slowly to the front door and opened it - cracked the screen. The creature ducked around and flew inside, chittering. It circled the room once and then perched on top of the tallest bookcase, looking down at them. Obviously ill at ease and soaking wet, besides. Sinclair spat, hissing furiously, and fled upstairs. They all just stared blankly for a moment, and then Tara stood up slowly, her hands out.

"You're welcome here. We won't harm you. Do you - h-have a m-message for us?" The creature - long and skinny, a hairless cat with a disturbingly human face - launched itself from the bookcase and flew on tissue-thin wings straight at Tara. Inches from her it pulled up and hovered, and Xander realized that it was female, and had a tail and talons on its primate-looking hands. It was just barely twelve inches, over all, but the gauzy wings were twice that, nearly transparent and pulsing with veins.

"She sends, She sends, She, She, She!" the thing lisped, and Tara nodded slowly.

"What - what is the message?" Tara asked, voice impossibly quiet - almost drowned in the raging storm that continued to batter at them.
She? Does it - she - mean the Queen? Or the - the other one or - where the fuck is SPIKE?

Calm, calm, just a messenger, just a - homing pigeon, Oz said, and Xander clenched his fists and nodded. Dawn was sketching surreptitiously in a notebook, her eyes enormous, and Derio was crouching beside her, looking ready to spring. Xander felt Oz's hand in the small of his back and he tried to just...wait.

"Scavenger comes - he has the news - do what he says - two days! Two days." The creature flicked up and then down and then sideways, like a hovering dragonfly and Tara nodded slowly.

"He'll tell us - in two days - what to do? For...Spike?"

"Sssssspiiiiiiiiiiike...." the thing hissed, its face twisting in what might be a smile or a snarl and Xander felt his heart lurch - his stomach drop. "Yesyesyes. Now there is cake. Scavenger said cake."

"Yes, there's cake," Tara said faintly, and got up and moved slowly to the kitchen. The creature - the fairy? - followed her, humming around her head.
"What - the fuck - is going on?" Xander couldn't catch his breath - couldn't actually see, the hyena was so enraged. Everything was a grey-washed tunnel, with *pack pack pack* the only thing that made sense. He wanted to rip throats and bellies open wide until he found *mate mate mine Spike mine mine MINE!*

"Xander -" Oz's hands on him - around him - and he turned and buried his face in the familiar scent and taste of the wolf - felt Derio's heat and weight behind him, and then Dawn crowding close as well.

"Fuckin' kill him, kill Jack, what the fuck -" He didn't think he could survive two more days without knowing. Tara came back into the room, holding a paper towel to her finger. The fairy had a lump of pound-cake in its front - paws? It was eating hungrily and the hyena smelled blood, and roared.

"It's okay! Xander, it's okay -" Tara was holding his arm hard, other hand to his face, and Xander stared at her - at the creature, who was baring its teeth. "It's how you do it. It's just a drop of blood, it's okay," Tara said, trying to sooth him. He glared at the creature, who made a gruesome face back, huge eyes like amber lamps and long, predator-sharp teeth.
"What's going on, you?" he snapped. The fairy swallowed the last of the blood-stained cake - licked itself, too catlike to be real.

"War, it's war, Ssspike'sss," it hissed, and then it was gone, flitting out the screen door and seeming to take the storm with it. The rain settled to the usual relentless drum - the thunder rattled rapidly away and they all slumped to the floor, exhausted - heartsick.

"Sounds like Spike," Oz said, shaky voice - shaky joke - and it was laugh or cry. They laughed.

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Two days, Tara had pointed out, was the Solstice night and that seemed to make everything worse. The longest night of the year - magic and otherness and secrets - and when a shadow with red-glowing eyes appeared at the door Xander pounced, snatching Scavenger inside and slamming him into a wall. The pooka snarled, aspect shifting, and Xander slammed him back again - rapped his head into the wall and growled, and Oz and Derio were right there behind him.
"What the fuck is going on? Where's Spike? What has Jack done?" he grated, and Scavenger sagged in his grip, not fighting. Not standing, and Xander watched dispassionately as the pooka slumped, sliding down the wall. There was blood on his face - dirt, or soot - and a raveling bandage on his arm.

"It's war, Alex-an-der. The...pixie said, didn't she? War."

"I don't give a fuck for your wars!" Xander crouched down and grabbed the raveling sweater Scavenger was wearing, jerking him close - letting the hyena rise up. Watching the shift of unease in the pooka's eyes with satisfaction. "Jack said Spike would come back - the same as he was - a year and a day! Where is he! Jack lied."

"No - didn't lie. He came back." Scavenger held very, very still and Xander was aware, just barely, of Tara behind him, and Dawn - of a sword-point coming over his shoulder and coming to a stop in inch or so from Scavenger's face. The pooka hissed and tried to twist away from it - from the iron that hurt him - but Xander leaned on him, hard, making him be still.
"Where. The fuck. IS HE."

"Ss-seelie Court! He's - in the Seelie Court. When - they let him go, out of hell, Jack was there, and the Queen. She wanted to - to see the one that hell had given up so much for and she - wanted him. She t-told Jack he could come back to the Seelie Court if he got S-spike to come to her."

"He wouldn't stay there -" Xander gasped out, his whole body singing as if he'd been hit - as if he'd fallen down a flight of stairs.

"No, he - he wouldn't, he didn't - Jack put a g-glamour on him. Said he was free of hell and l-like he was and that fulfilled his - pact so then - he -"

"Shut up," Xander choked out, and the pooka's mouth snapped shut, his eyes very wide.

"Can he do that? Is - is that -"

"He can," a new voice said, and they all jerked - looked around wildly, searching. Another figure - much like Scavenger but thinner - blond - crouched in the doorway, leaning on the wards as Drusilla had leaned on the
barrier before.

"Wing -" Scavenger moaned, and the other shot a look at him, eyes like blazing white fire.

"He can, he could, he did. Now they have him in the Wild Hunt, and tonight he consummates his marriage to the Queen. And the She has lost her consort, and the She...is at war."

"Say it again - explain it again!" Xander snapped, jerking Scavenger towards the point of the sword that - Xander finally realized - Dawn was holding.

"The Queen of Air and Darkness had a king - and he fell in love with the Queen of the Seelie Court, and he made a bargain, and he was hers. But she lost interest and sent him back again and he - he has plotted and planned to get her back - to have her back." Scavenger's eyes flicked from sword-point to Xander's face, his skin ashen, his whole body trembling from the poisonous iron. "He thought she would take him back for this - for the easing of the tithe, but she's taking another - she's taking Spike, and she'll never want him again - she's giving him to her Court. And the She - wants her own back. Wants Jack back."
"How do I get my own back? That's all I care about god damnit, Scavenger -" The pooka held up a shaking hand, shivering hard as the sword eased closer yet and Derio snapped at him, wolfish fangs and jaws.

"Ride. Ride with me. North - to the Hunt. You'll see the Court - you'll see them all and you'll see him, and you must take him and hold him and not let go, Alex-an-der, not let go no matter what, do you understand? No matter what is said, no matter what is done." Xander stared at him - felt despair and anger welling up in him so high that he was close to just killing the pooka right there - not even sure if he could, but he wanted to, oh god.

Xander, no - think - Oz pushing something at him, image - image of Drusilla and her new companion - Drusilla leaning on the barrier and the wards flaring up around her.

"You, mind your book and mind your heart and take the Slayer's skin when you're called to go riding. That's the only way you'll see your love again."

She knew - she knew, she knew, god - Xander stood up abruptly, pulling the pooka to his feet, pushing the
sword-blade gently aside. "I know what I have to do - and you're taking me there. Where are you taking me? They're going to meet us there -" he said, gesture back towards his family and Scavenger took a hard breath and nodded.

"It's north - north, the park by the Hill, by the grove of the dead -"

"Interlaken?" Derio asked, and the pooka nodded.

"Lay lines - power, there. She can ride out and ride in, and then he's hers. We have to hurry, Alex-an-der."

"Yeah. Oz - you guys go! Get there and maybe - Tara -"

"I'll do what I can," Tara said, and turned and ran towards the still-room. Dawn was yanking on the old work-boots by the door and Oz had taken the sword and Xander suddenly turned and ran himself, pounding up the stairs.

"Wait -!" the pooka shouted, but Xander ignored him. *Skin of the Slayer. His coat - Spike's coat. Has to be. God -* Xander stumbled into the bedroom and yanked open the closet door - pulled out the coat. He
held it for one moment, the feel of it, the scent of it flooding him with *Spike mate mine family mine mine*. And then he pulled it on and ran, down to the pooka and the night.

Scavenger was on the porch and he leaped to the yard as Xander came out - changed, in a flurry of blackness and coal-red sparks and the horse that he became bowed down, foreleg bending - offering its back. Xander climbed on awkwardly - looked down to see the pale, blond Sidhe - Wing - looking up at him.

"You'll not fall off a pooka's back if he wants you to stay on. When you see your Spike, you must take and hold and not let go. And when he is himself again, cover him with that coat. Do not speak, do not falter. All rides on this, all hinges on this," the Sidhe said, hugging itself as if it were cold and Scavenger shifted, stamping.

"Why? Why does it all hinge on - on me? And Spike?"

"Pacts have been broken. Things have shifted. If they fight - it will be a war the heavens have not seen for a hundred million years. The She will fight for it all back. Ride now! Scavenger, run!" Scavenger half-reared up and Xander saw Tara and Dawn and the wolves
running to the van - getting in and the headlights flicking on. The pale Sidhe ran as well, towards the Duwamish and leapt and dove, transmuting as he went into something sleek and pale - seal, or whale, or snake, Xander couldn't tell.

And then Scavenger was running flat out, heading north, skimming water and earth as if they were nothing - muscles like iron under Xander's thighs and he bent down low, hands fisted tight in a mane of silk and smoke. The patch whipped away in the wind and he buried his face, Oz and Derio in the link, the string of beads burning his chest. Going to get Spike.

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They stopped somewhere in dense woods - it was dark, and the storm had come muttering back while Scavenger ran, and Xander was lost. He slid stiffly down and the pooka shifted, human again, naked. He grabbed Xander's arm in a steel grip and pulled him down.

"They're coming. All along here. Hide, and let them pass by until you see Spike. He's on a white horse," Scavenger whispered, and then they simply waited. Long
moments passed, and Xander felt his body trembling - his breath tightening in his chest. He chanted the wolf-chant softly softly in his head; his fingers on the beads and his eye open wide, trying to see in near-blackness. There was water somewhere nearby, moving lightly and quickly.

Safe? See him? from Oz, and Xander shook his head.

No - I don't - Oz, god -I... Wait - wait, there's - He stared, straining his eye - shaped the seeing-word with his lips and felt Scavenger's fingers, hot and dry, on his mouth.

"No, must not. They'll feel it. Just wait," Scavenger murmured and Xander subsided. There was a pale blue-green light coming from somewhere to the right of them, and as he watched Xander saw the shapes of horses slowly emerge from the blackness. Black horses and brown ones and grey, all sparkling like glass figures in a shop-window. The people on their backs were tall - thin - beautiful, and Xander stared as they rode past, sending the images to the wolves.

God - the Queen - that's her - Xander thought, as Scavenger stiffened beside him and a woman on the back
of a dancing grey horse rode past. She was pale as snow, with long silver-white hair done up in braids and loops and falls. She was like ice and fire together and Xander felt...small. Grubby.

No. Hero. Spike's Knight! His love and his life and his own, Xander - do you see him? Oz, growling through the link and Xander blinked and looked again.

"Where is he? I don't see him!" he whispered frantically to Scavenger and the pooka shot him a look - pointed with a shaking hand. A white horse - a man on its back. Black trousers and boots, a shimmering white shirt and a brocade coat like Jack's, blood red. And a fall of long, dark hair oiled into ringlets and held back by a band of silver and ruby. Another Sidhe.

"That's not -" Xander started, and then he looked, and it was - it was.

Spike! Spike, my god, that's - Spike! "He can't hear me!"

"It's the glamour! Go, now!" Scavenger pushed him, hard, and Xander leaped up and ran - ran to the line of horses and Sidhe, to the still, pale figure on the white horse that rode as the others did - eyes only for the
Queen. He reached up and grabbed fistfuls of leather and brocade and silk and pulled, and with a small cry of surprise Spike toppled off the horse and onto him. Xander's breath was knocked out of him and he lay there, clutching Spike so hard it hurt, gasping for air. He buried his face in Spike's neck, searching for something - anything. And found it.

*Scar. That's the claim. Oh GOD, Spike - Spike, wake up!* Xander's breath whooped back into him and under the smells of horse and rain and mud and myrrh, he could smell Spike. Blood and cloves, and he felt tears in his eye.

"Spike?" he whispered, and Spike lifted his head.

"Oh, you do not dare," a cold voice said, and Xander looked up at the Queen of the Seelie Court and Spike twisted, convulsing - screaming. And then he wasn't holding Spike anymore. He was holding a hot, heavy body - stink of sweat and cheap wine - of Aqua Velva.

"You've done nothing but disappoint the both of us. Just one long string of regrets and sorrow. You're a sorry excuse for a son - for a man - for a human -" Xander shuddered in revulsion but hugged the man close -
buried his face in the sour flesh of the joweled neck and hung on. A cough - a convulsive heave - and the body shivered and changed and shrank.

"Why'd you do it, Xander? Why'd you do it? I thought we were friends - I thought you loved me! You didn't even give me a chance - not a chance -"

"Jesse, oh god -" Xander hugged the wiry body closer - sucked in boy-scent and soda-sweetness and tears. *Not him, it's not him, Xander - pack, pack, pack* - Oz's voice, whisper in his head and Xander shuddered - held on. *Hold fast, hold fast, we're coming, querido!* Another shuddering twist of the body in his arms and Xander smelled blood - blood and old wine and something musky-sharp and that drawling, hated voice -

"What is it that you see NOW, sinner? What do you see? I see an empty heart - an empty house - an empty life. Forever's too long to ask of an angel, don't you think? Flawed and imperfect and MAIMED that you are -"

"Fuck you!" Xander gasped, teeth gritted and his hands like claws in the black coat of Caleb's priest-garb. But he held on tight as the man fought him - as iron hands
scrabbled at his face. "You're not him, you're Spike and I'm not letting go!"

"Let go, oh, let go, let go..." a new voice sighed, and the body he was holding cooled - thinned - became softly feminine and Dru's dark hair foamed across his mouth - her legs twined with his and her scent of church incense and jasmine filled his nostrils. "I've had him for a century and more - I MADE him, I chose him - I can UNMAKE him, sweet little boy - kitten without claws... I KNOW him, sweetling, like you NEVER will...my poet, my sweet William -"

"No, you gave him up! You left him and I took him and he's mine! You hear me?" Xander crushed Drusilla to him - lifted his head and let the hyena roar its rage and terror. "He is mine! I chose him - I love him - I want him and I will not let him go!" Then he let his face drop into cool, white flesh and bit, hard and deep. Drusilla screamed - writhed - shrank in his arms and suddenly Xander wasn't holding an animal or a human - he was holding fire, that danced along his arms and face and burned like acid. He screamed, clutching it closer - felt a hand in his back pushing him and he staggered up and ran; stumbled and fell and rolled through wet leaves and mud and a crunching dead bush and suddenly into
water. The fire hissed like a thousand snakes and his arms were empty. Gravel dug into his elbows and knees - into his shoulder and he scrabbled madly.

"Spike!" His hands found something in the darkness - ice-cold flesh. An arm - a shoulder - and Xander was grabbing Spike and hauling him up - stumbling backwards and falling onto the gravel and dirt edge of the stream, falling on his butt and almost knocking the wind out of himself again. He twisted, Spike like a lifeless doll in his arms as he fought to get the duster off. Hands were at his shoulders, suddenly - hands and someone yanking - pulling - and the duster slithered free and Xander flung it over Spike. Over a Spike who was naked and still, and far too thin - far too cold.

"Spike - Spike - wake up, love, please - Spike -" Xander pulled him closer yet, tucking the duster around Spike's ribs and shoulders - aware of Oz and Derio, of Tara and Dawn crouching not far away. And Scavenger, half in the water, mud on his hands, his eyes like scarlet fire. Light was coming closer - cold and white-blue, and the Queen sat there, astride her horse. Shining like a star or a firefly, staring down at him with her lips drawn back in a snarl. Xander looked back at Spike - at the mud on his face and the leaves tangled in the impossible, knotted
hair. He gently stroked Spike's face - his lips - leaned down and kissed him, tasting iron and water and something like lemon, and nothing else.

"Spike -" he whispered. There was a sudden shift under his hands - a heaving of ribs and belly, and Spike's eyes opened wide, staring at him. He lay there, utterly still; blinking once, slowly, when something fell onto his face. A tear, that landed on his cheek and wended away into the hair. "Love - love, it's me -" Xander whispered, and there was a tiny shiver - a tingle. And then a flood - sensation, emotion - pain and pleasure and horror and despair, slamming into the link and out again in seconds.

Xander - like a distant echo. And then stronger. Xander. Love... "Came b-back," Spike whispered, and Xander gathered him in as close as he could and just held on.

34 Relearning

"Course you came back. I never - Spike, god, missed you, missed you..." Xander felt Spike's arms come up around him, too weak and too slow and not right and he kissed gently over Spike's thin face - kissed lips that were chapped and rough. He glared up at the Queen, heedless of the power that was around her like a swarm
of glittering bees.

"What did you do to him? Jack said he wouldn't be hurt - you lied, you all lied -"

"No, Jack did not lie," the Queen said, making a gesture with her hand and a slim brown horse stepped forward, and Jack was astride it, his coat of flowers and leaves glowing with eldritch fire.

"Yes he did," Xander growled, and Spike curled closer to him, shivering. "Fuck you all. I'm going home, and Spike's coming with me."

"I think not," the Queen said, and suddenly the wolves were there, growling - manes bristling and teeth gleaming like ice in the wisp-light of the Court.

_Run if you have to - we'll hold them. Tara's got a spell - Dawn brought the sword - we can hold them_, Oz thought, and Xander nodded silently - looked down at Spike.

"Love - can you get up? We're -"  _Going home, love, going home oh GOD, Spike, love you, missed you so much, so much -_
I can - get up. Xander - you're so thin, love, you - fuck, so beautiful, missed you missed you - Xander crushed Spike to him for a moment, aware of Scavenger moving up the bank, getting between them and the Queen - aware of a sudden silence as he helped Spike to his feet and got the duster on him properly, arms through the sleeves and middle button fastened.

"You've no right to be here," a voice said - male voice and it was another Sidhe, pale and kingly looking, astride a coal-black horse. He was very close to the Queen and he had a long, silver sword in his hand.

King. Her king, faintly from Spike, and Xander edged between them, his jeans sticking to his legs and his hair dripping onto his shoulders - cold, and feeling Spike shivering under his arm. He looked where the king was looking.

Jesus! MORE of them? Who the fuck - "Scavenger - who are these people?" Scavenger was clothed again - brocade and silk, nothing like what he'd worn at the mansion and he turned and made a deep bow to the ranks of riders that were coming up behind.

"It is the She. The Queen of Air and Darkness, Alex-an-
His eyes were flame, and Xander shuddered. The new Queen was dressed all in silver-shot black, with black hair like a waterfall down her back and over the horses' back - nearly to the ground. A crown of glowing silver sparks hovered over her hair and forehead, seemingly attached to nothing at all, like a collection of tame fireflies.

"I've every right," she said, her voice cold and steely. "Pacts have been broken and things have been - overturned. Someone has told lies, and now I've come to collect my own." She looked for one long moment at Spike and Xander - at the wolves - glanced across to Tara and Dawn who were standing shoulder to shoulder. "Mortals dragged into our private affairs. I like this not at all."

"They're not mortals," and that was Jack, nudging his horse forward and Xander growled - and Spike did, and the wolves both sent up wailing snarls of warning - of bloodlust.

*Pack pack protect* from them both - from the hyena - and *rage* from the demon, white-hot.

"Well, they are not ordinary, but they are not of the
Courts, nor yet of our kind." Her gaze turned to Xander, pinning him there with eyes that were like a starfield - black and spangled and infinite.

"Promises were broken. You are owned a debt."

"I don't want anything to do with you. Leave us alone," Xander growled, hugging Spike close.

"Be that as it may -" The dark Queen made a gesture and Scavenger walked over - held out a slim twig of wood to Tara. "This will call us, and that will cancel our debt." Tara hesitantly took the wood - nodded jerkily in surprise as Scavenger bowed low to her. The dark Queen looked at her paler counterpart and the pale Queen made a still little gesture. Another Sidhe - as pale, but dressed all in green - dismounted and walked to Dawn - offered a small mote of light that seemed to be a crystal. Dawn looked at Tara, who nodded, and took the shard carefully. It glowed faintly in her palm.

"And that will cancel the Seelie Court, as well. Do not use them lightly. Go home, children. Go home and be well." The dark Queen drew herself up, shooting a look at Jack that would have made lesser men slink away. Then she turned her attention to the pale
Queen. "Now - we've matters to settle. Will it be war, my sister, or will it be parley?"

Out of here - get you home - Spike -

Oh, missed you, missed you, love you, Xander, love you so much - They turned away from the deadly quiet, chillingly polite conversation the two Queens were having and picked their way down and down, through the crisp winter bracken and grass to the van. It was still running, the doors hanging open.

"Spike?" Dawn asked softly and the link opened wide, suddenly - the wolves changing and grabbing Spike at the same moment, Dawn pushing in and Tara; everyone trying for touch - for some connection - and Xander held on tight, watching Spike reach for Dawn's hand - stroke Tara's cheek - pull the wolves into a crushing embrace. Incoherence - a jumble in the link of emotion and love and pack and always.

Brother, from Dawn, and a heart-pounding joy, and the same from Tara - warmth and affection and stunned happiness that was overwhelming. It took long, long minutes for them to finally calm down - to slowly back off Spike who was shaking hard, cold and exhaustion. Oz
and Derio were dressing fast and Dawn crawled into the van, unfolding the old quilts Oz kept there, making a nest of them for Spike and Xander. Oz climbed in - cranked the heat up high and Xander and Spike curled down into the quilts, holding on tight. Dawn sat beside them, her hand on Spike's shoulder and Tara did the same, unable to resist reaching out and touching Spike's hair - his cheek - again and again. Xander just pushed his face into Spike's neck and breathed, holding back tears that felt too hysterical.

If I let go now I'll just... I'll cry all the way home. Spike, Spike, vampire-mine, oh GOD, love, love you...

Thought about you every day. Xander, love, mine...
Everybody all right? Is everybody - Tara's back? What did Angel do? Oh fuck, missed you, love you - don't let go, love, don't let go...has to be real...

Real, it's real, god - have to pry me off with a crowbar. Tara's home for good, we're all home, family now, Spike, all the family - Spike's hands were ice-cold, creeping under Xander's shirt and finding his ribs - curling around his back and stroking his spine and Xander was doing the same. Opening the duster and pulling Spike's naked body tight against him, sharing the warmth Spike
wanted so desperately. It seemed to take forever to get home. Forever, and no time at all.

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"Spike? Hey, Spike, you hungry?" Spike twitched just a little - turned in the bed and smiled sleepily up at Xander, who was sitting on the edge of the mattress, a tray in his hands that he was putting carefully on the chair next to the bed. Spike could smell tomato soup and grilled cheese and blood. "You awake, love?" Xander asked, turning back to him and running his fingers gently through Spike's hair. Spike pushed into his touch - scooted over and got an arm over Xander's thighs and snuggled into him - into the scent of clean wood and honey-sweet, woodsmoke and rue.

"You've been helping Tara," he mumbled, letting his eyes fall shut again and Xander was stroking his back now, pushing the hair out of his way so he could feel skin - hair he hadn't bothered to cut, yet. Just...too tired. And...something else. Nagging doubt that made him hesitate, again and again.

*Skin and bones, damnit. Still too skinny, love. C'mon and
sit up and eat, okay?

Only if you do, too, Spike thought, and Xander tugged gently at his hair.

"I will, you will, we'll both take a nap. Okay?"

"Okay." Spike sighed and loosened his hold on Xander's legs - sat up slowly and let Xander fuss a wedge of pillows behind him and hitch the covers up higher. Then Xander was stripping off sweats and flannel and t-shirt and getting into the bed with Spike - scooting over carefully with the tray and settling it on his own lap. Two sandwiches, two bowls of soup, huge mug of warm blood.

"Can't eat all that," Spike muttered, feeling a little panicky, and Xander just looked at him.

"Yes you can. It'll be okay, love." Spike nodded - reached out for a sandwich and tore off a corner - dipped it in the blood and ate, slowly. His hands shook, and his stomach clenched uncomfortably. Human blood was what he needed, but he'd gone so long without it - surviving on dilute demon blood and the strange magic of the hell he'd been in. The blood Xander was getting him was
so...rich. It made him feel sick, although not as bad now, five days home, as those first couple of days when he'd barely been able to keep it down. He wondered what in hell was going on - what this new thing was. And Xander wouldn't eat if he didn't and Xander was too damn thin... That was almost unbearable.

_Bastards. Hate this..._ The claim-illness had kicked in with a vengeance around year four, and Spike had been reduced to being carried from place to place - lord to lord. They hadn't much cared. They'd just wanted what was in his head... He flinched and sent his thoughts firmly elsewhere, shutting the link down to almost nothing. He felt the surge of panic from Xander and closed his eyes, concentrating.

_Sorry, sorry love, I - I can't -_

_Spike, it's okay. Please? Please don't. I can't stand for you to shut me out. Please, please, love..._ The same plea, the same desperation, and Spike leaned his head on Xander's shoulder and just rested there a moment, sniffing a little when Xander's arm slipped around him and hugged him close.

"Don't want to, love, but... It hurts. It hurts to...think
about it and I don't - don't want you to hurt." *Don't want to be WRONG, can't be wrong, can't do that, can't can't can't* - Spike stopped that thought before it hit the link - clamped down hard on the fear that surged through him every minute - every hour. Fear and despair.

"It hurts when you go away, Spike," Xander said, his voice so very soft but broken, a little - rough with emotion that he was trying to suppress. "It hurts more than - than anything. Please don't, Spike." Xander's cheek was on his head - his hand gently stroking Spike's shoulder and Spike nodded, wishing they could just curl and sleep. Sleep, and dream, and...

*No - no more sleeping until you eat.* Derio, downstairs with Tara and Dawn, sending a surge of anger and anguish through the link. Anger not at Spike, but anger all the same and Spike flinched from it.

*Trying, wolf, I'm...trying.*

*I know. Sorry. Worried about you... Want...* Derio let that thought trail away, but Spike knew what he wanted - what he wished. Wished he could fix things.

*Just time, love. Time is all will fix this.* Spike shuddered
at the feel of them in his head - at the intimate, longed-for wash of love and possessiveness, joy and pain.

Yeah. The wolf didn't believe that anymore than Xander did. They were all uneasy with his desertion in the link but Spike...didn't know what else to do. He wasn't sure, and that was all that had kept him...sane, there.

Let Xander in, damnit. You think you'll scare him off - hurt him more than he hurt while you were gone? Let him in. Oz, down in the yard, burning wood-scaps and yard waste - wearing himself out with work around the house and on his van. Angry, like Derio was, and afraid. Which made Spike feel that much worse.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm hurting you...

It's okay -

No it's not, Xander. It's not. Oz shut down, only a thread of upset coming from him, and they heard the back door open and shut - Derio going outside to be with him. After a moment they could hear water running, and knew Tara and Dawn were cleaning up.

Sorry, Spike thought - whispered, in his head, because he
hated this - hated it so much, but he didn't know - he just didn't know what to do.

"God - Spike, please don't - apologize! I - I shouldn't push you, I know that..." Xander fiddled with his spoon, his arm tight around Spike's shoulder. "I just - I can feel it, Spike! I can feel how much you...hurt and I...I have to fix it, I have to - make you feel better...to try..." He dropped the spoon into the soup and twisted just enough to hug Spike with both arms, lips on his forehead and in his hair and Spike hugged back hard, hating how thin Xander felt - how worn he looked. Hating that the family was on eggshells, and all because of him.

I'd let you fix it if you could, love. I would. I... Just let me...try, for a little longer, yeah? Try to...fix it myself. Let me work it out.

A LITTLE. Just a little, Spike. Can't DO this...

"I know, love. C'mon, now - bite for bite, yeah? Before it gets cold." Spike sat up, grateful for the electric blanket that radiated sun-hot warmth. He took the cup of blood from Xander and drank it, fast as he could. It choked him - made his stomach roll uneasily and made him lightheaded for a minute. But then he swallowed, hard,
and set his mind to ignoring it, and took a plate with a sandwich on it. Xander was slowly eating soup, slumped tiredly back against the headboard.

"You left this downstairs, Xander." Tara at the door, a bottle of juice and a beer in her hands and Spike smiled at her, feeling a little better.

"Oh - yeah, I did." Xander smiled too - took his juice and held the tray steady while Tara settled lightly on the edge of the bed. Rue and lavender and dragon's blood, sweet scents that made Spike feel safe - made him sure he was home. Tara squeezed his knee a little under the covers - reached out to stroke the long lock of hair that lay over his shoulder.

"Buffy's jealous. She said it's not fair for the evil undead to have such perfect curls."

"She'd look like Shirley Temple in curls like this - she doesn't want that." Spike looked down at the long hair - shivered a little and pushed it back over his shoulder, and took the bottle of beer from Tara. "Needs cutting, that."

"Whenever you like, okay?" Tara watched him for a moment, head a little to one side, and then she leaned
forward and kissed his cheek. "I'm so glad you're home," she whispered, and Spike caught at her as she leaned back and pulled her into a hug.

"Me too, Glinda." The door bumped open and Sinclair wandered in, nose twitching. He jumped up onto the bed and crept up between Spike and Xander - started his patented head-bump/full-body-rub that meant 'aren't I adorable and don't you want to feed me that?'

"Go away, miserable creature. You don't like tomato soup," Spike said, rubbing him behind the ears and stroking the long, cream-colored back. Sinclair 'brrruped' at him, bird-noise of pleasure and edged a little closer to the tray.

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Spike woke abruptly, lifting his head and looking sharply around. He was downstairs on the fold-out couch - the whole family was, actually, in a cozy dog-pile. Fell asleep watching a movie and here it was just dawn, and no one had stirred. Spike looked cautiously around himself,
cataloging the things that were the same...and the things that were different.

*There's my desk, right, and my journals, and there's Dawn's desk, and her b-books, that's new, that wasn't there... Same fold-out couch, fuckin' thing hurts everybody's back, don't know why we keep it... Sinclair, he's here but - Miss Kitty WASN'T, she wasn't and...Glinda was with that other girl, she wasn't here...* Spike wormed his way silently out of the clutch of heat and flesh, eyes warily on the wolves - on Xander. Waiting. But they slept on, and he untwisted the flannel pants and t-shirt he had on - pulled the sleeves of the over-large hoodie back down past his wrists a little. He was so damn cold, all the time... the warmth never lasted.

*Need to eat, that's why, need to go hunting, get the real stuff...* He waited, but nothing happened and he paddled over the house, looking - checking. First upstairs, looking into the three new rooms - looking at the new bits and pieces that were in the old rooms. Feeling a chill when he wasn't sure what really was new and what was old. Running his fingers down the line of postcards in the mirror in his and Xander's room but not daring to turn them over. *Might be right, might not, might...* He went back downstairs, standing for a long time in the
still-room, breathing in the heady mix of herbs - of the family. They all gravitated here, to watch Tara work and to get their hands soaked with good scents. Even the cats seemed to like it, although so far they had ignored the catnip growing near the windows. After a while, slowly, he walked out of that room and into the studio. He couldn't bring himself to go past the door for a long moment, and then he did and just stood there, looking. Watching the dust-sheeted statues, wondering if they would move - turn - touch him. He couldn't stand it if they did. He hadn't looked under the sheets yet - had pleaded illness and exhaustion even when he felt the hurt that caused....Xander. Today - today he would.

Cautiously, he went to the first one on his left and eased the sheet back - stepped hastily away once it was uncovered. But nothing happened - it didn't move, and he was left staring at...himself. Staring at William, surrounded by books and papers. William whose chest had a burned-out hole in it, and in the hole...an elaborate glass heart. Ruby-red, edged with gilt, sparkling with rhinestones. A gaudy, Las Vegas sort of heart and Spike had to laugh - laugh in a slightly hysterical way, staring at that.

*Is that what Dru saw? Burning baby fish and the heart of*
a fool. Is it what Xander sees? Never know... Sunlight was streaming in the studio windows, the frail yellow a watercolor. It's...been nice. It's been TOO nice. Too perfect. Can't stand the wait. Want it to be OVER. "Hear that, you wankers? I'm too tired to do this. Gonna wake up, now." Spike went slowly to the square of light on the floor. Won't even be warm. Bastards. Can't even give me that, can you? Can't even give me any heat that lasts... He felt a twist of utter despair, but he ignored it - took a breath - and stepped into the sun.

"Spike!" Spike winced as he was tackled to the floor, Xander rolling him away from the sunlight and he could only lie there and stare up at Xander's terrified - furious face.

"It - that hurt. It burned," he muttered, staring down at his arms, which were still smoking slightly.

"Of course it hurt! What the fuck are you doing?" Xander shouted, shaking him, and Spike heard the double thump of the wolves coming off the bed; sleepy 'what?' from Tara and Pack - Xander - what? from Oz or Derio, he couldn't be sure.
Hurt, it hurt, never hurt before, it just - I would just wake UP... Oh god, oh FUCK, gotta try - Spike wiggled a foot - inched it into the pool of light. The sun warmed, then stung, then burned - smoke wisped up from his toes and then flame and he was laughing as Xander yelled again - whipped around and smothered the flames in the flannel shirt he was wearing. The wolves ran in, dazed and snarling, and Tara and Dawn gazed in shock from the doorway. Xander took two fist-fulls of the hoodie and dragged Spike bodily away - sat down with a thump and pulled him close, tears streaking down from his eye, and from the empty socket.

"What the fuck are you doing? Jesus Christ, Spike!" Trying to KILL yourself? What the HELL?

"No, love, no, no - god - it hurt, it burned - fuck - Xander - help me, get a knife, get - get one of your knives -"

"Spike, tell me what's going on!" Xander was pale as paper - shaking like a leaf - and Spike yanked him close and hugged him, the floor cold under him, the sweet,
clean smell of wood thick in his nostrils.

"Love, it hurt, and it's not - it didn't before and I - I think I'm home, I think I'm home, Xander, god - please get me a knife, please, please -" Spike knew he was babbling - hell, ranting - knew he sounded crazy. But it had hurt, that sunlight - hurt and burned and done what it was supposed to do, and it hadn't done that - Seven years, seven fucking years and today it HURTS! Oz was rifling through a tool-box and snatched something up with a small sound of triumph. He hurried over with a longish knife, the blade's edge glittering like diamonds. He went to his knees beside Spike and Xander, offering, and Derio was there, and Dawn and Tara were crowding close as well, fear and the beginning of excitement on their faces. Spike took a handful of hair - held the knife above it for a long moment and then he hacked at it, ruthlessly chopping, hair catching and pulling but falling away under the blade until he had more than a foot of darkly-brown, spiraled hair in his hand. He sat there, trembling. Holding the length of hair and the knife, waiting.

"Okay, you cut your hair. You - are you okay? Spike, I don't get it." Xander was rubbing Spike's shoulder, visibly trying to keep himself calm.
"It's staying cut," Spike said, staring at the hair. He could sense the confusion around him, and Dawn knelt down next to him, looking seriously at him.

"That's what hair does, Spike. What's the deal?

"The deal, Niblet - the deal is..." Spike caught a hard breath - felt the tears coming and blinked them back, or tried to. "The deal is I'm home, I'm...fucking home, I'm....really here..." He laughed then, a little wildly maybe, but he couldn't help it. He held the knife out in a wobbling hand. "Cut it off - cut it all off! Dawnie, please - wolfling - cut it off!" He laughed again, almost sobbing, and watched Dawn reach and hesitantly take the knife from his hand - move behind him. He grabbed Xander and pulled him into another hug, burying his face in Xander's neck, kissing and kissing him - kissing the scar and then - biting, just a gentle nip. Enough to draw blood and Xander shivered in his arms and Spike laughed, just laughed, because the blood was right. It was hot and right and wonderful; spiced with Xander's love and with his desire - underlying hint of the wolves and the salt-musk of the hyena. Hot, human, his, his love, his own, his claimed and Spike laughed and cried and held his boy - felt Dawn sawing at the hair and felt his neck finally free
of it - felt the shorter, rough strands ruffle up under Derio's hand - felt Tara rubbing his back.

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"What did they do, Spike?" Xander asked, his chest to Spike's back and his arms firmly around Spike's ribs. Back on the sofa-bed and everyone gathered as close as they could.

"They.... They can't feel there. They're dead and - emotionless and...cold. Frozen. God, it was so cold there..." Spike shuddered, snuggling closer to Xander and Tara made a small sound of distress, tucking the throw up tighter around Spike's ribs. "Thank you, love..." Spike smiled at her and then leaned his head back on Xander's shoulder, letting his eyes fall shut.

"They don't feel, and they...wanted to. And they could...make the link work. Kind of. They could - feel it. And I think...they could let me feel you, sometimes. But I only...." Spike stopped and took a deep, hard breath, feeling shaky. "I felt...how sad you
were. I felt...the pain and the fear and... God, Xander, love, I'm so sorry, so sorry -" Never meant to hurt you like that, NEVER wanted that... Wolfling, lobo...so, so sorry -

"Shut up, Spike. Stop it." Xander's voice was choked with tears and he put his face down into Spike's neck, shuddering. "You - we know why you did it. We're okay, we're... God, love you, Spike, love you no matter what." No matter what, no matter WHAT, god! Vampire-mine, always, always...

Love you, love you, Spike...

Pack. Pack and...family...love you... Spike just sat there for a long moment, basking in it - in the link, the love, the warmth. In the brother joy brother always from Dawn and the more tangible love you love you brother from Tara.

"They wanted to feel. They wanted...to pretend to live. And they...they did it through me. But - it wasn't enough after a while. It wasn't...strong enough. They went over everything again and again and...they changed things." Xander's lips were warm and wet on his cheek and he turned into the caress - felt Dawn's hand slip into
his and smiled weakly.

"They wanted the strongest emotions they could get. Love, but hate, too. Joy, and despair. Madness... Xander, I -"

"Tell us, love. Tell us - show us. Let us in and - and we'll make it better. We will."

"Hurts, Xan..." Spike whispered, but he let the link open wide, and poured it all out. Dimly felt Tara's hand on him, and knew she was feeling it too - maybe even seeing it - and a sharp gasp from Dawn told him that Tara's magic was making it real for her, as well.

*Sorry, sorry...oh god...*  Seven years, and in seven years he'd seen Xander die, over and over. At the hands of demons, his friends - Glory. Killed him himself, in the throes of madness brought on by the First. Or failed to stop Caleb and a blind Xander was shuffled away by the Council - marginalized and loathing him. Oz dying, or trapped forever by the Initiative - mindless slave or eviscerated guinea-pig. Derio's magic somehow not fitting with the wolf - magic and Derio dying, as well... All of them, again and again. And Spike had come home - so many times. Home to a family that had fractured and
scattered - home to a Xander that had taken a new lover, or a Xander that simply didn't want him anymore. Wolves who had abandoned humanity and didn't know him. Tara dead, or Dawn - dead, gone, suffering - hating him, and the Lords of Hell - their magic made it real, every time. Made it as real as acid and razors - as holy-water. So real that he'd sure he'd been home, every time. Had been sure his time was up and this was...reality.

Seven years of guilt and rejection, death and loneliness, failure and despair. Seven years of near-madness and Spike never knew. Was always fooled, by the clever Lords - by their magic that clouded his mind and the illness that dulled his senses. Fooled and returned, nothing changed, to start all over again.

"But it hurt. My foot still hurts. And my fucking hair - staying short..."

You're home, you are! You really are, god - Spike - Pain in the link, but it was easing, and the more he poured out the lighter he felt. Spike held onto this family - held on tight for fear he'd float away as seven years of misery bled out, and seven years of pain was washed away with
compassionate tears and soothing voices and arms and hands that held him tight - held him fast.

35 The End of it All

"I never feel a thing is real
When I'm away from you...
Out of your embrace
The world's a temporary parking place..."

Xander shifted, just a little - ran his hand down Spike's ribs and onto his thigh - curled it around, the back of his hand just brushing against the cool weight of Spike's sac. Spike's head was lying back on Xander's shoulder and Xander was slowly, deliberately licking and kissing every inch of his neck - making bruises that wouldn't last long enough and making Spike's whole body sing and tingle with every scrape and nip of his teeth.

"Good...ssso...good..." Spike whispered, and Xander agreed, shifting again and flexing up - driving a little
deeper into the clinging, cool embrace of Spike's body.

*You taste like spice...like cream and spice...*

*That's nog, love. Do I?* Xander giggled and then bit at the claim mark, closing his eye to the all-over shudder that wracked Spike - that spiraled out through the link.

"You do, yeah...so fuckin' good..."

*Do that again, Xan, do it again -* Spikes hands were tight on his hips, encouraging more and faster movement but Xander kept it slow and deliberate - doing to Spike what he so often did to Xander.

"*Say it's only a paper moon*
*Sailing over a cardboard sea...*  
*But it wouldn't be make-believe*
*If you believed in me..."

"Do it all day, Spike," Xander promised, and moved and thrust again, slow easing of his cock in and out. Spike's thighs trembled against his and his hands gripped harder - loosened - gripped again. His body clenched tight around Xander and he bucked a little, twisting.
Evil, you're the evil one...yeah, that, love... Xander pushed Spike's head forward to nibble at the sensitive skin at the nape of his neck where the silk-soft, honey-brown hair lay in wisps and curls.

Glad you kept this...

Just for you, love. "For you..." Spike murmured, and his hands slipped off Xander's hips and down to the bed. He put his fists between his knees and leaned forward slowly and Xander let his mouth glide wetly from nape to spine - stopped to make a love-bite between Spike's shoulder-blades. Spike growled softly - grumble that rattled into the purr and back, vibrating Xander's mouth.

"Xaaaan-derrrrr..." he groaned, and Xander took Spike's hips in his hands - started to move a little faster and a little harder, jolting Spike up and forward with each thrust.

God, you're beautiful...

"Yes, it's only a canvas sky
Hanging over a muslin tree...
"But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me..."

"Nothin'...on you...yesss..." Spike shifted again, further up on hands and knees and Xander moved up as well - felt what the change of angle did to Spike and grinned - did it again. And again, until Spike was past words, past anything, and the link was like a sun; heat and blinding brilliance and fire, that danced along their nerves. Spike's blood sizzled in Xander's mouth - sparked and smoked with magic and lust and love - and long after they'd both stopped panting and Spike was curled against him, sleepy and content, Xander could taste it - feel it inside.

Not ever going to let you go again. Not...ever. Don't care if the world ends, don't care about any of it, just want you, you, you... Vampire-mine, so beautiful...

You'll turn my head, all that sweet-talk. Spike lifted his head just a little, looking down at Xander with a blissed-out expression that made Xander smile. "Gotten good at the pillow-talk, love," Spike murmured, running a slow finger along Xander's jaw - tracing his lips, touching his nose. Poring over details until Xander wanted to squirm, just a little.
"Had plenty of practice. I talked to your coat for a month -" That memory, in the link, and Spike laughed. Shaky laugh, but genuine amusement at the picture. The song on the radio changed - 'Moon River' - and Spike hummed along for a moment.

"Should I be jealous of my coat, love? Havin' you when I couldn't?" Xander's eye went wide at that and he shut the link down hard - reflex he couldn't control and instantly regretted.

*Oh shit.*

"Love? What is it? Why'd you - do that?"

"I just - I didn't mean to, I -" Spike was looking at him, and Xander felt panic rising - felt his mind skittering from thought to thought and story to story but, as usual, coming up empty in the face of Spike's unwavering gaze.

"Xander -"

*Fuck. Fuck it. Can't - lie, no matter what... "Spike, I - I wanted..."* Xander closed his eye, trying to organize his
thoughts and something nosed into the link - Oz, from somewhere downstairs.

_Just show him. He won't care, Xander - it'll be all right. Just let him know..._

_God, god... Yeah, okay... "Spike, I - I have to tell you something. Show you -"_ Xander opened his eye and Spike was staring at him, expression of mounting horror on his face and Xander pulled him close, hugging him tight. "No! No, it's - damnit, I'm fucking this up so bad. Spike, just - just..." _Here. I have to show you...this..._ He let the link open wide, showing in a cascade of image and emotion the days after Spike had gone - the months. Showed his depression and his withdrawal, showed the wolves and the patrols and Dawn - Tara. Showed, with panic making his heart pound, the nights spent with Oz and Derio. The intimacy he'd never expected to want or need - not without Spike right there.

_I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Spike, I'm sorry...you were being - tortured, you were - GOD, you were in pain and all alone and... And I just - fuckin' gave in, I -_

_Xander, stop it! Stop it, stop it -_ Spike pulled out of his
crushing embrace and got up on his elbow again, staring down at Xander wide-eyed. "You're telling me - that while I was gone - you went to the wolves?" Xander nodded miserably, not trusting his voice. Doing his best not to grab Spike and plead with him. Beg him to understand. Spike touched Xander's lips again - ran his finger up to the edge of the empty socket and traced the eyebrow that arched over it.

"You really think... Xander, you really think I'm - mad at you?"

"You should be!" Xander nearly yelled - snapped his mouth shut - bit his lip and then continued in a softer voice. "You should be. You were alone. You were - everything was so horrible for you there and I was here. I was at home, and I h-had the wolves and Dawn and Tara, most of the time, and - and the cats and - " Spike snorted quiet laughter and Xander wanted to scream. "Don't! Don't do that! I had fucking everything and you had nothing and - and I shouldn't have done it! Spike, I shouldn't - have done it, it was wrong, it was..." so fucking selfish, so....weak -

"NO. No, love." Spike looked mad now - mad and a little wild-eyed and Xander wanted to curl into a ball and just
...hide. "No hiding, love. Never. I'm not mad. Do you hear me?"

"You should be. I am," Xander whispered, and Spike sighed and tucked himself down - got his head under Xander's chin and his arms around him - tangling them together in a knot of flesh.

"Oh, love. I would have done anything to have your year be a happy one. I don't care, you hear me?" Spike's fingers rubbed slowly over his shoulder, touching the gun-shot scar and skittering away, flinch of pain in the link. "I'd have done - anything at all. If those bloody wolves hadn't made you feel better -"

"Us 'bloody wolves' did our best," Oz said, standing in the doorway and Spike lifted his head and held out a hand. Oz crossed to him and twined his fingers with Spike's and the low hum of nearly-undetectable discontent that was both wolves eased off. They were only truly happy when they were touching Spike. Xander reached out and put his hand on Oz's knee, blinking. Trying to accept that Spike really wasn't mad.

*COURSE I'm not! I'm not... "I can see what you did,
wolfling. Saved my boy - kept him here - owe you both."

"No you don't," Oz whispered. He hesitated one long moment and then he curled into Xander, his arm going over Spike's ribs, his other hand finding Xander's and clinging tight. *Kept him here - couldn't stand to lose him, too - had to have you both -*

*Spike, I -*

"Don't apologize again, love," Spike growled, nipping hard enough at Xander's collarbone to make Xander gasp. "You didn't do anything wrong. Nothing, I'm not mad. It's - * Pack. Family. How it IS. Never wanted you to be alone - never wanted that. You're not a martyr, love, didn't want that... Wolves kept you safe, they - kept you sane. Why would I want anything different? Love you, love you, love you so much... Nothing changes that, ever."

"So not fair!" Dawn darted in from the doorway, jumping hard onto the bed and cuddling up behind Spike, hugging him. "Oz said to leave you alone but he's up here in the bed! If he can I can."

"Dawn! I don't have anything on under here!"
"I'm on top of the covers, Spike!" Dawn gripped tighter at bicep and shoulder and ducked her face down, obstinately not moving and *brothers want love I will I will*. Clearer in the link than she ever had been. A remnant of Tara's magic, maybe. Or her own mystical origins, lending her an ability she shouldn't have.

*Not fair, not fair!* from Derio then, faint with distance. He and Tara were grocery shopping.

*It's all right. We'll stay here until you get home,* Xander assured him, finding a lock of Dawn's hair and curling it around his finger. A bit of his old self - a bit of basement-Xander made him ask, one more time - "Spike - are you - sure- ?"

"Course I'm sure. You can feel it, love. I know you can."

"TMI, Spike! God!" Dawn was fighting laughter and Spike reached around and whapped at her, glancing tap to her thigh.

"The link, you filthy-minded thing!"

"I'm not the one who's been in bed for two weeks in a
"Well, what'd you expect, Bit? Haven't seen the love of my life for...too long. Gonna keep him here for a month."

"That could get really gross," Dawn said, contemplative note in her voice and Xander shut his eye and laughed helplessly, telling Derio what was going on. *Bring some of those cracker-and-cheese things, we can eat those in bed -*

"No, you can't. You're still too thin, Xander, you have to get up and eat real food -" Oz was scolding, and Dawn was trying to tickle Spike, and Derio and Tara were pushing down the aisles, gathering the last things they needed, eager to get home.

*Home, home, this is our home and we're ALL here and I have you again, my own, my love. I have you again and will never, ever let you go, Spike...*

*Promise you that, love. Promise you that on my heart and soul and blood and bones. "DAWN! Leave the bedclothes be!" Scandalized voice of William and Dawn's incoherent laughter - Oz's yipping growl of amusement.*
Never want anything but this, Xander thought, and hugged his family close.

"We're after the same rainbow's end
Waiting around the bend...
My Huckleberry friend
Moon River and me..."

*```````````````````````````

May was full of wind and storms and long, drowsy days in the studio - nights running the beaches and the woods and the darkest parts of the city. It was still a thrill to watch Spike fight - to fight beside him - and sometimes Xander just stopped and watched; dusted a vamp or knocked a brawling human unconscious and stared. But something had changed, in Spike. A slow change, over the last five months, but a change nevertheless. His fighting technique was the same - mix of street-brawler
and trained fighter - but he was silent now. He fought with a focused savagery that made Xander shiver, sometimes. He hunted with the same single-minded intention, weeding out the dregs and taking their life-blood with a sort of manic glee. More the demon, in those moments, than he had been for a while. *Darklife olderthan chaos malice* broadcasting Spike out to anyone with the senses to feel it.

*What's different?* Xander asked, watching him drive one of his spiral nails straight through a doggish demon's heart and watching it convulse in its death-throes. *Why are you so...intent?*

Spike kicked the demon into the gutter - took out a smoke and lit it and then paced slowly away down the street, glancing over at Xander as he fell into step with him.

*Might not like it*, he thought, and Xander shrugged.

"Not like I have to." Spike nodded, his eyes flickering here and there, making sure of every shadow and corner. Demon's eyes, and the demon's face, and he stopped, finally, and faced Xander. The smoldering coal of his cigarette lit hellish sparks in his eyes.
"They dragged out every bit of humanity I still have. Played me like a harp, love. Didn't let me change... I don't..." Spike stopped and smoked, leaning against the wall behind him with a small sigh. "I don't want to be human. I don't want to...be that vulnerable again. It fucking hurt, Xander."

"It's not vulnerable to love, Spike," Xander said softly, and Spike reached out and touched his cheek - ran his fingers back through Xander's hair.

"No. The demon never had any trouble loving. But it's not...pretty, all the time. It's not hearts and puppies, pet. I need..."

"You need to be...a vampire, and not - worry about the human stuff?" Xander pushed into Spike's hand and Spike tugged at his hair - flicked his cigarette away and pulled Xander close.

"Yeah. I need...something..." Xander crushed Spike to him for a minute, then he leaned back a little and slowly stroked the strange and beautiful features that were the demons.
"Can I help?" he whispered.

"Don't want you to see it, love. You'll be hurt. Can't do that."

"Yeah." Xander kissed, lightly, at Spike's mouth and his forehead and his cheeks - trailed lips and tongue over his jaw and throat and finally the claim-scar, making Spike shudder.

"Figure it out, vampire-mine. Figure out what you need, and then do it. I'll be here for you, no matter what." *Always, always, always. My blood in you and yours in me and nothing can break that, love, nothing on this earth.*

*Always...*

Three days later Spike made subdued goodbyes and walked into the night, and didn't come back for a week. He did his best to keep the link closed, and Xander did, but things crept into Xander's dreams - blood and fire and vicious fighting - grudges and paybacks and hunts that would have made Vlad the Impaler blanch. Xander kept himself awake all night after the second night, and slept in the day when the link was only
the faintest of vibrations along his nerves.

When Spike came back he seemed - at peace, and sat for a day writing in his journal. He'd bleached his hair again - snow white - but left it in a disordered crest of spikes and tufts that were soft to the touch. Xander missed the silky honey-brown of his 'real' hair, but the darklife older than malice of the demon seemed to have ebbed, and Spike started talking again on patrol.

* Might do it again, * he thought, watching Oz make a fire in the back yard, burning the 'mistakes' that Xander had accumulated trying to make a fancy wardrobe for Dawn.

* If you do, it's all right, * Xander thought back, kissing him, and that satisfied them both.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The end of May - the end of classes - Memorial Day weekend and they weren't planning anything more elaborate than a bar-b-que and movies, mostly to avoid the stuff the rest of the city was planning. Oz was looking at maps, finding a place on the mountain to camp because they all wanted to do that again, and Dawn was
excited to camp 'for real', with tents and backpacks and astronaut food. Tara had grimaced at the thought and was researching online for ways to cook food over a campfire - wrapped in foil, or soup - anything but 'dehydrated franks'n'beans' she said, shaking her head. Xander remembered the hot, melting flesh of the deer's liver and doubted he'd be eating any soup.

Spike came whistling in near midnight, having spent most of his day trolling the Underground, and then hunting down south of the city. The roar of his DeSoto was sounding a little smoother lately and Xander knew he'd found a mechanic he trusted to take care of his darling. The man was talking him into replacing the spray-paint on the windows with some sort of special tinted glass and Spike was warming to the idea.

"Guess you're all keeping vampire hours now?" Spike asked, looking around the kitchen at the assembled household. Derio and Oz were making waffles and Dawn was circling them like a starving tiger, plate in hand.

"I get the first one, Spike," she said in passing, and he reached out and poked her in the ribs then went back to taking his boots off.
"It's too hot," Tara said, peering at the waffle iron, furry bunny-slippers that Sinclair had chewed to rags on her feet and her hair done up in two braids. She looked thirteen.

"It is not, gatita," Derio said, wielding a fork and a pot-holder. *Impugning my waffle-making abilities.*

*She HAS seen you make French toast,* Xander thought, and Derio rolled his eyes.

"That was one time. I was on the phone. Vampire hours are more convenient," Derio added, smiling over at Spike, who climbed up onto the table and wrapped his legs around Xander, pulling him close for a kiss. He tasted like blood and smoke and lemon drops, and Xander 'hmmm'd' happily into the kiss.

*Glad you're home,*

*Me too,* Spike thought. Halfway through the waffles a car pulled up outside, and when Tara answered the door with Oz right behind her, it was Cordelia. Looking exhausted, Connor in her arms and a bag by her feet.

"Got room for two more?" she asked.
Connor was sticky with syrup and spilled grape juice and Dawn, in a sudden fit of maturity, volunteered to take him upstairs and give him a bath. He went with her sleepily, staring hard at Spike and whining once for 'Unc' Oz, be the wolf!' When they could hear him splashing happily upstairs they retreated to the living room, trying to find places to sit without excluding Cordelia but ultimately ending up in a sort of lump on and around the couch. Oz turned on the little Bose radio they had in there, to a station that played quiet, folksy things. Cordelia sat in the 'new' recliner, looking at them with a small smile on her face.

"It's like some kind of hippie thing," she joked, and Tara laughed with her, softly.

"Kind of. What's - going on, Cordelia? Fred emailed me a week ago and said - she was moving back to Texas. Going back to school there..."

"Yeah, she is." Cordelia leaned back in the chair, letting go of a long, shaky sigh. "Angel talked her into it. Well,
Angel and Gunn and Wes. It took them weeks, but... She did it."

"Why? I thought - she was doing so much good there - " Tara looked upset - *pushed her out* in the link, a stab of anger and unease.

"It's because... Remember when Angel had that amulet?" Cordelia took in the winces and the low growl that resulted from that question and nodded, looking sad. "I know. I'm - sorry for that. But - before we came up here there was this firm of lawyers - Wolfram and Hart - remember them? They brought Darla back."

"Yeah - I remember," Xander said. "Did the lawyers have something to do with Fred leaving?"

"In a round-about way. They've been trying to get A.I. to join up forever. They told Angel he'd be the CEO - that he'd have unlimited resources and funds... He even went on a tour of the place. It was - pretty impressive."

"Angelus the CEO of a bunch of lawyers? That's - daft," Spike muttered, and Xander had to agree - they all did, even Cordelia, who was nodding slowly.
"Yeah. We talked about it - you should have seen the stuff they showed Wes... Anyway, he turned them down and now..." Cordelia's hands were gripping each other tightly, knuckles white. She blinked up at the ceiling, her eyes tracking footsteps from the bathroom to the spare bedroom, Connor's giggles making her smile wanly. "Now that he's pretty much told them he'll never work for them - they've been trying to - kill him."

"We talked about this," Oz said softly, and Cordelia nodded.

"Yeah, I know. Only now - we found out from...from a vision...they're going to open some sort of gate. They're going to bring - thousands of demons through and - and wipe out Angel Investigations and t-take over L.A."

"You saw this?"

"Yeah, Xander." Cordelia wiped at her eyes and sat up a little, fixing them all with a steely glare. "I saw it and it's going to be...really ugly. And the Powers - won't step in, they say that....they showed us what was going to happen and we have to - figure out how to stop it ourselves. That Angel...has to win it for h-himself -"

"Cordelia stopped abruptly and dropped her head into
her hands and Tara got up and went to her, kneeling down and stroking her arms, talking quietly. Xander had a sinking feeling in his gut.

*Well fuck. It never fucking ENDS...*

"Why are you here, cheerleader?" Spike asked, his voice more growl than anything and Xander automatically reached for him, smoothing a hand up and down his back.

"I...because Angel... He's going to fight, and he wanted me and Connor safe," she whispered. A long silence followed, broken by Dawn coming downstairs with Connor in her arms, clean and dressed in brightly-colored 'Oscar the Grouch' pajamas.

"Time to say goodnight, Connor!" Dawn chirped, pushing wet hair out of her face and letting Connor down. He ran straight to Oz and Derio, flopping onto their laps.

"Wolf, the wolf! Be the wolf!"

"Not tonight, Connor - it's too late." Oz hauled him upright and settled him on his knee. "You have to go to bed."
"Nooo - won't!"

"Don't talk back to Uncle Oz, Connor," Cordelia said. She got up slowly and went to her bag - gathered a book and a stuffed camel out of it. "Bedtime, give everybody kisses." Connor pouted but turned to Oz and Derio finally, giving quick kisses on offered cheeks. He clambered over them to Tara and gave her a big hug and kiss.

"Miss you, Aunt Tara," he said, solemn-eyed, and Tara palmed back his thick fall of blond hair.

"I miss you too, Connor. I'm glad you came for a visit." Connor got down and walked slowly over to Xander and Spike, looking nervous.

Oh, damn. No patch. Probably freaking him out, Xander thought, ducking his head a little.

He'll learn, Spike thought, shrugging.

"I like your Oscar pajamas," Xander said, leaning forward. "He's my favorite."
"Mine, too," Connor said. He looked down at the green puppet on his shirt. "Da says Unc' Spike and Oscar are the same."

"M'not green," Spike snapped, and Connor took a step back.

"N-no, Da says you're both grouchy."

Got you there, Xander smirked, and smiled at Connor. "He's right. Uncle Spike can be pretty grouchy but he's a good guy." Connor stood there, twisting his pajama-top hem in his fingers. "You - umm, you don't have to give me a kiss if you don't want to, Connor, it's okay," Xander said, feeling a little sinking feeling. Spike immediately reached out and pulled Xander close, kissing his 'blind' side.

I'll kiss you all you want, love, soft and warm in the link and Xander rubbed his head for just a moment against Spike's cheek.

Thank you, vampire-mine. Connor's lip had stuck out a little and now he looked over at Cordelia, who rolled her eyes.
"I can," he said, and darted in - gave Xander a sloppy kiss and then did the same to Spike - turned and ran to Cordelia and buried his head in her thigh.

"That was really nice, Connor, thank you. Good night, everybody." Cordelia gathered Connor up and slung him on her hip - turned and started walking towards the stairs. "I'm - I'm just going to get Connor settled in and then have a shower, if that's okay? I'm - just really tired."

"Sure, Cordy. When is this big...thing...going down?" Cordelia paused at the foot of the stairs and turned back, her eyes bleak.

"Three days from today," she said softly, and went away upstairs. Silence followed her, the sounds of an Irish ballad on the radio and then Tara was talking softly to Dawn, explaining, and Dawn was looking more and more horrified.

_What is it with threes? Why always - three days?_

_It's...a special number. Always has been_, Oz thought, curling close against Derio and twining his fingers in Derio's dreads.
It fucking sucks.

Wonder if these Wolfram and Hart bastards are gonna...spread out. Try and take - more than L.A. Spike dug into his jeans-pocket for a cigarette and Xander leaned forward, elbows on knees.

"Fuck, I hope not..."

"We have to help!" Dawn was crying, but her face was set in grim lines, and she sat on the floor in front of the couch and stared at all of them.

"Bloody hell - we do not!" Spike was on his feet and pacing, his demon snarling and the link a bitter, determined no that made Xander and the wolves flinch. Tara put her hand to her head and even Dawn swiveled around, staring at him.

"We have to. We have to. We can't let Wesley and Gunn die! Or Angel - what'll Cordelia do if Angel dies! What'll Connor do?"

"Probably heave a sigh of re-"

STOP IT. You know that's not so. You KNOW she loves
him. And Connor does. They'd - they'd be heartbroken.

Don't care, don't care, don't CARE -

"Look - look, I have an idea, I know what to do!" Dawn wiped at her face and then got up and ran to her desk - rifled through two drawers before she pulled out a small box Xander had made for her, carved with stars and moons. "Look - we can use this - we can call them -" She hurried back to the couch and crouched down - held up the palely glowing mote of crystal that the queen of the Seelie Court had given her and the link went to ice.

"I will not have anything to do with them." Spike's voice was a sibilant growl and the stance he was in was one of attack. Xander stood up slowly - got between Spike and Dawn and carefully reached for him. Spike flinched - jerked back and then growled again, a querulous, sing-song noise that made the hyena surface fast - that brought Oz and Derio to their feet.

"What - what is -?" Dawn looked stricken and Tara smoothed her hair, staring at Spike.

Spike! Spike, don't.
Will NOT. Not. Pack pack pack protect, damnit, protect protect PROTECT! He wasn't sensible - wasn't thinking - was letting the demon take over utterly and Xander got up close to him and forced him back, step by step, until Spike was against the wall. There was panic in his eyes and suddenly he simply grabbed Xander and bit - hard and deep and just held on. Not drinking - not moving. Just holding, the growl vibrating through his fangs and into Xander's neck - into his head and his spine and his groin.

Mine, mine, protect mine, pack pack pack!

Okay, it's okay, yours, love, yours... Spike, please, calm, calm -

Pack is here, from Oz, and the werewolf came closer and closer and then just leaned into Spike, as close as he could. Derio was doing the same and for a moment the four of them were just there, the link and the scent of blood and musk and smoke and salt - almonds and lime, cloves and clean wood.

"Spike, Spike," Xander whispered, frozen in Spike's arms, the fangs delicious lances of hot, stinging pleasure in his throat. "It's all right, it's all right...shhhhh,
shhhhh..." Gradually Spike eased off - drew slowly away. He was still the demon - the link was still roiling with agitation - but he was calmer.

"Sorry, love," he mumbled - reached for Oz and Derio both, brush of knuckles over their cheeks. "Sorry. Dawnie, I didn't - didn't mean to scare you," he said a little louder, and Dawn looked up from studying the crystal.

"It's okay. But Spike - they owe us - the Queen said so. Let's - let's just call Scavenger. He was here the night you - the night Xander got you." Dawn stood up, and Tara, and they both came over and were added to the huddle. "He helped Xander - told him what to do - let's just ask. If they can help - we have to try, Spike. We can't let Angel die - we can't let Cordelia down like that." Dawn stared up at Spike, eyes huge and wet, and Spike reached out and rubbed his thumb lightly over her lower lip - cupped her cheek.

"I - I don't trust them, Bit. I just - don't."

"I know. But - Tara's been doing research and she has some new things - wards - they won't be able to walk in like they could. And - Scavenger helped before - he was
mad at Jack - he was -"

*Oh god, god, god...* Spike shut his eyes and pushed his face into Xander's neck and Xander just held onto him.

"It'll be okay, love. Promise. Promise you," he soothed, and Spike just shuddered under his hands. There was a creak on the stairs and moment later Cordelia was there, gratefully ducking under Tara's out-held arm, her strange, fey eyes glimmering with tears.

"Thank you - god - thank you..." she whispered. Outside, the wind picked up and howled, a lost and lonely sort of sound, and the distant bell of a ship in the Duwamish made them all shiver.

"*Lake Huron rolls, Superior sings in the rooms of her ice-water mansion.*
*Old Michigan steams like a young man's dreams: the islands and bays are for sportsmen.*
*And farther below Lake Ontario takes in what Lake Erie can send her,*
*And the iron boats go as the mariners all know with the Gales of November remembered...*"
The house was warded to within an inch of its life when Tara raised the twig of dark wood - really, a finely-carved whistle - to her lips. She blew, a long note that was delicate and high and sent Sinclair and Miss Kitty running. Then she whispered 'Scavenger, Scavenger, Scavenger'.

"Now what?" Cordelia asked, helping Connor to put together a puzzle.

"Now we wait. I don't think he'll come until dusk." Tara put the whistle carefully away in another small box - one carved with acorns and leaves - and settled down on the floor with Cordy and Connor. Dawn was online, typing back and forth with Giles, and Oz and Derio were making music in the corner, guitar and fiddle and soft voices, something new of Derio's.

Xander was sprawled over Spike on the couch, head
firmly under Spike's chin and Spike was slowly rubbing his hands up and down Xander's back.

_Wish we could go... Let's go somewhere, love. Let's go to New York, or - or over to Europe or England, yeah? Let's travel._

_I'd like that, _Xander agreed, sleepy in the late-afternoon warmth and quiet of the house. _Spike hated this part - the waiting part - more than anything. _Hated asking for a favor from a people who drove the demon to a frenzy - who made his human self shrink back in something too much like fear._

_Not supposed to be like this. _Supposed to be... _Images from his days with _Dru - traveling and stopping on a whim; staying here and there for as long or as short a time as they liked. _Seeking out the mysteries and the mundanities of the world. _Ghosts in Edinburgh and a jazz-singer in Paris; treasure and new frocks for _Dru and a faster car - spell books bound in human skin and an original edition of _The Lord of the Rings, signed by the man himself. _Several lifetimes' worth of laughter and love and fighting and blood - chases and races and pell-mell flights._
Just seein' the world - loving each other... All I want to do with you, love. With the family.

We'll get there. We'll do it - we will. Love you, Spike. Always. It's going to be okay.

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\

Tara was right and an hour after a stormy sunset the wards suddenly sparked to life, flaring witch-fire green and yellow all around. Connor laughed out loud and ran to touch, and Cordelia snatched him back - joined Dawn on the couch, wide-eyed. Spike stalked in from the kitchen, a bottle of whiskey in his hand, and went up to the door - opened it and peered out through the screen. A horse's heavy whuff of breath blasted across him, and then there was a sparkling shimmer and Scavenger stood there, limned in the ward-light, his hair tangled and caught full of weed and leaves, dripping wetly over his chest and arms. He hugged his arms tight around his ribs and stood there, his eyes sparking ruby-red.

"It's cold, chovexani - won't you invite me in?"
"Only if you bind yourself with salt and bread, to bring no harm to this house or those within it," Tara said softly. Scavenger looked at her, his lips peeling back in a snarl and Spike growled, the wards like ants over his skin and the string of beads burning against his chest. Scavenger shook his hair back and the air around him rippled and he was dressed. Ragged jeans and sweater, like before, but barefoot this time and feathers and trinkets in his hair.

"You have the calling of us, and may choose how to use it. Bring me the things and I will so swear." Oz rose from the back of the couch and picked up a small plate - brought it over. Spike eased the screen door open and Scavenger took the plate - took the slice of bread with the pinch of salt on it and folded it and wolfed it down, his eyes gleaming.

"You make good bread, lady. With your own fair hands, you made it. By bread and salt I do swear, no harm to you or yours, no harm under this roof."

"Let him in, Spike," Tara said softly, and Spike did, utterly unable to keep the demon submerged and not caring.

Better behave. Better not try one bloody thing -
Calm, faintly from Oz, who was also twitching restlessly as Scavenger moved inside and his peculiar magical presence washed over them.

"Back off, damnit," Xander snapped, eye green-glowing and his voice dropping to a growl, and Scavenger took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them the nerve-tingling sensation was gone, and they all relaxed just a little.

"So - you've called. What shall I do? Take you around the world in a night? Grant you three wishes?" His roving eye caught sight of Connor and he smiled. "I could teach yon boy many a skill, in the mounds."

"No," Tara said sharply, and Scavenger grinned at her.

"What then?"

"Do you have the calling of the Court? Can you bargain for them?" Scavenger abruptly sobered and looked away for a moment.

"I have and I can. What would you with the Court?"
"Long story," Spike said, and went to sit with Xander on the back of the couch, taking a long pull of the whiskey while Tara slowly told their story.

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"Are we ready?" Xander looked around the room - at the wolves and Spike and Tara - at Cordelia and Connor and Dawn who were huddling together.

"Ready as we'll ever be for this kind of nonsense," Spike grumbled. But he tucked a second knife into his other boot, and the wolves nodded silently. Outside in the yard - noticeable only by glinting spots of scarlet fire in the dusk - were Scavenger and another pooka, waiting to take them to L.A. Cordelia hadn't been able to reach Angel and she was on the verge of breaking down. Dawn was calming herself in the link, holding Cordy's hand so tightly Xander was sure there would be bruises.

"Oh - god -" Dawn let go of Cordy and ran to Spike - hugged him hard and kissed him, then did the same to Xander and the wolves. "Be careful, damnit! No - heroics!"
"Don't fret, love. Back before breakfast," Spike said, and Dawn smiled crookedly at him and went back to Cordelia.

"It's time!" Scavenger called, and Xander grabbed Spike in a hard kiss.

*What Dawn said - no fuckin' heroics.*

*Leave that to Peaches, love,* Spike thought, grabbing Xander's ass and pulling him close. They kissed again, and then went out to the waiting pookas. Scavenger nodded at them, grinning, his white teeth flashing in the ward-light and street-light, his hair whipping in a hard wind.

"Chovexani, this is Reed. She will bear you." The other pooka eyed them from behind an even wilder mat of black hair, thin arms crossed over her small breasts.

"Thank you," Tara said, and Reed nodded once - shimmered and twisted and changed, and the massive black horse that stood there dipped its shoulder to Tara and snorted. Derio gave Tara a leg-up, his hands laced around her shin, and Tara settled lightly on the sateen back, her hands clutching deep into the smoky-soft
mane, a small backpack over her shoulders.

"If the wolves run with us, they can pace us. Stay at my heels, changelings!" Scavenger laughed, then he changed as well, braying a trumpeting challenge to the night and the storm. Xander climbed on and Spike swung up easily behind him, arms tight around his ribs. The wolves were shedding their jeans - morphing to the wolf and howling up at the sky, eyes flashing green fire.

"Let's go!" Xander yelled, and Scavenger reared up - leapt forward with a bunch and push of powerful hindquarters and suddenly they were flying - skimming over the land - over water - over treetops, it seemed, and the bulking mass of black cloud that was moving in from the sea. They ran south, faster and faster, and Xander tucked down, eye squinted shut - Spike's face in his back and their hands locked together. The wolves were right there, joyous and fierce, running with the pookas as if they had wings.

_Lets do this, then - do it right - fists and fangs and make the world know...nothing on this earth touches my family._

_I'm in love with William the Bloody and I like it_, Xander replied,
Flying flying! from Tara, delight and awe, and Xander laughed aloud. L.A. seemed to come too soon.

*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

The Wolfram and Hart building was huge - brightly lit - swarming with demons and things darker and less identifiable. There was a swirling mass of lightning-shot cloud hovering over it, and far, far below Spike could see Angelus, standing with a sword and his stupid hair - standing next to Gunn and Wesley with a look of determination and utter loneliness on his face. Rain poured down, a stinging veil, and the gutters ran with dirty, trash-speckled water. Scavenger leapt, forty stories in one stomach-churning go and Xander yelped, clutching at Spike's hands. The pooka skidded on the tarmac of the street, water splashing up from his hooves. He threw his head up and bugled a wild neigh, shaking rain off in an all-over move like a dog. Angel started and spun around - stared, his sword slowly dipping down until the point touched the ground. The wolves loped forward out of a swirling mist, Flying! God, it was wonderful - in the link.
"What - what are you - Spike? Xander - what -" He gaped at them and Spike grinned - slid off the pooka and braced Xander as he did the same.

"Heard you were havin' a bit of a dust-up, Angelus. Care for a hand?" Angel's lips moved soundlessly, and Gunn - limping and with blood down the side of his face - hobbled over to them. The pooka did a little side-ways dancing move and Gunn froze - then stared in bewilderment as the horse swirled up and away in a fountain of blackness and sparks, revealing after a moment the slight, wickedly grinning form of the pooka.

"Scavenger?" Angel took his own step forward, staring, swiping at the water in his eyes. "What the hell is going on, Spike!" A scream from a demonic throat made them all jerk around and stare, and then Reed was there as well, Tara astride her back, her blonde hair a tangle over her shoulders, her sodden shirt clinging to her.

"Are we ready?" she asked, and Wesley hurried up beside Gunn, blood washing pinkly from his shirt, his face worn and haggard.

"Ready for what? What's going on?"
"Just a little - debt, bein' paid." Spike nodded to Tara and she took the crystal shard out of her pocket and breathed over it - hurled it to the ground where it shattered. Suddenly the sky seemed to split overhead, light pouring out of a fissure in the clouds that was edged in green and yellow, white and scarlet. And the Seelie Court poured out - ranks and ranks of pale horsemen, stretching as far back as the eye could see.

*Seraphim and Cherubim - Thrones and Dominions - the assembled Host* - Spike stared at the them - at the wave of light that was pouring from the sky and glittering off of spear-heads and arrow-points, sword blades and axes. The wolves howled, and a roar went up from the Court.

*God, it's beautiful, it's* - Xander had Spike's hand in his, squeezing it tight, and Spike grinned and turned back to Tara, flinging ran out of his eyes with a sideways snap of his head.

"Let's get the others too, love," he called and she smiled - pulled out the whistle from her other pocket. She put it to her mouth and blew one long, shrill note that swelled over the hissing rain and the clink and rumble of the advancing horsemen. The demons caught up the note
and howled it back and the ground split; riders surging up like a whale from the depths. The UnSeelie Court; black horses and riders clad in shimmering mail and dark gems - weapons that gleamed with a poisoned light.

"What - is it?" Wesley was clutching at Gunn, and Angel was looking around wildly, and Spike grinned like a madman. He walked over to a car that was parked to one side and peered inside, then put his fist through the window - fished a CD out of his coat pocket and slid it into the car's player.

"Glinda!" he called. "Can you make it work?" Tara nodded - urged Reed over and leaned down from the high, black back - touched the hood of the car. Green light arched from finger to finger and then to the car and suddenly the stereo blared to life, music pouring out into the street, louder than the demons and the Seelie and UnSeelie host.

"Welcome to the jungle,
We got fun'n'games,
We got everything you want
Honey we know the names
We are the people that can find
Whatever you may need
If you got the money honey
We got your disease..."

"It's a rescue, Percy! Come on - we've got things to kill!" Spike shouted gleefully, taking the sword Scavenger drew from the air - seeing Xander do the same. Reed leapt to a building-roof with Tara, standing beside the Queens and their consorts. Overhead, something screeched, and they all looked up to see a dragon swooping and diving along the Wolfram and Hart façade.

"A - rescue?" Angel stared for one more moment at the Courts, shaking his head in bewilderment. "Jesus - Spike, I -"

"C'mon, me old china! The Princess is safe at home with your boy, time to get to work!" Spike leapt, demon-faced and roaring, Xander at his side and the wolves going out to flank them. The Courts were surging forward and Spike saw Gunn and then Wesley climb aboard the broad back of some pale, dappled horse, swords thrust into their hands and armor slung on in haste, magic making the straps and buckles do the work themselves. Rain gleamed like ice and diamonds and fire on the fantastical armor of the Courts and their
weapons - on the tack and equipage of the horses and the banners that snapped and fluttered in the storm-wind.

It's like - a fuckin' movie. We're in the middle of a movie, Xander thought, pushing his rain-soaked hair off his face and staring, a grin on his face.

"I'm going to kill the dragon!" Angel yelled, and Spike laughed, and they plunged into the fray.

"In the jungle
Welcome to the jungle
Watch it bring you to your....knees, knees
I wanna watch you bleed..."

*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

In the peculiar way of magic, when all was said and done L.A. hadn't seemed to notice the titanic forces that had battled for hours in the streets. The rain had slacked and
finally stopped, and now a dense fog was eddying along the streets, glowing faintly in the impending dawn. The Wolfram and Hart building was gone - was nothing more than a smoking hole in the ground surrounded by broken asphalt and concrete, rain-water pooling in the low places. Xander couldn't imagine how that was going to be explained away. Reed came down from the rooftop, dipping her shoulder so Tara could dismount and then standing there for a moment, staring at them. With a shake of her head she turned and darted away, shimmering into nothingness. The Courts had already gone - when the last demon had fallen they had ridden away into smoke and obscurity, rippling away into thin air as if they had never been. Xander had seen the Queens both raise a hand to them, and then turn and go as well, without a word.

*Well rid of them,* was Spike's thought, and Xander supposed he was right.

"God - did we win? I mean - they're gone, right?" Xander carefully flexed his hand, trying to ease the cramps out of his fingers. The sword-hilt had been welded to his hand with blood and sweat and it had taken him five minutes or more to get his fingers to unlock and let go. The Sidhe blade was propped against
a heap of broken concrete now, and he slid slowly down next to it, wincing as broken edges poked him sharply in the back. Tara found a patch of street that wasn't too muddy and sat down, gazing around her with wide eyes.

"Think we won," Spike said, flopping down next to Xander, mud and blood spattered all over him - his face smeared with it and his hair glued into a mat with demon gore. He wiped tiredly at his face and then just lay there.

Oz?  You all right?  Derio?

We're here  The wolves trotted out of the fog, their fur plastered to them, their muzzles wet with blood. Tara reached into her backpack and pulled out two pair of jeans, holding them while the wolves changed. Oz and Derio got the jeans on and then stood there, drooping with exhaustion, as filthy as Spike and Xander were.

"Where's Angel?  And - Wes and Gunn?  Did you see them?"

"Saw Angel getting that dragon - guess he did kill it."  Oz settled gingerly on a twisted mailbox and Derio slumped next to him, leaning his head on Oz's shoulder.
"Is anyone there?" a voice called, sounding distant, and Xander looked around.

"We're here! Who's that?"

"It's Wesley and Gunn! Are you all right?" The two men staggered out of the fog, their Sidhe armor smeared and filthy, both looking dazed and utterly spent.

"We're all right," Spike said. He was doing a slow search for his cigarettes, and when he finally found them Gunn silently held out his hand. Spike snorted and tossed him the pack - lit up and then handed over his lighter. Gunn lit his own smoke and handed everything back, then tiredly wiped his hand back over his head.

"Are you all right?" Tara asked, eyeing their muddy, bloody selves and looking like she was itching to start wiping faces and checking bones.

"I think we're fine, actually," Wesley sounded surprised. He looked down at the intricately wrought breastplate he wore and gave it a tap over his heart. "I think it's all down to these that we fared so well."

"Think they'll let us keep these? Don't even have a dent -"
"They may," Wesley said, his hands starting to work on the buckles and straps. Gunn stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and helped him, and after a few moments Wesley eased the breastplate off with a sigh of relief, rolling his shoulders and neck.

"My turn," Gunn said, and they worked in silence to get Gunn's armor off as well. When the pieces were propped next to Xander's sword Gunn drew Wesley into his arms and held him for a long moment, big hands smoothing Wesley's back and Wesley murmuring something into Gunn's shoulder, eyes closed. They both drew apart reluctantly, and Gunn wiped at his face and looked around.

"Where's Angel? Sun'll be up soon, he needs to get undercover - you too, Spike."

"Yeah," Spike said, eyes closed, cigarette going to ash between his fingers. Xander sighed and slowly started leveraging himself to his feet, every muscle screaming. During the fight he'd felt - like a superhero. Now he felt a hundred years old.
Hundred's not so old, Spike thought, opening one eye and peering at him, and Xander grinned and held out his hand.

"Maybe not for you. I want a hot bath and my bed. For a week."

"Amen to that," Gunn said. Spike groaned and took Xander's hand, letting himself be pulled up, and the wolves climbed slowly to their feet as well. Tara stood up and slung her backpack onto her shoulders, the only one of them with any energy at all.

"I guess we need to find Angel then," she said, looking around in a kind of despair, and they all gazed at the rubble and demon corpses around them. "What - wh-what's going to happen to all this? I mean - all this can't just be - I-left here."

"Maybe they'll burn up when the sun comes up?" Gunn asked hopefully.

"Some will." Spike looked around - wrinkled his nose. "There's gonna be a god's awful stink, otherwise."
"Oh, dear god, I can't even imagine," Wesley said, his face wrinkled in distaste, and they began to slowly walk down the street, circling chunks of the Wolfram and Hart building, looking for Angel. The sky was getting lighter, a pale greenish-grey, and the fog was thinning and wisping away as dawn approached. Xander was getting more and more nervous.

*We've got to get you inside soon, dammit. Why the hell isn't he HERE?*

*Maybe something grabbed him and drug him off,* Spike thought, poking at what looked like half of a safe and pulling something out - dropping it hastily and wiping his hand on his jeans.

*This is NO place for looting, Spike!*

*No harm in looking.*

*There might be! Just - don't touch anything.* Spike grinned tiredly at him and they plodded on.

"Hey! He's over h-here!" Tara yelled, and Xander and Spike both changed direction, heading towards Tara's voice. Tara was kneeling behind the crushed body of a
car, Angel's head cradled on her knee. The vampire was covered in mud and blood and what looked like a strip of dragon-hide. His sword was broken, wedged into the car's hood. "Is he o-okay? He's not wa-waking up." Tara was trying to clean the mud off Angel's face with her fingers and had only succeeded in smearing it around more.

"Oh, he probably just needs a little blood. I could use a pint or two, myself," Spike said, dropping down next to them and reaching for Angel. His hand gripped Angel's shoulder and then he froze, staring.

"Spike? Wh-what is it?" Tara whispered. Spike snatched his hand off Angel, his gaze never leaving Angel's face.

"Spike?"

*What is it? What's the matter?*

*God, I don't - I don't...know, I -*

"You find Angel?" Gunn and Wesley came around the back of the car as well and Wesley made a small noise of shock, hurrying forward.
"Is he all right?"

"No, there's - something... Spike, what is it." Spike looked up at Xander, eyes wide, shaking his head.

"Glinda - feel his neck - feel - right there." Spike pointed at the pulse-point on Angel's throat and Tara gave him a confused look but obediently put her fingers on Angel's jugular. She sat for a long moment and then she looked up at them, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Tara?"

"He h-has a pulse! Xander, he - he has a heartbeat."

"What?" Wesley pushed forward, and Gunn did, and Spike climbed to his feet and edged away, bumping into Xander and putting his arms around him.

He - really has a heartbeat?

He was WARM... He - I think he's alive. Spike was staring at Angel - at Gunn and Wesley, who were feeling for a pulse and obviously finding it. The feeling in the link from Spike were a mixture of anger and awe and happiness and Xander hugged him.
You okay?

Me? I'm... If he's...not a vamp anymore it's... It's weird. Angelus...was always there. Can't be GONE...

Angel's alive? Oz and Derio jogged into view from up the street, half-wolf to better help find Angel and shifting back to human, now.

He's - human. He's got a heartbeat, Spike thought.

"Wow." Oz peered down at the - man - lying in Tara's lap, and they all looked around in startlement as hoof-beats rang behind them. It was Scavenger, trotting towards them, Cordelia and Dawn and Connor on his back.

"Xander! Are you okay? Is everybody okay? Spike?" Dawn looked like she was about to leap right off Scavenger's back and the pooka stopped and dipped his shoulder down, holding stock-still as Dawn started to slither to the ground. Spike leaped forward and helped her then held out his hand for Cordelia, bracing her as she slid off awkwardly, holding a squirming Connor tightly.
"Unc' Spike! We were running in the clouds! We were higher than the trees!" Connor broke free of Cordelia's hold and ran towards the others - stumbled to a halt as he saw Angel. "Why is Da sleeping on the road? Unc' Wes, why is Da sleeping in the road?"

"Oh, no, oh - no - god -" Cordelia went white, stumbling forward, and Spike got an arm around her.

"Don't get in a panic now, Princess. He's - he's not - I mean, he's -"

"Cordelia -" Wesley said, standing up and holding out his hand. "Angel is - he's...alive."

"Of course he's - alive, he's not - dust -" Cordelia went down on her knees next to Angel and Wesley crouched down next to her, his hand on her shoulder. Dawn snagged Connor and held him and he struggled, scowling.

"Want down, Aunt Dawn!"

"Cordelia..." Wesley smiled suddenly - a huge smile, his eyes gleaming through the muck and mud on his face, his teeth startlingly white. "Angel has a heartbeat. I think - I
think it's Shanshu." Cordelia just stared at him - jumped a little when Angel groaned and started to move.

"Angel? Oh, god - Angel? Are you all right?" Angel's eyes fluttered, open and shut and finally open, and he peered dazedly upwards for a moment before his gaze settled on Cordelia.

"Cordy? What - why are you here? It's - too dangerous -"

"The fight's over, man. We won!" Gunn was grinning now, too, and he pulled Wesley to his feet and kissed him, hard. "We won! We. Fucking. WON!"

"We did? God - my head hurts." Angel sat up slowly, Tara and Cordelia helping him. He smiled briefly at Tara and then hugged Cordelia. "We really won?"

"Yeah, beat 'em into the ground. Literally. Look around you, Angel," Spike said and Angel did, taking in the smoking ruins and the mess of squashed cars and demon bits.

"Wow. Yeah, I guess we did. Where are - the Sidhe?"
"Buggered off as soon as the fight was done and good riddance."

Angel nodded - grimaced. "You know... I don't - feel...right."

"How do you feel?" Wesley asked, his face alight with curiosity, and Angel clambered slowly to his feet, frowning. Tara stood up as well, retrieving her backpack and moving to stand next to Oz and Derio, smiling when the werewolves linked their arms around her.

"I - dunno, I'm kind of...dizzy? And...my chest hurts. Did I get hit?" Angel passed a shaking hand over his chest - looked down at himself in startlement. "What the -"

"Angel - Angel, it's - Shanshu. You're alive - Angel, you're alive!" Cordelia couldn't hold back - she flung herself on Angel, crying, hugging him, and Angel automatically held her, rubbing her back. He looked at Wesley, his face alight with fear and hope and shock.

"Wes? Is - what's going on?"

"It's true, Angel! You have a heartbeat - you're alive." Wesley's grin was enormous and so was Gunn's
and Angel just stared and then slowly started to grin back. Beside Xander, Connor flailed harder and Dawn put him down. He ran straight to his parents, clinging to Angel's thigh and Angel gently loosened Cordelia's hold and bent down to pick him up.

"Da, you okay? Da - why were you sleeping in the road? Why is mommy crying? Da, I rode a horse here, did you see the horse? He could talk!" Angel hugged Connor to him, speechless, then looked around. Scavenger stepped out of the shadows of an awning, ragged clothes and ruby-glowing eyes, and made a small bow.

"Consider your new...state a parting gift from the Powers. They have found another to fight for them. Your visions will come no more," Scavenger added, nodding to Cordelia, and she gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. "The defeat of Wolfram and Hart will leave a void, and there will be many factions fighting for control of the city. Best for you all to move on."

"No. We don't abandon our post," Wesley said, and Gunn was nodding. Angel glanced at them and nodded as well.
"We don't need visions - or a mandate from the Powers - to fight. There're too many innocents at risk to just leave." Scavenger shrugged - looked over at Xander and Spike. "I'll bear you one last time - take you home. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I - yeah, we are," Xander said, suddenly feeling like he couldn't keep on his feet for one minute longer. Angel passed Connor over to Cordelia and approached them.

"I don't - know what to say. I can't believe you did this for me. For us. Thank you."

"Thank the Niblet - she's the one insisted," Spike said, frowning a little, and Angel looked over at Dawn, who grinned.

"Whoever made it happen - I'm grateful. I - god. This is weird. It's so - loud." Angel stood for a moment with his hand to his chest, then he looked at Spike.

"I guess - I'm not a vampire anymore... Guess that's the last I'll be seeing of you." Spike eyed him, then stepped forward and let the demon emerge - took a long sniff at Angel's neck.
"I dunno, Angelus - you don't smell half bad. Might come see you some night." Spike was grinning, and then Angel was, and suddenly they were hugging, a hard embrace that lasted for long minutes. Then Spike backed off and slipped his arm around Xander's waist again, and Angel retreated to Cordelia's side.

"Come and visit sometime," Xander said. "You've never seen our house. You're welcome anytime. All of you - you're welcome anytime."

"Thank you, Xander," Wesley said - walked over and held out his hand and shook, one after the other, with Xander and Spike, Oz and Derio. Tara he hugged, kissing her cheek, and he and Dawn both stood and looked at each other for a moment until Dawn shrugged and hugged the ex-Watcher. Wesley retreated to Gunn's side and Gunn took his hand.

"We can always use an extra hand in the demon-fighting business," he said.

"We're done with that for a while," Xander said, feeling Spike's arm tighten around him. "And right now - I just want to go home."
"Me too," Tara said, plucking at her still-wet shirt, and Scavenger, who'd faded back while they talked, emerged again, horse-shape. A low whicker and another horse trotted out of the shadows - shadows that were uncomfortably sharp-edged as the sun climbed past the horizon and began to creep through the canyons of the city.

*Definitely time to get out of here,* Xander thought, as he and Spike climbed one last time onto Scavenger's back and Gunn helped Tara and Dawn up onto the other pooka - Reed, Xander was sure. Oz and Derio changed, making Connor squeal with delight, and Xander raised his hand.

"Be careful, you guys. And Angel - remember. Sunblock is your friend." He grinned, and Angel laughed, snatching Cordelia and Connor to him and hugging them, spinning them around with a shout of pure joy.

"Bye! We'll call you!" Dawn yelled, and then Reed began to run, and Scavenger did, pounding over the street and then over air - over nothing. Moving into pearl-shot blackness as L.A. disappeared behind them.
God, going home. Not gonna be saving the world again anytime soon. Spike tightened his arms around Xander and Xander leaned back into him, closing his eye to the stinging wind.

Nope. Just gonna - be together. Travel. Maybe we'll go see Buffy and Giles. And Willow. I miss her.

I know. Whenever you like, love. I can find something to do while you two braid hair.

Oh stop. You've braided plenty of hair in your time. Spike growled in Xander's ear and nipped at his throat, and Scavenger bucked under them.

Go home, stay home - not worry about anything for a while... Love you so much, vampire-mine... Love you more than you know.

Do you, now? Can't be as much as I love you.

Maybe not. Always, Spike. Forever and always.

Forever for sure, my love, my own. No getting away from me now.
Would never even try, Xander thought, and Spike's arms were a shield around him - were holding him and holding him up and keeping him safe - keeping him. Below was the Sound, and then the Duwamish, and *home home*, and their little house had never looked so beautiful - so welcoming. The mist that the pookas seemed to drag with them shielded Spike from the rising sun and they slithered down and ran for the door, the pookas wheeling and gone, faster than thought. Once inside they simply stared at one another while the wolves changed and Spike peeled off his filthy coat. Then they were grabbing on - holding tight - a crush of flesh and bone and love you, love you

brother home love

pack pack

This is my life, Xander thought. This is my life and it is...better than I ever thought it could be.

Happy then, love? Spike asked, kissing him, and Xander looked at his family - at Tara and Dawn like the sisters he'd secretly wished for; at Derio and Oz who were brothers, lovers - the truest of friends. And at Spike, whose tired face and sparkling eyes made his heart
pound in sheer joy - in a rush of giddy happiness that seemed to make the whole room spin.

"Happiest I've ever been, Spike. Happiest I've ever been."

"That's all right, then," Spike said, and kissed him.

*It's Only a Paper Moon* - *Billy Rose*

*Moon River* - Lyrics by Johnny Mercer, music by Henry Mancini

*The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* - *Gordon Lightfoot*

*Welcome to the Jungle* - *Guns 'n' Roses*

The End