

Beta'd by  [cordelianne](#) and  [apreludetoanend](#). I owe them both many cookies, as they are marvellous and speedy.

Rating: NC-17 overall, this part PG-13

Disclaimer: Characters not mine. Full disclaimer [here](#).

Author's Notes: Takes place in BtVS season 7, starting from roughly before *Lies My Parents Told Me*. I have taken mild liberties with the timeline, though, in terms of when Spike's trigger is discovered. For instance, Spike's kidnapping has already happened, the seal is opened and the Turok-han are freed, but Spike is not yet known to be killing under compulsion from the First. If you haven't seen S7 BtVS, you will have trouble following the plot and will be spoiled. Warnings for NC-17 rating and mild bloodplay.

The first 100 words of this were written as a drabble for the prompt "puppet" at  [open_on_sunday](#)

10.113 words

Dies Irae

by
Electricalgwen

*Day of wrath, O day of mourning,
See fulfilled the prophet's warning,
Heaven and earth in ashes burning.*

- Office hymn for November 2, All Souls' Day

Prologue

Early one morning...

Xander picked up his bowl and slurped the last of the Corn Pop flavored milk. He could hear Kennedy hollering as the Potentials turned right at the end of the street. They'd be jogging for at least an hour.

Mornings like this were all too rare. He grinned and stretched, spread the paper out, and stirred extra sugar into his coffee.

Just as the sun was rising...

A shadow fell over him.

“Spike?” He looked up. “You – uh, you okay? You look a bit...”

“Waited a long time for this, pet.” Crunch, shift. “Just relax.”

“Spike! No!”

Part One

Willow jolted awake.

The house was startlingly quiet. The girls must be out training. She listened, but heard nothing except a muffled lawnmower several yards away. Had that woken her, then?

She stretched luxuriantly, snuggling in her sunny drift of duvet. Stay here, all cozy? Or get breakfast? She really wanted some tea. And that blueberry muffin hidden behind a glamour of bottled beets. Some might call that a frivolous use of magic, but how else could you keep any food in the house, with a herd of baby Slayers grazing at all hours of the day?

She briefly contemplated summoning the muffin to her, but reluctantly admitted that was *definitely* frivolous. Fine, she'd get up. But in her fuzzy slippers. Like taking a bit of bed with her.

She shuffled into the kitchen, filled the kettle, and retrieved the secret muffin. No clean plates – she pulled open the dishwasher and sighed. Stuffed full, and no one had turned it on. Typical. She fished out a small plate and went over to the sink to rinse it.

The sink was surprisingly empty, except for Xander’s “Make It So” coffee mug. Broken into three pieces. Poor Xander. She knew he treasured that mug.

Odd that he hadn’t carefully gathered the fragments, to glue it back together.

Ten seconds in the microwave made for a perfect muffin. She settled at the island, a curl of steam from her tea glinting in the sun. She elbowed her plate a little further out of the way, and reached for the badly folded newspaper.

It was sticky and reluctant to open, because page 5 was covered with blood. She dropped it in disgust. Sharing a house with Spike had numerous downsides.

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Her day continued peacefully following that nicely slow start, with few interruptions from research and meditation. The Potentials returned from their morning run, and after an hour or two of squabbles over the shower, spent most of the day outside alternately training and sunbathing. Andrew hovered near the potentials, Anya went shopping, and Xander was evidently out running errands or something. Spike emerged from the basement and lazed on the couch until one of the girls tried to play with his hair, at which point he stomped back down to “catch some kip in bloody peace.”

She was back in the kitchen fixing an afternoon snack when Buffy and Dawn breezed in from school at the same time, dumping their bags in a heap. There was a minor scuffle over the tiny remaining selection of fruit; Buffy scored the kiwi.

“Will, have you seen Xander? The pommel horse keeps wobbling and I don’t know if its legs need sawing off or nailing on.”

Willow shook her head. “No, he was gone when I got up. There was a Post-It on the

fridge saying he'd gone to get studs. Or screws, or shelving maybe? I couldn't quite read it."

"That's from yesterday," Dawn said indistinctly, crunching her apple. "He put up some extra shelves in my closet. Which I'd been asking for for *ages*, but Molly and Rona promptly dumped all their stuff on them."

Buffy put on her sympathetic-but-lecturing look. "I know it's hard sharing the house, Dawn, but we need to keep everybody close. This is the safest place for these girls." She frowned. "And for Xander. It's not like him to take off without telling anyone."

"Sharing the house, fine. I *didn't* agree to share my closet," Dawn pouted. "Maybe he went in to the construction site?"

"He said they were closed indefinitely." Willow finished assembling her cheese-on-crackers. Dawn promptly stole one. "Though, indefinite means you don't know how long the thing in question, which in this case is the closing, goes on for, so maybe the indefinite is now... definite?" She met twin bemused glances. "Um, I mean definitely over. I mean, they might have changed their minds?"

"I guess so." Buffy didn't look convinced. "His car's outside, though. Why wouldn't he drive, if he was going across town?"

"Eww!" Dawn had tried to read the comics.

Buffy wrinkled her nose at the paper. "I deal with demons all night, psycho teenagers all day, and I'm not sure which is worse, evil is set to devour us from the bottom up, and Andrew keeps trying to see me in my underwear." She sighed. "Is it too much to ask that I have a blood-free kitchen?"

"You can't," Dawn pointed out. "He needs to keep it in the fridge. Which is in the kitchen."

Buffy rolled her eyes and sighed. Throwing open the basement door, she shouted down. "Spike! Get up here!"

He took the stairs three at a time. “Where is it?!”

“Where’s what?”

“Oh. Thought somebody was being eaten or something, the way you were yelling.”

“No. You’re just a slob. Clean up your blood when you spill it.”

“Didn’t spill any.” Spike looked the picture of injured innocence. Nobody bought it.

“Whatever. Got any idea where Xander’s gone?”

Spike shrugged. “Haven’t seen him all day.”

“Nobody has.”

“Probably just wanted some time away from this madhouse. Don’t blame him.”

“It’s not like him to disappear, though. He usually leaves a note.” She chewed her lip. “Maybe I should swing by the construction site and see if they’re up and running again. There’s too much craziness going on right now.”

“Was going to head to Willy’s anyway. ‘M running low on pigswill. Can stop by on the way, see if he’s there – last I heard, they’d laid the sewer connections.”

Willow blinked. “That’s very, um – helpful of you.”

Spike looked dismissive. “Just don’t want to listen to you all fussing and getting in a flap. Give me a blanket, I’ll be on my way.” He glanced speculatively at Willow. “Y’know, if *you* wanted to be helpful, Red, you could invent me some vampire sunscreen. Seeing as how I keep running errands for you lot and all.”

Buffy retrieved the blanket stashed by the door and tossed it at him. “Bye, Spike.”

He exited, grumbling.

Willow was staring off into space, eyes narrowed. Buffy sighed and nudged her.

“No. Daylight vamps bad, remember?”

Willow looked sheepish. “I bet it would work, though.” She looked askance at Buffy’s glare and hurriedly added, “In a purely theoretical way, of course.”

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“See, it’s all in sorting out what they’re asking you. You know the equations. Just ignore the extra details they put in to confuse you.”

Dawn sighed. “Yeah. The math is cool. It’s just hard when they mix it all up in word problems.”

Willow nodded sympathetically. “You’re getting the hang of it, though. You figured out the last two just fine.” She rose. “I’m going to fix supper, before everyone gets back from their evening run all hypoglycemic and cranky. Come on down when you’re done the rest of them, and I’ll look them over.”

She grinned as she reached the top of the stairs, and skipped down them.

“Xander! There you are. We were starting to worry!” She smiled in relief. “We even sent Spike out to look for you! You should have left a note.”

“It’s still daylight.”

“Oh, you know that doesn’t stop Spike! He took the tunnels.”

“It’s too bright.”

“Huh? Not in the…” She paused and looked at him. “Xand, do you feel okay? You look like hell.”

“Really?” Xander looked at her speculatively. “I wouldn’t have said I look like hell right now.”

Crunch, shift. His face morphed.

“*This* is what hell looks like, Wills, old buddy, old pal.”

Willow’s face blanched in shock. She shrieked, turned, and fled to the kitchen.

Xander followed, humming.

The shriek brought Buffy and Dawn charging downstairs, heading for the sounds of scrabbling and cutlery crashing in the kitchen. They jostled down the hallway; Buffy shoved Dawn behind her and burst into the room. Willow was backed against the counter, hands raised in front of her, gasping and sobbing too hard to say anything coherent as Xander advanced on her.

“Will, what’s the…”

Xander turned.

A moment of frozen disbelief. No one moved.

“No,” Dawn muttered brokenly, and things exploded into action.

Xander grinned and leapt forward. Buffy’s fighting stance had collapsed in horrified disbelief, and she was knocked against the doorframe by the force of his attack. Tears were running down her face but instinct took over; she thrust her arms out, throwing him across the room.

Willow scurried around the island and to the hall door, still sobbing uncontrollably and wringing her hands. She tried to pull Dawn down the hall with her as Xander swung at Buffy. Buffy easily blocked it – then nearly collapsed as his other fist nailed her in the solar plexus. She aimed a roundhouse kick at him; Xander neatly grabbed her heel and yanked her off-balance.

Willow realized in horror that Buffy was up against someone who’d watched her fight – watched her train – for years. She yanked on Dawn’s sleeve again, but Dawn broke away, burst into the kitchen and snatched up the kettle. She smashed it against the back of Xander’s head just as he flipped Buffy onto her back on the

floor. Willow shrieked again and ran up the hall.

Xander growled and lunged for Dawn, knocking her down against the cupboards. Buffy grabbed his ankle, yanked him back; he turned, punched her in the shoulder and slammed her onto the kitchen island. She grunted as the edge met her spine and smashed her head forward into Xander's face. Blood began to drip from his nose.

“Willow! *Do something!!*” Dawn shrieked. Muffled thuds came from the living room.

Xander had both Buffy's wrists in one hand, pulled her up, and punched her hard in the stomach. As she crumpled, he spun her, kneed her in the kidneys, and shoved her headfirst into the fridge. She dropped to her hands and knees, fighting to suck in some air.

Xander turned and paced towards Dawn, face contorted and bloody. “Willow isn't going to use magic on *me*, Dawnie. I'm her best friend!” He grinned manically. “Besides, she doesn't trust herself. Not surprising, since none of you trust her either. She's too afraid of her own darkness to let it out.”

He bent down; Dawn hit out at him but he easily blocked it. “Magic won't save you now, Dawnie.”

Thunk.

He collapsed into Dawn's lap. Willow kept the tranquilizer gun trained on him, albeit shakily, until Buffy had recovered, carried him downstairs and chained him up on Spike's bed.

She climbed the stairs, laid the gun on the table and stared at it meditatively. Buffy came up beside her and touched her arm gently. Willow looked up, said, “Why am I always shooting the men I love?” and burst into tears.

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Spike sauntered into the kitchen after the sun went down.

“Your boy didn’t go by the construction site today. I stopped in at – ”

He broke off, taking in the counters littered with Kleenex, the tear-streaked witch, and the Slayer rocking back and forth in the corner crooning to an axe.

Two rapid steps, and he was gripping Buffy’s shoulders gently. “Bloody hell. Is he – not dead, is he?”

She looked up, eyes huge and swimming in tears. “Not exactly.”

“He at the hospital? Why are you lot all still here? I can watch the Bit, you should go – ” He stopped once again, appalled at the depth of pain in Buffy’s gaze.

“He’s *undead*, Spike. He’s downstairs.”

Spike dropped heavily to the floor. Pushed the heel of one hand into his forehead and told himself that his sudden, devastating grief was on Buffy’s behalf.

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You can’t cry forever. Eventually, cocoa was made.

Kennedy had received the news in silence, hugged Willow, and taken it on herself to keep the potentials quiet and out of the way. Spike paced around the living room as the girls huddled on the sofa. Willow was stroking Dawn’s hair. Buffy was still clinging to her axe.

“He must have met an ubervamp.” Buffy was the first to speak, voice hollow. “Xander could handle an ordinary vamp. I know he could.”

“I don’t understand what he was doing,” Dawn whispered. “Where would he have gone in the middle of the night? And why?”

“He was watching some space show with Andrew when I went out. Anyone see him leave after that?”

Willow shook her head. “I don’t know if he did leave last night. I’m pretty sure he had breakfast here, ‘cause his Star Trek mug was in the sink.” She frowned. “Unless one of the girls used it. It was broken, and I thought it was kinda weird that Xand hadn’t picked it up and glued it. So maybe it wasn’t him?”

Buffy had her jaw set, determined look in place. Spike mentally saluted her; she was moving beyond personal grief, into Slayer territory. “Did anyone see him this morning? Dawn?”

Dawn didn’t look up, but the curtain of hair hiding her face swung as she shook her head. A snuffly voice said, “I forgot to set the alarm. I was late, I just grabbed a cereal bar and ran. Someone was in the bathroom but I don’t know who.”

“So he *could* have gone out last night. Why would he go without telling anyone, though? He knows what’s out there.”

Willow frowned. “How did he get back here so quickly? It was awfully bright out today. When he, um, woke up – ,” she swallowed painfully, “how did he get back to the house without being, you know, all...”

“Crispy?”

Dawn glared at Spike. Buffy was fidgeting with her axe, drumming her fingers on the blade. “He does know the tunnels, Will.”

“And who let him in?”

“What?”

“Who let him in? He’d need an invitation.”

Buffy’s fingers stopped.

Spike arched an eyebrow. “Probably one of your babes in arms out there. *Come in for some lemonade, Xander, you manly man you, working so hard out in the hot sun.*” He snorted. “No sense at all, that bunch.”

Willow shook her head. “They wouldn’t. Would they? They’re pretty spooked these days. And he would have been under a blanket. All smokey...” she trailed off again.

“Maybe he didn’t have to come in.” Buffy’s voice was quiet, level, measured. Scraped off with a knife.

“Huh?”

“Blood on the paper. Broken mug in the kitchen?”

She crossed the room in a blink, pinning Spike to the wall, axe blade sweetly parting the thinnest layer of skin on his throat.

“I bet he woke up right here.” Blank shock in Spike’s eyes, betrayal and hate in hers. “I bet he *died* here.”

Part Two

Spike flattened himself away from the blade at his throat.

“Are you out of your *mind*, Slayer?”

“Don’t play games with me!” The axe glinted. “I trusted you. *I took your chip out*. And you did *this*. To him. To us.”

Willow had never seen Spike look quite as he did now, not even in the first days post-chip, or when Drusilla had left him. Desperation, loss, and fear in his eyes.

“*I didn’t*. I – couldn’t. Must have been one of the Turok-han!” His eyes strayed

frantically to Willow. “Red, you can’t believe I’d do that to him?! Number of times I’ve saved his life on patrol?” He blinked and stilled even more as the blade edged forward. “And I’m *not killing* these days! You know that.”

Willow bit her lip.

Spike’s eyes were blank. “Buffy. *Please.*”

“I met a vampire the other night who claimed differently.” Very quiet in the stillness.

Spike looked completely at sea. “You what?”

“I staked a vampire a couple of nights ago. We had a little chat first. He claimed you sired him.”

“And you believed him?” Eyebrows arched. “Oh sure. Believe the evil fledge, instead of the vampire *with a soul* who’s protected you and little sis – ”

His words were cut off by Buffy’s fist and the clang of the axe as it hit the floor.

“No, I thought he was lying.” She punched him again. “I thought he was bragging.” Kick to the shins. “Trying to pretend he was the new Big Bad.” Nails down his cheek. “I *trusted* you.” The tears were back again. “I *wanted* to believe he was lying.”

She held him by the neck and hit him several more times in the face and ribs, before twisting his arms behind his back and frog-marching him to the basement. Grimacing at the smears of his blood on her free hand, she wiped it on his shirt. As they descended, Spike looked back up to where Willow stood in the kitchen, wringing her hands futilely.

“Wouldn’t do it. Not to him. He’s – ”

He couldn’t finish. He didn’t really know what he would have said.

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No one had anticipated the need to chain *two* vampires in the basement. They had to settle for manacling one wrist of each to the wall. Xander got the cot, despite being soulless; Spike was relegated to folded blankets on the floor, as befitted a murderer. Buffy secured them and sorted bedding with rigid, economical movements and no words. Xander began to stir as she finished; she flinched and hurried even more.

Two mugs of blood within reach, and they were left in darkness.

Rustling as Xander stirred and reached for his mug. Slurping sounds. Mutters of disgust, but he downed it in a few gulps – boy was brand new and hungry, Spike reminded himself. Guilt sat leaden in his stomach, but he forced his down.

Clink as the mug was set on the floor. Snick of zipper being undone, and slither of jeans shoved off hips. Spike stiffened at the sounds, so near and distinct in the close room. Of course. Brand new and hungry. Blood only satisfied one appetite.

He'd heard the boy before, but those days were different. Furtive, frantic jerking off when he thought Spike was asleep in his chair. Quiet as possible under the bedclothes, slow strokes, ears pricked for any hint the vampire might be awakening – until the need to come temporarily overtook embarrassment, and fifteen seconds of rapid pumping and harsh panting culminated in a quiet groan, followed by mortified silence.

Now, Xander took his time and made no attempt to conceal his activity. Spike lay frozen, listening despite himself to the sounds of flesh on flesh as Xander worked his cock one-handed. Soft grunts of pleasure as he played with his balls. Rasp of nails over rough hairy skin. Small slippery sounds as he licked his lips and rubbed his thumb in the slick pre-come Spike could smell leaking from him. Scrape of chain as he twisted on the bed, pulling against the restraint on his right hand.

Scent of blood as he bit his lip. Spike hardened against his will; guilt, shame, hunger, and something new twisted in his gut. The concrete dug into his hip through the thin blankets. He fought the urge to turn on his front and press his throbbing cock into the floor. Kept silent, unmoving. God, the boy's blood smelled so *good*. Different than human, but – *right*. Compatible.

Xander gasped loudly and came in five long spurts, each accompanied by a satisfied moan. His smell flooded the basement. Spike realized he was inhaling hungrily, and made himself stop.

His erection took hours to subside, but it was the tiny, knowing chuckle before the boy passed out that kept him awake until dawn.

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He was really in no shape, after a night like that, to have some gooey stone shoved through his eye into his brain. He cursed Giles vehemently under his breath as the thing burrowed its way inward, and then it took control and he went away.

He returned to discover beyond-horrified-into-appalled Buffy, unconscious Dawn, and frowning Giles. He was also in no shape to deal with the memories the thing had evoked, and so he simply closed his eyes and retreated into sleep for the rest of the day.

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Xander had meanwhile been allowed another mug of blood for breakfast, which he bolted down despite continuous complaints about the taste, and been kept under guard in the kitchen. The Potentials had fled, one by one, as his taunts got progressively more lewd, until only Kennedy was left trading sexual insults with him.

Buffy and Giles clumped up the stairs, carrying Dawn.

Xander eyed Dawn and opened his mouth. Kennedy hit him pro-actively.

“What happened?” she asked Willow, who trailed up after them.

“Spike happened,” Willow said grimly. Her lips thinned as she looked at Xander. “Into the living room, mister. We need to talk.”

Xander was sprawled on the sofa, legs spread, looking far too cocky and relaxed when Buffy came back. She, by contrast, looked exhausted.

No preamble. “Who turned you? Do you remember what happened?”

Xander grinned. “Sure do. What a rush.”

“*Who* was it?”

“Spike, of course.” Xander slouched a bit more, ran his hands suggestively down his thighs. “He’s been gagging for it for years.”

Buffy’s fingers tightened into claws, worked in the air. Willow could almost see her ripping Spike’s heart out, very slowly.

“I will kill him for this.” Whispered. “Xander. I’m so sorry. It’s my fault. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey. Buff. Relax! Sure, you let your team down.” He grinned, but the amusement didn’t reach his eyes. “You let one of your precious inner circle get killed and evilized. But look at it this way: at least Spike chose the useless one. The waste of space, the guy you never had time for.” She started to protest but he raised his voice and continued. “He could have picked off one of your precious baby Slayers, but nah, he went for the gofer. Repairs and coffee guy. Guess you’ll just have to unblock your own toilets from now on.” Mock sympathetic look. “Poor humans, all those icky bodily functions.” He spread his arms wide. “Don’t apologize, Buff. I feel *great!*”

Buffy didn’t say anything. Willow looked over. She’d closed her eyes. Withdrawn. Tears leaked out from under dark lashes.

Willow sighed and took over interrogation duties. “How did he do it?”

Xander looked at her pityingly. “If you don’t know the facts of life yet, Will, I’m not gonna be the one to break your fluffy little bubble.”

Her eyes darkened. “You know what I mean. Something’s not right with him. We think he’s being controlled by the First. Did he look at all – weird? Did he say anything?”

“Mmm.” Xander leaned forward and looked at her conspiratorially. “He looked like – *Spike*. Not the pathetic guy that’s been wandering around the last few years, begging for crumbs from the Slayer.” His gaze grew hot. “He looked big and bad. The old Spike, the predator. And he chose *me*. Not Buffy.”

“He doesn’t remember!”

Xander shrugged. “Doesn’t change what he decided.”

“Or what he did,” Buffy murmured. Willow hurriedly squeezed her hand.

“When I met you on the stairs – where’d you come from?”

“Ah,” Xander said, raising one finger, “now that is an interesting question.” He leered. “I woke up under Spike’s *bed*. Gotta wonder about that.”

Buffy’s face probably couldn’t look any more shell-shocked, but it tried. Willow felt – less shocked than she thought she ought to.

There was a gasp from the stairs, rapidly suppressed. Buffy didn’t even look round. “Dawn! Go back to your room!”

“Aw, c’mon Buffster,” Xander drawled. “Can’t she come down? Give her Uncle Xander a hug?”

Willow’s eyes grew even darker. Her roots began to follow suit. Xander laughed. “C’mon, Wills. Go for it. It’ll be you and me, just like old times.”

She gritted her teeth, but her hair slowly faded back to red. “Buffy? I think we’ve heard enough.”

“I agree,” Buffy said wearily. “Basement.”

“Basement *again*? With Spike? Oh, what *fun!*”

“You want fun? Just wait for tonight.”

For the first time, Xander showed a glimmer of uncertainty. “Tonight?” His tone aimed for casual, almost succeeded. “Party time tonight, then?”

Buffy had gone wordless again, and simply dragged him out to the kitchen. When he held onto the doorframe, she jerked her chin at Kennedy, who obligingly peeled his fingers free and helped push him downstairs.

Spike didn't appear to have moved. Xander tried to kick him experimentally, before Buffy pulled him away. Xander raised an eyebrow.

“Spike always gets away with it, doesn't he? Just because you *fucked* him – ”

Two fists, and a blast of energy from the stairs, hit him simultaneously. Buffy and Kennedy turned, shocked. Willow was breathing hard, hair flickering.

“We resoul him tonight,” she said through clenched teeth. “I can't be around him like this.”

But she lingered on the stairs after the others had gone, her back turned, but unable to leave. She heard him roll over on the cot.

“Wil-low.”

She would *not* turn around.

“C'mon, Wills.” Dark treacle voice that was-and-was-not Xander. Her best friend.

Just like Jesse.

“Y'know what, Wills? I liked you better with black hair.” He laughed, low and wicked.

She couldn't help it, she glanced around. Looked at him lounging on the bed, thumb

tucked through the belt loop riding low on his hip, fingers splayed at his groin. Dark hair falling into his eyes. Licking his lips as he leered at her, twisting his wrist suggestively in the chains. Same body, different inhabitant. *Demon. Not Xander! Not your friend.*

She ran up the stairs into the sunny kitchen and slammed the door behind her.

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Angel arrived that night. He brought with him an Orb of Thesulah, a gaudy piece of costume jewelry, a nominally reformed Slayer, and two-hundred-plus years of emotional baggage.

“Buffy.”

“Thanks for coming so quickly.”

“You should have called me sooner.”

She looked at him calmly. “Well, I didn’t know that Spike was evil again. Or that you had Faith stashed away. And I have *no* idea what this thingy is.”

He sighed. “The thing with Faith? It’s – complicated. And Spike? I’m guessing even more so. He’s not much for keeping in touch. I didn’t know about... well, anything, until Fred talked to Willow.” He frowned. “And that was less than clear. She did tell us that Spike has a soul, and doesn’t have a chip, and had turned Xander. After that, it got a little... sniffly. Fred calmed her down. She’s good at that.”

Buffy’s shoulders slumped. “That pretty much sums it up. We found him earlier this year, in the school basement. He was pretty messed up, and eventually we figured out he’d gotten a soul. He did it himself.” At Angel’s startled look, she explained painfully. “He – did it for me.”

“For you.” Angel was very still.

She shrugged minutely. “He said he loved me.”

The tiniest hiss of indrawn breath. “And you? What did you say?”

She looked infinitely tired. “I thought – I thought he was a monster. I told him so. And he went and got a soul. For me.”

“And *coped* with it? After all he’s done?” Angel looked incredulous.

“Not very well, not to start. The basement was making him crazy, he was right over the Hellmouth. But we – got him out, and he settled down. I thought.” The tears were back. “I trusted him. I thought the soul would be enough, even once he lost the chip.” Dark memory flickered in her eyes. “I should have known better.”

Angel tightened his lips, but simply nodded in acknowledgment.

“It’s my fault. I told the Initiative to take the chip out.”

“Buffy – no!” Angel began pacing. “It’s as much my fault. More. I’m responsible for him. For bringing him into the world. Everything he’s done, all the evil that’s resulted – I share the blame.”

Buffy shook her head. “That’s ridiculous. That’s like saying my mom had a hand in all the vamps I killed.” She paused and frowned. “I don’t recall you sounding so parental about Spike before. What gives?”

Angel winced. “I – ,” he paused. “Let’s just say I’ve had a different perspective lately.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but let it go.

“The First Evil’s got some sort of control over him. Giles put this thing in Spike that told us that much. There’s a trigger, Giles thinks it has something to do with Spike’s early days as a vampire, but we haven’t found out exactly what it is. Or how to disable it.”

Angel furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “Maybe I can help you there.”

Buffy glanced quickly at him, knotting her fingers. “Angel? Please – be gentle, okay? He’s changed – ,” she glared at Angel’s bark of laughter, “he’s changed a lot in the last couple of years. He’s not the Spike who tortured you.” *Or me*, she added silently. “I – beat him the other night. I was so furious, I thought he’d deliberately betrayed us.” Her eyes were bright with tears, yet again. “But what if Spike’s telling the truth, and he really doesn’t remember?”

There was silence. Angel stood with hands hanging aimlessly.

“I never thought...” He cleared his throat. “I never imagined the day you’d defend Spike against me.”

She was on her feet in an instant.

“Not against you. Never against you. Angel – ” Her voice faltered. Too many things missed, too many secrets. He had his too, she didn’t doubt.

He took a step forward, carefully. She threw herself at him, hugged him, allowed herself a moment to feel the solidity and strength of him.

“We have a history.” Angel looked down at her. “Spike and I,” he clarified. “He might talk to me. We were...” he trailed off, staring into the distance. “We were close, once,” he finished.

She hugged him again, stepped back reluctantly. “Find out what you can.” She looked at her feet. “He killed *Xander*, and I’m not sure I can forgive that. But I know what it’s like to be controlled. And I ... I don’t want to stake him if I don’t have to.” Looked up again, eyes steely. “But if I have to, I will.”

Angel’s gaze was dark and old, so old. “I know. And if he’s a threat to you – I’ll stake him myself.”

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Neither Spike nor Angel said a word about what specifically was said or done

between them later that night. The following morning, however, Spike looked – lighter, somehow. Angel looked as if he'd been dragged through a keyhole backwards.

“It's done,” he said wearily to Buffy. “The trigger's disabled.”

Giles' teacup rattled against his saucer. “How can you be sure?”

“I'm sure,” Angel said.

“Forgive me if that doesn't sound sufficient,” Giles said coldly.

Buffy started to speak, but Angel shook his head.

“It was a song that triggered it. A song Spike's mother used to sing. The First used a – rather traumatic memory that Spike had repressed.”

“And you, what, retrieved this lost memory?”

Angel sighed.

“The trigger won't work any more. Spike's dealt with it.” He rose. “How did the rest of *your* night go?”

Buffy let her head thunk onto the table. “Willow can add another resouling to her resume. For once, something went right. But *we* are all completely exhausted, and *he's* all perky. It's not fair.”

Angel looked slightly wistful. “It'll be a lot easier on him. He hasn't had the chance to do anything really evil yet. The soul won't bother him. You gave him that.” He looked at the basement door. “Is he downstairs? I'd – like to look in on him.”

Buffy shook her head. “In the living room, I think.”

Xander looked up in surprise as Angel entered.

“Come to meet the newest member of the family?”

Angel grimaced in surprise and Xander laughed mirthlessly.

“Kind of ironic, isn’t it? All the grief I gave you, all these years, and look at me now.”

“I’m looking,” Angel said gently. “And I see Buffy’s friend. Xander. You’re still the same man.”

“Only more flammable.”

“True.”

They stared at each other a while.

“I’m sorry,” Angel said finally.

“Not your fault.” The words sounded worn, as if Xander had used them a lot recently. Angel supposed maybe he had; Buffy and Willow probably weren’t hearing them. “If anyone gets to claim blame for this, Spike does. I’ll talk to him later.”

Angel looked vaguely worried.

“I hear you brought Willow the Orb,” Xander added. “Thanks. For finding one. And, um. Sorry about – all the stuff I said. Before. Ever.”

“You’re welcome.” Angel rubbed the back of his head. “Deadboy.”

Xander stared open-mouthed as Angel walked away. Then he began to laugh, and didn’t stop until the tears came.

Part Three

Everybody felt they deserved the morning off. Willow slept until noon, the potentials past that, and the vampires snoozed until suppertime. Buffy and Faith appeared to have reached a tentative truce, and went out reconnoitering in the afternoon, returning with a mission.

“The place is crawling with Bringers. Whatever this guy is about, I want information from him. Faith, you get the girls ready.”

Giles looked perturbed. “Most of them have never been in the field, let alone a life and death situation. They’re not ready for this.”

“Then it's time we test them. Look, I'll just take the ones that have been here the longest. The rest can stay behind.”

“Could be that’s just what he wants you to do,” Spike pointed out. “The old bait-and-switch.”

“Yeah,” Willow added. “He lures us away and then kills the girls we leave behind.”

“I know. That’s why I need you and Xander to stay here with them. Keep them safe, if anything happens.”

Xander looked put out. “How about Angel stays? Giles wants to talk to him anyway –see if he’s got any more information on that amulet doohickey.”

She looked dubious.

“C’mon, Buff! I need something to do.” He was fidgeting. “I can’t stand another night lying around in the basement. And you’ve gotta admit, I’m a better fighter now.”

Spike was carefully not looking at anyone.

Buffy nodded, smiled sadly. “Fine. You and Spike come with me. We could use the muscle.”

He winked at her. “You want muscles, I got ‘em.”

She blushed and continued outlining the plan of attack.

Things went more or less as planned until they got inside. Then it all went to hell.

Molly and Kennedy were down immediately. Rona was whimpering and clutching her arm. Spike had been hurled through a wine tank, Faith was coughing blood, and Buffy was being tossed around like a Frisbee.

Xander lunged for Caleb, pulling him off Buffy. Caleb whirled and shoved Xander’s shoulders, throwing him backwards.

“Now, *you’re* different than I expected.” Caleb advanced again, grabbing Xander’s upper arms. Xander kicked him in the knee with a crunch, but Caleb stayed standing. “Didn’t expect another vampire on the Slayer’s team. You’re the one who sees, aren’t you? Surprised you never saw it comin’.”

He brought a hand up to Xander’s face, slowly, almost caressingly.

“If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.”

His thumb moved towards Xander’s eye.

Spike looked over, horrified, and staggered to his feet.

Xander vamped out, lunged forward and bit deep into Caleb’s forearm. Caleb yelled, tried to pull free, and kneed Xander in the groin. Xander sagged and Caleb stabbed out at his face. His hand was caught from behind.

“*Mine,*” Spike announced in a terrifying growl, and yanked the priest’s arm from its socket.

“Unclean!” Caleb hissed, looking at Xander and Spike.

Spike slammed the edge of his hand into Caleb’s larynx. He dropped, gurgling.

Faith was helping girls to their feet. Buffy was staring, trance-like, at a door in the corner.

“Let’s go!” Xander yelled. “Get the wounded and get out!”

“You go,” said Buffy dreamily. “There’s something here of mine.”

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

Molly was in intensive care but it looked like she might survive. They got the others bandaged and settled. Cocoa was made.

Xander and Buffy were the last two left in the kitchen, clearing up.

“I made a mistake, taking them in there.” Her voice was raw. “I’m making too many these days.”

Xander continued to load the dishwasher. “Buffy, you’re doing fine. These girls couldn’t have better. It’s a tough time.” He straightened and turned. “You’ll get us through this. You got the thing you went for, didn’t you?”

Her face softened in awe. “God, yes. It’s so... beautiful.”

“You and your weapons,” he teased.

She handed him a plate. “Well, it took care of Caleb all right. Thanks for the help there. I didn’t expect him to get up again, the first time.”

“See? You got what you went for, you killed the bad guy, and most of your team’s still standing.” He reached out and rubbed her arm. “You knew it would be rough, but you still did what a leader has to.”

“But Molly. And Chao-ahn.” Her eyes welled up. “God. I can’t stop crying these days. I just – I’m so scared. I’m responsible for all of you, and I keep letting you down.”

He tucked a straggling lock of hair behind her ear. “We’re responsible for each other too, Buff. We watch each other’s backs. Watch *your* back. We’re a team. But we need a leader, and I *know* you can do it. You’ve stopped everything that’s ever come up against you. You’ve laid down your life – literally – to protect the people around you. I know how much you care about these girls. And you’ll get us through.”

Quiet. Finally she heaved a deep sigh.

“Thanks, Xander. I’ll do my best.”

“You always do.”

Her expression lightened, turned quizzical. “Speaking of watching out for each other – what the heck was that with Spike?”

“What was what?”

“You know what I mean. The whole ‘Mine!’ thing. He’s certainly watching out for *you*. Is this a vampire thing?”

“I think it’s a Spike thing.”

She looked uncertain. “Do you think it’s just a Spike thing, or – ” she hesitated, and her brow furrowed uncertainly, “a Spike and you thing? ‘Cause,” she swallowed, “*that* is new and weird. And kind of eww. And did I mention weird?”

“I wouldn’t say there’s a Spike and me thing,” said Xander slowly. “Not exactly.” He grinned. “Not yet. He has to get used to the idea.”

Buffy gaped. “*He* has to get used to it? What about you? How come you’re – are *you* gay now?” Her eyes widened comically. “And for *Spike*? You’ve always hated him!”

“He is – how shall I put it? Compact and well-muscled.” Xander’s look turned serious. “I don’t know, Buff. I won’t say I didn’t notice him before but things

were... different, you know? Maybe it is a vampire thing. I just know that since I – changed – I see him differently.” His mouth quirked. “And I like what I see.”

She blushed.

“So. How is he?”

She squeaked and blushed even more. “I am *not* discussing that with you!”

He laughed and pushed her towards the door. “I’m kidding. Go to bed. Your troops are depending on you – get some rest.”

“You’ll be okay? In the basement?”

He smiled to himself. “I’ll be just fine.”

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

He made his way slowly downstairs. Spike was sitting in the corner, chipping polish off his nails, resolutely ignoring him. Xander leant against the wall and watched for a while.

“Thanks for tonight.”

Spike looked up, startled.

“You jumped right in for me. I owe you.”

Spike looked at him like he’d grown another head. “Don’t owe me a thing,” he muttered.

“Are you kidding? That maniac was trying to take my *eye* out!” Xander frowned. “Can vampires regenerate eyes? Have you ever lost one?”

Spike shuddered. “No. And no, obviously.” He stood and began pacing. “Least I could do. After...,” he paused, “...after what I did.”

He raised his fingers to his own neck, let them fall. “I – fuck. I’m sorry, Harris.”

“I’m not.”

Spike’s jaw dropped. “What?!”

“I’m not sorry.” Xander pushed off the wall and stalked over, standing close. Too close; Spike could feel the breath that powered his words, feathering cool over his cheek. “Why’d you turn me, Spike?”

Spike backed up, eyes wild. “I don’t *know*, Harris! Did you miss the memo? I’m insane! No fucking idea what I was doing or why!”

Xander followed, movements smooth and lithe. “I don’t believe that.”

Spike glared furiously. “Don’t care what you believe. I drained you and turned you and I don’t remember a single moment.” He backed away again, flinging his arms wide. “Came to my senses feeling oddly satisfied, with a mark healing on my wrist, and apparently I *killed* you, *and I don’t fucking remember!*”

“Oh, I believe that.” Xander continued to advance, crowding Spike into the corner. “I was there, remember. I know you killed me.” He reached out, knocked his knuckles on Spike’s skull. “And I believe you don’t remember.”

His face rippled. Spike looked down, pained, but Xander grabbed his chin and forced it up. Yellow gaze met blue. Xander licked his lips, carefully, around the fangs.

“But I don’t believe you don’t know why.” The voice was low, rich and slow, like bubbles rising through chocolate. “These eyes see things pretty clearly, Spike, and I’m not as bothered by human hang-ups as I used to be.”

“And I don’t believe you’re – ” Xander paused. “Satisfied.”

He looked pointedly down at Spike’s crotch, before closing the last distance between them. His larger body blanketed Spike, one hand each side of his head.

Spike snarled as Xander thrust his hips forward, pressing Spike's ass against the wall.

“Don't need anything from you.”

“Yes you do,” said Xander gently. He nicked his lip, and lowered his bleeding mouth to Spike's.

Spike gasped involuntarily as the rich scent of Xander's blood filled his senses again – and groaned as a trickle ran between his lips. Xander's mouth moved lightly but surely over his. Not questioning, but not invading. Just... offering. Knowing.

Their tongues brushed tentatively, and all barriers fell.

The kisses were frantic, sucking and devouring, bruising and tearing their lips. They both groaned at the heady taste of their mingled blood. Spike grabbed the back of Xander's head and pulled him in even harder. Xander in turn began to rock rhythmically against Spike, doing a slow grind and thrust that had Spike painfully hard in no time. He pushed erratically at Xander and they staggered off the wall, mouths still fused, hands roaming, knees bumping and hips rubbing, until they fell backwards onto the cot. It complained loudly. They took no notice.

Spike worried Xander's bleeding lip one more time, licking the last drops, before pulling away and sucking a path of bruises down his neck and along his collarbone. He tore at Xander's shirt; buttons pinged into the corners and Xander made a weak protest.

“Good riddance,” Spike growled. “No self-respecting vampire wears a fuckin' Hawaiian shirt. Get you outfitted proper tomorrow.”

Xander might have protested, but Spike's tongue was swirling in his navel and Spike's fingers were opening his pants, and all clothes were to be despised if they stood between Spike and his skin. He whimpered as Spike licked the head of his cock and wriggled his hips, pleading for more. Moaned as Spike engulfed him to the root and sucked firmly; screamed as Spike swallowed around him; gasped in shocked complaint when Spike pulled off, releasing him with a pop.

“Wasn’t nice, what you did the other night,” Spike purred. “Teasing me like that.”

Xander whimpered again. “Wanted it. Wanted *you*. And I was evil then!” He reached out, trying to pull Spike back to him. “Please! Don’t stop! *You’re* not supposed to be evil now.”

“Only if you promise to do it again. When I can watch.”

Xander’s cock surged against his belly and he groaned. “God, yes, next time, anything you want. Just... suck me now. Please? Need it.”

Spike growled in satisfaction and returned his mouth to Xander’s groin. His hands cradled Xander’s hipbones and his tongue did amazing things to Xander’s perineum. He sucked Xander in again, agonizingly slowly, and proceeded to torment him in a way that no breathing creature could. Within minutes, he felt the body beneath him stiffen even more, and he swallowed hungrily as Xander convulsed and shot down his throat.

Xander was breathing heavily. Spike released his cock and crawled up to kiss him. “Don’t have to do that, you know.”

“No,” Xander gasped, “but it’s kind of a habit.”

“Time to try new things,” Spike said meaningfully, and brought Xander’s right hand to his own swollen prick.

Xander smiled and began to work Spike in just the same way he’d done himself – but now he had both hands free, and he made full use of them. One hand rolled Spike’s balls while the other encircled his erection. Nails scratched up Spike’s inner thighs; a thumb slicked pre-come over the shiny head and teased him until he groaned painfully through gritted teeth, thrashing his head back and forth. His face shifted. A hand began stripping his cock purposefully, fast and hard, bringing him rapidly to the brink.

He opened his eyes to see Xander arching over him, rubbing into the sheets and offering his neck. He instinctively parted his lips and bared his fangs – then drew back with a muffled curse. The hand on his cock didn’t slow.

A conclave was held the next day. It appeared Angel's evening with Giles had been productive.

"It has to be worn into battle by someone strong. Ensouled, but stronger than human." Giles looked somber. "Someone who is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the world."

"Or herself," Buffy said quietly.

"No!" Angel said. "No," he repeated more quietly, as she turned to him angrily. "You have a different role here. You're the Slayer. You lead the army, into the battle – and out of it." Their gazes warred. "I'll wear it. Besides, you've got that real cool axe-thing going for you."

"So you're going to be with me in this?"

"Shoulder to shoulder," Angel said. "I'm yours."

Xander glanced furtively at Spike to gauge his reaction. Spike didn't even look at him, just grinned and kicked him under the table.

"No."

"Angel is right, Buffy," Giles said gently. "He is the obvious choice."

"No," Buffy said, louder. "What if," she checked herself, lowered her voice, "what if I can't stop it? If I lose – if this thing gets past Sunnydale – then it's days, maybe hours, before the rest of the world goes. We need a second front."

"You won't lose," Angel said firmly. "But you need all your fighters on the line. And I need to go in there with you, and with *this*." He gathered up the amulet. "It's the final fight, Buffy. There is no second front."

Her knuckles were white on the edge of the table.

"Souled, but stronger than human." Xander spoke up. "Y'know, you *do* have

options there, Buff.”

This time the “no” came from various directions.

“I’m not risking you again,” she said. Giles looked worried and Angel inscrutable.

Spike raised a hand.

“No!” Xander objected. Giles and Angel now both looked startled, and worried.

“Obvious choice,” Spike said matter-of-factly. “Don’t need to lose your friend *or* your...” he tilted his head and looked at Angel, “sweetie-bear. I’ve got lots to atone for. Give it to me.”

She closed her eyes and swallowed. “No,” she whispered. “No. *I am not choosing.*”

Giles leaned forward. “I don’t think it’s wise to entrust this to Spike.” He held up a hand at Spike’s insulted expression. “The First has tampered with him once already. As Angel said, there is no second chance in this fight. The Powers have seen fit to give us this weapon, and we cannot risk any interference.” He frowned. “I do wish they’d seen fit to include a set of instructions, though.”

“So it’s settled,” Angel said quietly. “They gave it to me. I wear it.”

He reached out and placed his hand over Buffy’s. Spike rose, flipped Giles the bird, and stalked out. Xander gave Giles an apologetic glance and followed. Giles, looking deeply disturbed, watched them go.

“Don’t fail,” he said grimly to Angel, and left him with Buffy.

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Spike was slouched angrily on the camp bed, intermittently punching the mattress. Xander sat at his feet, dangling a bottle of whiskey from one hand.

“Should be me.”

“And again, I’m not sorry.”

Spike dropped his head back. It hit the wall with a dull thud. “Ow.”

“You moron,” Xander said affectionately. “Here. Have some alcohol.”

Spike took a swig and handed it back.

“Isn’t supposed to be him. He’s the champion of the Powers.” He picked at loose threads in the knee of his jeans. “They won’t be happy to lose him.”

“Has it occurred to you, in your dead and bleach-fried brain, that this is exactly the kind of thing champions *do*?”

Spike looked stubborn. “World needs him.” He reached for the bottle again.

“Damn right.” Xander pulled Spike’s feet into his lap and began rubbing them. “The world needs him to do his job and wear that thing. And the world needs you to get over it and shut up and stop being stupid just because you feel guilty for something you had no control over.”

Spike lifted his head and glared. It would have been more impressive if his hair hadn’t been in terribly cute and fluffy disarray. Xander glared back equally firmly, and continued the footrub. Finally, Spike let his head fall back again, and took several long swallows from the bottle.

“It’s always him.”

“I know.”

“She’d rather it was me.”

“I know.”

“Don’t – don’t want her any more. Not like that. But,” he took another drink, “having her look at you like that... ‘s an amazing feeling. Like you’re invincible,

like you could do anything.”

“I know.”

“She’s a flame. We’re all moths, circling her, getting burned and coming back for more. Knowing we’ll get burned again. Gets tiring.”

“I know.”

“Can we just... rest now?” Spike said, wistfully.

“No,” said Xander firmly.

“No?”

“No. Sex now. Rest later.”

Scuffles and thumps and at one point they ended up mostly under the sagging bed again and Xander didn’t mind at all.

He was vaguely aware that his yells could probably be heard all through the house, but from the various noises he’d been picking up earlier, he was pretty certain nobody else would notice or mind either. Except possibly Dawn. He made a brief effort to stifle the screaming for her sake, but then Spike did this thing with his tongue and fingers simultaneously and everything outside their bed was forgotten.

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Buffy’s gaze rested on them all in turn. “It’s time.”

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

“Welcome to Sunnydale High,” Wood said. “There’s no running in the halls, no yelling, no gum-chewing. Apart from that, there’s only one rule: if they move, kill

them.”

Buffy nodded as she walked up.

“Okay, potentials in the basement. Divide into three teams. Xander, you lead the right, Spike left. Faith – straight down the middle.”

Faith grinned wickedly. “Kick ‘em in the crotch. My specialty.”

Buffy touched Faith’s elbow as everyone marched resolutely past, and spoke softly.

“Don’t be afraid to lead them. I know you’ll protect them – but if Willow holds up her end, they won’t need it. Show ‘em how it’s done.”

They stared at each other a moment, before Faith snorted, punched Buffy in the shoulder, and swung away down the hall. “Stake finger’s itchy!” she hollered. “Let’s go!”

Wood pointed. “Willow, my office is straight through there.”

“It’s right over the Seal,” Buffy added.

Willow nodded and handed her bag to Kennedy, drawing a deep breath. Kennedy glanced around the group and headed in to set up, leaving them to say their goodbyes. She didn’t begrudge Willow the past. She had the future.

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Buffy slashed the knife across her palm, watched her blood drip onto the Seal, handed the knife to Angel. He added his blood, then handed the knife to Spike.

The two of them stepped back slightly. Everyone else’s attention was focused on the Seal. Buffy held out her hand.

Angel’s eyes widened and he shook his head. She rolled her eyes and raised her palm to his lips. He pulled back; she followed. Stood on tiptoe and brought her

mouth to his ear.

“I want you to be strong. I want you to take me with you into... whatever comes. I want – ,” he felt a small shiver spread through her, “I want you to taste me again.”

A long pause. Finally, gravely, he bent his head and licked across her palm. She shivered again, fiercely. He closed his eyes. A look of benediction spread over his face.

Clicks from behind them broke their trance. They turned to see the glowing Seal moving into position, and Spike and Xander eyeing them knowingly. Buffy blushed. Angel frowned – but the frown had an air of smugness.

They clasped their unmarked hands, and walked into the mouth of Hell.

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

The army facing them was immense and practically invulnerable.

It didn't stand a chance.

Buffy watched the girls – the *Slayers!*, she exulted – tear the Turok-han to shreds, even as she herself kicked, spun, whirled the scythe. Releasing its hold on the Slayer power hadn't had any apparent effect on its abilities; it felt glorious in her hand. She hacked her way randomly in grim delight, an avatar of death. Angel fought at her back, ripping the enemy limb from limb, complementing her in the dance.

Then he wasn't there, and there was a sword through Buffy's gut.

“Buffy!” Faith hurtled towards her. Buffy raised her head weakly, looked around. She caught a flash of white-blond off to the left. A Bringer screamed as he was thrown off the chasm edge. No sign of Angel.

“Hold the line,” she gasped, and thrust the scythe at Faith, as she watched her army start to falter. She rolled over and began to crawl through the dust and dying,

searching. *You wouldn't leave without good reason. Angel, what's happening?*

She heard a Tarzan yell, incongruous and bizarrely cheering, and turned to see Xander scattering a group of Turok-han. He was moving with amazing grace and speed, fighting like she'd never seen him fight before. *Fighting like Spike*, she thought, and shook her head at the general insanity that seemed to be their existence. She coughed and dragged herself further along. *Losing too much blood. Angel, where are you?*

No Angel, but suddenly, there she was in front of herself, mortal wound and all.

“Oh, no... ow!” she heard herself mocking.

The First crouched down. “You pulled a nice trick.” It grinned. “You came pretty close to smacking me down. What more do you want?”

Buffy stared past its shoulder. Stared at a white-hot light slowly building behind it.

“I want you to get out of my face!”

She pushed herself to her feet. The First backed away, uncertainty clouding its features, and vanished. She heard her name yelled, and grasped the scythe thrown to her. Turned back and fought her way towards the light.

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

The amulet began to glow more strongly, its outline searing through Angel's clothes. He gasped as the mark began to burn inward. Towards his heart. He stretched his arms wide. *This is my body, given for you...*

He blinked. Blinked again. Buffy was standing in front of him. Her hair shone brightly in the light emanating from his chest. *So beautiful. Always so beautiful. So alive.*

Tears stood in her eyes. She uncurled the fingers of one hand from her weapon and reached towards him. *The fight always came between us.*

“I love you.”

His bones were on fire now. Heat consumed him.

“I know.”

His tongue was a flame.

“Buffy. Always loved you.”

One last look. He closed his eyes.

“Now *go!*”

She backed off, blinded by tears and the brilliant light that burst from him.

The ubervamps began disintegrating in waves as sunlight spread through the caverns. She screamed in fury and loss and resumed cutting a swath through anything that remained standing between her army and the exit. Her face was black with tears and dust by the time Faith wrapped her arms around her from behind, stayed her hand, took the scythe, and led her up into the open air.

The ground shook. They ran.

Heaven and earth, in ashes burning.

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Most of the girls had staggered straight to the bus and its crate of bottled water.

Buffy still stood, dazed, with Faith supporting her. Dawn came and slipped her hand into Buffy's; Willow and Giles came up on her other side. Her family.

They stared at the crater that held their homes, their possessions, their previous lives. And their dead. All the years. All they'd fought for.

A hole in the world.

Flakes of ash periodically drifted down from the sky. *Angel*. She remembered the feel of snow on her hair. The hot sun beat down on them. Sun. Dear God.

“*Xander!* What happened to Xander? He was down there!”

“He’s on the bus,” Giles reassured her. “He and Spike are busy arguing over who gets to drive.” He coughed. “I advise that you keep both of them far away from the keys. And the radio controls.”

Buffy smiled in relieved surprise. “How did they get out?”

“Um – ”

Willow blushed and bit her lip nervously.

“It’s only temporary, it wears off after an hour, I figured that would probably be enough, at least I *hoped* it would – I didn’t know the amulet would do, well, *that*, but I did worry there might be general destruction and things falling down and possible exposure to sunlight, and I thought, better safe than sorry? And I only made a very limited batch and they used it all up, I think they rubbed it on each *other* though I really didn’t want to know about *that*...”

She broke off. Buffy was staring at her blankly.

“Er. You remember when Spike asked about vampire sunscreen?”

Buffy went on staring for a full ten seconds. Then she stared at the sky.

“I can’t believe you did it.”

“I wasn’t irresponsible about it. And it saved Xander!” Willow looked hurt. “And Spike,” she added.

Buffy shook her head. “No, Will. I can’t believe you *did* it. All of it.” She turned

and grinned weakly at them. “We did it.”

Giles laid a hand on her shoulder. Dawn put an arm round her waist. With a last glance at the crater, they walked to the bus.

They reluctantly let Xander drive when it became apparent that keeping his hands on the wheel was the only way to keep them off Spike.

The End

*It's been a hell of a ride - my first multi-chapter, and at over 10K words, my longest yet.
Thanks again to  [spikedluv](#) and  [truly_tazi](#) for the chance to participate. S/X forever!! :)*