

Rating: NC17

Pairing(s): Spike/Xander & Angel/Oz

Genre: AU

Master: [Master!post](#)

Chapter : Prologue

Beta(s): [theladymerlin](#)

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Summary: A werewolf/hyena hybrid, a vamp with a chip, a vamp with a soul and a werewolf come together as pack..

This is the first collaboration between [wrtr aka wmgrq](#) & [skargasm](#).

Xander is attacked and bitten by a werewolf but doesn't change in the same way Oz did – indeed, the hyena never quite left and changes the boy into something other. Xander is aided in adjusting by Oz who is mated to Angel, and a fledging relationship with Spike that neither ever expected.

Enjoy!! Comments make Una and Lola smile and treat us nicer, and might just encourage us to do this again! This story is our contribution to season 8 of [fall for sx](#)

Four Under a Blood Red Moon

by

[Skargasm](#) and [WmGeorge](#)

Prologue

It was the howling that finally convinced Angel to go and check on Oz. The small, quiet werewolf had turned up three days ago and had stayed in the room Angel assigned him ever since. Angel vaguely remembered that Oz didn't have much to say for himself when he had been dating Willow, but now he was even more taciturn – he made Angel feel like he was indulging in Xander-babble or something. And only the good Lord knew why he'd thought about the young Scooby right then.

Thanking all the Gods that Wes and Cordelia had gone out for an expensive dinner, Angel took the stairs up to the first floor two at a time. Standing outside Oz's room, he thought again that maybe he should leave the young man alone. He'd been through enough being captured by – and escaping from – the Initiative. He deserved some privacy. Then another mournful cry came from the room and acting on instinct, Angel shoved the door open and walked in.

Oz wasn't on the bed, something even the dim light from the bedside lamp revealed to Angel's preternatural sight. In fact, it didn't look like he was even in the room. Angel finally realized the whimpering noises were coming from beneath the bed. Getting down on his hands and knees, Angel lifted the sheet and blanket, and peered under the bed. Seeing the eyes shining at him, he held his hand out.

“Oz.” A whimper greeted him, and the eyes moved back as the man shuffled further under the bed. “Oz – I won't hurt you, I promise. Come on out of there now.” For a moment he thought he would be ignored, but suddenly he had an armful of growling and snarling man as Oz threw himself at Angel.

Automatically vamping out, Angel grappled with the much smaller man, trying desperately not to hurt him. Oz gave him no choice, half changed into his wolf form and snapping at Angel with his elongated jaws. Determining that ending this sooner was preferable to later, Angel clamped his hands around the powerful jaws, slamming Oz into the ground and rolling on top of him. The half-wolf scabbled against the floor, frantic to get away, whining and whimpering until Angel managed to lean down and bite into the junction of

Oz's shoulder and neck.

Almost instantly the fight went out of the wolf as he submitted, lowering his head and lying limp beneath Angel's weight. Still whimpering, Oz curled in on himself, as though trying to disappear. Sorrow for the younger man filled him, and Angel gathered him into his arms, staggered to his feet, and sat awkwardly on the bed. With no further panic or objections coming from Oz, Angel slowly leaned back until he was half propped against the headboard and Oz was curled up on the bed near Angel's waist, one slim, pale arm slung across Angel's body like an anchor. The whimpering faded as the young man fell into a deep slumber, morphing back to his smaller human form but keeping his arm wrapped around Angel. It was only then that Angel realized he was singing an Irish lullaby his mother used to sing to comfort *him*, his hand carding through the green stripes in Oz's hair in a calming fashion. With no further ado, savouring the warmth pouring off his sleeping companion, Angel drifted to sleep.

Angel woke before Oz, and debated leaving so the young were could wake in privacy. But the healing bite mark on Oz's neck, and the peace Angel had found by

the young man's side last night, decided him against that. He smirked. Oz's arm was still wrapped around Angel's waist. Small the werewolf might be, but he had an impressive grip. *Not like I could get up without waking him, anyway. Might as well stay put.*

Oz stirred, and his arm tightened around Angel's waist. “Mmph. Timezit?”

Angel blinked, mentally translated the mumbled phrase, and looked at the clock. “Four in the morning. Ye had a rough night, lad. Do ye good to sleep more, eh?”

Oz sat up and gazed at him warily. “Brogue. Angelus?”

Angel chuckled. “No. Told you the soul's permanent. The T'sani shaman made sure of that. But – I was taken back to my childhood last night. You needed soothing, and I suppose that brought my ma t'mind. Last thing I remember is singing an Irish lullaby to ye. Be glad ye slept through it.” He offered the younger man a wry grin.

Oz nodded, yawned, and stretched. Angel eyed the small, slender body with appreciation – and then tried

to get his wayward libido under control. Prior to the merging of his demon and soul, he'd had few sexual encounters. None of them had any meaning beyond meeting the needs of his body. Since the merger, he'd had none, because he'd discovered he wanted more than anonymous sex, but was wary of beginning a relationship with a mortal. That way lay heartache and loss. Now, soul and demon alike desired the were, and his body wasn't particularly reticent about showing it.

Oz raised a russet eyebrow and grinned. "You're up."

Angel dropped his head into his hands and groaned. It was going to be a long day.

A month later, and Oz was still at the Hyperion. He'd landed work at Caritas as a bartender, and he helped Lorne find new and unusual music for the karaoke machine. On slow nights, he'd stroll onto the stage, sit down, and play his guitar. Sometimes, Angel hummed – very quietly – along. After the first night, Lorne avoided reading the young werewolf.

"Too much pain there for me to handle, Angel-kins. That young man has been through so much already,

and his road is still filled with trouble.” Lorne had smiled and patted Angel's shoulder. “But you're good for him, and he for you. You'll get each other through whatever comes.”

Angel had nodded, and that had been that. Oz moved into Angel's basement apartment, and Sunnydale – and the Initiative – were never mentioned. Wesley and Cordelia welcomed the werewolf without hesitation, and the young man began to heal.

Sitting at the bar whistling, Angel's foot tapped and kept rhythm with Oz's song. Oz looked up from his strumming, smiling slightly, although there was no way he could see Angel in the gloom of the club. A sappy smile crossed Angel's face and he ducked his head. He still couldn't get used to how happy Oz made him – in fact, it was a good thing his soul had been glued on tight as payment for services rendered, otherwise Oz would have caused Angelus to be running free a *long* time ago. It took him a few moments to realize that Lorne had taken the seat next to him, and he turned to meet the demon's wide-open red eyes.

“Oh Angel-cakes. Looks like you and your little furry-muffin are in for an interesting ride.”

“Huh?”

“Aggravating, intriguing, frustrating time ahead of you, but well worth it in the end if you stick the course. It's good you and the little fur ball-and-chain are happily settled – they're gonna need some stability.”

“They?”

Lorne nodded. “Your childe and – well, I don't know his name. All I see is dark, shaggy hair and a suit of armour. Know who I mean?”

Angel felt the hair on the back of his neck lift. “Oh, shit,” he muttered.

Part One

Xander groaned, dug his hands into the damp grass, and pulled himself forward another few inches. His left leg was a blood-soaked, useless appendage, sending lightning strikes of pain through him with every

movement. He knew he was leaving a trail of blood that a fledge with brain damage could follow. Knew he was weakening with every second that passed. Knew he'd never make the dubious safety of the crypt that was so tantalizingly close. Still, he kept trying.

Can't give up. Gotta keep moving. Can't let them get me. He couldn't remember who *they were*, couldn't remember what had happened. All he could remember, the only thing he knew, was that he had to get to that crypt, before ... before what? Before he bled out? He snorted weakly. *Yeah, cuz it'll be so much better to die in there than out here.* He set his will and gathered his strength, ready to drag himself forward again. He heard snarling and then a dark shape bore down on him.

He tried to roll over to meet the attack, even though he knew he couldn't defend himself against them. Blue-gold eyes and shocking white hair met his confused gaze. "S-spike? What're you ... why're you here? No one important around. Jus' me." He struggled to push himself up onto his elbow, not wanting to meet his death lying down. "Jus' ... make it fast. I think ... won't hurt you. Chip proly won't fire. 'M too far ... gone. Just don't turn me. 'Kay? We're kinda friends, so I can ... can

ask that, right?" He heard Spike's snarl, and sighed. "Do what ... you want. Not like I ... can stop you."

The world spun in a dizzying circle and he gasped as the pain ratcheted higher. *What?* He realized Spike had picked him up and was running through the graveyard. When they reached Spike's crypt, Xander nodded. "Easier here, huh? That's ... well, that's making sense of the not kind. What're you ... why'd you ... huh?"

"Shut it," Spike growled. "Not gonna turn ya. Not gonna drain ya, neither." The vampire cut Xander's jeans away from his bleeding thigh and examined the wound, sniffing and growling. "Bloody hell, whelp. How'd you manage to get yourself bitten by a werewolf?"

Xander blinked slowly. "Is that ... I don't remember ... just noise and ... and pain. How ... how can you ... tell?"

"Can smell it, can't I?" The blonde gave a gusty sigh. "Gotta stop the bleeding, pet. Gonna hurt like the devil, and I won't be much use to ya after." He reached for a roll of gauze.

"W-wait. Can you ... um ... use the blood? It isn't ... bad

for you, is it?”

Spike rocked back on his heels and frowned. “What’re ya going on about?”

“It’s ... I’m bleeding heavy, Spike. Know that. Don’t want ... it’s gonna hurt you to ... why waste it? Just ... collect it, or ... I dunno, lick it up. And eww, but ... makes sense, right? Maybe it’ll ... help you, a little.”

“Can do that. And it’ll help you, as well. Vampire saliva has healing properties. Just never figured you’d ... well, never mind. Hang on, pet.” Spike lowered his head to Xander’s thigh, strong fingers holding Xander’s leg still.

Xander felt Spike’s tongue swipe over his leg and tried to stay awake to help Spike if he needed it. But pain and exhaustion took their toll. His eyes closed once too often, and all that was left was darkness.

The taste of the blood was amazing. The boy had always smelt good – s'why he was such a demon magnet. To most demons he smelt like chocolate brownies, hugs from mother and sweet, sweet blood all wrapped up in a tidy carry-out package. And yes,

Spike's demon was one of them – had many a time surreptitiously sniffed the whelp and just enjoyed the aroma, like waiting for your favourite meal to cook, or the smell of bread baking. Shaking his head at the whimsy, Spike continued to suck and lap at the blood that was spilling from the boy. Xander's heart rate had settled – in fact, quicker than Spike had expected – and the bite mark didn't look anywhere near as bad as he had expected. Blood cleaned away, he slowly and carefully licked every inch of the bite area. Trust the whelp to get bitten so high on the leg – anyone else got it in the neck or arm, but not this one. Mind you, it showed he'd been putting up a fight -they'd obviously had to tackle him to get him still enough to even be able to bite him.

Realizing that he was rapidly straying into an area that *wasn't* part of the bite radius, Spike lifted his head and moved back. Probably the best thing for the boy was sleep, fluids, and food – in that order – but there was no way Spike was going to carry him through the cemetery and back to his apartment. Shrugging his shoulder, he carefully lifted him up and moved towards the hole that led to his bedroom, dropping lithely down despite his burden.

At least down there would be peace and quiet – the Slayer had a nasty habit of slamming into his crypt at all hours, uncaring if a stray bit of sunlight hit him where he sat, and demanding services – whether it be assistance slaying or information. And she was prone to using her fists to get him to speed up his answers. Fuck, he hated that bint so much – she was top of his list once the chip was gone and he'd fed himself up a bit. He wasn't stupid – despite how often his plans failed – he knew once he got the chip out he couldn't go straight after her. She'd kick his arse without ruining her manicure. No, once it was out, however he managed it, he was going to glut himself on the willfully blind populace of Sunnydale and *then* he was going to have at the Slayer and bag himself his third.

While he'd been dreaming about blood and destruction he'd stripped Xander down to his boxers and placed him gently in the bed. Spike took a moment to really look at the youth stretched out before him. The boy was maturing into his body – the broad shoulders that he still hunched slightly as though trying to hide, and the surprisingly muscular, long legs. Spike vaguely remembered the girls taunting and teasing him about some stint on the swimming team. Yeah, he could definitely see the boy as a swimmer – he had the body

for it, and Spike could just see him cutting through the water like a shark. And again with the imagining Xander as a predator – what was in the boy's blood anyway? It was strong – stronger than a normal human's – with a hint of something feral. Yeah, definitely bore some investigating, that did. And before the next lunar cycle. Because whether the boy realized it or not, he was about to join the ranks of the supernatural. Bitten by a werewolf meant at the full moon you became one – no two ways about it.

Stripping down to just his jeans – didn't want to give the boy a heart-attack by waking up next to his nakedness – Spike climbed carefully onto the bed next to Xander, pulling the sheets up over both of them.

Feeling the warm human blood fizzing through his veins, and licking his lips to ensure he'd caught every single drop, Spike allowed himself to drop off to sleep.

Xander woke suddenly, yanked from sleep with a scream on his lips. He sat up, heart pounding, and darted his eyes from corner to corner of the dark room. *Where am I? What happened?* Scents from the room were swiftly taken in and catalogued. Dust, earth,

stone, and cement. Leather, blood, and cigarettes. Candles, booze, and ... hot wings? *Spike's crypt – that's where I am. But, why? What–*

“Easy, pet. Nothing here to hurt you, yeah?” Spike sat up and leaned against the headboard in a relaxed pose.

Xander stared at him. *Looks all casual, but his muscles are tight. Ready to – what? React if I threaten him. Yeah, that's a defensive tension. He isn't going to attack. And how do I know that? How did I know what the smells meant? Shit, how could I even smell all that?*

Xander licked dry lips and managed to find his voice. “You – I remember you helping me. I don't ... it's all jumbled...” He shuddered as the memory slammed into him.

Heading for Spike's crypt, worried about the vamp. Growling in the bushes at the border of the cemetery. The hiss and crackle of static over a walkie-talkie. The sharper buzz and smell of ozone that signalled a taser. The growl getting louder, the sudden rush of a dark shape hurtling over the grass at him. Running to the relative safety of a large headstone, standing with his back to it and facing the...

“Oh, fuck,” he whispered. “Soldiers. And a werewolf. It bit me.” Xander jerked the cover back and looked down – at his unmarked thigh. “What the – I remember getting bitten. Shouldn’t there still be a mark?”

Blue eyes blinked, and a tousled blonde head lowered. “Yeah, that’s – well, that’s bloody unusual, is what it is. You were healin’ fast last night, and I wondered about it. Never expected *this*.”

Xander gave a weak laugh. “Figures that I'd do this weird. Why not? Nothing in my life has ever been normal.” He swiped his hand over his face and leaned against the pillows behind him. “Oz told me about getting bitten, but I never thought ... and now it isn't like he said ... of course not, but still ... and Willow is gonna freak and cry ... Giles and Buffy will just lock me up ... well, not in the library, cuz that's gone, but I'm sure they'll ... fuck.” He looked over at Spike. “What the hell am I gonna do? Oz could help, but I don't know where he is. I can't ... my dad used to put me in ... if they try to k-keep me in a c-cage, I'll...” Xander heard the growl in his words and stumbled to a stop.

Spike gently gathered Xander into his arms, and began a light stroking along his back. “We'll figure it out, pet.”

He sighed. “Maybe ... maybe the poof will be able to help. But ya gotta calm down, yeah? Your eyes are changin' colour, and I don't think that's a good thing.”

Xander gasped. “Oh shit, what colour? Spike, tell me – what colour are they?”

“Eh? Sort of glowing green. Hmm. That's not the usual werewolf colour”

Xander felt himself tremble, and couldn't stop it. “N-no. N-not werewolf. It's ... it's the hyena. She wasn't ... wasn't gone. I wondered, but they said ... and I thought it was just memories, but ... oh, I am so screwed.” He buried his face in his hands. “It didn't work – she's back, and they're gonna have a major meltdown. I can't stay here. The minute they know they'll – well, I don't know what they'll do, but it won't be good for me. We have to ... we have to go. And,” he lifted his head and stared at the speckled fur sprouting on the back of his hand, “we'd better hurry.”

Keeping Xander quiet throughout the next day was no easy feat – he was feverish, starving hungry and blaming Spike personally for anything and everything.

The only good thing seemed to be that the chip no longer recognized him as human so Spike was able to sit on him literally – which proved to be necessary when during one of his deliriums he decided that he was going back to his apartment whether Spike wanted him to or not.

“Ssh Pet, just need you to hold on til sunset, then I promise we're out of here. We'll head off to LA and the Poof, and get you seen to, alright? That is if I can get my friggin' car out from under those demons I lost to at poker the other night...” The last bit was whispered under his breath and he hoped that whatever changes had already occurred, super-hearing had not kicked in yet.

“Spike. SPIKE!” Xander's voice was whiny enough for Spike to seriously consider holding the boy's nose and mouth until he passed out from lack of oxygen, but looking at the young man, who was obviously in a great deal of discomfort and trying very hard *not* to whine, he held back his initial snark and pressed a cool hand to Xander's hot forehead.

“Yeah, Xander, I'm here.”

“Can we go yet? Can we go – please? Please, Spike, I'll be good – promise I'll be good.”

“Not yet, luv, but soon. Xan – Xander? Do you have any blood at your place? And Pet, I'm gonna need your car keys.”

“Promise you won't leave me? Daddy left me. Locked me in the closet and forgot I was there for a whole day. I was good, didn't cry or anything, but I got in trouble cuz I made a mess. You're not gonna leave me are you Spike?” Gritting his teeth against the desire to track down the older Harris and rip his heart out through his chest and show him the withered lump before he died, Spike continued to stroke Xander's forehead.

“No Xander, I promise I won't leave ya. Just gotta pop to your flat yeah? You stay here for me and I'll be back before you even know I've gone.” The new werewolf settled into a restless sleep.

Hating to do it, but knowing he had no choice if Xander was going to be here when he returned (and why that was so important to him he couldn't say) Spike used his spelled handcuffs to attach Xander to the headboard. He had enough room to slide under the sheets and stay

warm, but he shouldn't be able to escape – well, not before Spike got back with the car and supplies. Having rummaged through Xander's jeans and found his keys, Spike thanked God for sewer access and set off at a sprint to get to Xander's flat and back again. All being well, he should be able to return in time to load Xander into the car and head off to LA.

Of course, all was not well. When he got to Xander's flat it was just in time to see Red and the Slayer leaving the building, complaining bitterly about Xander's lack of responsibility as he hadn't turned up at the Magic Box either last evening or today. The fact that their complaints were more about the lack of beverages and snacks than any real concern for their friend made Spike growl, but shaking off his mood he slithered from the nearest sewer round the side of the building and through the fire exit. Hoping that Xander hadn't revoked his invitation from the one time he had visited, he ran lithely up the stairs and down the corridor to the boy's flat. Figuring out which was the right key took precious seconds, and he had to remind himself forcibly that more haste meant less speed as he finally made his way inside.

Wincing as a last stray ray of light caught his arm as he

crossed the living space, he went to Xander's bedroom and grabbed a few pairs of jeans and some shirts from the drawer unit. Socks were next, and reaching into the bottom of the wardrobe he grabbed hold of a large duffel into which he crammed the clothes he had gathered. Swiftly into the kitchen and avoiding the sunbeam that seemed determined to fry as much of him as it could catch, he raided the fridge and freezer. Surprised to find three packets of human blood in the freezer, he gratefully sucked back one of bags from the fridge before grabbing the large carton of orange juice in the fridge door and adding it to the pile. Swiftly moving to the cupboard, he pulled down some of the less nasty sugary snacks Xander loved to consume as well as a half empty packet of crackers. Just in case the man's stomach didn't react well to rich food with everything else it was battling.

The duffel now close to overflowing, he decided enough was enough and that it was dark enough to find the whelp's car and make his way back to his crypt. He didn't want to leave Xander alone any longer than necessary and risk him getting free. A creature of routine and habit, Xander had parked his car neatly to the side of the building and Spike hastened to it, swearing beneath his breath as he fumbled with the

keys. “Come on, come on,” he muttered to himself as he finally started the engine and set off for his crypt.

He considered himself lucky to find a parking space right outside the entrance to the cemetery, and parking the car carefully he grabbed at the duffel of clothes and food. Rummaging through, he held one bag of blood between his teeth as he yanked out a pair of a jeans and a tee-shirt for Xander to wear, as well as an old pair of sneakers. Knowing his scent all over the car should keep it safe (for a short time), he rushed back towards his crypt, critically examining the sky to assess how much time he had left to get them loaded into the car and get to LA. He wanted to leave a little bit of leeway in case Angel wouldn't take them in – he knew neither he nor Xander were on the Poof's list of favourite people and he was frantically working on a contingency plan in his head as he made his way back to his crypt.

Part Two

Xander woke, felt the cuffs around his wrists, and began to frantically tug at the chains anchored to the wall. He heard the growls and whimpers pouring from his mouth, but couldn't stop them. The sound of a boot scuffing over cement pulled him from his panic.

“Spike, you bastard. Why am I ... get me out of these! I can't ... you shouldn't have ... don't leave me like this! You ... you promised.” He felt the prickle of tears behind his eyes and lowered his head. No way he'd give the undead shithead the satisfaction of seeing tears.

Spike hurried over and began stroking Xander's dishevelled hair. “Easy pet. Not gonna leave ya like this. I did promise, and I always keep me word.” He reached up and unlocked one cuff, still touching and petting Xander. “Had to get your car, Xander. Was worried you'd wander off. You've been feverish and out of your head most of the day. Just wanted you safe, is all.”

Xander raised his head to see blue eyes filled with worry. “Safe? You ... kept me safe? That's all? Really?”

Spike sighed and unlocked the other cuff. “That's all, pet. Y'have my word.” He handed Xander a pair of jeans, shirt, and shoes. “Get your kit on. We're

leaving.” Spike frowned. “There's something bothering me. Dunno what – summat I saw or heard while I was out, but ... just get dressed and let's go, yeah?”

Xander sniffed, smelled the tang of worry and fear coming from Spike, and nodded. “Okay.” His stomach growled, and he felt the heat of a blush in his face. “Um, might need to stop for food, though. Kinda hungry.” He was yanking the shirt over his head as he spoke, followed by pulling on his jeans. He stuffed his feet into the sneakers and glanced up at Spike, suddenly shy. “I'm sorry to be so much trouble. I ... I don't mean to be. You've been really good to me, and ... um ... well, just ... thanks.” He ducked his head again and stood, nearly tipping over from the dizziness of suddenly being upright.

Spike wrapped an arm around Xander's waist, supporting him as they walked to the ladder leading up to the crypt entrance. “Welcome, pet. Let's just get gone, yeah?”

Xander nodded again, his nose still working overtime. “You smell good,” he murmured as he tried to get his feet and hands to work together on the ladder. At last they were in the upper portion of the crypt, and Spike

was hurrying him through the door and into the coolness of the early evening.

The drive to L.A was uneventful as long as you didn't count Xander sniffing at everything continually like some demented bloodhound. Slightly stunned by the boy's words about him smelling good, Spike tried to shrug it off as part of the general insanity of the past two evenings although in the back of his mind his instant response had been *You too Pet*. It was obvious Xander wasn't feeling himself, not a word escaping him about Spike driving his car, no questions asked about what else Spike might have helped himself to from his apartment, and Spike found himself missing the snark and quick wit.

To see what his response would be, Spike lowered the window and damned if the boy didn't act like some sort of dog, practically hanging out the window and gulping in the new scents as they rushed by. That mild amusement aside, Spike was happy to see the huge Hyperion sign up ahead, and rolling the window back up he ignored Xander's growls and parked as near as he could to the entrance. Getting his charge out of the car along with their luggage took a few minutes and then

he guided the young man into the lobby and looked around for Angel.

Xander was growling, baring his teeth and crouching down. Spike could smell another predator and it wasn't Angel. Shushing the boy, he stepped down into the large lobby and shouted Angel's name even though he could tell his sire wasn't there.

“Come on, the Poof's kitchen is downstairs. We'll get you something to eat apart from those gross chunks of sugar you call snacks, yeah?” He was getting slightly worried – Xander seemed to be becoming more and more animalistic, and he hadn't spoken in words for a good hour. Steering him down the stairs to Angel's apartment, he sat Xander at the table and began searching the cupboards for food. He struck gold with the fridge – there were steaks, eggs and veggies galore, as well as a decent array of blood bags. Snagging one for himself, he took out a large steak and some vegetables realizing he would have to cook since he could never recall seeing Xander do anything other than operate a microwave.

With the steak sizzling in a frying pan, the vegetables simmering in a saucepan and the microwave churning a

mug of blood around, Spike jumped slightly as Xander came to stand close behind him. Stiffening, he waited for whatever it was the boy planned to do, a small gasp escaping him as Xander reached around him with one arm. The quasi embrace felt strange but not unpleasant, although he rolled his eyes at his reaction to all that heat pressed against him from the rear when Xander simply reached out to agitate the steak. Shaking the frying pan, his hips shook in a matching rhythm brushing against Spike's from behind. Xander released the frying pan, turning his head to sniff deeply at Spike's neck – hot breath washing over him as Xander moved infinitesimally closer and sniffed a little harder. Instinct led Spike to tilt his head sideways not down – his demon would not submit to such a baby as the new were – but the distracting feel of Xander nosing against his neck meant Spike didn't hear the arrival of the others. Xander did. His lips curled back from his teeth, his growl became continuous and he turned to face the perceived threat. Realizing the Poof and whoever he had living with him had returned, Spike swivelled to face the entrance to the kitchen, automatically turning the heating under the food off. The ping of the microwave caught his attention for a second, but that was enough – Xander leaped towards the door,

snarling, growling, and changing even as he moved forward..

Part Three

Angel and Oz were halfway down the stairs, Oz in the lead, when the commotion in the kitchen broke through Angel's contemplation of Oz's shapely ass, and just what he planned to do with it later. Angel sniffed, recognizing the scent of his childe and another. The second scent was familiar, but before he could analyse it he and Oz were greeted by the sight of Spike, fighting to control an outraged and furious -

“Harris? Spike, what the hell?”

“Not now, Peaches. Kinda got my hands full. Xander, ya gotta calm down.”

Angel and Oz stepped back, giving Spike the space he needed to calm the furious young man down. They shared a worried glance, a worry that escalated when

Angel saw that Oz's eyes had bled to his wolf. Now he realised why he hadn't recognized Xander from his scent – it was actually in the process of changing as they stood there. Something feral – something that had always been part of Xander's scent – was growing and spreading, as though Xander was changing on a molecular level. That was when it hit Angel – Oz's instinctive response, Xander's uncharacteristic animalistic ferocity – and shoving his mate protectively behind him he shouted at Spike “He's been bitten?”

Still trying to wrangle Xander, who was fighting with everything in him, Spike barely spared Angel a glance. He finally managed to push the younger man into a corner of the kitchen, squashing him into as small a space as possible in spite of his struggles. Finally unable to get through to him any other way, Spike morphed into his vampire face and snapped his teeth in Xander's face, growling back at him and asserting his dominance.

Instantly Xander curled into himself, the animal inside aware that alpha was angry with him. Whimpering, he pulled himself into a tight ball, rocking gently back and forth until he slowly calmed down, shifting back to human in a blink of an eye and staring mournfully up at

Spike.

“Sorry, pet – I'm so sorry. Didn't want to do that. Don't want ya scared of me but ya gotta settle, yeah?”

Angel released Oz from behind him, automatically checking him over for non-existent injuries before motioning to the table. “I think we all need to sit down and talk.” He raised an eyebrow at the stove. “And eat, it seems.”

~*~

Xander looked up, confused. He remembered little of the trip, and barely recalled arriving at the Hyperion. Sensory overload. But now he was awake, and embarrassed. “Angel? Oz? Is it really you?” He sniffed, his new abilities kicked in, and felt his eyes widen. “You ... you're ... the two of you are...” He snapped his mouth shut, narrowed his eyes, and stood straight. He could feel himself tremble, but he'd never backed down from Angelus before, and wouldn't start now. “Tell me that damned soul is tacked on tight, Deadboy, or that's what you'll be – only dustier.”

Angel's mouth twisted in a wry grin. “Ever the White Knight, even when you're without a weapon, eh boy?”

“And the sarcasm isn't all that reassuring, Broodmeister. Oz, what's the what?”

Oz leaned into Angel, a tiny smile gracing his lips. “Permanent. Mated.” He shrugged. “Long story. You?”

Xander sidled closer to Spike, seeking comfort and finding it when a cool, slender arm wrapped around his waist. “Short version? Cemetery, soldiers, werewolf, got bitten. Now I'm Xander the Amazing Dogboy. Or something.” He chewed on his lip. “It ... it isn't like with you, Oz. I mean, you said it took a week to heal from the bite, and that you didn't start going all wolf-like until the full moon. I'm ... the bite's already healed, and I'm sprouting fur at the drop of a hat.” He ducked his head. “Not that anyone's been dropping hats, at least not that I've noticed ... and that's a really stupid saying. Who goes around dropping hats? And why would it make people do things?” Xander shook his head. “Anyway, I just meant – it's way different.”

Oz nodded. “Got it. Know why?”

Xander hunched in on himself, dreading what came next. Spike's arm tightened around him, and Xander lifted his head to stare at understanding blue eyes. “Go

on, pet. Think these two will handle it better than the gang in Sunnydale.”

Xander bit his lip again, but nodded. “Yeah, okay. You're probably right.” He took a deep breath. “It's the hyena. She never left. I guess they didn't get rid of her so much as, um, lock her up. And now she's out, and combined with the werewolf – I don't know what's gonna happen. And ... I'm really scared.”

Angel insisted that they eat, and Oz had agreed. “New were,” the smaller man said. “Need protein.” The redhead quickly prepared another steak, while Spike added more vegetables to the pot, and Xander buttered bread.

Angel, meanwhile, considered his options. It was obvious, at least to him, that Xander hadn't informed his friends about his new status. Given that Buffy was dating one of the Initiative's soldiers, he couldn't say he blamed the boy. Angel felt his lips lift in a silent snarl. After what happened to Oz, no way he was letting Xander return to that hell hole.

They sat at the table, Xander and Oz with heaping

plates of steak and vegetables, Angel and Spike with mugs of blood. Spike took a sip and raised both eyebrows.

“Since when do you spring for the good stuff, Peaches?”

Angel returned the surprised look with a bland one. “Since I've a mate to protect and keep healthy. And if you want to keep drinking the 'good stuff' you'll be civil. Hear me, William.”

Spike glared at him, but Angel was well used to reading Spike's glares. This one meant little and was given from habit. Xander, who seemed even more aware of emotional undercurrents than the average werewolf, looked up but quickly returned his attention to his food. Oz didn't even twitch.

“You're thin, childe. Haven't you been feeding?”

Spike shrugged. “Can't feed, as you well know.”

“And you well know where to buy blood.”

Spike jumped up and carried his empty mug to the sink.

“Yeah, well...”

Xander joined him, rinsing his dish and Spike's mug and then washing both.

“What would he use to buy blood, Deadboy? The money Giles doesn't pay him for information or help?”

Angel stared at the two Sunnydalers. “The deal was that you were paid for helping, either in blood or cash.”

Xander snorted. “Yeah, they lived up to that. Not. Unless you consider a pint or two of pig's blood, or ten bucks now and then keeping their part of the deal? Cuz I don't. I tried to help when I could – bought human blood from the blood bank – but it's expensive. I just got myself set – good job, decent place to live, extra money to make sure Spike gets what he earns – but I've only had the job a month. Not long enough to make a real difference. And now – well, that's pretty much fucked. So you tell me what Spike should have done.”

Angel's hand tightened into a fist. “They've gone back on their word to me? Why didn't you come to me, childe?”

“So you could do what? Ignore him? He's a master vampire – he shouldn't have to crawl to his sire for help. His sire should fucking be there without being asked!”

Spike sighed and pulled Xander back against his chest. “Pet, calm down. We need help, here – ranting at me sire won't do no good.”

Xander turned and buried his face in Spike's neck. “Shouldn't need to ask. They won't even think about researching the chip, and he hasn't cared enough to find out how bad things are for you. You deserve better.”

Xander's words were like a stake to Angel's heart, and he dropped his gaze to the cup in his hands. “Your boy's right, William. Once I merged demon and soul, I should have come straight to Sunnydale and brought you home. At the least, I should have asked about you.” He looked up. “I apologize – to you both. Not knowing is no excuse.”

Oz drifted over and laid a gentle hand on Angel's shoulder. “It's the past. Can't be changed. Gotta move on.”

Angel caressed Oz's hand and smiled. "As spare with words as ever, aren't you love? And each one dipped in gold." He nodded. "Oz is right. We can't change the past – but we can change how we go on from here. I'll give you both all the help I can. And William – even if they wouldn't consider negating the chip, I will."

Xander's head whipped around, and for the first time since they'd arrived, Angel saw the boy smile. "Really? Oh, man – that would be so cool. Thanks, Angel."

Spike regarded Angel warily. "And why would you do that? Wouldn't think you'd want me back to me old self."

Angel chuckled. "Doubt you'll go back to your old ways. Not if you want to keep your boy happy. And you do, don't you? Want him happy?"

"Think you know me so well don'tcha?? Fine – yeah, can't see this one being happy with me feeding off the general populace so the Bloody will have to stand for poetry again. And no, Pet, I ain't telling ya what that's about. Eat up – you're wasting away in front of me – you ate enough before, can't imagine you managing to

eat more but 'm sure you'll prove me wrong!"

The speed with which Xander and Oz devoured their meal brought a smile to both Angel and Spike, both quietly satisfied that they had eaten sufficient.

"You found somewhere to stay?" Xander shook his head, ducking to avoid Oz's kindly look. He hated asking for charity – it went against everything within him – but neither he nor Spike were in much of a position to do anything else. "Plenty of room here. Got some nice rooms on the second floor if you wanna come and look?" Not waiting for a response, Oz stood up from the table and gathered together the dirty crockery and utensils, dropping them gently into the sink and covering them with hot water. "We can wash 'em later. Come on – I think the vamps wanna talk." Oz smirked at his mate, pressing a light kiss against his mouth and trailing his hand casually across the broad shoulders as he headed out of the room.

Xander barely managed to stop his jaw from dropping as he watched the casual intimacy between Oz and Angel, admitting inwardly to more than a twinge of envy. A large part of him wanted to have the same rights to Spike, to be able to touch, stroke, kiss him

when he wanted, how he wanted -

“Xander.” Oz's voice broke into his reverie, and flushing deeply he stumbled across the floor to follow the smaller man up the stairs. He darted a look backwards, tripping slightly as he caught Spike staring at him, blue eyes darkening with an emotion he wasn't used to seeing on Spike's face. For a moment he hesitated, suddenly nervous at the thought of leaving Spike behind. What if Spike left without him? Decided Xander wasn't worth all the trouble and left for Sunnydale? He knew he was being stupid – apart from anything else, Angel had agreed to look into getting Spike's chip removed – a fine reason in and of itself for Spike to remain in L.A. Aware that Oz had already started up the stairs he spared one final glance for Spike before following Oz's silent footsteps. By the time they had gained the first floor, he was slightly recovered.

“So – you and Angel huh?”

“Yup. You and Spike?”

“What?! No – I mean, he's just – I don't think – um, it's only because – God, he smells good but..... hell I don't know.”

“Hey, no big. Not like I got room to talk.”

“No, it's not that. It's just – I don't even know if he likes me like that, you know?”

“Willing to don the white-hat for you.”

“Yeah – yeah, I guess he is. Even without the chip he's – whoa!” Xander's back thudded against the wall, and he stood in deep thought, rearranging the facts as he knew them. This was so not what he had expected and he felt completely thrown. Oz pushed open one of the doors, gently guiding Xander into one of the nicer suites on the first floor. There were two double bedrooms, joined together by a small sitting room, a shower/bathroom leading off from it, long heavy curtains protecting the room from any rays of sunlight. Xander shook his head, still unable to accept what he was thinking and hoping. Spike was just being a good guy, helping him out- it didn't mean that he wanted to be with Xander.

“Wow, Oz, this is nice. What's with the heavy curtains?”

“Had them put up in most of the rooms.” Xander nodded, walking around the room slowly, picking up and examining the little knick-knacks as he nervously paced around. Xander scuffed the toe of his shoe over the carpet. “Do you think you'll be able to help me – with the wolf-thing I mean?”

Oz looked at Xander and sighed.

“I really don't know. I can help with some of it but the hyena thing might make a big difference. We'll just have to give it a try”. A smile broke out on Xander's face. “Besides, those two downstairs are more than alpha enough to handle a couple of weres.”

“Yeah. I think my hyena recognizes Spike as alpha already – no idea why.”

Oz shrugged. “You look beat. Why don't you grab a shower and hit the hay? All of this stuff can wait.” As he spoke, Xander cracked a huge yawn, laughing at the tail end of it.

“Yeah – that would be really really of the good. Thanks man, I really appreciate it.”

“Any time Xander. And I mean that.” Patting Xander gently on the back, Oz let himself out of the room and Xander sighed, wondering about Spike's intentions.

Part Four

Angel stared across the table at Spike. “You're more than welcome to stay – you and Xander both – but there are rules Will. I'll not have you treating our home the same as some of the slums you and Dru lived in”.

“Oi! I'll have you know Dru'n'I were perfectly capable of keeping a nice household – s'not our fault the minions didn't take the bodies out regular-like. 'Sides, me and the boy have lived with each other before, and considering it was a basement he kept it right clean.” Spike returned the stare with interest. “Wasn't like I had my choice of accommodations, either. Or any privacy, no matter where I stayed.” He waved his hand. “Doesn't matter. Whelp's the important thing, now. This change – it ain't going the normal way. Always thought weres changed with the moon, and then initially at the first full one after they were bit.” He gusted out a breath in frustration. “Boy seems to be changin' based on emotions. Day or night, it don't matter.”

Angel nodded. “Xander has always had strong feelings about – well, he feels everything very deeply. But I don't understand what he meant about the hyena. How could that still be there?”

Spike snorted. “Combination of things, I expect. Watcher wasn't as thorough as he should've been – too focused on his precious slayer. Didn't realize he was dealin' with two different manifestations of the hyena.”

“Two?”

“Yeah – thinking back I heard the chits talking 'bout it – did some research. The zoo keeper brought the hyenas over special. Wanted to be the one possessing the hyena's strength. Way I figure it, the other boys were taken over by a regular animal spirit. Simple to get rid of, yeah, so the Watcher's spell was enough to get rid of it from 'em. But Xander – well, he was tryin' to protect someone. Changed the equation. So while they got an animal – he got the primal. She chose him. When Rupert worked the exorcism, it wasn't enough to get rid of her 'less she wanted to go.”

Angel sighed. “And she didn't want to. How the hell

does he get himself into these things? Better question. How does he survive?”

Spike thought about that. “Puts his whole being into everything he does. Never been trained, but he's still alive. Never even been seriously injured.” He plucked at his lower lip. “You suppose she's been helpin' him all along? An' if so – why?”

Oz slid into the chair beside Angel. “He's the heart.”

Spike sat up straighter. “Angel – why did you never go after Xander? You targeted every other friend the slayer had, but ya circled wide 'round the boy. Why? What did you sense?”

Angel shifted in his seat. Oz laid a hand on Angel's arm and gave him a gentle squeeze. “Know it's hard, Ang – but we gotta know.”

“He was ... I sensed his potential, but ... there was a core of strength in him that I ... I didn't know if I could control him.” Angel frowned. “You were a gentle soul, William. I knew you'd be a difficult childe, but I also knew I could manage you.” He tipped his lips up in a wry grin. “Not easily, mind – but I knew I could do it.

With Xander, it was ... there's a ruthlessness in him that wasn't in you. And ... the depth of his hatred for me ... the overwhelming protectiveness he felt for Buffy and the others..."

"Ya thought those emotions would survive his turning."

Angel nodded. "They would have been twisted, probably. But if even a portion of them remained..."

"He would have turned on you." Oz raised an eyebrow. "What? I know something about vamps. Xan as one – seen that. Bad news."

"When was he a vamp, and how come I didn't see that?" Spike demanded.

"You weren't around. Cordy wished Buffy hadn't come to Sunnydale. Shazam – vamp Xander. He was – ruthless. And yet, still very Xander." Oz glanced up at his mate. "Angelus was right to be wary."

Spike took out a cigarette, but didn't light it. "None of that tells me what to do, how to help him."

"He needs to gain emotional control, William."

Something you've learned, both from my ... lessons, and from the chip. Something you can teach him.”

“Me? When have ya known me to be in control?”

“Every damn day, and well you know that. Even as a fledge, you knew what buttons to push, and just how far you could take something before it bit you in the ass. Time refined that control, and the chip – damnable as it is – has tempered your control even more.” Angel smiled. “Oh yes – you're more than capable.”

“Even so – why would he listen ta me?”

Oz leaned against Angel, a sly grin on his face. “Has so far.”

“Bloody, buggerin' hell – wanted him to want me for me, not cos I can help him. Don't want this ... this...”

A faint sound brought their heads up to see Xander standing in the doorway, eyes brown and sad. “Y-you don't want me?”

“Bugger!! Look Pet, it's not what you think! Fuck! Why'd you have to come down now?!!” Spike banged

his fist on the table, smashing his cigarette and scattering tobacco all over.

“Spike, I – I really appreciate everything you've done for me – I really do. And I get it. I know this isn't your thing, and I'm not your responsibility.”

“No Xander – wait!”

“Hey it's alright – I'm just gonna get some sleep, alright?” Unable to stand it any longer, Xander turned and left the room.

“Fuck.”

“Spike.”

“What?” He turned to look at Angel angrily, totally unprepared for what had happened and unable to figure out what to do.

“Go and talk to him.”

“I don't know what to say to him.”

“How about you just tell him the truth – tell him what

we were talking about and what you meant. That would probably be a good start.”

“Yeah. Okay, yeah.” Spike stood and headed towards the door purposefully, stopping as he reached the bottom step. “Thanks. You know. For everything. Sire”. Without waiting for a response, he took the stairs two at a time, following Xander's scent and leaving behind a dumbstruck Angel.

“He hasn't called me that in over a hundred years.”

“You haven't deserved to be called that in over a hundred years.” Angel winced and then nodded – what Oz said was true, before the soul and demon merged he had hidden from everything and everyone from his former life. And his childe had suffered the most because of it. Now he had the opportunity to be there for his childe properly and he was going to do everything in his power to make up for it. Dropping his head to Oz's shoulder, he nuzzled at the smaller man's chin.

“Thank you.”

Knowing that Angel was thanking him for more than his words, that he was thanking him for the underlying love, support and understanding, Oz nuzzled him back. “You're welcome.”

Spike stood outside the door, completely unsure what to do. Was easy for the Poof to say he should just tell Xander how he felt – it was bloody obvious that Oz thought the sun rose and shone out of Angel's fat arse. Spike had no idea how Xander felt about him and he didn't relish pouring out his heart just to get it stamped on. Maybe it would be better to wait – talk tomorrow when things had calmed down. About to turn away, Spike heard a sob and realised that Xander was crying. Without thinking about it any further, he shoved the door open and entered the room. The sitting room was empty but he followed the sounds of muffled cries to one of the double bedrooms, wincing as he saw the boy curled into a fetal ball on top of the covers.

“Xander - “ The boy jumped, swiping at his face and trying to hide his tears. Sniffing, he pushed himself into a sitting position, ducking his head in an attempt to hide his face. “ - can I come in?” Xander shrugged, tugging at the sheet and pleating it between his fingers,

deliberately not looking up at Spike.

Sighing, Spike walked over to the bed and sat down next to the boy. God, how did he get himself into these things? And how was he going to get himself out of this one? Sod it, honesty might well be for the best.

Unconsciously mirroring Xander's actions, he lifted part of the sheet and began pleating it between his fingers.

“Look, Pet, none of this has been normal. You being bitten, us coming to LA and finding the Poof in a state of wedded bliss. It's been difficult for us both, yeah? But I need you to understand something. I don't take on responsibilities lightly, and I don't care about very many people. I loved my Dark Plum, was wiv her for over 100 years and she broke my black heart – always wantin' her daddy then going off with that slimy bastard chaos demon.

“I loved the bog-trotting mick downstairs cos he was me Sire, and he left me when he got the soul. Didn't seem to occur to him that we might have wanted him to stay even with the bastard thing stuck in him. Everyone I've ever loved has upped and left me -I've never been anyone's first choice. What you heard downstairs wasn't me rejecting you – it was me wishing

you'd chosen to be with me rather than having all this foisted on you.”

He waited for Xander's response, crumpling and twisting the sheet in his hand, but the only thing that greeted his speech were a few sniffs. Finally he couldn't wait any longer. “You gonna say anything Luv?” He risked a glance over at the boy who just shook his head. Spike sighed – so much for honesty. About to get to his feet and leave the room, he froze as he felt Xander shuffle closer. He shifted his hand onto his lap, leaving the way between them clear. Xander shuffled again, and then once more until the heat from his body warmed Spike all down his left side. Almost too scared to move, Spike waited a few moments longer and his rare show of patience was rewarded. Xander slowly lowered his head to Spike's shoulder, a sub-vocal whiny growl emanating from his chest. Spike realised Xander was trying to comfort himself, and his heart twisted at knowing the boy felt so alone, was so upset. Acting on impulse, he wrapped his arms around Xander and tugged him in close, stroking up and down his arm until the boy snuggled down into his lap. Without conscious thought, his hand dived into the thick dark strands of hair, fingers running through the heavy locks as he caressed the boy's head.

Like a cat being stroked the whine deepened into a rumbling growl as it rose in volume, and a smile spread across Spike's face as he realised the boy was rumbling with contentment, happy where he was and relaxing into sleep.

“Come on Pet, why don't you get into bed, yeah? We can talk about this tomorrow - okay?” Sleepily, Xander lifted his head from Spike's lap, blinking slowly and yawning widely as he awaited further instructions. Stifling a laugh at the boy's actions – cute was not a word Spike used but if he did, Xander in this mode would certainly qualify for it – Spike nudged and shuffled the boy over until he could manoeuvre him under the covers. He stood up and walked across the room to turn off the lights, turning back as a high pitched whine reached his ears.

“You okay luv?”

“Stay”.

“Ok luv – 'll stay. 'm just gonna grab a chair from the other room, then I can sit next to ya”.

“No, I mean stay in the bed. With me.”

Spike blinked rapidly, unsure he had heard correctly. He looked over at the bed and met Xander's eyes, the eerie green light emanating from them reminding him that it wasn't just the boy in there – the beast wanted, no *needed* reassurance.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” Silently, Spike nodded then tugged off his black tee shirt and unlaced his boots so he could kick them off. Clad in just his tight denims, he walked back to the bed and crawled into it, making sure he left plenty of space so the boy didn't feel crowded. Keeping himself tucked tightly into one space and lying stiffly, he waited to hear the boy's breathing settle into sleep.

He heard more than saw the yawn that cracked Xander's jaw, then held his breath as slowly the boy slid over in the bed until he was lying right next to Spike. Acting once more on instinct, Spike lifted his arm, a smile breaking across his face as Xander immediately tucked himself under it, his head coming to rest on Spike's chest as he slung his arm over Spike's waist to rest naturally against his hip. Another yawn and a

heavy sigh, and he could feel Xander snuffling against him, pushing his face into Spike and rubbing the slightly stubbly skin of his cheek against Spike's chest. As the boy's breathing deepened into sleep, he moved just once more, slinging his leg over both of Spike's and shifting until he was pretty much lying half on top of him, pinning him to the bed and trapping him in place under the heat of Xander's body. The low rumbling growl returned, once more sub-vocal but with a definite tone of satisfaction.

“Did choose you.” The words were slurred with sleep, so low that vamp hearing only just managed to catch it, but Spike heard what Xander said.

Smiling once more, Spike wrapped his arm around Xander, and wallowing in the heat emanating from his human blanket, drifted off to sleep.

Part Five

Giles massaged his temples and sighed. "Willow, what would you have me do? Xander is a grown man. If he wished to leave for some untold reason, we certainly have no right to tell him he cannot do so."

Willow raised watery green eyes and regarded him sadly. "But, he's missed work--"

"I checked with his employer. He asked for and received some time off."

Willow sniffled. "He didn't call, or say anything to us, or--"

"And I repeat – that is his right." Giles was heartily tired of the entire drama, and wished the redhead would simply run out of steam.

"Spike was driving Xander's car! Giles, please, you have to see that's wrong in a majorly bad, wrong way. Xander wouldn't let Spike do that ... he's seen the way Spike drives, and there's no way he'd ever let that menace behind the wheel of the Xander-mobile. And, and he would call me, just to let me know he's all right. He wouldn't just leave without--"

“Call Angel.” Buffy's voice was flat.

Giles repositioned his glasses and blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Buffy glanced at Riley and then sighed. “Call Angel. Let him know his idiot ... tell him Spike was seen driving Xander's car, and Xander's missing. He'll know what to do.”

Giles pursed his lips. “While I agree that he better understands Spike than any of us, I fail to see how he can help with the current situation. Or have you forgotten that Angel now resides in Los Angeles, and that Spike is rather vehement in his refusal to accept Angel's, ah, authority?”

Willow bounced in her seat. “No, but she's right! Angel will know what Spike's up to ... he can't really help with the finding of Xander ... unless Spike had Xander in the car. Oh my god! Do you think Spike kidnapped Xander? Why would he ... but that doesn't matter. We have to do something. Yes, call Angel, right now, please. He can ... he can ... well, there has to be something he can do. I mean, what good is it to be someone's sire if you can't make them do something, or stop doing something?”

My poor Xander, what's Spike doing to you?" Willow began to cry.

Giles wanted nothing more than to return to his empty flat and have a stiff drink. He'd seen the tentative friendship begin between Spike and Xander. If Spike was driving Xander's car, it was probably with the boy's permission. "Willow, please – calm yourself."

"Yeah, Will ... you're babbling." Buffy slouched back in her chair.

Riley spoke from the corner where he was sharpening an ax. "Angel is Spike's sire. So, Angel's a vampire." He looked up at Buffy, his face devoid of expression.

"Angel, the guy you dated – the guy you still talk about all the time – is a hostile."

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Willow. "Yeah. Thanks for that, Willow."

"The guy you're ... you were in love with – who went all psycho on you – is a vampire." Riley stood slowly.

"You're the slayer, endowed with supernatural powers just so you can fight and destroy demons and vampires. Explain to me why you didn't dust his ass the first time

you saw him.”

Buffy stared at her shoes. “It wasn't ... at first, I didn't ... Angel's different. He has a soul.”

Riley snorted. “So did Hitler. Didn't make him less bloodthirsty, less insane, or less vile.”

“I'd be careful using that argument,” Giles murmured.

Riley's head turned toward Giles. “What?”

“Nothing at all. Carry on.” Giles smirked mentally. What's that phrase Xander uses? Ah yes – pot, meet kettle.

Buffy jumped to her feet and glared at Riley. “You don't get to be all judgment-y about Angel. You weren't there, you ... you don't know what happened. I was – he was the first man I loved. I couldn't ... it was ... I was only sixteen.”

Riley took a step forward, his eyes narrowed. “Not what I'm talking about. You're the slayer, yet you voluntarily work with two hostiles. Demons, the very things you're supposed to slay. See, that's what I want

you to explain.”

Willow took a hesitant step toward the angry pair. “Let's ... let's all just calm down, okay? Because we've sort of gotten off-track, what with talking about the past and, and ... well, it's the present we're all worried about, right? I mean, what we need to do is figure out what kind of trouble Xander's in, and how we can get him out of it, right? Buffy? That's ... that's what we should concentrate on. Not this ... this nasty, bad, side-trip down memory lane.”

Riley glared at them, disgust clear on his face. “I don't get it. You're supposed to protect people from these ... things ... and yet you're consorting with them.” He stalked to the door, opened it, and paused. “There's a word for people like you.” *Traitors*. The word hung in the air, unsaid but definitely implied. He stepped through the door and slammed it shut.

Buffy stomped into the training room, and soon the sound of heavy thuds filtered through the door.

Willow bit her lip. “Well, that was ... not fun.”

Giles sighed again. “Yes, you did rather set the cat

among the canaries this time. Perhaps now you'll agree that we should proceed with a bit more caution?" The witch shook her head, crossed the room, and picked up the phone. "Willow, I really don't think-"

She was already dialling and then speaking into the receiver. "Is Angel there? We really need to talk to ... Oz? What are you ... why are you answering Angel's phone?"

Part Six

Lighting a cigarette, Spike exhaled sharply and looked over at Angel. The night air was crisp but not cold, and he breathed in deeply, appreciating the fresh air after being in the hotel.

"Willi - *Spike* - I wanted to talk to you." Angel looked so uncomfortable Spike had a dreadful moment of wondering if he was kicking him and the boy out.

"Look, Peaches, it's fine. Me an' the boy can camp

down somewhere else – can understand you not wanting us to mess with your happy home an' all that.”

“What?! No – that wasn't what I meant at all!” Running his hands through his hair in frustration, Angel sighed.

“No, Spike, I feel like I owe you an explanation – an apology maybe. Things have been so different, so much has changed – I feel like I let you down.”

“God Peaches, don't get your knickers in a twist! So ya left me with the Slayer an' the Watcher – big deal. What else were ya gonna do? S'not like ya didn't try to get 'em to play nice – s'more than I expected you to do.” Lengthening his stride, and trying hard to hide his relief that Angel wasn't kicking him and Xander out, Spike smoked furiously whilst looking around for something, *anything* to fight.

“No – that's not why I'm apologising – well it is, but that's not - fuck, why did I listen to Oz when he said I should talk to you?” Spike smirked – he could see who wore the trousers in *that* relationship and it wasn't the hairy poof that was for sure. Ruddy typical though – Darla used to lead him around by his todger so why should the little Wolf should be any different. Rolling his eyes, Spike looked over his shoulder at Angel, trying

to decide whether to make it easier for him or not. His evil streak said no and he waited in silence for the larger man to begin speaking again.

“Right, okay, let me try that again. Spike, I owe you an apology. When I got the soul – when I left – I really didn't think there was anything else I could do. Darla didn't understand and wanted me to be evil Angelus but I just couldn't – I – there was just no way I could keep doing those things with my soul screaming at what I'd already done. So I left. And it's only now that I see how selfish that was – I left you and Drusilla with Darla, knowing she was pissed off, that she might even stake you but I was so busy thinking about myself I didn't consider you two.” They had come to a standstill in the car park of a local supermarket, deserted at that time of night.

“Yeah, well, wasn't expecting that. Darla was right ticked off – turned into even more of a bitch than normal. Was a pretty dance keeping Dru out o'her way when she was having one of her turns – Darla was as likely to wanna stake her as she was to listen.” Spike sighed, looked down at his feet and considered his next words carefully. “Why didn't you ask us how we felt? Sod Darla – she was nothing but a whore when she was

turned and she never changed. But me'n'Dru – we would have understood, we would have tried to help. We coulda come with ya maybe.”

“Spike - “

“But no. Instead you just fuck off with ya head up your arse and go live in a fuckin' sewer for nigh on a'hundred years! Do you have any idea how fuckin' difficult it was to live with what you did? Darla was inna rage, and every other vamp out there thought it was free season on the Aurelian clan cos Angelus had gone soft and left his childe. I had to be the meanest son'ova bitch out there just to keep me'n'Dru safe! Ya think I *wanted* to torture people? I mean, okay, yeah, some of that was right fun but that's not the point! You were meant to be there for us – what kinda sire fucks off and leaves his childe in the hands of a fuckin' monster like Darla?!” Spike had built himself up into a rage, stalking up and down and shouting. He stamped over to Angel, getting right in his face and almost spitting with rage. “Ya left us and ya didn't give a flyin' fuck what happened to us!! We fuckin' adored ya and ya left us!” Without warning, he swung a punch, catching Angel right in the mouth and knocking him backwards.

“I said I'm sorry!” Setting his feet, Angel touched his mouth, pulling back to look at the blood coming from where Spike had split his lip.

“Sorry?! Sorry?!!” Practically incandescent with rage, Spike barrelled into Angel, shoving him backwards until he fell onto the ground, smacking his head on the concrete as Spike rode him down and straddled him. “I almost lost her – my fuckin' Dark Princess almost faded away after Prague and you were too busy sniffing round the Slayer to help us. What the fuck does that say about you that you would put our natural enemy before your own family? We were supposed to be FAMILY.” Punctuating his words with punches, Spike battered at Angel's face, not even registering that Angel wasn't fighting back.

“Enough. ENOUGH!” Angel roared, switching to game-face and blocking Spike's next punch with his forearm. He heaved his hips, throwing Spike off balance and knocking him from his position above him. He rolled swiftly to his feet, whipping round to face Spike with a backhand that knocked the smaller vamp backwards several feet. Spike was back in an instant, flying at Angel swinging punches wildly. Trying to avoid fighting, Angel used his superior height, build and general better

health to block most of Spike's punches, grappling and twisting with the lean vampire until they were shoved against the wall of the supermarket, Spike struggling in his arms.

“You just left us – you left me to take care of Dru and I wasn't even a Master! You didn't give a shit and ya left us. Ya left me!”

“I'm sorry – Spike, William, I am so so sorry.”
Cautiously, Angel pulled Spike into his embrace, wrapping his arms around the smaller vampire as his shoulders shook with silent sobs. “I'm so so sorry, William, but I'm here now – Sire is here and you have a family that won't leave you. I swear. I swear – you won't be alone again.”

They sat with their backs against the wall, Angel smoking a rare cigarette as he listened to Spike describing how it was after Angelus left. The guilt he felt on leaving them grew as he heard just how vicious Darla had been in her rage, how much the young fledging named William had had to deal with to finally become Spike, the Master Vampire capable of looking after Mad Drusilla and gain a reputation second only to

Angelus.

“Wasn't always bad – me'n'Dru had a right laugh in Rio, and ya shoulda *seen* what she did at that orphanage in Krakow. Now that was fuckin' inventive. But, yeah, sometimes it seemed like we were always on the move, trying to keep one step ahead of the mobs. Dru – Dru, she really took it badly you going – wanted her Daddy back summat fierce and that pissed Darla off even more. Times I took a whippin' cos Darla wanted to take it out on someone and Drusilla's visions were too important to risk it being her.” Spike shook his head, then smiled. “Course, there were times I took a whippin' cos I pissed her off – they were too many to count – I couldn't resist yanking her chain sometimes, she was so up her own arse.”

“I'm sor-”

“No more apologies Peaches. You did what you thought you had to do – can't go back and change it, and we wouldn't be the vamps we are today if it hadn't happened. So, yeah, no more apologies yeah?”

“Yeah.” They smoked in companionably silence for a minute or two, each thinking their own thoughts. “You

and Xander?”

“What of it?”

“Whoa, whoa! No need to get defensive. I was just - *feeling* you out about how you were handling it all. I can see he's got under your skin – can understand it too. They have a way of throwing you off guard and turning everything around.” He shook his head, fondly remembering his and Oz's courtship.

“Yeah – jus, I dunno. Wasn't expecting it – certainly wasn't looking for it. But the boy's got to me somehow. He's like some fuckin' unsung hero or summat – always there, taking a beating for 'em, bleeding for 'em, and they barely even know he's alive. Apart from Red – she is one *scarily* possessive little bitch! That's one **no one** should ever turn cos she'd take over the world and we'd be feeling the pain for decades.”

“God I know! Did I tell you about the time he stood up to me when I was Angelus – stopped me visiting Buffy when she was in hospital?”

“Oh mate, I remember that! You were in a right moody for days going on about the Slayer's white knight!” For

a few moments, they just chuckled, sharing the memory. “We should go back, yeah? Been out long enough – don't want the boy waking up without me there.”

Angel got to his feet, holding out a hand to help Spike up. He looked them both up and down. His shirt was torn, dirt and gravel decorating his trousers and no doubt the back of his jacket. Spike was in no better shape – there were rips in the tight black denim and the sleeve of his duster was hanging off, held on by only a few threads. When Spike saw that, he was in trouble. Sighing, he hesitated to think of what his face looked like.

“Oz is gonna kill me.” Spike looked at him curiously, a smirk crossing his face as he took in the smeared blood and bruising on Angel's face. Casually, Angel reached out and slapped Spike over the back of his head. “This is your fault! This was supposed to be a chance for us to *talk* not smear each other over the pavement.”

“S'not my problem mate – good luck explaining it ta the little woman!” Laughing uproariously, Spike took off at a run, sprinting away in the direction of the hotel.

“Fuck, Spike! SPIKE! Don't you tell him any lies if you get there before me!” Giving chase, Angel wondered what tale Spike would spin to Oz to get him into even more trouble.

Part Seven

Oz sat at the kitchen table, tapping his feet to the music in his head as he read the paper. Angel had taken Spike out to patrol, more to get him out of the hotel than for any pressing need. Xander was out cold upstairs – the boy hadn't been seen since the confrontation in the kitchen the night before. Spike had said that he and Xander had talked, but neither Angel nor Oz had pried for details. None of them were *too* concerned about the amount that Xander was sleeping – Oz had explained that after he was bitten he slept for a few days while his body struggled through its internal changes, so it seemed more than reasonable for Xander to be out for the count.

He looked up when the phone rang, debating whether

or not he wanted to answer. Shrugging – it might be Lorne about a gig – he picked up the receiver.

“Hello.” He stiffened when he recognised the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Is Angel there? We really need to talk to ... Oz? What are you ... why are you answering Angel's phone?”

“Hey Wills.”

“OZ!! It is you!! What are you – I don't understand, you're in L.A.? And ... and with the picking up the phone, which means you're at Angel's place, and ... why are you? I, I mean, why did you answer, and not him?”

“He's not here and the ringing was messing with my beat.”

“Huh? Oh, right - Oz made a funny. Look, Oz, I don't mean to be rude but we've got a real situation down here and I need to speak to Angel.”

“Not here. Can I help?”

“Oh sweetie, it is so kind of you to offer. But unless you

know where Spike is, then no, you can't really help us.”

“Spike?”

“He's kidnapped Xander.” A male voice muttered in the background, and Willow huffed an annoyed breath.

“Okay, *fine* Giles – Spike was seen driving Xander's car and we haven't seen Xander since, so I'm thinking Spike may have kidnapped him, right? Giles isn't taking this seriously, and Buffy and Riley are arguing about Angel so they're not helping at all, and so we were hoping that Angel might give us some idea where Spike may have taken him – Xander that is.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, so if you could ask Angel to call Giles that would be so of the good because we need to track down Spike before he can do Xander any more harm.” More muttering. “Yes, yes, there's a *slim* possibility that Xander's fine, and Spike had Xan's permission to drive his car, so maybe it'll just be a case of finding that out and everyone's all happy, but we won't *know* that until we talk to Angel. So, you'll have him call, okay?”

“You want him to call. Got it.” Oz looked up at the

sound of footsteps on the stairs. Angel and Spike stepped into the kitchen, and Oz held a finger to his lips. Angel frowned and nodded. Spike leaned against the counter, arms crossed against his chest.

“So, um, how are you Oz? You didn't stay long when you came home – I thought we would have the chance to, you know, talk and stuff. Because there's been so much going on and I really wanted a chance to talk to you. But then, it was like, poof! One minute you were here and the next Devon said you'd left town and hadn't really given a reason why. Are you coming home soon?”

“About that. Something happened in Sunnydale that -”

“Listen, I totally meant to tell you about me and Tara! And please, don't hate me. Although it's mostly your fault, cuz, you know, with the whole you going off to soothe your inner werewolf or whatever and leaving me behind. And, and you can't expect a girl to just wait around for you, mister, cuz I have the right to a life, too. And Tara's really good for me, she's so sweet and kind, and I was really really hoping we could stay friends – you and me as friends, I mean - but if you're going to be all judge-y about it then – then, fine, you

can just go ahead and be a big poopy head!” Willow's voice rose higher and higher as she spoke, and Oz winced as his ear-drums protested.

“No, Wills, that's not it. But you and Tara? That explains the scent – I just thought she was using your perfume and stuff.”

“I can't believe you're being so judgemental Oz – what did you expect me to do? Wait for you? I just – I can't talk to you about this, not if you're gonna be - I really can't.”

Oz heard the sound of the phone changing hands, and suddenly found himself talking to Giles.

“Oz? What the devil is going on – Willow is beside herself and I can't make head nor tail of what's she's saying.”

“Hey Giles. Willow didn't give me a chance to talk – got carried away on some heavy-duty guilt about Tara.”

“Ah, I see. Yes, well, she did feel rather guilty about the entire situation and that may have coloured her responses. However, I have to note that you didn't

actually answer the question. Why are you at the Hyperion, answering Angel's phone?"

"About that - can you leave the room? I don't think Willow should hear this yet."

"Why, yes – certainly. One moment." After a brief pause, Giles continued. "Now that I'm audience free – what happened after you left here that led you to Los Angeles and Angel?"

"Ran into some trouble. Needed a place to recover. Came here. Still here."

Giles sighed. "Oz, I realize babbling is as foreign to you as silence is to Buffy and Willow. And while I'd rather you not descend into their mode of speech, you will have to use more words than you just did to adequately explain things."

Oz grunted. "Yeah, figured. Just – need a minute." He looked over at his mate and found brown eyes gazing at him, full of love and support. He ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. "Was late when I left. I took a short cut across the campus. Met up with some guys in fatigues, carrying tasers. Took me into their labs."

“Dear lord.” The watcher's voice quavered. “How ... how long were you there? And how did you escape?”

“Not sure. Three, four days. Maybe longer. There was some kind of confusion when they took me out of the cell, I don't ... don't really remember what happened. Just ... I was running, made it outside. Didn't stop until I was ... I think I was about a half hour away from L.A. when I ... Giles, I really don't know how I got out, or why I came here. I was the wolf most of the time, running on instincts.” He cleared his throat. “But Angel gave me a place to stay, took care of me, and ... and I'm still here. Because I *want* to be. Doesn't have anything to do with Willow, or you guys.”

“And are you all right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Well then, I suppose your reasons for going there were valid, and your reasons for staying are none of our business.”

“Giles, I didn't-”

“Oz, please. You're entitled to do as you wish. Something I've been trying to convince Willow is Xander's right, as well.”

“She holds on tight.”

“That she does. Now then, if you'd be so kind as to have Angel call us, we'd greatly appreciate it. While I don't share Willow's certainty that Spike intends to harm Xander, I seem powerless to convince her or Buffy of that. It's possible Angel might succeed where I've failed. At the least, he might know where Spike would be likely to go.”

“It's possible.” Both Angel and Spike were frowning now, and Oz knew they'd heard the watcher's comments.

“Thank you. And while I doubt you plan to visit Sunnydale in the near future, I feel I must warn you. Buffy reported hearing a wolf howling on her last patrol. If there is another werewolf here, you'd do well to stay away.”

Oz closed his eyes, worried for the others still in Sunnydale. “Giles, be careful. When I was there, I didn't

scent any other wolves, until they took me down to the labs. So what Buffy heard ... they were training them, Giles. Like attack dogs. All of you need to watch out.”

Rupert's tone was weary. “Yes, of course. I'll be sure to warn everyone. Oz ... I know you won't want to talk about your ... your time there, but I must ask. Did they perform any surgery on you? When Spike was there, they placed a chip in his brain that ... well, it prevents him from harming humans. I just wondered ... I mean, if such a device was implanted in you, I'd very much like to help you.”

Oz heard Angel's low growl and looked up to see two pairs of golden eyes gazing at the phone. “Uh, no. Nothing like that happened to me. But, um, thanks. For the offer. I gotta go, the, uh, the spaghetti's about to boil over. Bye.”

He hung up, noting absently that his hands were shaking. Not in fear, because he wasn't afraid of the vampires, even though they were growling softly and continuously. No, he was furious. Giles had, without hesitation, offered to help him circumvent the microchip that the Initiative might have stuck in his head. And yet, when Spike had come to them, starving,

frightened, and begging for help, they'd turned him away, not even offering him the dignity of a stake through the heart.

Oz looked up at the blonde, to find that gold had been replaced by blue. Spike shrugged his shoulder.

“Don't stress yourself, pup. There's no love lost 'tween me and the Scoobies. Can't expect 'em to help me, can ya?”

Oz said nothing, not knowing what to say.

“How's my Xan doing? He been down for food or anything?”

“Still asleep.” Oz looked at the clock. “But maybe you should wake him. He needs to eat.”

“Right. I'll do that. You and me sire need to figure out what to tell the Sunnydale gang. Cos I just remembered what was buggin' me about when I left Xan's place. Red was there – could smell her. She saw me leave with Xander's car. Sure as the watcher polishes his glasses, they'll be calling again.” Spike turned on his heel and took the stairs two at a time.

Part Eight

Spike entered the room he shared with Xander and found the boy curled up in the middle of the bed, sound asleep. Spike dropped his coat over a convenient chair, kicked off his boots, and sat down next to Xander. The young were scooted over immediately, resting his head on Spike's thigh and sighing softly. Spike smiled. The heat felt wonderful, and he couldn't deny enjoying the way the boy seemed to instinctively seek him out.

“I'd love to know what's goin' on in that head of yours, Xander.” Spike sighed and leaned back, closing his eyes.

“Xander, wake up. Xander. Harris, wake up!”

Xander jerked his head up at the barked command, rubbed his eyes, and looked around. Huh, fell asleep in class again. Except, isn't the high school ... gone?

A tall, broad-shouldered man stepped out of the shadows in the corner of the room. “Yes, the high

school is gone. Don't worry, this is just a dream. A place for you to meet ... someone important.”

Xander frowned. “A dream? But ... you told me to ... and if I'm awake ... huh?”

“Don't play the fool with me, Harris. I know better.”

Xander carefully looked the man over, noting the straight posture, the short, graying hair, and the military fatigues. “Soldier? From Halloween? But I thought you were gone.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. I'm your memory of his memories.” Soldier pulled a chair over and sat down. “When the magic started working that Halloween, you didn't actually become someone else. The spell merged your memories with those of the man who originally wore these dog tags. When the spell ended, the merging did, too. But the memories remained. You've used them, from time to time.”

Xander nodded. “The rocket launcher, setting up the charges to deal with the mayor. Yeah, but ... it wasn't conscious. It was like the information just popped into my head when I needed it.” He snorted. “Could've used

it during late-night slaying sessions, but it never showed up.”

“That's because your mind is ... disordered.” He stood and motioned to the door. “Come on. Something you need to see.”

Xander followed him out the door and down the hallway. “Just like old times. We're going to the library, aren't we?” He stepped through the double doors and stared in dismay at the mess. The small drawers that held the card catalogue were open and empty. The cards themselves were scattered all over the floor. “Wow. Someone trashed the place. Giles would be way unhappy if he saw this.”

“Harris, do you think this is actually the library? We're in your head, kid.”

“Yeah, so?”

Soldier propped his hip against a table. “So, if we're in your head, what do you think this-” he waved his hand to indicate the cards on the floor, “is?”

Xander bent down and picked up a card. Instead of

seeing typed information, as he'd expected, he was looking at a photograph. A picture of-

“Hey! This is ... these are my memories?”

Soldier nodded. “Most of 'em. There are others that are kept ... in a different way. But the bulk of your life?” He gestured to the cards again. “Scattered around. That's what I meant when I said your mind is disordered.”

Xander narrowed his eyes at the [older man](#). “Yeah, okay – so why are we here?”

Soldier raised an eyebrow, his lips tipping up in a crooked smile. “Why else? We're here to clean it up.” He leaned forward, suddenly serious. “Can't think clearly – and trust me, kid, you need some clear thinking – until you remember what you've forgotten.”

Xander glanced around him in dismay. “Ah, man – this will take forever. I don't even know where to start.”

Soldier clapped a hand on Xander's shoulder. “Won't take as long as you think. I'll help.” He turned Xander to face the weapons cage, barely visible in the dimly lit

room. "As for you ... start over there. That's the biggest single memory you need to recover." He gave Xander a push. "Go on – she won't hurt you."

Xander bit his lip and looked over his shoulder at the older man. "Will you ... I, I know you're not real, but ... will you still be here when ... when I'm done?"

Soldier stepped forward and tilted a desk lamp up so the light struck his face. "What do you think, kid?"

Xander stared. That was his face – older, more serious, but definitely his. "You ... you're ... me?"

Soldier nodded. "You made me. Built me from the memories of that Halloween, the things you've done since then, and your ideas of the man you want to become. So yeah, I'll be here. Maybe not walkin' and talkin' like now – but I'm a part of you, kid. Always." He pointed at the cage. "Now go on – she's been waitin' a long time for this day."

Xander took a hesitant step forward and then another. The closer he got to the cage, the more the library faded. He stopped in front of the cage door and lifted a shaking hand to the latch. He realized the lock was

broken, even though the door was still closed. The large, sloped form of the hyena padded over to him. She pressed against the wire of the cage, her soft, speckled fur brushing against his fingers.

“Cub, we must hurry. There is much to be discussed, much for you to learn, and little time. Your mate will worry if you remain asleep too long.”

“M-my mate ... what?” He found he'd lifted the latch and opened the door, and was surprised at his lack of fear.

The hyena gave a rumbling, gravelly growl. Xander knew, somehow, that she was conveying amusement. “Later for that, cub.” She used her snout to push him away from the cage, and he suddenly felt warm grass beneath his feet. “Run with me ... and learn.”

She sped away in a ground-devouring lope, and Xander ran after her, the hot breeze blowing his hair back from his face and the scents of the savannah rushing over him as he followed her, laughing.

Spike looked down at his boy and smiled. Xander was obviously dreaming, but the young were didn't seem distressed. His arms and legs twitched, but the small yips and rumbles Xander gave voice to spoke of happiness and excitement, rather than fear. Spike was reminded of the advice his mother had given him long ago. "Bother not the sleeping, growling dog, my son. His dreams are not happy ones, and he may bite on waking, not knowing where he is. But the dog that runs in his dreams, panting and wagging his tail, is in a happy place."

"If ya had a tail, bet it would be waggin' now, eh pet?" He ran his fingers through the boy's hair, chuckling when Xander pressed into the caress and snuffled happily. "Sweet dreams, Xan – don't think you've had many of those, so enjoy this one, yeah?"

The hyena led Xander to a small oasis – soft, green grass, a large tree with wide, low branches, and a pond of clear, cool water. The sun was low in the horizon, and a mist began to rise from the ground, shimmering as the heat of the day fled before the cool of the evening. Hyena stretched out next to the tree, her head held high. "Sit with me, cub. Watch and learn."

Pictures began to form in the mist, details of Xander's life – many of which he'd pushed aside, not wanting to remember. He fidgeted against the trunk of the tree, until the hyena nudged him over to rest against her large shoulder. “Settle, else you'll worry the alpha.”

“I don't ... I already lived through this shit. My dad ... the c-closet ... the way he treated me. Why are you showing me this?”

“You must learn from your past. What others think of you, how they treat you ... is that who you are? Is that who you wish to be?”

Xander chewed on his lip. “I don't think ... I mean, Dad always called me worthless, but...”

An image rose, showing him reviving Buffy after she'd drowned in the Master's lair. “Is this the action of one who has no worth? What of this?” Again the picture changed, this time to the hyena exhibit at the zoo. Xander stood between Kyle's group and another boy. “You protected the other, at grave risk to yourself. It was this act of courage that drew me. I chose you, cub.”

“You ... chose me? Because of that? But ... I was scared.”

“That only increases your bravery. It made you worthy of me.” She licked the side of his face and nuzzled his neck. “Now observe. We must be quick.”

Xander watched as his life zoomed by in clips and stills – it was like watching the news on television, without the voice-over from a reporter. When it ended, he leaned against the hyena, dazed. “I'm ... I don't know what I was supposed to learn from all that. Except ... maybe I'm not the waste of space my dad calls me. Maybe ... maybe I'm not the Zeppo.”

Hyena rumbled approval. “It's a start, cub.” She stood and stretched, her profile strong and powerful against the setting sun. “Time to return to the waking world. Remember, like Soldier ... I am always with you.”

Xander threw his arms around the shaggy neck and buried his nose in the spicy fur. “I won't forget, but ... what about the wolf part of me? Why haven't I seen him here?”

“He had much to learn, as well. Like you, he is but a cub. You'll find him when you return.”

“Wait – before you go, or I go, however that works. What's your name?”

“I am called Impisi, the Purifier.”

“Impisi. It's ... it's a regal name. I like it.”

Green eyes glowed, and she lolled her tongue in a doggy grin. “Thank you, cub. Now, back you go. Remember what you have learned.”

Xander blinked, and was back in the library – but a very different library. This one was warmer, brighter, more comfortable. It resembled a book-filled den, more than a school library. Only the card catalogue remained from the previous room. Soldier sat in an armchair, looking through a photo album. The cage was gone – replaced by a large, soft dog bed that resided next to the chair. Curled on the cushion was a sleeping wolf cub.

Xander grinned at Soldier. “You're still here. I mean, really here, not just ghostly here. Cool.” He sat down next to the dog bed and gently touched the fur of the

sleeping pup. “Impisi – the hyena – showed me a lot of things. And ... I get the message, about learning from my past ... but ... it's...”

“A lot to take in?” Soldier patted Xander's shoulder. “Yup, sure is. Why don't you curl up with the cub ... Cub?” Soldier's smile was sly.

Xander groaned. “Am I gonna be called that all the time? Cuz Impisi called me that, too.” He curled around the pup, grumbling. “Want a better name than cub. Want a new name, somethin' better...”

Spike watched as Xander slowly woke. Aimless movements turned into a full body stretch. And what a lovely body it was. A yawn and a snuffle. Hazel eyes blinked once, twice, and finally opened to gaze warmly at Spike.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Most of the day and night, pet. Not unusual, considerin' what's happened to ya, hm?” Spike couldn't resist the sight of all that warm, tan skin, and ran his fingers slowly from Xander's shoulder to his wrist. “Did

ya rest? Seemed to be dreamin' – hope it wasn't nothin' nasty.”

Xander smiled, his eyes lighting with joy. “I met them, all of them. It was incredible – I wish you could've been there, too.”

Spike raised his eyebrow. “So, who'd ya meet? Tin Man, Cowardly Lion, and Scarecrow?”

Xander snorted. “It wasn't a Wizard of Oz dream, Spike. I met ... myself, mostly. My memories. The soldier, hyena, and wolf.” He frowned. “They kept calling me cub. Well, except for the wolf. He just slept, and he is a cub, so calling me one would be like calling me... um ... never mind. But seriously, I want a better name than cub. I'm not a kid anymore.”

Spike chuckled. “Nah, but you're not exactly an old man, either. Don't fret – I'm sure we can come up with something better'n cub. Right, whelp?”

“Undead comedian.” Xander bit his lip and then looked up at Spike through his eyelashes. “Impisi kept talking about ... the alpha. And ... and m-my mate. I ... I know you're the alpha, but ... are you ... do you think of me

as ... as a mate?"

"Is that what ya want, Xan? Ya want a mate?" Had he needed to breathe, Spike knew he'd be holding his breath now, waiting for the answer.

Xander frowned. "Wolf and hyena want ... a pack. Pack mates. You, Oz, Angel ... even Wes and Cordy ... you're my pack. But ... they also want a mate, the one who'll be my other half. So do I, but ... the thing is ... wolves mate for life." The boy's voice dropped to a whisper with the last words.

"And?" Spike waited, as patiently as he could.

"Are you ... do you..." Xander took a deep breath. "I need someone who's all mine. And, and I'd be theirs. Only theirs." He chewed on his lip and finally raised his eyes to Spike's. "Could you be my only one? And ... would I be yours?"

Spike tilted his head to the side and gazed thoughtfully at the young were. "Are you askin' cos the wolf needs a mate? Need ta be sure of your reasons, Xan ... this isn't something I take lightly. Don't want to be someone you ... settle for, yeah?"

“Not settling, Spike. I'm asking ... choosing. I choose you. If ... if you'll have me, and ... and if you'll be only mine. None of us - wolf, hyena, me – are willing to share.”

Spike lowered himself to rest against the were's warmth. “Not to worry, pet – 'm a bit territorial, m'self.” He bent his head and kissed that chewed on, pouting lower lip. “Yeah, Xan ... I choose you, too.”

Part Nine

"You know traditionally speaking, talking is done with the mouth not the fists." Oz walked over to Angel, looking his mate up and down and taking in the damage of a couple of hours spent with Spike. The shirt would have to be thrown out and it was doubtful they'd be able to salvage the trousers either. Angel sighed, pulling Oz in close and holding him tight.

"I tried, believe me I tried. But with Spike you gotta get

his attention first." He leaned down and caught Oz's mouth in a gentle kiss, deepening it as the other's mouth opened automatically and invited him in. He inhaled sharply, the touch and taste of his mate ratcheting his arousal higher. Fighting had always caused this reaction in him - desire rampaging through his system, making him hard. Spike hadn't been wrong when he said vampires were all about fucking, fighting and feeding. Sliding his hands down Oz's back, he grabbed the pert ass, pulling him up until Oz automatically gave a little jump and wrapped his legs around Angel's waist.

"We should talk - " Oz mumbled, pulling back slightly to take a few breaths.

"Can talk later. Need this now." Gripping Oz tight with one hand under his ass, Angel shrugged his shoulders to get his jacket off, swapping hands over to do the other side and letting it drop to the floor. Laying kisses down the smoothness of Oz's jaw and neck, he began to walk blindly towards their bedroom.

"Willow - " Angel growled, not wanting to hear *her* name while he was making love to his mate. "Sssh, ssh. Just meant we're gonna need to figure out what to say

to her - to those guys - soon. With Spike and Xander here, it's going to happen sooner rather than later."

"Mo chuisle*, are ya so used to me love-making that you can think of them while I'm kissing ya?" Kicking the bedroom door shut with his foot, Angel made his way over to the bed and tossed Oz down onto it. Tugging his shirt out of his trousers, he stripped it off, toeing off his shoes at the same time. He stopped, frozen in place as he looked down at his mate.

Oz was wearing a pair of black sweats and a thin green tank, his red hair bleached at the tips and standing up on his head in little tufts. He lay back, leaning up on his elbows so he could watch as Angel stripped off his clothes. It was part of what Angel loved about him, his quiet, honest sensuality. Oz was incredibly open-minded, willing to try anything as long as it was done with love. He accepted everything about Angel - his past, his demon, even his brooding with love and simple understanding that astounded Angel every single time he thought about it.

Smiling, Angel reached for the button and zip on his trousers, slipping them off and tugging his socks off at the same time. His cock stood to attention, eagerly

pointing the way towards his mate.

"S'that for me?" Oz cocked a brow, bending his leg at the knee and balancing his foot on the other knee. Angel growled, wanting to see the evidence of his mate's arousal, and leaning forward he grabbed at the ankles of the sweatpants. He tugged and Oz arched his hips up to give him room to pull them off. His cock slapped against his belly as soon as it was released, already hard and aching just by being in their room with Angel.

"All for you. O'course, ya have to be paying attention - wouldna want to bore ya if you be wanting to talk about the Sunnydale lot."

"Oh I think you have my attention." He leaned up and pulled the green tank over his head, tossing it to the floor and returning his gaze to Angel.

"Fuck I love you." The words were torn from him, and Angel put one knee onto the bed, crawling over Oz so that he was hovering over the smaller man, so close but not touching. He lowered his head and gently kissed Oz's forehead, staying still with his lips pressed to the soft, smooth skin as he breathed in the scent of

his beloved. "If anything happened to you - if anyone tried to take you away from me, the demon in me would drown the world in blood just to get you back, and the soul would agree." Oz reached up and cupped Angel's face with his palm, a soft smile crossing his face as Angel pressed his cheek into it.

"I am strangely content with such a reaction - must be the beast in me." Sliding his hand back around Angel's neck, he pulled him down into a passionate kiss. Moaning into Oz's mouth, Angel lowered his body, slipping between Oz's thighs and pressing their pelvises together. Oz's legs wrapped round his waist, his hands reaching up to cup the back of Angel's head and pull him closer. Tongues duelling, fighting for control as Oz pushed up with his hips at the same time as pushing against Angel's shoulder. Taking the hint to roll over, Oz straddled his waist and sat up, cheeks flushed as he looked down at his lover.

Angel reached up with one large hand and traced a line from Oz's chin down his neck, to his chest, circling one small pink nipple before tweaking it gently between finger and thumb. Oz gasped and jerked, his cock pressing against Angel's cock. His long pale fingers wrapped around them both, squeezing the hard rods

together as he stroked up and down. Normally, Angel enjoyed taking it long and slow, the build up of passion as they caressed each other, rolling around on the bed together. He loved the weight of Oz on top of him, the smooth movements as he rode Angel at a slow walk, rolling his hips as he took Angel deep into his body. He adored the hiccuping moans that escaped his small were as the pace quickened, the walk speeding up - the difference between a trot and a canter. He knew his mate was listening to internal music as he swivelled his hips and rode Angel to his own beat, leaning back and grasping Angel's ankles as he finally sped to a gallop.

Groaning, Angel wrapped his hand around Oz's hips, encouraging him to press their flesh together harder, bucking up with his hips as a dark need threatened to overtake him. He swallowed hard, trying to rein himself in, desperately reminding himself that Oz might be a were but he was *not* a vampire. He was not built to take the true depths of Angel's darkest passions - only another vampire could handle that without damage. Being around Spike was more dangerous than he had first thought.

"Where are you?" Angel looked up at Oz, frowning at the unhappiness in his face. "You're not here with me -

not fully. Is it - I didn't mean to mention Willow you know." Shaking his head, furious with himself for causing the look of vulnerability on Oz's face, Angel pulled his mate to his chest.

"You can feel how much I love you. I - you haven't done anything wrong." Oz looked up at him from his position against his chest for a moment, then his gaze became shuttered and he pushed himself up into a sitting position, climbing off of Angel and flopping down onto his back on the bed.

"Is it me you're wanting, or a vampire?" Angel turned his head swiftly, shocked that Oz would even think that.

"No, NO! Oz, my sweet faol**, we are mated. You know there is no one else I desire - I'm truly sorry if I have made you feel unwanted. I - look, I - "

"Ang - my head is all over the place. You need to tell me what *you* need because I can sense you holding back. And we don't do that with each other - not you and me." Angel knew Oz was right - they *didn't* lie to each other or hold back. How many times had he thanked the Gods for gifting him with someone like Oz?

Someone who understood all of him and accepted it all. He needed to trust that because if Lorne was right (and he was generally right) he and Oz needed to be strong for whatever it was that was coming their way. And they wouldn't be strong if he started lying or holding back.

"My demon is riding me hard tonight. I don't think - I don't *feel* gentle and I don't want to hurt you." He lowered his lids, unwilling to meet Oz's gaze. He was taken completely by surprise when Oz laughed, the husky tones reawakening his dick as he heard his mate's amusement.

"And you think, what, that I can't handle it? Angel - I'm a *werewolf*. Part demon. Believe me, I understand the desire for - well, *different*. What made you think I wouldn't?" Oz rolled into him, sliding his leg over Angel's, his hand stroking down Angel's chest.

"I don't know. I think - I think sometimes I can't believe how blessed I am and expect it all to be taken away, or that I'll do something to cause me to lose it. And despite the soul and demon being merged, there are times when I feel like I taint you with my darker side."

Oz sat up, frowning down on Angel. Angel stared back at him, wishing he could read his mate's thoughts. Their link was not that strong - yet. He *hoped* that given time, he would get more than a flash of what his Danny boy was wanting or needing, but in the meantime he tried to read the visual clues, sniff out the emotions he could and let that lead him.

"Wait here. Five minutes. Okay?" Before he could say anything or do anything, Oz had climbed off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. Sighing, Angel tried to push down the heat inside of him, very conscious that he might have lost any chance of making love to his mate that night. He heard the light go off in the bathroom and saw the door open but there was no sign of Oz. He looked down, realising his mate was crawling towards him on hands and knees, and he had to fight hard not to vamp out. He sat up on the bed, watched the almost leisurely progress as Oz slunk across the room on hands and knees, and fought to keep himself still. He wanted nothing more but to grab Oz, throw him to the bed and fuck him senseless but maybe -

A whine caught his attention and he swiftly turned his attention to his mate. Oz's head was tilted

submissively, and he whined deep in his throat again. Angel couldn't stop himself from leaping from the bed, the demon obeying the instinctive desire to accept the submission, claim his mate again. Growling, he swiftly yanked Oz from the floor and threw him onto the bed, following him down and pushing the smaller man into the mattress. Sinking his teeth into the back of Oz's neck he held him in position, roughly kneeling his legs apart and slipping between them. Sliding his hands down the sides of Oz's body, he gripped the slender hips, unbearably aroused by the whines and growls coming from his mate. Tugging Oz up onto his knees, he reached round and grabbed the steely hardness of his erection, fisting it roughly as he used his other hand to position his cock.

Even in his feral state, Angel stopped momentarily as he realised he hadn't prepared the young man. Growling at the delay, he shifted backwards, intending to reach into their bedside cabinet for the lube, faltering as he heard Oz mumble "S'done" in slurred tones. Angel slipped his hands between the smooth white cheeks and down to Oz's asshole, a smile stretching his mouth around his fangs as he registered that during his time in the bathroom, Oz had indeed prepared the way.

He slid two fingers in, hissing as the inner heat almost burned the skin, twisting and turning them to ensure that Oz had prepared himself well. Crooking two fingers, he pressed against Oz's special spot, the place that always made him whine and jerk. Again he smiled as his actions caused just that reaction, Oz's growls rising in tempo and volume as he just touched - no pressing, no moving - just a persistent touch that was guaranteed to drive the young wolf out of his mind with lust. The scent of his aroused mate was flooding his senses, eye ridges becoming more pronounced as he tasted the air around the two of them. Lust, love and blood all swirled together to make it nearly impossible to shake off his vampiric face but the demon was not fully in control - the scent of blood, though arousing, was enough to make him question.

"You're bleeding?" He leaned over, pressing himself against the length of Oz's body from behind, reaching down to grab both slender wrists and press them to the bed. Oz turned his head and Angel could see that his eyes had bled to the wolf, and the cause of the blood scent was revealed as Oz gasped for breath and revealed he had bitten his lips with passion. Reassured, Angel once more relaxed his control over his demon,

shifting forward on powerful legs so that he was cradled in the vee of Oz's lower body. He tugged both of Oz's wrists together so that he could hold them in one hand, using the other to guide his hardness to the slick opening awaiting him.

He pressed in slowly, teasing his way past the tight ring of muscles, tunnelling deeper and deeper until he was wedged as far as he could go, the flatness of his lower belly pressing against the slight curve of Oz's ass. Oz pressed up and back, fighting Angel's grip on his wrists and instinctively Angel countered his move, shoving more of his weight onto the slighter figure beneath him and forcing him down onto the bed. Leaning down, he scented the back of Oz's neck, delicately licking the twin holes he had made earlier to help them heal without marking, sucking in the scents of his partner - he could sense no fear, just aroused male and finally completely reassured, Angel set his demon loose.

With smooth swings of his hips he pulled out of the clinging tunnel, hands resting once more on the slender hips as he pushed his way back in. Again he pulled back, slowly tugging his cock almost free before slipping back in, the subtle shift as Oz spread his legs further allowing him just that little bit deeper. Angel

slid hands down Oz's body once more, gripping the cheeks of his ass and pulling them apart so he could see himself dipping in and out of his mate, short digging thrusts that prodded Oz exactly where he needed it without giving him the long, deep movements that he craved.

The sight of himself moving in and out of his lover, the feel of the welcoming grasp around his hardness sent him reeling, and it was no longer enough to slip in and out with only a few inches - now he needed to be as deep as he could get. A twist of his hips, a hard thrust and Oz cried out, scrabbling at the bed with hands half-shifted to wolf form despite the lack of full moon. Grinning wildly around his fangs, knowing that he had touched the inner animal enough to loosen Oz's rigid control, Angel let loose a volley of thrusts, pounding into his lover and barely registering the rhythmic grunts and cries the two of them were making.

So good, so tight - just the most perfect place in the world to be - Angel struggled not to come too soon, wanting to savour this savage gentleness as long as he could. Oz was keening at every inward thrust now, pushing back with his hips and rutting forward into the bed. Knowing he was searching for the friction to

enable him to come, Angel pulled back and lifted Oz from the bed so that his hardness was thrusting freely in the hot air of the bedroom. Oz growled, claws digging into Angel's hands on his hips as he writhed in passion. Wrapping one strong arm around Oz's waist to hold him in position, Angel shifted back so that he was on his haunches, Oz's back tight against his chest as he was pressed impossibly deeper by gravity in the new position. Mouthing and nibbling at Oz's neck, he reached round and once more grabbed the leaking hardness bobbing against Oz's stomach in a harsh grip. He stroked up and down in unison with the steady thrusts of his hips, shoving Oz higher and higher, the cries from his mate became more high pitched as Angel pressed all of Oz's known hotspots at once. A knowledgeable flick of his wrist to squeeze the head of Oz's cock, the swivel of his hips as he ground himself in deeper pushing against Oz's prostate with unrelenting pressure.

"Going to make you come for me, boy - going to make you shoot so hard and so far you're going to want to pass out but you won't. Ya know why?" Oz shook his head, dropping it back against Angel's chest as he panted for breath around his groans. "You won't pass out because you know I want you to feel it when I

come - I want you to feel me as I shove myself into you as deep as I can go, fill you up with me, the scent of me so that everyone knows you're my mate, that you belong to me. Ya want that? Hmmm - Danny-boy - do ya want to feel that?"

"God, yes yes fuck - please, yes!" Angel squeezed hard, harder around Oz's cock before his hand became a blur of motion, tugging the younger man off faster than he could ever hope to do it himself. At the same time, his thrusts became harsher, more urgent as he used vampire strength to bounce Oz on his cock, the twin sensations enough to cause the young were to come, frozen in a perfect arch on top of Angel. The back of his head pressed against Angel's chest, the beautiful arch of his spine as he thrust himself into the torturing hand bringing him off in such incredibly painful pleasure. Angel grimaced with pleasure as Oz tightened around him, holding off by sheer dint of will as he rode out Oz's climax.

The sound of Oz panting in the aftermath, the clench of his inner muscles slackening slightly were all the confirmation Angel needed. With a graceful lurch, he moved Oz forwards until his sweat-riddled body was spread out on the bed like a sacrifice to Angel's demon

and unable to hold off any longer Angel thrust as deep as he could get and came, grunting in Oz's ear before once more sliding his fangs into the side of Oz's neck and growling throatily through his release.

Part Ten

Curled up behind his boy, Spike soaked up the heat emanating from his body. Xander had always seemed to run hot -a few times in the Magic Box, Spike had stood near him and been astounded at the heat flowing from the boy. Now was better though – now he could touch, get close to, soak up the heat as part of the boy's gift to him. And the boy was turning out to be one gift after another. The bravery it had taken to open himself up to possible rejection, asking Spike if he would be his only – that was a gift so rare as to bring tears to the eyes of a poet.

He stroked his hand down the boy's stomach, enjoying the feel of the firm muscles as they twitched beneath his touch. Xander seemed to have dozed off following

their conversation, and Spike lay behind him, thinking over the evening. The talk with Angel had cleared the air so much, and he felt more secure in their position here at the hotel – the poof seemed ready to reclaim his family, or at least build a new one, and it made Spike's demon practically purr that sire was prepared to do whatever it took to get the chip removed.

Spike cocked his head as he heard a noise downstairs, a slight leer crossing his features as he registered the sounds of Peaches and his boy. Sounded like sire wasn't in *too* much trouble for getting all messed up whilst out to play – and also sounded like the poof was letting the demon out good and proper. Spike was pleased – he had fleetingly had thoughts of him and Angel, then realised that time was past. And he had wondered whether Angel was letting the red-head have **all** of him, or if he was holding back some. Sounded like he wasn't holding back anymore.

For a moment, Spike felt envious. Looking down at Xander, he wondered whether they would have that, would share that. The boy had surprised him a lot with his talk of mating and being one and onlys, but Spike wondered if he really knew what it meant. If he really wanted to tie himself to Spike's demon like that. The

way Oz had. He ran his hand down the smoothness of Xander's side, enjoying the feel of the boy's skin under his fingertips. What colour wolf would his boy be? Judging by his luxurious dark chocolate hair he was gonna be a dark one, and those gorgeous eyes – whether they were hazel or flashing green. Yeah, Spike was kinda looking forward to when his boy changed and he got to meet the other side of him.

He shifted closer, not wanting to wake Xander, just wanting to *feel* him. He traced the strong muscles of his boy's back, enjoying their firmness before moving down towards the firm buttocks hidden by dark boxers. Stroking over the material lightly he was struck by desire. Oh he wanted the boy – no two ways about it. But this hit him hard – the want, no *need* to make the boy his, properly his. And become the boy's mate in truth. Love had come quickly, but that was kinda typical for him and this time he seemed to have chosen someone with the same capacity – to love quickly, love long and love hard. Perhaps it wasn't such a stretch after all – the two of them were alike in so many ways.

A muffled moan from Xander made him realise that he had continued stroking and petting whilst lost in his thoughts, his hands learning the contours of the man

beside him until it seemed that he would recognise him blindfolded by feel alone. Spike wasn't sure if now was the right time to take things further – it had been an emotional few days, and he didn't want to take advantage. But he couldn't deny that he wanted to get at least a *little* physical. He applied gentle pressure to Xander's shoulder until the boy moved over onto his back, settling into sleep in a relaxed sprawl. Oh the bounty laid before him. Xander had grown into his body, hardened by his work in construction without being overblown – his physique spoke of purpose rather than hobby. Broad chest, with dusky brown nipples sitting high, leading down to a flat stomach with a dipping belly-button that made Spike want to take a nibble, dip his tongue in and taste it.

A thin trail of hair a shade or two darker than that on his head disappeared into the waistband of his boxers.. Long, lean thighs led down to toned calves and narrow feet, his toes also long and narrow. Shifting down the bed, resting his head on his elbow, Spike allowed his eyes to sweep up and down, admiring the entirety of the tanned, lean, muscled body.

“Whatchya looking at?” The rumble came from above and Spike raised his eyes, sheepish at being caught

staring.

“Looking at you, luv. Looking and liking.”

“Yeah? You like what you see?” Xander did a full body stretch that showed his body off in new and gorgeous ways, and Spike felt his body perking up with more interest. He'd never known the boy to be that confident, and this side of him was, as the slayer and her minions would say, definitely of the good.

“Oh yeah, luv, I like what I see. Wondered about touchin' it didn't I, but someone was spark out like, and I wouldn't want to touch the unwilling or the unconscious.” Spike moved back up the bed, pressing his body against Xander. Xander hissed, and from the corner of his eye Spike could see the boy's cock stirring against his thigh through the thin material.

“I'm not unwilling or unconscious now.”

“So I see, Pet, so I see.” Telegraphing his intent, Spike leaned towards Xander, eyes fixated on the pouting red lips. One tanned hand reached up, curving around the back of his neck and resting there. Spike looked up, blue eyes suddenly locked with hazel as he lowered his

head the final distance and placed his lips against Xander's. Xander gave a rumbling moan, lips parting and inviting Spike to enter the wet warmth of his mouth.

Wrapping his hands around the young were's face, Spike allowed his tongue to dart in and out, sweeping through the interior, learning his boy's taste and feel as he pressed his body against Xander's.

“Fuck, Spike - “ Xander groaned, hand gripping at his neck tightly as his other arm came up to wrap around Spike's shoulders, pulling him closer. For a time, there were no more words as they kissed passionately, bodies crushed against each other as they learnt each other's taste and scent, both revelling in the knowledge that they had chosen each other – through the most bizarre of circumstances – they were both exactly where they wanted to be.

“Fuckin' hell, you feel good!” Spike, exclaimed, slipping into the cradle of Xander's thighs so that they were pressed tight against each other, groin to groin. “Want these off, Xan – can I? Can I please? Promise won't go further than you want – won't do nothin' til you're ready – just want to feel you all over – please?” Spike

lifted himself up, freeing Xander of his weight and helping him out of the thin boxer shorts. Before the boy had pulled his legs free, Spike took his hardness in his hand, sliding up and down the hot length as he dropped back down onto the boy.

“Oh please, oh Spike – my mate, oh mine, please!” The boy's begging went straight to his cock, and Spike reached down to take them both in hand, gasping at the hotness of Xander's cock resting against his own. He could almost feel the hot blood pumping through the veins as it throbbed in his hand, and he knew neither of them were going to last long. Pressing his forehead against Xander's, close enough to inhale the boy's panting breaths, he stared down at his hand as it jerked their rods together, moving so fast it was almost a blur. Hips thrusting jerkily, other hand wrapped tight around Xander's neck, Spike groaned aloud as the boy pulled his legs up and wrapped them around Spike's waist, his heels practically dancing as he drummed them against Spike.

Spike watched, transfixed as Xander suddenly arched up, mouth open with a silent scream as his cock jerked and spat in Spike's hand, hot come spilling over the stroking fingers. It was enough, more than enough, to

send Spike over the edge and he let go of his cock so that he could pull Xander up towards him, holding him close and burying his face in the boy's hair as it felt like he would never stop coming. They lay panting, wrapped in each other's arms, Spike pressing kisses all over Xander's face as they recovered slowly. Rolling to the side, Spike grabbed the discarded boxers and wiped them both clean, swiping at his hands before throwing them onto the floor. Pulling Xander into his arms, he tugged him close, a happy sigh leaving him as Xander wriggled around until he was comfortable, hands stroking the base of Spike's spine as he settled.

“You didn't bite me.”

“Hmmm?”

“You didn't bite me – I thought, well, vamps, blood and sex – you didn't bite me.” He looked up at Spike, and Spike found himself grinning – flippin' boy kept catching him off guard.

“No luv. When I bite ya, it'll be when we're both ready, yeah? Won't be no casual thing neither – will be sign of our commitment to each other. Okay?” Xander smiled and nodded, obviously happy with the answer. “Now,

get some sleep. Bloody hell, you've worn me out, Pet.”
There was silence, but Spike could tell his boy hadn't gone to sleep, although he was on the edge.

“Spike?” A sleepy murmur, pretty much what Spike had been expecting.

“Yeah Xander?”

“Thanks. For looking after me, for caring. Just – I appreciate it, you know?”

“I know, Pet, I know. And thank you – for trusting me.”
Dropping a kiss on Xander's head, Spike listened as the boy's breathing slowed and once more, he drifted off to sleep.

Part Eleven

Angel stirred beside Oz, feeling a faint pang of hunger. Noon - early by his standards. He ran his fingers gently through Oz's hair, smiled at his mate, and pressed a

light kiss to the smaller man's temple. "Sleep, love. I'll be back soon." Oz barely moved. Angel sat up, pulled on a pair of slacks, and trotted downstairs.

He passed Cordelia and Wesley, who were chatting in the reception area. They followed him to the kitchen, Cordelia smirking at him. "So," she said, "are you two still in the honeymoon stage? Because if so, you'll need to learn some control. I'm tired of covering my eyes every time I walk into a room. And some of the stains I've seen here and there are just gross."

Angel shoved a mug of blood into the microwave and set it to heat. "We'll try to keep it to our rooms." He pulled the blood from the microwave and sipped it. "We have bigger problems, though." He sat at the table and sighed.

Wesley leaned against the counter, one arm around Cordelia's shoulder. "And what might those be?"

"The Scoobies. And how to keep them from coming here. Oz spoke with them last night, but they want me to call. They figure I'll know where Spike is, or might be. They seem to think he's done something to Xander."

Cordelia huffed. "And they're just now calling? He's been gone two days." She rested her head on Wesley's shoulder. "So, what are you going to tell them?"

Angel shrugged. "Don't have a clue. I need to feed them a convincing line. Something that will keep them away from here. At least until we can get Xander trained, and he and Spike figure out their relationship."

Cordy snorted. "A lie ... from you? Not happening."

Angel washed his mug and rinsed it. "If I don't, they'll show up here. You want that?"

"Not in this lifetime. But you can't lie, and you know it." She smiled. "I, on the other hand, can. And will. With great pleasure, I might add. I'll just tell them I've spoken with Xander, that he's taking a vacation, and your undead brat isn't a threat. Trust me, I can make it believable." This time her grin was evil. "And if they doubt me, I'll insult and confuse them. It'll be fun."

Angel thumped his head against the cabinet door and groaned.

Xander woke to a rumbling stomach and checked the clock. *One in the afternoon, no wonder I'm hungry.* He dressed in jeans and a tee shirt and ambled downstairs in search of food. He found Oz at the stove, the scent of fried ham and scrambled eggs permeating the air.

“Hey Oz. Enough there for two?”

Oz looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow.
“For four. Figured you'll eat a lot.”

Xander blushed and opened the fridge. “Well, yeah – seems like I'm starving lately. Uh, more than usual, that is. And why is that? I get that the changes are taking a lot out of me, but you don't eat that much more than a regular human-type person. I know you got hungrier when the moon was full, but not like this.”

Oz shrugged. “Probably the hyena. You're healing faster. Takes more energy.”

Xander pulled a gallon of orange juice from the fridge. “Guess so. You want some of this?” Oz nodded, and Xander filled two large glasses. “So, have you figured out what I need to do to get this under control? I mean, I can't go out in public until I know I won't change just

because the cashier pissed me off by shorting my change at the grocery store, y'know?"

Oz snickered. "Can see that." He pointed to the cabinet by Xander. "Plates, please." When Xander handed him one, Oz piled eggs and ham onto it and gestured for the other plate. This one he heaped nearly to overflowing and shoved back into Xander's hands. "Sit. Eat."

For a few minutes, the only sound was the clink of flatware against plates, the clunk of a glass being set back on the table, and Xander's appreciative groans. Oz finished first, set his dishes in the sink, and returned to the table with a cup of tea.

"Been thinking about this, Xan. You'll have to make changes – major ones. And work hard. I know you can do it, but it won't be easy."

Xander swallowed a bite of food, drank some juice, and nodded. "I didn't think it would be simple, Oz. I just ... I wish I was as certain as you that I can do it. And, um, what is it exactly, that I'll be doing?"

Oz held up a hand and began ticking off items as he

spoke. “Diet changes. Meditation. Hand to hand training. And you'll need to build a secure room.” Oz scrunched up his nose. “Angel has a cage, but it sucks. So – secure room, until we're sure of your control.”

Xander polished off the last of his food and orange juice and added his dishes to the pile in the sink. “I can manage building a room, or altering an existing room, no problem. I'll need tools and supplies, but a quick trip to the closest home improvement center will take care of that. I'm down with learning how to defend myself and fight, cuz I'm kinda tired of being thrown into walls and headstones. Meditation ... well, not so sure on that one. I mean, come on – we're talking me, here. The guy who couldn't concentrate enough to pull more than C's and D's in school. And what kind of diet changes?”

Oz shook his head. “Never knew I missed the babble.” He took a sip of tea. “Diet – need to increase your protein, decrease caffeine and sugar. Those two things make the wolf ... hyper. Not good.”

Xander sighed. “Yeah, okay – not good. But ... all caffeine? Like, no coffee, no sodas, no ... no chocolate?”

“Decaf coffee, herbal teas, no soft drinks at all, and limited chocolate. Maybe we can change it later, Xander – but right now, we have to calm the wolf down.”

“Well, I guess it won't kill me. But I gotta tell you – withholding chocolate from me? Not a pretty sight.”

Oz's grin was sly. “I'll use it as a reward. Make you earn it.”

“You're a cruel, cruel man. How did I never notice that? And you didn't tell me how I'm gonna manage to meditate.” Xander frowned at the table and sighed. “I wasn't exaggerating, you know. My head is ... full. That's why I talk so much, sometimes. I mean, yeah, sometimes it's nerves, or fear, or embarrassment, but ... mostly it's just there's so much junk in my head that my mouth kinda spews it out. And so ... well, how do I learn to concentrate?”

Oz reached over and patted Xander's hand. “We'll find a way. There's something you'll be able to focus on that will make it easier. We just have to figure out what that something is.”

“What do you use?”

“Hunter's moon. I picture it, riding full and blood-red in the night sky. Calms me down. Don't know why.”

Xander scratched his head. “Huh. Seems like it should do the opposite, but hey – if it works, it works.”

Spike sauntered into the kitchen and dropped a kiss to the top of Xander's head on his way to the fridge.

“Don't worry so, pet. You'll find your image. Might be something unexpected, something that don't mean nothing to anyone else.” He pulled a bag of blood from the refrigerator and shrugged. “Doesn't matter what it is, yeah? Just that it settles you.” He faced Xander and smiled.

Xander smiled back, caught in Spike's eyes. He wasn't thinking of anything, just enjoying the sight. Spike's eyes were so ... so blue. A summer sky had nothing on them. Xander felt someone poke his shoulder, blinked, and looked over at Oz, who was daintily sniffing. “Sorry Oz ... kinda got lost there.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“Um ... nothing? Just ... was just looking.” Xander ducked his head. “I mean ... Spike's eyes are so ... well, I just like looking at them.”

A corner of Oz's mouth twitched. “Your scent was calm. Think you found your image.”

While Oz and Spike worked out a training schedule, Xander slipped into Angel's office. The dark-haired vampire was reading, his feet propped on the desk.

“Hey, Deadb- ... um ... Angel. Mind if I ask you some questions?” Dark brown eyes gazed steadily at him, and Xander bit his lip at the scrutiny. “If you don't have the time, it's no big. I can ask Oz, or Spike. I just...”

Angel shook his head and smiled. “Calm down, Xander. I wasn't going to refuse. You surprised me, that's all.”

“Oh, um, I did?”

“Yeah – you actually used my name. Although I have to admit, Deadboy isn't half as bad as Peaches.” Angel set his book aside, dropped his feet to the floor, and gestured to a chair. “Have a seat. What did you want to

ask me?”

Xander wiped his hands on his jeans. “Well, see, um, Spike and I ... last night we talked, and ... the thing is, my wolf wants ... well, not just the wolf, cuz I want it, too, but I don't know how ... last night Spike said ... well, I told him I wanted him as my mate if he'd be just mine ... but he didn't bite me, and when I asked, he said when he did, it would be special, so I just wondered ... um ... what can you tell me about mates and, and claiming?”

Angel held up a hand. “Uh, let my brain catch up with everything you just said. You two talked, and want to be each others mates?” Xander nodded. “You had sex, but no biting?” Another nod. “Okay, and you want to know ... what? How a claiming works?”

Xander sighed. “It's just ... I know how the wolf views a mate. And me. I mean, I feel the same as the wolf. A mate is ... forever. And, and the only one. No fooling around, y'know? And Spike said it's the same for him, that he wasn't into sharing, but ... see, I don't know how vampires do it. Mate, I mean. Is there some kind of ceremony or ritual? Is it just sex with biting? I'm ... this means a lot to me – Spike means a lot to me - and I

don't want to screw it up.”

Angel leaned back and narrowed his eyes. “You're telling me that you, Xander Harris, the boy who hates all vampires, wants to take my favoured childe as a mate? If I recall correctly, it was your lie to Buffy that got me sent to hell. Am I supposed to believe you've suddenly seen the light?”

Xander straightened in his chair. “No, it was my lie to Buffy that got Angelus, the psycho vampire that wanted to bring Acatla to life, sent to hell.” He ran his hands through his hair. “Look, I admit I didn't have much use for you when you first showed up. I was fifteen, my best friend had been turned, and I was the one who staked him. So yeah, not real on board with the idea that you were a good guy. And ... you weren't just a vampire. You were the anti-me.”

Angel blinked. “The ... what?”

Xander snorted. “I was this goofy kid, with a major crush on Buffy. Just human, nothing special about me. Always getting into trouble, falling over my own feet, wearing Salvation Army rejects. You ... you were mysterious, handsome, stronger than human, and you

dressed like a male model ... hell, I was jealous.” He felt his cheeks warm with a blush and ducked his head.

“Not just jealous of you ... I was kinda jealous of Buffy. And that was ... well, let's just say I was the master of denial for a long time. It wasn't until Larry that I ... and that's a story you don't need to hear.”

“Thank you for that. And the lie you told Buffy? Knowing what you know now, what would you say?”

Xander lifted his head and met the vampire's eyes without flinching. “I'd say exactly the same thing, Deadboy. And before you condemn me for that, bear a few things in mind. One, you were insane. Two, you killed a lot of people who wouldn't have had to die if Buffy could have gotten her shit together sooner. Three, you had Giles, and I would have crawled through fire to save him. And four ... she didn't have to shove that sword into you and throw you into Acatla. All she needed was your blood to shut it down. So I think she can share some of the blame.” He scrubbed his face with his hand. “Still – I won't apologize for doing what I thought had to be done to save the world. And yeah, I'd do it again.”

Angel stared at him and then nodded. “Good.”

“So just ... wait, um ... good?”

Angel smiled. “Yes, good. Because I know you'll protect your mate with that same fierceness and surety. You are indeed worthy of my childe.” He patted Xander on the shoulder and pulled a slim book from the bookshelf. “Now, about the claiming ritual...”

Spike set his pen down and rubbed his eyes. “Think we've covered it all, mate. Boy won't have many hours left in the day, you add anything else to his training schedule.”

Oz scratched his temple and nodded. “Looks good. Hard, but good.”

“He'll manage. Whelp always seems to get through whatever anyone sets him. He's a hard worker, and he wants this, so ... he'll do it, no doubts.” Spike picked at the black polish on his thumbnail. “You and me sire, you're mated proper, right? Went through the ritual and all, yeah?”

Oz nodded. “Yep. Why?”

“Want to claim the boy, don't I? Want it to be ... right for him. If he was a vamp, there'd be no problems. The ritual was made for vamps. But he's like you, so ... was it enough? Or did Peaches add sommat to make it better for your wolf? More to your needs?”

“You want to ... satisfy the wolf?”

Spike scowled. “Course I do – what the bloody hell d'ya think? Gonna claim the boy as my mate. Human and wolf. Gotta do it right, so he's happy.”

Oz grinned. “Well, the normal ritual is fine, but after ... the wolf likes to hunt.”

“What? You mean I hafta take him out hunting after? What the hell are we supposed to hunt? And where?”

Oz snickered. “Not what you're thinking. I hunted Angel.” He shrugged. “The wolf needed to track and claim his mate.” He leaned back and a fond look played across his face. “Angel led me all over the hotel, even outside on the grounds a little. Finally caught him ... just outside the suite. It was ... fun.” He shifted in his seat. “Might have to do that again. Soon.”

The next two weeks were the hardest Xander had ever experienced. Oz had him up, fed, and meditating before the sun was truly in the sky. This was followed by an hour of Tai Chi, which both Angel and Oz informed him was good for strength, flexibility, and endurance.

After a break for a mid-morning snack – Xander was still burning calories nearly as fast as he consumed them – Angel and Spike took over. They were merciless in teaching him how to fight and defend himself, and they never accepted less than his best effort.

Following a shower, he joined the others for lunch. After that, he worked on turning a third-floor suite into a room that could contain his werewolf – and Spike - in comfort. This was the time that Cordelia or Wesley would join him, offering support and friendship.

He was setting bars into the window frame when Cordelia strolled in with a large bottle of water. “Hey, fur ball. Brought you a drink.” She tossed the bottle to him and he nodded his thanks. “Got a question, Xander.”

He downed half the water, wiped his face and neck with a rag, and slid down the wall to rest on the floor. “What's the what, Queen C?”

Cordelia dusted off a sofa and sat. “I noticed you did something to this suite to soundproof it. I mean, you're up here working with power tools and hammers and stuff, and I couldn't hear a thing until I opened the door.”

Xander shrugged. “The four of us can hear, but I figured you and Wesley don't need to know when Spike has to fight with my wolf to control it. So?” He looked up as Wesley entered the room. “Hey, Wes. Take a load off.” The former watcher perched next to Cordelia.

Cordy tilted her head. “So, I'd like you to do that for Angel and Oz. Their rooms, I mean. I'm so tired of the howling and snarling at all hours of the night and day. Not to mention the grunts and groans.” She grinned wickedly. “I get that they're mates, and that Angel is making up for all kinds of lost time on the sex front ... but hearing it? So not helping with a good night's sleep.”

Xander laughed at Wesley's blush and Cordy's bluntness. "Sure, I can do that." He offered up a sly smile. "Want me to do your rooms while I'm at it? I seem to remember you being pretty damn vocal, yourself."

Cordelia scowled and shook her finger at him. "Watch it, buster. I can always buy a pair of silver-toed boots to plant up your ass."

Wesley grabbed her wrist. "Cordelia! I doubt Angel or Spike would like hearing you threaten Alexander."

Xander chuckled. "Threat? Hell, Wes ... that's love talk from Cordy."

Wesley shook his head. "I shall never understand Americans."

Xander stood, crossed to Wesley, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Nah, it's not that we're Americans. It's a Scooby thing. So don't feel lonely. No one else understands us, either."

Part Twelve

Throughout all the training, the meditation and what was turning into a slow and steady renovation of the entire Hyperion to make it 'demon friendly', Xander found that his most enjoyable times were spent with Spike. They talked – a lot – about the several lifetimes Spike had already lived: his adventures with (and without Dru); what he had been like before he was turned; the parts that had stayed with him, been moulded and shaped by the demon but had remained William.

They discovered that they had a lot in common – from abusive fathers through to loving but ineffectual mothers; a general feeling of uselessness and not fitting in; the capacity to love and love deeply which came with the side effect of being hurt deeply by those they gave their hearts to.

And they became closer every day. They had still not had the Big Gay Sex as Xander was calling it in his head, but they had done pretty much everything else. And everything had felt pretty damn good thank you very much. There was only one area they kept arguing about and that was the bite. Xander *wanted* Spike to bite him, was convinced that his demonic upgrade and recognition of Spike as Alpha meant that the chip

wouldn't even peep. And that theory was borne out by the training they did together. Spike was fully capable of throwing Xander around while they sparred without the chip even nudging him. Not that it was needed – Spike was incredibly careful with him, a fact that Xander was fully aware. Too careful if anyone had asked Xander, not that anyone had.

“Leave it Pet,” Spike stomped out of the training room in a temper, throwing Xander a fulminating glare as he went.

“NO! I will not leave it. This involves me too Mr Undead Guy, so don't be thinking you can be calling me pet, and cub, and and all those other sweet little nicknames and that's an end to the conversation. I am in this relationship too and I say we talk about it!” Xander chased Spike from the training room he had built from what used to be the hotel's ballroom, putting on a spurt of supernatural speed as Spike disappeared in the direction of the stairs. “SPIKE!”

“Whoa!! Xander – scream much?!” Cordelia stood in the entrance to the office, watching everything with interest.

“Butt out Cordy!” Trying his best to ignore her, Xander headed towards the stairs, determined to have this out with Spike once and for all. “Cordy!” he shouted as she jumped into his path, and it was only his inner White Knight that stopped him shoving her out of the way and following his vampire up the stairs.

“Xander. Get into the office.”

“Wha - !?! Look, Cordy, not now okay?” He growled with frustration as she gave him *that* look. The look that used to get him into closets when it was the last place he wanted to go; the look that made him meekly stand by her side when she and Willow got into it during research parties and the two of them were treating him like a bone between two alpha bitches; the look that made Wesley go white and say 'yes dear' to whatever came out of her mouth next. All of the men in the hotel were well used to doing as she said, although each one of them would say it was out of respect rather than fear.

Scowling, he stomped into her office, throwing himself into a chair.

“Xander – I know what you're going through, I really

do.”

“Huh! Somehow I don't think so. I know you mean well, Cordy, but – just, no.”

“Fine, don't let me be nice about it. I lied to the Scoobies for you – okay, for me too because I love yanking Willow's chain and it's been fun sending them on wild goose chases following the postcards I've said are from you. But that's beside the point. I did it – for you, and for that 80s reject bleach menace of yours. And you are – excuse my language – fucking this up.” Xander's mouth fell open – he couldn't think of the last time he'd heard Queen C swear. Although he thought it had something to do with some Jimmy Choo's and mud that had been trekked into the hotel. “You're behaving like a victim so he's treating you like one. Believe me – I know. When I got the demon upgrade, Angel, Wes – even Oz – they all looked at me like it was something to pity me for. Oh, they knew it was better than being dead, but every single one of them has been made demon or only know demons who are that way through a lack of choice. I *chose* this because it meant I could make a difference. You could have gone back to the Scoobies with your tail between your legs so they could pity your ass. But you didn't. You came here, with

Spike, and now you can damn well make the most of it.” She was panting, and Xander realised she was really angry. And possibly really really correct. How fucking irritating was that?

“So what do you suggest? I mean, I'm training, I'm meditating, I'm eating right – God, I've even given up chocolate. Just how am I acting the victim?”

“Do you want Spike or don't you?”

“What?! Of course I want Spike. What do you think I was doing when you interrupted? I've been trying to talk to him but - ”

“Talk?! Pshaw! You don't *talk* to Spike – you **do** to Spike or you **show** Spike. That's what he understands. Have you not seen how he and Angel communicate? Angel talks, Spike laughs; Angel slams him into walls, Spike listens. See what I mean? You need to *show* him that you are ready – and God knows, Xander, I can tell you are ready because my demon sensibilities include a sensitive nose! You need to get claimed and laid before your inner demon magnet turns this hotel into a full fledged bordello!” Xander flushed a deep, dark red. Did *everyone* know that he and Spike hadn't had sex?

“Yes, everyone does know.” Xander face-palmed, flushing deeper as he realised he'd asked that out loud. “And everyone knows that Spike is waiting for you to be ready. Just look at his history Xander – he wants you to be sure because he doesn't want to be left again. So, do you want your Big Bad enough to really put it out there?”

Standing outside the bedroom door, Spike took a deep breath. He knew the whelp thought things were moving too slowly but Spike wanted him to be sure. There was just so much going on for the boy, he didn't want Xander to make a decision in the heat of the moment, cling to someone familiar only to find out too late that he had tied himself to his security blanket.

Deciding it was better to face the music than stand around outside, he opened the door, totally unsure what to expect. But he definitely hadn't expected what he saw. The lights had been dimmed to a low glow and jazz was playing on the stereo. He looked around the suite but couldn't see Xander anywhere. But he could scent him, and the lure was so strong he found himself walking to their bedroom quickly.

Xander was lying on their bed, head propped up on pillows, completely naked. He was also achingly aroused, one hand rolling his balls gently while the other stroked his cock to full attention.

“Wasn't sure when you would come back – glad you timed it this well though.” Mouth agape, Spike shut the door behind him, unable to take his eyes away from the beauty laid out before him. He moved towards the bed, determined to touch and taste. “Nah-huh. You're going to stand there and you're going to listen to me. No touching until we've sorted this – ok?”

“Huh?”

“You can't touch til we reach a decision.” Spike nodded, vaguely understanding that in order to get to play, he had to pay attention. Not a problem – Xander had his full attention. “Spike- my eyes are up here.” Xander sniggered as Spike obviously struggled to pull his gaze upwards. “Spike I love you. I want to be with you. And I know that you think it's just because I got bitten, or demonised, or whatever you want to call it. But – it's not, it's really not. I have always thought more of you than Angel – you were true to yourself as a vampire,

seemed to be more of a person – please don't be insulted!! And this time together has just made that more real, more true. But you are in danger of treating me the same way the Scoobies do – like, like I don't know any better, that I don't know my own mind.”

“Xander - “

“No! You will listen to me. Impisi has more respect for me than you do – she knows that although I'm young I know myself, and you don't pay me the same courtesy. I know you want to wait for – for, well - “

“Cub, if you can't say it, you certainly shouldn't be doing it.”

“Fine – for full sex. And I was all for that a few weeks ago. But Spike – man, how can you not know how much I love you? And – and, my balls are going to fall off if we don't take the next step soon! You're acting more virtuous than Cordelia in High School and I thought **her** knees were glued together!!”

“OI!! Just – I want you to know I respect ya, and I don't wanna rush ya. And, oh Pet, believe me I want to just as much as you do, if not more. And the smell of ya has

been driving me friggin' insane and Peaches said I've scared most of the demons in LA off cos I've been beating 'em up in frustration. But I just **need** you to be sure. Xander – if, ok when we do this, that's it. For life. An' if what I've read up about Primals is truth, we're talking about a fuckin' long life Pet.” Spike had moved closer and closer through the conversation until he was sat next to Xander on the bed, unconsciously stroking the warmth of his boy's leg, playing with the hairs that were thicker and tougher than they had previously been.

“You almost sound like you want to wait until we're married or something.”

“Well, I'm a Victorian man – what do you expect?”

“Are you *serious*?” Spike thought about it for a few moments, the whole time stroking the muscles of Xander's thigh, scratching gently down his leg as his brain ticked over.

“Pet – been thinkin about this yeah? And, what I want more than anything is to belong. I want to belong to a family, and I want to belong to someone. Angel, Oz – even the cheerleader and Percy – they're family Pet.

But the person I want to belong to is you. So. Yeah. Xander – will you be mine?” Xander sat up, grabbing Spike's hand where it was still stroking his leg.

“Forever?”

“Yeah, Pet. Want ya to be with me forever.”

“Then yes please.” The simple statement took Spike's breath away and until he'd heard the words he hadn't realised just how petrified he was of the answer. But there was no turning back now. Xander knew what he was getting into – there were no secrets between them. And the boy had still said yeah. Head reeling, Spike reached out and tugged Xander into his shaking arms, burying his face in the warmth of his boy's neck. Fuckin' hell, he had so very much more to lose now than he'd ever had before.

Spike and Xander stood side by side in front of the altar. On it were three items. Spike dipped his finger in the first, a bowl containing the ground ashes of orange blossom. "I, William the Bloody, call you to be my mate. Mind to mind." He smudged the ashes onto Xander's forehead, and reached into the second bowl,

a mixture of oils, smearing some above Xander's left breast. "Body to body." He picked up the last item, it looked like a branding iron, but the edges were sharp enough to cut through leather. Holding Xander's gaze with his own, he pressed the edges into the oil. "Blood to blood. I call you to be my mate. Do you consent?"

Xander smiled as the blood welled from the cuts. "I consent."

Spike felt the magical power building in the room, and dropped his hands to his sides.

With a brilliant smile, Xander followed Spike's actions, his voice strong and clear as he made his statement. "I, Alexander LaVelle Harris, Honorary Cub to Impisi, call you to be my mate. Mind to mind. Body to body. Blood to blood. I call you to be my mate. Do you consent?"

The magical power swelled, the air pregnant with meaning. Angel and Oz stood side by side, part of yet outside of the ceremony. It called to them, called to the parts within them that were mated, the parts within them that were clan and pack and family to Spike and Xander.

“I consent.” Spike's voice was husky with emotion and he couldn't pull his eyes away from Xander's as he felt a connection snap into place. The scent of feral animal overpowered him momentarily, and he swayed in place as he was buffeted by a mystical hyena, examining and accepting him as mate to her cub. His eyes snapped open, bled gold as his demon came to the fore. He looked at Xander, a gasp escaping him as he watched his boy's eyes bleed to green and the hyena spirit came forward. A sub-vocal growl was coming from Xander's throat, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. This was what it felt like to be prey. Xander was looking at him like food. Or, rather -

“Mate.” He nodded, a smile splitting his face as he realised this was his boy, boiled down to the barest essentials. This was what his demon had mated, this was who he would be spending the rest of his unlife with. His demon was purring, deeming his claimant as worthy. And now – well, now it was time for them to play.

“Gotta catch me first – mate!” With a leer for his mate, and a laugh thrown towards Angel and Oz who were watching grinning, Spike took off into the hotel at a sprint. Oz had said his wolf liked the chase, and Spike

reckoned that a wolf/hyena hybrid would *definitely* like to run down its mate. Now he just had to figure out where to let the whelp catch him.

Part Thirteen

Xander saw Angel press something into Spike's hand just before the blonde took off. He heard laughter from Angel and Oz as he sped past them, but he didn't spare them much thought. He had a vampire – *his* vampire – to find. At first Spike's scent was strong and easy to follow. Spike's pheromones, released during the binding ceremony, left a strong trail that Xander tracked without hesitation. He was racing up the stairs to the fourth floor when he realized the lust-enriched scent was fading. He paused at the top of the stairs, lifted his head, and sniffed, panting slightly. Air passed through his nostrils and over his tongue, and he sorted and discarded various smells without thinking.

There ... just a hint of blood, leather, smoke, and lust. He swivelled his head, turning into the scent, and

listened. A whisper of sound below him, a blur of motion caught in the corner of his eye, and he was off. He ran back down the stairs, a happy yip left his mouth and changed into a deep whoop of joy. Spike was moving fast – Xander hadn't realized just how quickly a master vampire could move – but a werewolf being pushed by a primal was no slouch, and he was gaining on his mate.

Spike had to restrain his laughter – who would ever have imagined being chased by a werewolf could be this much fun? He'd stopped briefly outside the door to their room to remove his boots. He could move quietly enough in the Docs, but running over wooden floors barefoot was even stealthier. *Have to give my pup a good run. And then a good seein' to.* He grinned, excited at the prospect of finally claiming his boy, and being claimed in turn. He looked at the room key Angel had given him and nearly chuckled. *Fifth floor, eh? Wonder what Peaches arranged for us – best find out.* He loped around the balcony, jumped down to the second floor to throw Xander off, and then flew up three flights of stairs in a blur. He paced back and forth a bit to lay a heavy scent-marker by the door and then unlocked it. *No sense makin' it too difficult – wanna be*

caught, don't I? He swept open the door and grinned at the sight that greeted him. A huge, four-poster bed, covered in green satin sheets, with a warm coverlet folded neatly at the foot of the bed. One side of the room was a kitchen area. Spike checked out the fridge, which he discovered contained bags of human blood, drinks, and food for Xander. Beside that was a stove, on a small counter was a microwave, and he could smell other foods in the cabinets above. A table with two chairs completed the area.

He turned his attention back to the bed, and raised his eyebrow appreciatively at the basket on the end table. It was filled with tubes of lubricant and packets of wipes, all unscented. Good on ya, Sire – nothin' there to annoy a sensitive nose. *Xan'll be here soon – best get ready to greet 'im.* He quickly stripped off his clothes.

Xander slowed on the third floor, once again scenting the air. Spike's scent faded near the bannister and Xander leaned over to look at the floor below him. The scent was stronger there, and he started to follow. A tiny sound from above stopped him - the click of a door latch, the faintest creak of floor boards. He tipped his face up and grinned. He trotted up the stairs, stopping

on the fifth floor. He walked slowly down the hall, pulled on by Spike's scent, and halted outside the door to room 525. The smell of his mate nearly overwhelmed him. *Gotcha!* He pushed the door open with his fingers, and stood there, gaping at the naked body spread out before him. Pale skin, pink nipples already standing erect, and a hard cock that was being gently stroked by slender fingers.

“Don't just stand there, pet. Shut the door, yeah? Feelin' a draft on me bits – don't wanna shrink from the cold, do I?”

Xander shut and locked the door, growling softly. He prowled forward, shedding his clothing as he stalked toward his mate. By the time he reached the foot of the bed, he was as naked as Spike – and achingly hard. He crawled up the bed until he blanketed the blonde, pressed their bodies together, and bent his head to claim Spike's lips. “Mine.”

Spike slid his arms around Xander. “Yeah, pet – yours.” In a move that left Xander blinking in surprise, the vampire flipped them over. Blue eyes twinkled at him. “But you're mine, too. And that's where we'll start.”

Spike laid a trail of nips and kisses down Xander's throat, lapped briefly at the junction of shoulder and neck, and nibbled his way down Xander's chest. Xander squirmed and writhed under those lips, so cool against his burning skin. When Spike sucked a nipple into his mouth and then bit it gently, Xander groaned.

“S-Spike, please, need ... please, please.” Xander shifted his hips, trying to rub his aching cock against his mate. Strong hands held him down, and Xander sobbed in frustration. “No, please, can't ... don't tease.”

Spike gentled his touch and lifted his head. “Shh. Easy, luv. Know we've waited for this. Know you're on fire from the chase. Gonna take care of ya, promise. Not teasin' ya, pet ... just gonna get ya ready. Won't hurt you – never hurt you.”

Xander groped blindly for the basket and snagged a tube of lubricant, popped the lid open, and coated Spike's fingers with the slippery stuff. “Can't wait much longer ... please, you won't hurt me. Need it. Need *you*. Now.”

He gasped as a cool finger breached his hole, and shuddered when it slid deeper inside. “Yes, please, yes

... so good, more, need more.”

Spike's mouth crushed Xander's in a short kiss. “Bloody hell – you're like a furnace.” The vampire's voice grew deeper and rougher. “So tight, so hot ... like oiled silk, you are.”

Xander felt another finger pressing against him, and pushed himself onto it. His cock was leaking a steady stream of pre-cum, and he thrust his hips hard, riding Spike's fingers. “Can't ... oh god ... can't hold on. In me, Spike, please. Need you in me now.” Xander looked into the worried blue eyes of his mate. “Know it'll hurt a little. Don't care. Gotta have you in me, now.” The last word was growled, and Xander felt the hyena-wolf in him rise closer to the surface. He watched as Spike nodded and quickly coated his pale shaft with lube.

Spike removed his fingers and Xander whined. “Shh, gonna fill you up good, luv.” He pressed the head of his cock against Xander's hole. “Bear down, pet ... let me in.”

Xander did, and winced at the ache. The guardian ring stretched and finally gave, and Spike slid inside. Xander

mewled. He felt full, but the pain soon eased, and he lifted his hips again, urging Spike on.

Oz looked over at Angel as groans, squeals, and moans drifted down from the fifth floor. He raised an eyebrow and grinned. “You chose that room rather than theirs because?”

Angel banged his head against the wall. “Thought we'd get a little more peace and quiet if they were farther away.” A loud thump, followed by a keening wail echoed down the staircase. Angel shook his head. “Spike was always very ... vocal.”

Oz growled and grabbed Angel's hand. “Let's go make some noise of our own.”

Spike slid his cock in and out of Xander's channel, gazing at his boy's eyes all the while. One minute a lovely hazel, the next a glowing green. Sweat was pooling in the hollows of Xander's body and his hair was curling and sticking to his forehead. Spike thrust into Xander faster, feeling the heat from his boy baking

into his cooler body like the sun baked the desert sand. He wouldn't last much longer, vampire stamina or no, and angled his cock to rub against Xander's prostrate.

Xander began wailing, a long, ululating cry that ranged up and down the scale. A ring of blazing green surrounded his blown pupils and his back arched to a degree impossible for a mere human. Xander's legs locked around Spike's back, searing into his flesh like a brand. Spike forced his hand between their bodies and gripped Xander's cock, stroking it faster and faster, in time with his thrusts into his mate.

“Gonna bite you, luv. Taste your blood as you come. Mark you with my teeth, and fill you with my cum.” Spike was panting now, his hips and hand moving fast enough to blur. He felt Xander's dick twitch in his hand, leaned forward, and struck. He bit into his boy's shoulder, tasted the extra spice of Xander's orgasm, and felt the heat of Xander's release spill over his hand. Spike lifted his head and roared as his own climax ripped through him.

Angel cuddled against Oz's back, holding the smaller man close. “Love you, Danny boy.”

Oz wriggled against him, snickering when Angel's cock began to stiffen. “Love you, Ang. Think they're done for now?”

Angel closed his eyes and thrust gently against Oz's ass. “Hmm. Doubt it. Round one was likely Spike claiming Xander ... as the alpha, he'd go first. Round two will start soon. Why?”

Oz turned within Angel's arms and gave him a wicked grin. “Thinking I need to stake a claim of my own.”

Angel smiled. “Do ya now? Well, then ... best see to it, hadn't you?”

Spike woke curled against Xander's back, the two of them warm and snug under the covers. He inhaled quietly, drawing in the scent of his claimed, his mate, and felt a gentle purring start in his chest. Taking Xander had been exquisite. Being taken by him had been better than any dream he'd ever had. Despite the wolf and the hyena – or maybe because of them – Xander had been supremely gentle. Strong, yes. Forceful enough to satisfy Spike's demon. But still with

care. Xander had filled Spike's head with words of love, even as he'd filled Spike's body.

Xander's heart beat sped up a little, and he stirred.
“Spike?”

“What, luv? You should be sleeping.”

“Mm. Just ... makin' sure.” Xander pressed back against Spike and moved his hands to loosely clasp the arm Spike had curved around Xander's waist.

“Making sure of what, pet?”

“That it was real.”

“Real enough to leave me worn out. You shag like a demon, Xan. Was brilliant.” He kissed one warm, brown shoulder and snuggled as close as he could to his boy. “Now we need to rest, yeah? We'll get up later, have a nosh, and maybe do it all over again.”

“Sounds good. Angel's still gonna work on the chip thing, right?”

“The poof gave his word. Doesn't do that lightly.”

“Good. Too bad he doesn't have connections with the hospital. Bet the MRI machine thingie would mess up the chip.” Xander yawned. “Never mind. Probably wouldn't work. Not a genius, here.”

“Nah, 's a good idea, pet. We'll ask him. Later, though, okay?”

“M'kay. Love you, Spike.” Xander planted a sleepy kiss on Spike's arm and yawned again.

“Love you, pet. Sleep well.”

Willow waited impatiently for Buffy and Riley to arrive at the Magic Box. She was worried about Xander, now more than ever. He'd been gone two weeks, and he hadn't called them once. His boss said he'd spoken to Xander, and approved the vacation time, but she knew something was wrong. Her Xander wouldn't have wanted her to worry. He would have called her, let her know everything was all right. Giles wouldn't listen to her, and phone calls to Los Angeles had become pointless. The only one Willow had spoken with was Cordelia, who just confused and irritated her.

Buffy and Riley walked through the door as Giles was cashing out the last customer.

“Thank goodness you're here!” Willow pulled them over to sit at the table. “Listen, I'm really worried about Xan. I know Giles says he's okay, and that I should give him space, and that Xander just needs some time to himself, but ... see, Cordy made me so mad the last time we talked. I mean, I just asked her to give Xander a message, and get an answer back, and she ... she got all high and mighty, and all I'm not your secretary and ... so, well, I just wanted to know where he was, you know? So I did a spell ... just a locator spell, nothing big, I've done them hundreds of times, and ... but she said he was driving around, that he'd dropped Spike off somewhere and he ... Xander he, I mean, was driving up the coast, seeing the sights. But he isn't. I mean, I did a spell on him, *and* on his car, and they're both in Los Angeles. They haven't moved all weekend, either, cuz I did the spell a few more times, just to be sure. So ... so, Cordelia's lying, and Xander isn't sightseeing, he's right there in the hotel, so why won't they let me talk to him?”

Buffy blinked at her. “Whoa, Willow ... take a breath,

okay?”

Giles joined them at the table. “Willow, please ... isn't it possible that Xander has merely finished his coastal trip and has stopped in to say hello to an old friend? He and Cordelia are on quite good terms. I'm sure he'd want to spend some time with her before he comes home.”

Willow shook her head. “No, but, see ... I, um, I called Friday afternoon, and Cordy said he wasn't there, and she was going to be out of town all weekend, so not to keep calling, but ... he *was* there. She lied to me. And when I called Saturday, *and* Sunday, I just got the answering machine. And if everything's all right, why didn't they answer the phone? Why is Cordelia lying?” She smacked the table with her hand. “Where's my Xander? What have they ... maybe, maybe Spike got the chip out, and he ... I don't know, he could be making them lie. He could be holding them hostage, or something.”

Giles chewed on the ear piece of his glasses. “Yes, well, I admit that does sound suspicious. Not that I believe Spike has managed to get the chip out and take over the Hyperion. That's a bit far-fetched. But it is odd that Xander and his car would be ... er ... stationary when

he's supposed to be driving around." He sighed. "Well, I suppose we'll have to call again, and try and get the truth out of someone up there."

Willow jumped up. "No! They'll just lie some more, or Cordy will get all snooty and ... we have to go up there. Please. It isn't that far, and Tara already said she'd go along, and if Buffy comes with us, we'd have slayer strength to back us up, so they'd have to talk to us. Please, Giles, this is too important to wait anymore. Phone calls aren't good enough." She stared at each of them. "And, and if you won't go with me, I'll just go by myself. Because something is very wrong, even if none of you believe me."

Buffy frowned. "And Tara's agreed with you about this?"

They all looked up as Tara entered the shop and made her way to the table.

Willow fidgeted. "Well, not so much agreed with me as she ... um ... well, she said she'd come along, so..."

"Willow," Tara scolded. "I said I'd go along if you insisted on making this trip. And mostly to keep you

from using magic on them.” Tara shoved her hair behind her ears. “Look, I don't know if anything's wrong or not. I agree it's odd, but I ... well, I don't know Xander or Spike well enough to make that decision. But yes, I'll go with you if it's decided that we need to make the trip.”

Riley cleared his throat. “I think ... I think maybe we should go. I've been hearing some ... rumours about problems at the labs, right before Xander disappeared. And Mr. Giles, you said Oz warned you about werewolves at the facility. I don't really know what's going on. Professor Walsh hasn't been telling me much, lately. Forrest doesn't talk to me at all, and Graham's out on some fact-finding mission in Utah. So, it's just a hunch on my part. But the timing is a little ... odd.”

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh dear lord.”

Wesley held the door open for Cordelia and then followed her into the lobby of the Hyperion. “Well,” he said. “Nothing appears to be broken or damaged. Things must have gone well this weekend.”

Cordy dropped her purse on her desk and headed for

the kitchen. "Or they confined the wreckage to the upper floors. I am so glad Angel sent us away for the weekend. And the hotel he chose was very classy. I'm sort of surprised Mr. Broody has such good taste."

Wesley smiled. "It was rather nice, wasn't it?" He slid his arm around her waist and leaned against the counter. "I particularly enjoyed having you all to myself."

Cordelia laughed and kissed his cheek. "You're a wicked man, Wesley. I like that about you." She pushed him away with a mock scowl. "Now, why don't you start the coffee, and I'll check the answering machine." She smirked at him. "Don't look so surprised. I know everyone hates my coffee, but you're all too scared to say anything."

Xander came bounding down the steps and slid to a stop in front of Cordelia. "Too scared to say what, CC? That you're gorgeous? Nah, we say that all the time. Oh! Hi there, Wesley. Did you two have a good time? I had a great weekend. But I'm starving. Is Oz up? Cuz if not, I'm gonna start breakfast."

"Hold up, pet." Spike joined them, frowning at Xander.

“Not gonna turn you loose in here. Already had to replace the smoke detector twice.” He looped his arm around Xander's waist and reeled him in for a kiss. “I'll cook.”

Cordelia leaned against Wesley and shook with laughter. “Xander, did you get into the chocolate again?”

Wesley snickered when Xander turned wounded eyes on Cordy. “Oh, dear, I don't believe I've laughed so much in years. Why are you two in such high spirits? Aside from the ceremony, which we're very pleased to have missed.”

Angel and Oz strolled into the kitchen. Oz went to help Spike prepare breakfast while Angel began heating blood for himself and Spike. Once the microwave was humming, Angel turned to face Cordelia and Wesley. “Xander had an idea about a way to disable Spike's chip. We're all up early so we can discuss it, and then call in some favours.”

By the time breakfast was eaten, Xander's idea had been thoroughly dissected. Oz and Wesley both thought it had a good chance of succeeding. Cordelia

and Angel were going through the address book, finding demons, humans, and anyone else Angel could tap for help with the project. Spike and Xander cleaned the kitchen and fetched everyone fresh coffee.

They'd gathered in the lobby office for the first round of phone calls when someone knocked on the door. Xander bounced out of his chair. "I'll get it. You guys keep working."

He trotted to the door, opened it, and stared. "Um, wow. H-hi, guys."

Part Fourteen

Xander shifted nervously in the doorway. *This is a disaster waiting to happen.* "Um, what are ... why are you here? All of you, I mean. Did ... is something wrong? Another apocalypse? Do you need Angel's help, or ... what's going on?"

Willow grabbed Xander's hands and began tugging at

him. “Come on, come on. This is your chance! No one's watching, right? I mean, Spike isn't hiding behind the door holding a gun to Cordelia's head or anything? Well, he wouldn't really need a gun, just his teeth would work as a threat, but ... why are you fighting me? Maybe it's Stockholm Syndrome, but there are people who can help you with that. Psychiatrists know all about it, and you could go to one. But see, you can leave now, we're here to rescue you. Not that you can't rescue yourself, because capable Xander and all, but maybe you haven't had a chance yet, and with Cordelia and Wes being hostages ... oh! Are they helping him? Is that why she told all those lies, and why you haven't been able to get away? But it doesn't matter now, we're here and you're safe and ... come *on*, Xander.”

Xander had been trying to free his hands – and get a word in – throughout her non-stop babble. Now he gave a hard tug and wrested his hands away from her. “Willow, what are you talking about? I'm not a prisoner, I don't need rescuing, and what the hell is Stockholm Syndrome?” He looked past Willow to Buffy, Riley, Giles, and Tara. The slayer seemed irritated, Riley looked nervous, and Giles just looked resigned. Tara was blushing a little, like she was embarrassed. “Uh, someone wanna give me a clue here? Cuz I have no

idea what's going on.”

Giles stepped forward and placed himself between Willow and Xander. “Willow, I hardly think Stockholm Syndrome applies in this instance. Xander seems to be as normal as he ever is.”

Xander crossed his arms. “Hey! That sounded vaguely like an insult.” He winked at Giles.

“Construe it as you will, Xander.” There was a twinkle in the watcher's green eyes, but his voice remained smooth. “While I don't share Willow's assumption that you were kidnapped, I must admit it's good to see you looking so well. She was concerned – as were we all – when you didn't call. This trip was a way to, er, calm her nerves and ascertain the state of your health in one go. May we come in?”

Willow's hands were fluttering at her waist. “But Giles, we agreed something's wrong, and I *told* you what I saw, and-”

Xander held up a hand to stop another barrage of babble. “Whoa! What did you see that made you think I needed help? And I'm sorry I haven't called, but I've

been a little busy. Not like you call me every day, either. You guys really didn't need to come up here just to check on me, and now is *so* not a great time for company. We're kinda in the middle of ... things. So ... yeah. I'm fine, glad you cared enough to check, sorry to worry you, but ... um..."

Struggling to avoid Willow's hands as she tried once again to latch onto him, Xander could only watch, open-mouthed, as Giles stepped calmly around Willow and into the lobby of the hotel. He was followed by Tara, who hauled Willow with her and gave Xander a shy smile. Buffy shrugged as she walked past him and Riley looked around suspiciously, as if expecting to be attacked by a hostile at any moment.

Xander gave a fleeting thought to praying for Spike to hold his temper and the Scoobies to hold theirs, then realised no prayer would help since Cordelia was in the lobby with the others. *Oh, shit ... Oz. This is destined to go badly.*

Willow was still talking. "But Giles – we don't know *what* Xander's been through. Or, or what happened. Xander – why didn't you call? We've been so worried about you, and I don't know if you realised it but

Cordelia has been telling lies! She said you'd gone away and kept going on about postcards and phone calls and sightseeing, but I know you were here when she said you weren't, because I did a locator spell and-"

Xander struggled to control his temper. "Hold up, Wills. You did magic on me again? I hate when you do magic on me." He shook his head and sidled around the group, stopping in front of them. "Look, this really isn't a good time. Not at all. Um ... maybe you could go shopping or something, and come back in a few hours. That would be better. Much, much better. So, go ... uh ... shop til you drop. Okay?"

The Scoobies continued moving forward, and Xander was pushed helplessly along. When they reached the lobby, he sighed and stepped away. Cordelia, Wesley, and Oz were sifting through business and Rolodex cards, talking quietly back and forth. Spike was on the phone, his feet propped on a convenient table. Judging from the silent snarl on his face, he didn't like what he was hearing. It was Angel, however, that brought the Sunnydale group to a standstill.

He was pacing while he talked, cell phone gripped tightly in one big hand. "So, you have access to an MRI?"

Great, great. And you think it'll work? Yeah, I know it can mess up pacemakers, but this is in his *head* and it's ... oh. You've actually seen a chip like this? How ... oh, well that's ... yeah, not good. But did the machine ... it did? How soon can you do it? I want my childe free of this monstrosity.”

That's when Xander swore he heard it. The liquid thwap of shit hitting the proverbial fan. *Oh yeah – this is gonna be bad.*

“That hurt. You didn't have to drag me you know.” Scowling, Willow sat down in the nearest office chair, rubbing her wrist. For a moment, Xander wondered if he had hurt her with his new-found strength, then he realised that there was no way he had – he was very aware of how strong he was, it was part of his training, and he had used no more strength than was necessary.

Perching on the edge of the desk, he smiled over at Tara who had followed them into the room and placed herself behind Willow's chair. He had high hopes that Tara would help Willow listen to what he was saying because he knew it was going to be hard for her.

“Willow, I was attacked by soldiers and a werewolf and pretty much left for dead. I managed to get to Spike and he not only saved my life but brought me to Angel. Nuh huh, Xander is talking,” he said as she began to interrupt. “He brought me here because I didn't **want** to go to you and Buffy. For all sorts of reasons that I will not be going into while there are military-type people around. Because I don't trust the Initiative. I didn't like them much before, but now I'm thinking something seriously evil is going on there. Spike and I – well, we're mated. That means for life Willow. That means if you do anything, *anything* to him it may well kill me. So get that idea out of your witchy skull because I can almost see you plotting from here. I'm not coming back to Sunnydale. I **like** being in L.A with Spike, Angel and Oz – and Cordy and Wes. They're my family. Not the same way you and I are family, cuz you'll always be my number one girl, you know that. But I matter here, Willow, and I make a difference. And I'm sorry I didn't get in touch but I knew this was going to be a hellish conversation and I was putting it off as long as I could, which is why Cordelia was lying to you – I *asked* her to. So don't be mad at her, you can be mad at me. So – that's it, pretty much the whole story. Willow? Hey, Wills, you can talk now – if ya want.” He stared at Willow who had gone paler than normal and

waited for the Willow-babble to begin. And waited.
“Oh God, Tara, did I break her?!” Tara came round to the front of Willow, taking her by the hand and patting it gently.

“Sweetie? Sweetie, are you okay?”

“Oh my God, Xander what did you do to Willow?”
Buffy's voice came from the doorway and Xander turned to her, mildly panicking at the continued silence from Willow.

“I didn't do anything – I just told her what had happened and that I wanted to stay here.” He shrugged, bewildered by her reaction. He had expected more tears, maybe shouting but not this stunned silence.

“Angel and Oz?”

“Errr.....”

“When you said Angel and Oz, did you mean Angel and Oz in a singular but living in the same place kinda way or Angel *and* Oz? Because that's a pretty important distinction to make, don't you think? Buffy – you agree

with me, right? That it's an important distinction to make whether they're just in the same hotel or, like, in the same room?"

"Huh?"

"And that would be the cat squirming it's way out of the bag and scattering worms all over the place. Or something like that. Wills, concentrate for me will you?" Xander took a deep breath, refusing to revert to the Zeppo – he *knew* he wasn't that person anymore, not in any way. Impisi had chosen him, and she wouldn't have chosen a mere Donut Boy. And Spike had mated to him – his beloved vampire would not have settled, which meant he was worth so much more than the old Xander-shaped person. "I'm not going to talk for Oz or Angel, because they're perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. And to a certain extent, I don't actually think it's any of your business especially bearing in mind who's hand you're holding there Willow. I love you – I always will. But you've done what you set out to do – you can see I'm fine and I'm happy. Now there are things we really need to be getting on with, including getting that revolting chip out of my vampire's head. If you want to meet up and talk some more when you've got this sorted in your head, then

that's cool. You can call – I promise I won't avoid your calls anymore – and we can agree to meet somewhere neutral and talk some more. But you won't be forcing your way into our home, throwing around accusations and expecting to drag me home like some wayward child. Is that clear?”

“You tell 'em Pet!” Xander looked over to realize that everyone else had joined Buffy and were crowded in the doorway listening to his low impassioned speech, and he flushed a deep red. Then he straightened his spine and smiled at his mate – he had meant every single word and knew it had needed to be said – he wasn't going to take any of it back when it had taken him years to finally say it.

Part Fifteen

Angel herded the group out of the small office and back to the lobby, pausing to smile and tip a wink at Xander. He was proud of the boy – standing up to Willow and the others had taken courage and conviction, and he'd

done it without babbling or yelling. Spike had chosen his mate well. Xander had managed to calm things down, and for that alone, Angel was grateful.

“All right,” he said, briskly rubbing his hands together. “You folks need to be on your way back home. We have things we need to arrange, and I'd like to get to it.”

Buffy planted herself in front of him, feet apart and hands on her hips. “I don't think so. Those 'things' you need to arrange – you're talking about the chip, aren't you? We all heard you on the phone. You're gonna fix it so the chip doesn't work. And then what? You'll just stand back while Spike starts dining on all the Happy Meals with legs? Of course, then I'll have to hunt him down and dust him, and ... you know what? Why don't I save us all the time and hassle?” She pulled a stake from her jacket pocket, and tried to dodge around Angel.

Cordelia and Wesley slid to either side of Angel, standing between Buffy and Spike, even as Angel grabbed the slayer's wrist. “No, Buffy, you won't. Yes, I'm going to have that atrocity deactivated. But Spike won't be snacking on anything but bagged blood.”

“Well, maybe the occasional rapist or murderer, Peaches. Fresh is so much better.”

Angel glared at Spike. “Not helping, childe.” Buffy was still struggling. Angel squeezed her wrist harder and she stilled, blue eyes wide with surprise.

“I can't believe you're standing up for him. This is Spike – remember, the guy who tortured you with hot pokers?”

Angel sighed. “That's in the past. I've done worse to him, and for less reason. He's given me his word, Buffy. And he has Xander to consider now. They're mated. You do know what that means, don't you?”

Giles stepped up and laid a hand on Buffy's shoulder. “Calm down, please. Angel is right. As Spike and Xander are mated, Spike will not want to distress Xander. Any, er, indiscriminate feeding would greatly upset Xander, as you well know. Therefore, Spike will refrain from that sort of behaviour. He's not a fledge, after all, but a Master Vampire. And as such, is quite capable of controlling himself.”

“Ta, Rupes.” Spike nodded at the watcher.

Giles smirked at the blonde vampire. “However, if he continues to address me by that appalling nickname, you have my permission to punch him.”

Cordelia grinned. “Giles has developed a sense of humour. Quick, Wes – grab your dusty old books. The world must be ending.”

Angel relaxed. Once again, a nasty situation had been defused. *Maybe we'll get through this without bloodshed after all.*

They all froze as sudden shouting reached them from the other office. “You!” “No!” “Let him go!” “Xander, he's a-” “I said no!” “Back off, Finn!”

Angel and Spike were already moving, twin growls ripped from their throats at the sounds of their mates in distress. Growls that were matched and exceeded by the window-rattling, snarling howl of a fully-changed werewolf.

Willow was drifting in a gray fog. Xander's words, his attitude, his new-found strength and purpose hit her hard. *Have I really been so ... so blind? So selfish? So...* The howling broke through her thoughts, cut through the mist surrounding her, and she jumped to her feet. "What ... oh my god, what's happening?" She ran after Angel and Spike, certain only that Xander was still in that office, and needed help. Buffy, Giles, and Tara weren't far behind her. The scene that greeted them reignited Willow's temper.

Angel stood in front of Oz – an Oz whose eyes were the cold yellow of the wolf. Riley was in front of Angel, a taser gun – *He brought it with him? Why?* - in his hand, wires trailing from the gun, across the floor, and ending at the darts embedded in the fur of a snarling, howling werewolf. A werewolf unlike any Willow had ever seen. *Xander?*

"Riley, what are you doing? Why did you bring that?" Buffy shouted over the racket the wolf was making.

Spike was crouched in front of the wolf. His eyes were closed to mere slits, lines of pain etched on his face. With one hand he held the werewolf still while the other yanked the darts out and flung them away.

Willow could see Spike's lips moving, but couldn't hear what he was saying.

Riley pressed a button on the side of the gun and the barbs retracted. He lifted the taser and aimed it at the werewolf's unprotected flank.

Willow couldn't allow that. The werewolf had to be Xander – and Riley was going to shoot him again. “Diripio!” The magic rippled through the office.

Bodies flew across the room as her magic took hold and separated the combatants. Riley was shoved into a corner, his head bouncing off the wall with a solid thunk. Oz and Angel were pushed away and held, struggling, against another wall. Spike and Xander were torn away from each other, both howling out their rage and frustration at the separation. Willow bit her lip. “Um, I didn't really mean to ... I just wanted to ... they were fighting and ... I didn't know it would work like that.”

“You need to brush up on your Latin. Cerno would have sufficed.” Giles sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He walked over to Riley and removed the taser from the man's lax fingers. “At any rate... release them,

please, Willow. Mr. Finn, if you make one move out of that corner, I'll use this weapon on you myself." The five men relaxed as the spell was cancelled. He turned to the others and grimaced. "Angel, are you and Oz all right?"

Angel gave a jerky nod. "Just angry." He placed his arm around Oz's shoulder and they walked over to Spike and Xander. "Childe, do you need help?"

Xander was still in werewolf form, and still snarling. Spike was once again crouched in front of him, slender fingers stroking through the thick fur on the were's neck. "Easy now, luv – gotta calm down, yeah? I'm not hurt, Xan. Look at me, pet – you can see I'm fine." Snarls changed into whines and a low, rumbling growl. "That's right – Rupert and Red have soldier boy sorted. He won't be hurtin' anyone. Come back to me, Xan." Spike continued petting and soothing the distressed werewolf.

Oz stepped forward and spoke quietly. "He probably won't change until he sleeps, Spike. He's too young to have that much control."

Spike looked up at Oz. "That's all it is, ya think? He's not

hurt or ... he got hit by that damn taser, yeah? It didn't do something permanent, did it?"

Oz shook his head, and Angel gripped Spike's shoulder for a brief moment. "No, Spike. No permanent damage. Although I'd like to know why such a weapon was brought into my home in the first place. And why Willow felt the need to use such a harsh spell on us. We weren't doing anything wrong."

Willow gulped. "I ... I didn't know it would do that. It was just supposed to make you all move apart, so ... so no one would get hurt. I'm really sorry, Angel. A-and Oz, Spike, and Xander. Th-that is Xander, right? He doesn't look like a regular wolf. B-but he's still pretty."

The werewolf peered around Spike and whined. His ears, rounder than a normal wolf's, swivelled back and forth. His snout was softer and broader, and covered with speckled fur that gradually darkened into a rich, dark brown. His eyes were neither the yellow nor blue of a true wolf. They were a glowing green, the colour of a peridot. Xander looked around the room and then pressed his head into Spike's shoulder, effectively hiding from everyone.

“C'mon, luv ... most everyone here's your friend. They won't hurt ya. And Red thinks you're pretty, yeah? So quit your hidin' – give everyone a look, and then we'll go upstairs and have a kip. Just you and me, pet. Sire and the watcher can sort this nonsense for us.”

The young were whined again, lifted his head, and gazed at Willow. She took a tentative step forward, stopped, and glanced at Spike for reassurance. He nodded. “Come on then. He knows who ya are ... won't hurt ya. And I wouldn't let him ... know he'd regret causin' ya any harm.” He petted the thick ruff and crooned to the werewolf. “Won't let anything happen, luv. You're safe now. Witch just wants ta say hello, and she's sorry if she hurt ya.”

Willow crossed the short distance between her and the wolf, and knelt down in front of him. Green met green as their eyes locked on each other. Willow held out her hand, palm up, and smiled when the werewolf's cold snout brushed over it, followed by a warm tongue. “Hey, Xan,” she said softly. “Spike's right. I'm really sorry my spell hurt you. And ... and Giles is right, too. I guess my Latin isn't quite up to snuff.” She sniffled. “I owe you a ton of apologies, and maybe we can sit down later and talk about ... well, about a lot of things.

Like how you're not that scrawny kid I met in kindergarten, and ... and about how I can be a better friend to you." Xander wriggled, and Willow realized he was wagging his tail. She grinned at Spike, who winked back. "I guess that means you're okay, and happy, right?"

She gathered her courage and scratched behind the werewolf's ear. He pushed into her hand for a moment, and then drew back. "Yeah," she said, "you're probably pretty tired, huh? Spike and Oz said you need to rest, so ... and I can tell Spike really cares about you, so I won't turn him into a yucky frog or anything." She chuckled at the vampire's indignant "Oi!" and brushed her hand over Xander's coat. "You should probably do what your mate wants. And boy, does it sound weird to hear myself say that. But ... you care just as much for him. I could see that before, when we talked. So, you go with him now, and we'll talk some more when you have a person-type mouth capable of speech. Oh ... tell Spike about the shovel, okay?"

Spike stood and held his hand out to her. Willow bit her lip but accepted his help, and watched as the mated pair left the room. Xander walked next to Spike, pressed close to the vampire's side. Spike kept his hand

on the were's head, fingers sifting through Xander's fur.

Willow glanced at the others, thankful they'd remained quiet and allowed her to reconnect with Xander. Angel was seated in the chair behind the desk, Oz on his lap and held firmly in Angel's arms. Tara was curled in a corner of the love-seat, and Giles stood by the doorway, the taser still in his hands.

Buffy was seated in a chair, looking lonely and confused. Riley was still pressed into the corner, defiance in the stance of his body while bewilderment shone in his eyes. Willow exchanged a glance with Giles, who tipped his head in Tara's direction. Willow sighed and sat next to her lover.

“Now then,” Giles began. “I suggest we find out precisely what happened here, so we don't have to deal with a repeat of the problem. Oz – would you be so kind as to start?”

Oz sighed and shifted in Angel's arms. “Not a long story. Xan and I were relaxing. I've been teaching him techniques to help him stay calm, since his were can be triggered by strong emotions.” Oz shrugged. “He's

different, because of the hyena. He was upset after talking to Willow – not in a bad way, it was just heavy emotions. Then Finn stepped into the room and I...” He shivered. “I could smell him more clearly, with just the three of us in here. I recognized the scent. He was one of the ones from the labs. Finn grabbed me, Xander got angry, and Finn shot him with the taser.” Oz leaned into Angel's embrace, aware of the low growl rumbling in his mate's chest. “Xan changed completely when the darts hit him. And then you guys came in. I think Spike shoved Riley, and Spike's chip fired. But then he went straight to Xan.”

Giles chewed on the stem of his glasses. “I see. So neither of you threatened Riley in any way?” Angel's growl grew louder, and Giles sighed. “I want to make sure I fully understand what happened Angel. I'm not making an accusation.”

Oz patted Angel's forearm. “Hush. I'm fine, and Giles had to ask.” He looked at the watcher. “No. Neither one of us moved until Finn grabbed me. Everything happened pretty fast after that, but I don't think I left anything out.” He curled his fingers around Angel's wrist. “This is going to be difficult for Xan. It's his first full change, and it happened when he was out of

control, and in front of all of you. He ... you're his family of choice, and your opinion matters to him. Don't let what happened freak you, okay? His control has been phenomenal, until now. But he was frightened, and angry, and ... I think the whole thing triggered a flashback. You know, with the soldier scent, and the taser.”

Giles frowned. “What do you mean? I thought he was simply bitten by a random werewolf. No one mentioned soldiers or tasers. Oz, tell me precisely what happened to Xander that night.”

Angel answered him, his voice harsh. “Xander was walking home after patrol, and heard something strange in one of the cemeteries. He checked it out, and was attacked by a werewolf. A werewolf that was being controlled by an Initiative soldier. We don't know if he interrupted a training session, or a patrol of some kind. What we *do* know is that the soldier goaded the werewolf into attacking.” He turned cold, golden eyes on Riley. “Now I'd like an answer to *my* questions. Why the hell did you bring that weapon into my home? And why did you attack Xander and Oz?”

Riley straightened his shoulders and glared at the

vampire. “The werewolves are hostiles. They have to be contained and controlled. You can see how vicious it was. It would be safer for everyone involved if they were returned to the Initiative's labs. We have the means to insure that no innocent will be harmed by them.”

“Ye'll not touch my mate, Finn. Not you nor your thrice-damned Initiative.”

“But you all saw it! He ... it attacked me!”

Willow stalked over to Riley. “Did he? I don't see a mark on you. Not one scratch, not even a bruise. What I *saw* was you aiming your gun at Xander. I saw Xander trying to protect his mate from *you*. And I saw him lick my hand, and respond to me. Not just my voice, but my words. That means he's thinking, even when he's a werewolf.” She poked him in the chest and narrowed her eyes. “I think, if there's a dangerous ... being ... in this room, it's you. You stay away from him, Riley. All of them.” She smiled at him. “I only promised not to turn *Spike* into a frog. You *really* don't want to piss me off.” She returned to her seat beside Tara.

“Riley?” Buffy spoke quietly, huddled in her chair.

“Why would you ... you saw Xander. Before, when he was talking to us, and Willow. He wasn't ... and even when he was all wolfie, he didn't ... he *knew* us, he didn't try to ... can't you see he wouldn't hurt us? I don't ... I don't understand.”

Riley opened and closed his mouth, shook his head, and rubbed at his temple. “I ... werewolves are hostiles, they ... I know he was your friend, but ... they have to ... it isn't safe to have him...”

Giles stepped closer to Riley, frowning as he stared into the young man's eyes . “Riley, have you experienced any blackouts lately?”

“I ... what? Blackouts? What do you...”

“Have there been times when you knew you'd been awake, but for which you have no real memories? Perhaps an hour or two that passed, which remains a blank in your mind?”

“I ... I haven't been sleeping very well. It ... there were a few times I ... I guess I dozed off or something. It happens. You get tired, and things are quiet. You can sleep standing up, if you're exhausted. But that's all I ...

I'm just tired.”

Giles nodded. “Yes, of course you are. Long hours, fraught with danger. Worried about Buffy and her friends. It's quite natural you'd be restless in your bed.” He guided the young man to a vacant chair. “I'm afraid we've been rather harsh with you, haven't we? I do apologize. We're all concerned, but that's certainly no excuse. Why don't you just sit here for a moment, and relax?” He patted Riley on the shoulder. “There's a good lad. *Dormite,*” he murmured. Riley slumped in his chair, his eyes closed and breathing deep and even.

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “I'm believe we truly have misjudged Mr. Finn. He isn't in full control of his faculties.”

Oz regarded the sleeping man sadly. “It isn't just us, is it? They're experimenting on their own people.”

Giles nodded, his face bleak. “Brainwashing, I imagine. Certain drugs, combined with hypnosis and other less savoury techniques. You take a man's fear, give it a face and a name, and he'll do nearly anything to protect himself, and never question why. Bloody bastards.”

Oz leaned back against Angel's chest. "So – now what?"

Part Sixteen

The 'now what' was something Angel most definitely didn't want to do. But he couldn't in all good conscience send the Sunnydale mob home now but first thing tomorrow he wanted them all out of there. Before they were all shown to various rooms on the first floor, Finn's luggage was checked for other weapons. They were all shocked and disappointed to see that he had come loaded for battle, and even Giles' confidence that now they knew what was going on with Riley they could help him wasn't enough to cheer them up. Buffy especially was very down – Angel had caught her watching him and Oz a time or two, a look of sadness in her eyes. He felt guilty, God knows he felt sorry for the girl being betrayed this way, but he couldn't bring himself to allow Oz to leave his side and his priorities were clear to him: his family came first and none of the Sunnydale gang were family, not any more.

He desperately wanted to check in on Spike and Xander but needed their guests settled first.

“I still think they should be paying us for the night – if they're going to treat us like a hotel, they should **pay** us like a proper hotel!”

“Cordelia, really my sweet, it's not worth it. Now, rather than concentrating on all of them, why don't I see if I can get your mind on other things?” Wesley stood behind his sweetheart, wrapping his arms around her.

“What other things would you like my mind on?” She turned and smiled at him flirtatiously, and Angel wasn't in the slightest bit surprised when Wesley gave him a small wave before hurrying his partner out of the hotel.

“Could smell that one coming.” Angel looked down at his [mate](#), surprised that his eyes were still showing signs of the wolf. It took a lot to bring out Oz's wild side when the moon wasn't high, and it was testament to how stressed Oz was by the Sunnydale mob that the wolf was still riding him hard.

“Yeah, no surprise there really. Are you okay?”

“I'm okay. Just..... worried about Xander. Not too

comfy with Willow and them being here. Feeling – I don't know – out of sorts. Don't really care *why* the soldiers did what they did – just, it's horrible remembering what they did. You know?” That was a long speech from his were, and it brought home to him just how stressed Oz was feeling. He needed to do something to take his mate's mind off of everything that was going on, and yes, his demon needed to reassure itself that his mate was fine.

Turning to Oz, he tilted the young man's face up towards him. Staring into the wild, feral eyes he let his face half-shift so that his eyes bled golden and his forehead ridges began to show.

“So, just how far do you think a half-wolf can get before a half-vampire can catch him?”

“Depends if the half-wolf wants to be caught or not.”

“Well, if I catch you within ten minutes I get to stay on top a-l-l night long.” Angel smiled at the blast of pheromones that came from his mate at his statement.

“And what happens if I last longer than that?”

“Then you may just get to top before we get rid of our guests. And you **know** how loud you can make me growl if you really try....”

Spike still wasn't sure how he was feeling. He was aware of other people moving around in the hotel, figured that Peaches was letting the Sunnydale mob stay though he couldn't think why. His head was still throbbing from the major blast he had taken from the chip and he sighed heavily. The sooner they could do this MRI thing the better as far as he was concerned.

His main worry at the moment was Xander. The were was sprawled across their bed and it was obvious he was brooding. Spike couldn't explain how he could tell, but he could.

“For fuck's sake, Pet, you're taking this whole broody thing further than even Peaches manages. You're not meant to brood while in wolf-form – it's just not done. You're supposed to be all about primal instincts and needs, ya know, kinda grr.” The whole time he was grouching, he was rubbing his hands through the thick fur, luxuriating in the feel of his mate in his new form. Xander made a beautiful were – the best of the wolf

and the hyena and of course those amazing glowing green eyes. “Ya didn't touch the witch when ya coulda done – that's gotta be a good sign right? And even the Slayer thought you were gorgeous, luv, shoulda seen her – she was dying to get her hands on ya... only didn't cos Capt'n Cornfed was acting up. Come on, Xan, don't be like this. You're beautiful, luv, absolutely beautiful. And they've all seen ya now, nothing else to worry about. Ya gonna come back to me, luv?” They were continued panting quietly, eyes tracking solemnly round the room, seeming to avoid Spike's gaze.

With a sigh of resignation, Spike fell back onto the bed, tiredly rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. God, his head was just so friggin' painful – he shoulda grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the kitchen before making his way upstairs but he had just wanted to get Xander out of there. He heard the wolf whine, then with much tail thumping and trampling around on the bed, Xander landed heavily beside him, dropping his head onto Spike's chest and looking up into his face. He sat up a little and smiled, staring into the clearly intelligent green eyes.

“I'm okay, luv. Just got a bit of a headache. Shoulda brought some booze up with me but I forgot. Bloody

'ell, mate, thought you threw off a load of heat normally but you're like a furnace now!! Good job I'm not into bestiality innit!?! Oi, don't be giving me that look – I was joking, you know I was. 'Sides, the fur would get caught in me fangs if I bit ya!” Spike rolled backwards, laughing as Xander leapt onto him with a quiet chuffing noise that sounded eerily like a laugh. Wrapping his arms around the huge body, he tugged Xander in close and buried his face in the thick ruff. “Love you, Pet. Really really love you. So proud of ya tonight I was – the way ya dealt with Red and the Farm-boy. Ya did good Xander, ya did real good. God, I'm turning into a right sappy ponce, worse than the friggin' poof.” He spluttered as he got a faceful of weretongue, Xander licking him from chin to forehead despite Spike's growl. “Ya did that on purpose didn't ya?!”

They ran back to the hotel full tilt, Oz in wolf form at Angel's side. They burst through the lobby and headed directly down to their apartment, both eager to start the next part of the evening. The run together had done them the world of good, the group of fledges they'd played with then dusted making it the perfect 'date'. Now it just remained to see who was going to

'put out' for whom. Heading towards the shower, Angel stripped off as he crossed the room, turning to watch his mate morph back into his human form. Angel had told Oz that he never tired of watching the transformation, seeing Oz's pale skin emerge as the fur seemed to *fade* into nothingness, the wildness in the eyes always the last to go.

Standing fully on his feet as he shook off the last of the wolf, Oz walked up to his mate. His feelings for the vampire had taken him by surprise – even during his captivity with the Initiative his first thoughts had been of Willow. He couldn't have explained why he had headed for L.A. after his escape - there had been a desire, a deep-seated need for an alpha that he couldn't shake, and he just knew the Scoobies wouldn't be able to help him. He had vague memories of turning up at the Hyperion, of falling at Angel's feet and being carried upstairs but the next thing he knew he was crouched beneath a bed, trembling and whining in half-were form. He had thrown himself at Angel – not because he thought he could win such a fight, but because something inside him needed to know that Angel was strong enough to beat him. When the vampire had held him down and made him submit, he had felt something inside him relax and he had his first

good night's sleep in perhaps months.

Angel soothed something inside him, made him feel less feral, made him feel safe. He knew part of the attraction to Angel was because of that, but that wasn't all. Angel also made him feel desired in a way Willow never had – he never worried that the other man would stray or betray him, was free to be himself whether that was quiet, laconic, playful or wild. One of his favourite times was when they would go for a run - keeping their territory safe, letting the wolf and the demon out and using their hyper-senses to just roam. The wolf mated for life and his wolf was more than happy with his choice of partner, accepting Angel's claim with alacrity. His life had felt settled and complete for the first time since his little cousin had bitten him.

Shaking off his heavy thoughts, he took Angel's offered hand and followed him to the bathroom. A nice hot shower in their very spacious stall and then they could tumble into bed. Angel stepped into the stall, dipping his head under the water and soaking his hair and Oz was transfixed. There was something about Angel's face when his hair was wet and slicked back: the strong bone structure, the pouting lips, the sharpness of the

brown eyes that stared back at him – always, always got him hot. He allowed his eyes to slide down his mate's body, the broad shoulders and chest, water sliding down the angles and lines down his body. His cock was rising, lifting to Oz's gaze, and he felt his own body respond.

“So – does this mean I get to make you growl?” He walked into the stall, sliding his hand around the knob of Angel's hip, digging his nails in slightly as he stepped up close.

“I'm not sure – how long did you last before I caught you?” Oz didn't answer, leaning forward to sip at the water gathering in the hollow of Angel's collarbone. “I think – oh God, just – I think that maybe you – fuck....”

Nibbling his way down Angel's body, hair dripping into his eyes, Oz got down onto his knees. Leaning forward, taking each hip in hand, he tugged Angel forward so that he could slide his mouth down the hard length of his cock. He flicked his gaze upwards, loving the look on Angel's face as he looked down at him. Oh yeah, this was going to get loud.

Willow looked over at Tara who was sleeping peacefully. Cocking her head, she listened hard, wondering if the growling she could hear was Xander.

She was still reeling from the events of the evening, but foremost in her mind was the memory of Spike and Xander, side by side, facing all of them. Her friend really had grown up so much, and despite her general concerns she had to admit to herself that he had chosen the one person who could appreciate him and love him properly in return. Xander had always loved deeply, his loyalty second to none, and Spike had proven his devotion to Drusilla. Watching him as he stood between Xander and Riley, Willow had seen not just the demon, but the man. In spite of the pain he was going through with the chip, he had stood in front of his mate, protecting him from attack. She couldn't ask for more than that for her best friend.

Her feelings about Oz and Angel were not quite as clear-cut. She had been feeling so guilty about her relationship with Tara, had been so fixated on things from her own perspective that it hadn't even occurred to her that Oz might have moved on himself. Watching him curled up in Angel's lap, the vampire stroking his back and calming him down, had been a shock to the

system. She was still attracted to him – she would always love Oz because he was her first – and she couldn't prevent a few naughty pictures in her mind of Angel and Oz entwined.

That's when she realised the growling she could hear wasn't Xander – it was coming from *downstairs*, not the second floor which she had been given to understand was where Spike and Xander lived. Which meant she was listening to Oz and Angel – oh! Flushing deeply, she tried to settle herself down to sleep. She had discovered enough about herself for one trip to L.A. - it would be a comfort to be home and dealing with the Initiative instead of examining her thoughts and feelings about her werewolf ex and his vampire mate.

Getting the Scoobies out of the hotel the next evening was a subdued affair. Angel was in a hurry for them to leave, making no secret of the fact that his hospitality had ended and he just wanted them to go. He kept his mate glued to his side, growling when anyone got too close, Riley in particular.

Xander and Spike were the only people who seemed unaffected by all of it. Xander had eaten enough food

for three people but seemed to be suffering no ill effects from his first full change into a were, babbling away with Willow in a way they hadn't managed in a good number of years. Spike watched from the sidelines, smirking at the Slayer every now and then and growling at Riley, but seemingly content now that his mate was returned to his normal form and was happily talking to his friend.

Giles had a firm grip on Riley who was quietly subdued, meeting no one's gaze and sticking close to Buffy. Buffy was obviously unhappy with the entire situation, steering clear of Xander, Spike, Angel and Oz and in almost as big a hurry as Angel to get them all going.

It was agreed that Giles would look into Riley's condition further, and if possible break his conditioning and get as much information about the Initiative as possible with a view to the L.A. Gang coming to Sunnydale to help take it down once and for all. It went unsaid that in the meantime the L.A. Gang would be working on getting the chip removed. All opposition had been noted and over-ruled and the arrangements for the MRI had been made. By the next evening, if everything went according to plan, Spike would be chip-free.

Part Seventeen

Xander looked around the room dominated by the MRI machine, and sighed. Spike was pacing back and forth with nervous energy, and Xander couldn't blame him. The damn room was white, one wall was a glass window that fronted an observation room, and the MRI machine looked like something out of a science fiction movie. His mate had to be reminded of his time trapped in the Initiative's labs. Xander flicked a glance at Angel and Oz, and decided they didn't look all that happy, either. Oz was fidgeting, his fingers drumming against his thigh in an erratic rhythm, his eyes skipping around the room, refusing to settle on any one thing. Angel stood silently behind his mate, one large hand cupping Oz's shoulder, his dark eyes troubled. Wes and Cordy appeared calm, but Xander's nose told him they were more anxious than they appeared.

When Spike paced within his reach, Xander snagged the blonde's arm and reeled him in. "C'mon, vampire mine. Sit with me." He tugged Spike until the vampire

rested against his chest and ran a hand gently up and down his back, feeling the minute tremors that wracked the slender body. "It'll be okay. I won't let anything bad happen to you. None of us will."

Spike settled his mouth against Xander's claim mark, kissed it, and inhaled deeply. "Know that, pet. Place just gives me the creeps, yeah?"

"Yeah, figured that. But this is a demon clinic, and they've done this before. Several times, from what Angel said."

Spike nodded. "Know that, too. One vamp was dusted, remember?"

Xander tightened his hold on Spike. "His was one of the earliest chips. I asked the guy who performed that MRI about it. Because, you know, I was worried. John said ... he said the first chips were made of different materials, were connected throughout the entire brain, and were a lot bigger." Xander sighed. "It caught fire. John said even then, the vamp might've survived, but he was nearly starved. He wasn't ... he was really young, and he didn't have anyone to ... to help him, to make sure he fed. John told him he should wait, but ... so, anyway,

nothing like you.”

John entered the room, ending the wait and the discussion. “Master Spike,” he said, bowing slightly. The technician looked mostly human, only his size hinting at his demonic heritage. He stood at least seven feet tall, and was as broad as any linebacker in full padding.

Spike stood and returned the bow. “We ready, then?”

John nodded. “Yes, Master Spike. Please remember, you must not move once the machine starts to cycle. And you may feel some pain ... some do, and some don't. It doesn't seem to matter what species the demon is, so I can't honestly know if you will or not. But it is imperative that you remain motionless.” The big man hesitated. “I mean no disrespect, but if you feel you might move, I have restraints that will hold you.”

Spike stiffened, and Xander cupped his cheek. “It's totally up to you. He really doesn't mean to insult you. He just wants to make sure you're safe, and it works. That's all.”

Spike closed his eyes and pressed a kiss to Xander's palm. "Thanks, pet," he said quietly. He straightened and looked at John. "I'll be fine without the shackles, mate. Let's just get this done, yeah?"

Inside the machine, Spike tried to control the urge to shift and fidget. He hated being still, especially when he had no choice. He let his mind drift back to last night, and petting Xander in his wolf/hyena form.

"You're a lovely were, pet. Can see both animals in you." He combed the thick fur with his fingers. "Got a softer snout and rounder ears than a wolf. Some pretty speckles on your nose." The were chuffed at him, and Spike laughed. "Coat's almost striped, great swatches of red and black – my favourite colours, yeah? But your eyes – ah, they're a treat, they are. Larger than a wolf's, and a deep, mossy green. That must be the primal, cos hyena's eyes are black. But not yours." He rubbed behind Xander's ear and smiled at the low rumble of pleasure the were voiced. "Not another were like you in the world, luv – you're unique. And you're mine."

Xander cocked his head and whined, a question in his eyes. Spike thought about what he'd said, and nodded.

“Yeah, I know. Sounds a bit like braggin' on my part. Thing is, pet, vamps are status conscious, in a manner of speaking. Not for money, or material things, but for power, strength, and respect. Angel has power over me because he's stronger than me physically, and because he's older, and me sire. Those things earn him respect, as well. From me, and from other Masters.” Xander rested his snout on his paws and looked up at Spike. “I have power, too. I'm faster than Angel, a bit more agile, and I have better control over my temper.” The were snorted, and Spike flicked Xander's nose. “Oi, don't be laughin' at me. Even with the soul locked in tight, the poof has a terrible temper. He loses it, and any kind of rational thought goes with it. When was the last time ya saw me in that kind of unthinkin' rage?”

Spike smoothed the fur along Xander's neck. “So, that gives me an edge in the power game. Takin' two slayers out adds to it. Puts us almost on even footing, yeah? Now we're both mated to weres – and don't mistake the respect that'll garner in some circles – but of the two, you're the one with the biggest cachet.” Xander bent his neck and covered his face with his paws. Spike shook his head – even as a were, the boy was bloody easy to read. “Nah, don't be like that. I admit, I like the leg up havin' you as me mate gives me – but that ain't

why I love you. Lovin' you came first, yeah? Been feeling summat for you for a long time now, pet. I know I never said, but ... well, didn't want to be swept out the door, did I? And until last night, I didn't know you'd be anything but a normal werewolf. That woulda been fine with me, luv – but I won't deny this is even better.”

The were lifted his head, mouth lolling open in a very doggy grin. “Yeah, yeah, you're right chuffed about it. So you should be. You can lord your status over every other were ya know. Well, except Oz.” Spike frowned. “It's an odd clan we've made. Pack, if you prefer. But no matter what ya call it, it's a strange one. Two master vampires acting as alphas to a coupla werewolves, one of which is part Primal Hyena, but still a beta. Oz is beta, too, but senior to you.” He shook his head. “Could get dizzy sortin' this out, especially if you add in the humans.” Spike grinned. “Not like any of us were normal to start with – only fitting we'd form the craziest clan/pack/family ever seen.”

Xander uttered a happy yip and reached up to lick Spike's face. “Bloody hell, pet – don't be slobberin' on me.” But he couldn't keep the grin off his face. His boy understood him, and that was all that mattered.

The noise the machine made was horrendous. Xander held himself stiffly, refusing to look at any of the others. He was 100% focused on his mate in that Godawful machine as if he could make it work by sheer willpower. He refused to consider what might happen – there were so many ifs and buts. His focus was on how they would celebrate when Spike got out of there and the chip was fried. He looked down briefly, wondering what the pain in his hand was, and realised that he had partially shifted, his claws digging into his palms. This had to work - there was no other option.

“S'nearly done.” With a jerk, Xander looked over at John.

“What?!”

“That's it – it's nearly done. Come here and I'll show you.” With a quick look to the others to see if they wanted to come too, Xander walked over to the monitor and looked at a slice of his mate's brain. He'd have to remember to tell Spike it only took up a small portion of the screen since it wasn't really a big brain, but that was a little thought in his mind as he looked at the metallic dime sized mark on the screen. Such a

small thing to cause so much pain and heartache. Without conscious thought, he stroked the screen, tracing the chip. Without it, he and Spike wouldn't be together, but oh how he wished his mate had never had to go through all the pain and suffering.

“Would you like a moment alone with the Master?” John's voice interrupted his musings, and he looked up again. “It's over – you can go to him now.” Xander heard Angel and Oz laugh at the speed with which he sprinted through the door into the MRI room, but he didn't care – he just wanted to get to Spike. Tapping his fingers impatiently on the side of the machine, he waited while the platform was ejected, Spike's motionless figure coming slowly into view.

“Spike?” He watched as the hypnotic blue eyes fluttered open and his mate focused on him.

“Yeah Pet?”

“You ok?” He had no idea why they were almost whispering but it seemed appropriate. It was a life changing event after all.

“Yeah Pet, I'm good. Did it work?” He nodded, almost

blinded by the smile that spread across Spike's face. Yeah, they needed to test it but Xander knew it was gone. His mate was free to be himself, no longer made 'less than' by the actions of a group of evil scientists. “Wanna go hunting Pet? Let the wolf out, see what baddies we can bring down?”

“Oh yeah! Can we invite Oz and Angel? Make it a pack event?” Spike pushed himself to his feet, shaking himself out.

“Yeah. Let's all go out and celebrate.”

It had been, without doubt, the weirdest hunting party Cordelia had ever been part of and that was saying something. Cordelia looked around at her family, a wide smile crossing her face. Wrapped in a fluffy green bathrobe that smothered him from head to toe, Oz was helping Xander change back from his were, talking softly to the hybrid until he slowly morphed back into his human form. Spike and Angel were drinking mugs of human blood, sharing tales of their exploits with each other as though they hadn't all been together. Wesley was sat in the corner, cleaning an axe and humming to himself, a twinkle in his eye promising her

a very pleasant night when they got home.

Once Spike got out of the MRI machine and tested his new-found ability to hurt humans by deliberately stamping on the foot of the first person he met who *wasn't* part of their happy party, they had returned to the hotel and tooled up. Oz had helped Xander to concentrate and change voluntarily for the first time and the two mated couples celebrated as only demons could. There had been more than a few double takes as they walked into demon-central in down-town LA, a number of demons scurrying away in the hopes of living to see another dawn. It wasn't indiscriminate slaughter, even in their animal state the weres were well controlled – peaceable demons were allowed to leave unhindered. But everyone else – definitely open season.

It had been an arousing sight, Spike and Xander fighting side by side, the sounds they made a bizarre amalgamation of a wolf's howl and a hyena's yip. There was an almost innocent delight emanating from them as they played with their prey, a bizarre game of vampire tag as Xander harried them towards Spike and he sent them flying back towards Xander, often with pieces missing, until they were dust. They were quite

beautiful together, the exuberance at Spike being freed from the chip clear to see, their love for each other shining through.

Angel and Oz had been more restrained but no less exuberant, fighting alongside each other with skill and precision. Wes had prowled after the four of them, crossbow in hand to mop up any vamps or demons that managed to get past the manic four. Cordelia had deliberately stayed back, unwilling to risk her outfit getting covered with vamp dust or demon guts but more honestly simply enjoying seeing her family working so well together as a unit. Yes, it had been an absolutely fantastic night and when would she ever learn that even when you were no longer living on the Hellmouth, you didn't even dare to *think* stuff like that?

She was still smiling when she picked up the phone.

“Angel Investigations – we help the helpless as long as they can pay.”

“Cordelia?”

“Buffy? What do you want?? I thought you pretty much said everything you wanted to say.” Crossing her arms

over her chest, Cordelia avoided the worried looks she was getting from the men.

“Look, Cordelia, we need your help. We need all of you guys help.”

“Why? I mean, presumptuous much. After your behaviour while you were here, why the hell should we help you?”

“Riley suffered some kind of fit on the way home – we had to take him to hospital. They – they said he's suffering from heart failure as well as acute withdrawal. Cordelia, the Initiative have been drugging him – not just brainwashing him, but drugging him too. He could – they say he could die.”

“Oh Buffy, I'm so so sorry. But – I don't understand what you need us for?” She could hear Buffy sniffing then blowing her nose, and when she returned to the conversation her tone of voice reminded Cordelia of how Buffy had been when she finally faced Angelus. The same tone of voice she had used before she sent Angel to Hell.

“We need your help. We need the knowledge that Oz

and Spike have of the layout of the cells in the Initiative. Riley managed to tell us a few things – told us about some of the demons they have down there. Some..... okay, a LOT of them are actually peaceable demons, just wanting a normal life. And, God, I can't do this alone. Spike was one of our best fighters and Xander just always found a way, you know? So yeah, we need help and we need it fast.”

“Look Buffy, I *really* don't know. I can't speak for the boys but.....”

“I'll beg if I have to. This needs to happen.”

“What exactly are you talking about doing?”

“We're taking them down. The Initiative has to go, once and for all.”

Part Eighteen

Xander tilted his head and regarded his mate with narrowed eyes. Spike sighed. “C'mon, pet, we

discussed this, yeah? Not like it's a permanent thing – s'just a disguise. A way to walk about town, get a feel for what's what, without drawing too much attention.” Spike nodded to Angel and Oz, who were waiting at the door. “Wolf-boy ain't objecting, is he?” Xander tilted his head the other way, but showed no inclination to move closer to Spike. Angel snickered, and Spike shot his sire a quick glare. “Not helping, Peaches.”

Angel arranged his face into more sober lines. “I don't think it's the idea so much as ... uh ... your choice in ... um ... style, Spike.”

“What? I got bloody good taste! This here is genuine leather, soft and supple, with a good lining so's it won't irritate his neck.” Spike shook the collar and lead in his hand for emphasis.

Angel nodded. “I know you'd never do anything to harm Xan. He knows that, too. It's just ... spikes?” The leather collar was covered in sharp, stainless steel spikes of various sizes.

Spike shrugged, baffled at Xander's hesitation. “Well ... yeah. Don't want anyone ta be able ta grab his collar, do I? Oh ... wait.” He crouched down and regarded his

mate. “That the problem, luv? You think I was makin' a fashion statement with this?” He chuckled. “Not likely. And I know you can protect yourself a right treat, but if things get heavy, this is just a bit extra, yeah? Someone tries ta pull you away, they get a nasty surprise. I sharpened the tips of every spike on this collar. Anyone latchin' onto this is gonna be hurtin' after.”

Oz, in wolf-form and already wearing his own collar and leash, chuffed softly. Xander turned his head to gaze at the other were and whined. A soft bark from Oz, and Xander sighed, stood, and padded over to Spike's side. He leaned against his mate and stretched his neck out so Spike could place the collar on him. With the collar secured around Xander's neck, Spike took a moment to show him the lead. “This is strictly for show, luv. See this link here?” He pointed to one close to the clip. “It's a breakaway – one good tug, and you're free. So even if anyone else should manage to wrest the lead from me, they won't be able to hold ya.” He stroked Xander's ears. “Feel better?” Xander licked at his hand, and gave Spike a doggy grin.

Oz looked up at Angel and woofed. Angel smiled at his mate. “Yes, Oz, I got the same kind of lead. Neither of us want either of you trapped by this little charade.” He

pushed away from the wall he was leaning against. "Now, if you two are ready and willing to play 'dumb dog' we can get over to the watcher's place."

They left the mansion and ambled through town, taking a roundabout route to Rupert's apartment. They found no sign of Initiative soldiers and the snitches Spike and Angel spoke briefly with had no rumours to pass on. They were, however, accosted by a man and a woman who wanted to know what breed of dog Xander was.

The woman persisted in questioning Spike. "Really, he's just such a fascinating creature. I'm a breeder myself, and I've never seen anything remotely like this lovely boy. And his eyes! So unusual. Please, you have to tell me. Or at least think about letting me rent him for stud."

Xander sneezed and leaned against Spike's leg. Through their bond link, Spike picked up on his mate's amusement, and decided to end the discussion. "Not a pure-bred, is he? Got some African spotted dog in 'im, bit of wolfhound, and a touch of Suni hell hound. Not sure what else is in there. Just your average mutt, yeah?" Xander uttered a low growl at this comment.

“Not that I love 'im any less, mind. He's my boy. Now, if ya don't mind, we're late for a meeting. Ta and all.”

Spike strode down the sidewalk, Xander trotting at his side. Spike ignored Angel's shaking shoulders and the laughter he could sense from Xander. He spotted the watcher's apartment building and increased his speed, anxious to get inside and away from obsessed dog breeders.

Xander and Oz had appropriated the bathroom, changed into their human forms, and dressed in the clothes their mates had brought along. Their eyes met as they exited the bathroom. Oz cocked an eyebrow and murmured, “Suni hell hound?”

Xander chuckled. “African spotted dog? Wolfhound?”

A glint of humour lit Oz's eyes. “And he didn't really lie. Just ... embroidered around the truth.”

“Never thought I'd see Spike run from a human. But that woman actually made him nervous. And when she said she wanted to use me for stud, I thought he was gonna flip out.”

“Hey, at least he didn't name me as your sire. Angel wouldn't have been able to keep a straight face.”

They entered the living room giggling. The giggles turned into laughter at the indignant look on Spike's face, the sly grin on Angel's, and the bafflement shown by the Scoobies.

Angel and Spike were seated on opposite end's of the couch. Xander and Oz joined them, curling next to their respective mates. Xander looked up at Spike and smiled. “C'mon, Blondie. You know it was funny.”

Spike sniffed. “Wasn't afraid of the bint. Just didn't want to waste anymore time on her annoying nattering.”

Xander rubbed his cheek against Spike's shoulder. “I know. And that was fast thinking on your part. I don't know how you came up with those names. But it was the only way to get rid of her.” He snickered. “She'll spend days trying to find those breeds listed somewhere.”

Spike's lips curled in a smirk. “Hmmm, likely so. Good luck to her with that. Only one listed is the wolfhound.”

Giles cleared his throat. “If the ... inappropriate moment of humour is over, we have serious matters to discuss.”

Xander sighed. “The floor is yours, G-man – after you answer one question. Has anyone ordered dinner?”

Xander wiped his mouth, leaned back, and sighed. “So, to sum up – Willow used the passwords Riley provided to hack the Initiative's computer system and get a layout of the facility. She also retrieved the master code to the doors, so we can get in, release Riley, and get back out.”

Willow bounced in her seat. “Yeah, I-”

Xander raised his hand to stop the incoming babble. “Got it, Wills. Next, Buffy and Giles have been gathering weapons from various hidey holes, and Tara has researched and prepared spells to help us once we're in.” He tilted his head. “Right so far?”

Giles nodded. “Very well put, Xander. Now, as I see it-”

Again, Xander raised his hand. “Not quite done, G-man. Those are things in the plus column. And in the minus column we have a) absolutely no idea what they're doing to Riley at this moment, b) how many peaceful demons they may have in their cells, c) no fucking clue how many werewolves they've created, and finally, d) two different views on just what our mission is.”

Buffy narrowed her eyes. “Two different ... Xander, our goal is to get Riley out of there. And I don't care how many or what kind of demons they have in their cells. Makes no difference.”

Xander sighed. “And that's where the paths diverge. See, I get that Riley's your guy, and you want him back safe and sound. And I'm okay with that. But my goal? Our goal?” He waved his hand to include Angel, Oz, and Spike. “Not so much with the saving of Private Riley as with the shutting down of the Initiative. Again.” He rubbed his face. “Thought the Adam fiasco would've taught them not to mess with this shit, but they must have taken the short bus to school.”

“Look, it doesn't ... I know the Initiative isn't all that good, but...” Buffy stood and began to pace. “That's like, two separate missions. Right now we concentrate

on Riley. Then we can figure out how to deal with-”

Xander shook his head. “I’m not coming back in a week, or a month, or a year to deal with this shit again. We shut them down now, and we do it hard enough to make reforming a very bad idea.”

Buffy glared and opened her mouth, but Angel spoke first. “Xander’s right. This threat needs to end. If you want our help, that’s the price. Agreed?” He looked around the room and received nods from the Sunnydale group. “Good. Now, any ideas on just how we’re supposed to overcome superior numbers and who knows how many controlled werewolves?”

Xander bit his lip. “Maybe the spell they used to defeat Adam would work again? If it wasn’t a ‘use only once’ spell. Can it be used again?”

Angel frowned. “What spell? How dangerous is it?”

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, it wasn’t precisely dangerous, the spell itself. The, er, aftermath was a bit ... unsettling.”

Willow raised an eyebrow. “Unsettling? The First Slayer

trying to kill me in my dreams is more than unsettling. It's mondo scary."

Spike and Angel began to growl, yellow eyes glaring at Giles.

The watcher sighed. "Yes, but ... that issue has been faced and shouldn't occur again. She was ... angry ... that non-slayers had tapped into her power. But it was done, and can be done again. It's an excellent suggestion, Xander." He smiled. "And this time, we needn't be in the facility before we perform the spell. With Tara's power added to Willow's, we can find a safe place nearby. Oz can guard us, while Angel and Spike go in with Buffy to deal with ... well, with whatever must be dealt with."

Xander nodded. "Yeah, okay – that makes sense." He clapped his hands together. "So, the labs are outside of town this time. Fairly close to the mansion, actually. I'd suggest you guys come over tomorrow, about an hour before sunset. Time enough to do the spell before storming the castle."

The stake Buffy was fiddling with snapped in half. "If you don't mind, I have one tiny question. Why are we

letting Xander plan this thing? I'm the Slayer, Giles is my watcher. We should be the ones to-"

Giles sighed. "Buffy..."

Spike gazed at Buffy, his blue eyes cold. "Who better to plan something like this than a soldier, hmm? Or did you forget about Xan's passengers? Not just the hyena, little girl – the memories from that Halloween are still there. The man is still there." He stalked forward and leaned into Buffy's space. "Seems to me your memory's a bit defective, at that. Most of your best plans came from my boy. So you should just bugger off." He turned away and moved to stand beside his mate.

Xander stood and leaned against Spike. "Listen, we're all tired and grumpy. Talk it over with Giles if you want. Even if you don't like that I'm the one who came up with it, it's a good plan. Of course, if you can think of something better, I'm all for it. But for now, we're leaving. See you all tomorrow."

They gathered in the mansion's dining room. Giles, Xander, Buffy, and Willow sat in a circle. Tara sat

behind Willow, one hand resting lightly on the red-head's shoulder. Angel, Spike, and Oz stood guard.

Willow closed her eyes and began to speak. "The power of the Slayer and all who wield it. Last to ancient first, we invoke thee. Grant us thy domain and primal strength. Accept us in the power we possess. Make us mind and heart and spirit joy. Let the hand encompass us. Do thy will." She placed a tarot card on the floor. "Spiritus - Spirit."

Xander placed his card next to Willow's. "Animus - Heart."

Giles followed suit. "Sophus - Mind."

Buffy placed the final card on the floor. "And Manus - The Hand."

Willow continued the spell. "We enjoin that we may inhabit the vessel - the hand - daughter of Sineya - first of the ones. We implore thee, admit us, bring us to the vessel, take us now."

A warm breeze wafted through the room, bringing with

it the smell of dry grass and earth. Xander's eyes snapped open, bright green and glowing. Willow gasped. "No! That's not ... why is it changing? Buffy is supposed to be the hand. Tara, what's happening?"

Tara spoke, her voice mellow and full of power. "The magic seeks what it will, and what is right. Trust it. This is ... earth magic. Moon magic. Look ... and see."

They all turned as a deep, rumbling growl came from the corner of the room. A hyena stepped out of the shadows, and Xander laughed. "Impisi!"

Part Nineteen

The hyena jumped over the others and landed in the center of the circle, facing Xander. He laughed again and buried his fingers in the hyena's fur. Impisi lowered her head and butted Xander in the shoulder, the growl tempered to a soft rumble of pleasure.

"You've done well, youngling. However, there is yet more for you to do." Impisi's voice rolled over the

group, carrying with it the sound of drums and a hint of the xylophone tones of the akadinda. “It is time to grow into your heritage. The changelings will not respond to the slayer, so you must lead this battle. Find and defeat the alpha, the one who commands the werewolves – then they will follow you.”

Xander blinked. “B-but ... Oz is senior to me. Shouldn’t he be the one?”

Impisi rubbed the side of her face against Xander’s neck. “None but you can do this, my cub. It will take the strength and will of a Primal to best their leader.” She stepped back, her dark eyes holding Xander’s. “Find the dark one. He leads the pack. Show them how it is to be led through kindness and honour, rather than cruelty and fear.”

“Dark one?”

“Yes – dark, like my people.” Impisi stepped through the circle and faded into the shadows. “Hamba kahle – go well, youngling.”

“Tell me I wasn't the only one to see that – you saw that, right?! I mean – wow just – oh my God, Xander - “

Willow's babble filled the air and Spike seriously considered giving her a hearty slap to the back of the head to stop her noise. He wasn't happy – he wasn't happy at all. He trusted Impisi – as far as that went – but having his boy lead the charge? Not something he wanted, not at all. Especially if it meant facing the leader of the werewolves. They didn't know enough about them – what if it was more than his Xander could handle? He looked over at Xander who was sat quietly, obviously still under the influence of the spell and Impisi and realised that he had nothing to worry about. There was no way the Primal would put Xander into danger – not danger he couldn't cope with anyway. But still -

“You're not going in on your own, Pet.”

“Just a second!! Why are we listening to - “ Buffy was obviously indignant, her voice rising almost to a squeak.

“Definitely not Xander. I understand your – um, the hyena's words were quite well - “

“I get it Giles. And no, Spike, I have no intention of going in on my own. But I will be challenging their

Alpha. The power chose me for a reason.” Meeting Xander's resolute look, Spike nodded. As long as he and the rest of the clan (and, he supposed, Buffy's lot) were there to watch Xander's back, he was prepared to accept those restrictions. Knowing that the Farm boy had managed to convert a few of his pals into fighting on their side wasn't quite as reassuring as the Slayer seemed to think – Spike didn't trust any of those soldiers any further than he could throw them but he was more than prepared to use them as cannon fodder. Clan mattered – the rest of them could go to hell. But it looked like Hell was where they were all going – he just needed to make sure that all of his family got back out again. With a grim set to his face, Spike paid attention as they finalised their battle plans.

“Get in, lay the charges and get out before the place gets blown to kingdom come.” Angel's voice was grim and the grip he had on Oz looked painful. Knowing exactly how he was feeling, Spike just nodded. He deliberately did not look at Xander, the desperate urge to grab his mate and run enough to make him bounce on his toes in agitation. This wasn't their fight, it wasn't their territory and he was giving serious consideration to grabbing Xander and Oz and heading for the hills. Angel would follow his mate, no matter what the soul

told him and then the clan would be safe. He'd deal with the fall-out later – better family pissed off with him than hurt or even worse. About to go with that plan and get the hell out of dodge, Spike heard the Slayer come back to their position in the outer corridors, her steps loudly announcing their presence to anyone who had the sense to listen.

“The alarm to evacuate has just been sounded. Try to steer any soldiers out safely - “

“That's your agenda Slayer, not mine. They can all burn to a fuc - “

“Just don't kill them unless you have to Spike!” Angel snapped out.

“Fine, fine, but you take all the fun out of a good battle Peaches.” The words were barely out of Spike's mouth before it seemed that all hell broke loose and they all raced into the centre of the building where a giant hall was starting to look like a battle arena. It looked like a the alarm going off had opened the cages and yet again, the halls of the Initiative were filled with demons desperate to escape and possibly extract a little revenge at the same time. Obviously the soldiers

hadn't learned enough the first time as powerful demons headed towards soldiers with death in their eyes.

It would have been easy to lose track of the others in the crush of bodies but Spike was ultra conscious of where the members of his family were: he could feel Angel letting the demon loose, the sheer power of the vampire causing many demons to skirt around him or duck and run; Oz was more of a shadow in his mind but he could feel him too – could feel the joy at being free to run and fight alongside mate, but with the human intelligence guiding the animal; and then there was the feel of Xander. Xander felt like a golden light within, glowing with love and lust, happiness at being free to fight and yet more. Spike knew the more was Impisi and the spell the Slayer's lot had performed because it felt a little bit alien but there was enough of his boy in there to let him know that he hadn't lost him. For a few moments he revelled in the emotions rolling in his direction, then he was engaged by a S'nothrom demon who seemed determined to slime Spike as much as possible in an attempt to piss him off to death! With a whoop, Spike let his demon loose and began to dance.

He couldn't say how long it was, how many demons

he'd dispatched, how many soldiers he less than gently 'guided' towards the exits before the hairs on the back of his neck rose and a howl rent the air that seemed to silence everyone and everything. Turning in that direction, he heard a yipping growl that he more than recognised and watched in horror as Xander streaked across the room and threw himself onto the biggest werewolf Spike had ever seen.

TASTE OF BLOOD. DESIRE TO REND AND TEAR. *NEED TO KILL.*

The urge to kill was almost overwhelming and when he realised that this was the wolf that had bitten him, had tried to kill him, Xander felt like his brain whited out with the sheer desire to finish it off. But Impisi's words were burned into his mind and he knew that wasn't the right way, wasn't the correct thing to do. He was better than this, had more control than this – he had to.

Otherwise what made him any better?

Animal strength, primal cunning, human intelligence – all of them combined to make him a formidable opponent and it didn't take him long to realise that the other wasn't used to this. The other alpha was used to letting the animal side take over completely, was used

to going after much weaker prey. Not that he allowed it to make him cocky – his training at Spike's hands had taught him that even the weakest prey could be deadly given the brains and the opportunity – but he knew, KNEW he could beat him.

He was aware of the other werewolves gathered around, forming a loose semi circle around the fight but not interfering. That wasn't their way – this was a battle between alphas to decide who would lead them and Xander could already sense that none of the others were alphas in the making, none with the instincts or desire to lead. No, if he beat this one, he had the entire pack. On the other side of the semi circle, he was aware of his own pack keeping demons and soldiers alike away from this main fight. He could sense Spike – mate/lover/mine – and could practically hear and feel the blood in his veins popping and fizzing. Oh they had had some truly amazing sex after smaller battles than this! But he knew he had to concentrate – that was for *AFTER*. He had to win this first.

And suddenly an opening was right there, the chance to land the crippling blow that took the alpha down for the last time. A snap of his jaws, a grinding of his teeth, and the other werewolf was practically hamstrung and

lying whimpering at his feet. Laying his teeth into the muscle between neck and shoulder, he growled, insisting on absolute surrender. The lowering of the powerful head, the loud whine of submission and the fight was over – he had won, the pack was his!!

Throwing back his powerful head he let out a yipping howl of triumph, the undulating sound joined by the loud howls of his new pack as they acknowledged their new alpha.

Joy had him searching for pack and mate, the desire to celebrate taking over, and yipping loudly he bounded in Spike's direction – for praise, acknowledgment, love.

The pride was there on Spike's face, fangy grin causing those cheekbones to stand out even more; yellow eyes glinting with the love of the fight and fierce pride in his mate. The look on his face changed suddenly and Spike was running towards him, shouting 'Xander!' as he did so.

Needing no further warning, Xander did a leap and turned in the air, meeting the challenge of the dark alpha head on. No more thoughts of mercy now that treachery had been shown and with one wrench of his powerful jaws, Xander took out the throat of the alpha, a shake of his head sending the bleeding body

skittering away. Human treachery in animal form was shameful – the pack would not have followed his lead after that.

Spike's body thudding into his side took him by surprise and he yelped like a pup before submitting to the all-over body check that was the norm after any fight. With a chuffing laugh, he licked at Spike's face with his broad tongue, knowing how much Spike hated being covered with saliva that way.

“See if I try to save your furry hide again!! Get off me you mangy cur – enough playing! Get your new pack and let's get the hell out of here before the charges go off. Wouldn't put it past any of those soldier friends of the slayer to mess up the timing!” Another swipe at his mate, then he howled and yipped and the pack surged forward, following him as they headed towards the main doors. Spike was right – explosives and pack did not mix and it was past time that they got out of there!!

Exploding into the cool night, Xander howled towards the moon as he followed *his* alpha as Oz streaked past him, turning to watch Angel and Spike come sprinting out of the building followed by twenty or so

werewolves. Buffy, Giles and their soldiers weren't far behind and with everyone he cared about free and clear, Xander was ready to call this done. A loud explosion rocked the night, a huge mushroom cloud belching out flames and smoke and the second Initiative was taken out - Xander howled once more and bounded off towards the woods to make the most of the rest of the night. The celebration sex for *this* battle should be truly epic...

Epilogue

Xander leaned into Spike, looking across the kitchen table at Angel and Oz. It was late in the evening, the sun just down. The main room of the mansion held the still sleeping pack – twenty werewolves curled together in small groups took up a lot of space. He yawned and sipped his tea. “So – how are we going to handle the new pack?”

Oz raised an eyebrow. “Your pack. Your right to choose.”

Xander snorted. "Yuh-huh. I'm talking short-term practical here. Where are they gonna stay while they're retrained? How are we gonna feed them? And who's gonna tell Cordy? Cuz that screeching will make my ears bleed."

Angel grimaced. "I already told her. My ear is still ringing." He grinned. "You owe me, Xander."

The kitchen door slammed open to reveal Buffy and Willow. Xander sighed. "I see the concept of knocking and waiting for an answer has totally passed you by, Buffy. What can we do for you this fine evening?"

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest. "You can turn those werewolves over to us, right now."

Angel gave her a look of polite inquiry. "And why would we do that?"

"Because they're dangerous. They need to be controlled."

Xander stood, a low growl rumbling in his chest. "They're *my* pack, and they'll be joining us in L.A. You

don't have to worry about them. They won't do anything without my consent.”

Willow stepped forward. “Let's all just calm down, okay? Xander you're ... I mean, you haven't been a were that long, and your control is still new and, and shaky. Buffy has a point, weres can be really scary things. I should know. Look what happened when Oz and Veruca met.”

Xander clenched his fists. “Oh, no, you don't get to use that. That was two werewolves, one who was completely out of control and wanted only to give in to the wolf. That was *not* Oz's fault.” He waved a hand. “Besides, not even close to the same thing. My pack acknowledged me as alpha, and you know what that means. They've already had some training in controlling their beasts. Although it wasn't good training.” Buffy opened her mouth, and Xander pointed a finger at her. “Not a word. The only time I lost control was when your boyfriend attacked me and mine. So no, neither of you touches my pack. Are we clear?”

Buffy's eyes narrowed, and she launched herself at Xander. “I'm tired of being bossed around by you. You're nothing but a tag along.” She launched a blow to

his chest, and then blinked up at him when he flipped her onto her back and held her down.

A breeze began to stir Willow's hair, and Xander glared at her. "Shut it down or face Primal magic, Wills." Xander's voice echoed in the room. Suddenly, the kitchen was crowded with twenty wolves, all snarling. Xander's smile wasn't a pleasant one. "Not to mention my pack." He nodded at Angel, who was holding a growling, snapping Spike. Oz stood behind Xander, his eyes darkening.

Giles and Tara slipped through the open door. Tara grabbed Willow and shook her. "Haven't you learned anything? Leave them alone, Willow. If you use magic right now, Impisi will bend it to her will."

Giles stepped in front of Buffy. "Stop this nonsense at once. Both of you. Or I'll turn both of you over my knee and paddle your arses!" He turned to the L.A. group. "My apologies. We told them this was a bad idea – that you would deal with your pack in your own way." He glared back at Buffy and Willow. "Apparently, they thought they knew better. We *will* be talking about this later. In the meantime, if I can help in any way, you have only to ask."

Angel spoke up. “Thanks, Giles, but we've got it covered. Xander can go out tomorrow and rent a couple of vans, then we'll head out tomorrow night. Once we're settled, and the pack's had a chance to calm down and learn what a *real* pack is like, they can make some choices. I'd already decided to offer them a chance for more schooling. They can stay with us or move out on their own. I know they'll keep in touch with Xander, and that he'll have the ultimate say in what they do. I also know he'll be a kind and wise alpha.”

Xander smiled at Angel and moved to lean against Spike's chest. “Buffy, Willow – you'll always be my girls. You know that. But this is where our paths have to fork. Your place is here ... and mine isn't, not anymore. Can we part on a happier note?”

Willow twisted her fingers together. “It's just ... everything's changing, and you're not gonna be here anymore, and I don't know how to get by without my Xander-shaped friend.”

Buffy sighed and nodded. “What she said.”

Xander nodded. "It's hard, I get that. But I'm only three hours away, and there are phones and email. Not like we can't stay in touch. Just ... this is what I have to do. What I want to do. It's my chance to be happy – to feel loved and needed. And I need that. Try to be a little happy for me, okay?"

Willow and Buffy exchanged a glance and nodded. Willow crossed the room and hugged Xander. "I'm still not down with Spike being a good guy – but you're right. It's your choice, and maybe it's even right for you. So I guess I can bow out of this and ... and I hope you'll be happy." She turned and ran out of the house.

Buffy grimaced. "I'm with Willow on the not-happy-about-Spike train, Xan – but it's your life." She frowned at the werewolves behind Xander. "Just keep them out of trouble, and out of Sunnydale." She narrowed her eyes at Spike. "Him, too." She stalked out the door.

Giles rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'll talk with them. I'm sure they'll come around, eventually. Take care, my boy – stay in touch." He patted Xander on the shoulder and joined the others outside.

Tara shook her head and smiled at the two couples.

“You look right together. I wish all of the best life has to offer. Blessed be.” She left as well, closing the door quietly behind her.

Spike tightened his arms around Xander. “Best get your fur coat on, pet. Give the pack their first lesson tonight. Then tomorrow we'll be on our way home.”

Xander smiled at his mate. “Home. Like the sound of that.” He turned in Spike's arms and kissed him, leaning against him for a moment. He pulled away with a happy sigh and faced his pack. “All right, let's get started. There are some changes that you'll have to make. You'll need to learn meditation, hand-to-hand, and to calm your wolf through diet. Now...” His voice faded as he led his pack out of the kitchen, and into their new life.

The End