Pairing: Spike/Xander
Rating: PG-13
Disclaimer: Not mine, never will be. No harm, no foul, no money made.
For: Spikess, in the Fractured Fairy Tales Ficathon.
Title of fairy tale/folk tale/myth/legend: The tale of Brynhild, Sigurd, and Gunnar
Pairing and/or characters you want: Surprise me ^_^ Prefer either Spike or Xander or Spander
(Is Spander with hints of Giles/Wes, Spike/Harmony, Xander/Angel, Giles/Ethan.)
Rating desired: whatever you'll give me
Three things you want to see: angst. romance.
Two things you don't want to see: Buffy or Connor as a main character
Summary: Set in such a completely Alternate Reality that it might even be on another planet. It's a story full of magic and love and treachery and deceit, and while the Norse saga ends in a romantic but ultimately fatal fashion, I stand by my decision to never kill my boys... permanently.

From The Ashes

by

Darkhavens
"Do you have any idea of the trouble you've caused, Alexander? You've brought danger down upon us all with your heroic stunts!" Lord Rayne, head of the Council of The Valley of the Sun, glared at the young man who knelt before the dais between two guards. "I promised Lord Wilkins victory in that battle in return for his protection from the roaming demons that are moving ever closer to our lands. And then you go and kill him! Now we shall be forced to turn to the vampires for help in defending against the marauding clans and those who followed Lord Wilkins. **What were you thinking, boy?!**

Xander fought the urge to cringe beneath the scornful words. He knew that Lord Rayne would never dare raise anything more than his voice against the foster son of his old and powerful ex-lover, the great mage Rupert Giles.

"Lord Wilkins was a demon himself, my Lord Rayne, a fact he kept hidden from the Council and the rest of our people when he first suggested the bargain. He was already making plans to charge a protection 'tax' which would have been paid with the flesh and blood of our children. A set number of live 'volunteers', all no older than twenty, to be payable every year into eternity."

Xander bit off the rest of his words, and the expression
on his face left Lord Rayne in no doubt that the youth had somehow discovered that certain members of the Council had been made fully aware of the more...delicate details of the arrangement.

"The fact remains that you and your army of women and children managed to destroy the best protection we on the Council had been able to arrange. Now we shall be forced to do business with the vampires in the next valley. Do you not think that they too shall expect payment in live volunteers?"

A thousand barbed words bubbled up inside Xander, but he managed to swallow back the first waves of vitriol, forcing himself to answer calmly, as befitted a member of the Giles clan.

"The Aurelius vampires have shown on many occasions that they are willing to feed without killing their chosen victims. They view us as a renewable food source. They made their home in the Valley of the Moon two years ago, and as far as I can tell we're in no more danger of dying out than we were before they arrived. We also have less crime being committed, as very few wish to take the chance of being banished beyond our boundaries. Apparently our neighbours have been
collecting our *garbage* as we throw it out."

"Waste not, want not."

Xander's eyes flew to the guard standing at attention on his left and then flickered back to Lord Rayne.

"That's enough, Riley. We all know your opinions of those not as pure and godly as yourself. The point, however, is valid. One man's table scraps is another vampire's dinner." Ethan smirked and tapped one elegant, be- ringed finger against his lips.

"Which brings us back to the business at hand. Alexander, whatever are we to do with you? You brought about the death of our best protector, and several of our own people in your mighty battle against the great demon Lord Wilkins. You have defied the Council, and must be punished, but banishment would be too... quick for you. I have heard rumours that a number of the Aurelius beasts are considering taking human Consorts."

Xander was unable to prevent himself from flinching at the idea. To be bonded by blood and magic to a vampire for life? He shuddered, and knew by the delighted gleam in obsidian eyes that his reaction had been exactly what
Rayne had hoped.

"Ah, I see you must have heard some of the same rumours. I wonder, did you hear that human Consorts are irrevocably bound to the vampires who choose them? The death of the demon means the death of the chosen, but as long as the beast survives... so does the Consort. Even the most hideous injuries will heal, given time. You could be a hairsbreadth from death a hundred times or more and that bond would pull you back, slowly, inch by agonizing inch." The gleam in those black eyes changed from delight to something almost wistful. "And you can be sure that our friends in the next valley know exactly when to stop. They have centuries of experience in breaking people down to watch them scream and bleed and beg. Of course, if the Consort does die, the bereaved is free to choose another."

Ethan sat back in his ornate, padded chair and nodded to the guards.

"It is decided. Alexander, lately of the Giles Clan, shall be offered as Consort to whichever of the Aurelius vampires wish to take him. I'm sure, as kin to our greatest mage, you shall be much in demand. I hear that particular demon family hold magic in very high regard."
Xander allowed the two bulky guards to lift him to his feet, but he refused to simply turn and leave, accepting Lord Rayne's decree.

"You know Giles will never accept your ruling. If you force me into this blood-bond slavery he will not rest until he has had his revenge. You know him, Ethan. He'll have you burn in hell for this." Swallowing hard, he straightened his slumped shoulders and locked eyes with his lord and ruler.

"I understand that I must pay for going against the Council, but I also know that my foster father would never agree to handing me over like that without a fight." He paused to take a deep breath. "I have a... compromise in mind. There is a place of raw power, called the Mouth of Hell, sitting at the boundary of the lands between the two valleys. I am sure you have heard the legends just as I have. I would remain there, sleeping within the ring of fire, until a vampire of sufficient courage braved the flames to take me for its own. None but one of the undead may enter the circle and awaken me."

Ethan went to speak, but Xander interrupted him, not
caring any longer about the protocols involved.

"Please, Lord Rayne, allow my clan the dignity of knowing that I go to a fate of my own choosing. I know that I may spend eternity in the Mouth of Hell if no vampire finds me intriguing enough to risk a fiery death. Whether I am chosen or not, you are still rid of me, and Giles will accept my decision for the good of the clan."

A heavily jewelled hand fluttered in the air in a supremely irritating shooing motion.

"Very well. Riley. Graham. Take Alexander here back to his clan and allow him to collect whatever items he requires for his... journey. I don't want to see either of you back here unless you can tell me that you have seen him walk through the flames. And take the little witchling Amy with you. She doesn't have much power, but she should be able to tell if he is truly in the grip of the sleeping charm once he is out of your sight, and she can make sure that he doesn't have a chance to set any extra spells in place. Go! Now! And send in my wolfboy, I believe he's in need of further obedience training."
The walk home was silent and forced, and Xander could feel curious eyes burning holes in his skin from every window. Several times people approached to talk but the guards drove them back and bade them be silent or risk being called before the Guardmaster. No one was eager to face the wrath of the man known only as Adam, so Xander was left to his own thoughts until they reached the tall wooden doors of the only real home he'd ever known.

Stepping forward through the wards that automatically repelled the guardsmen, he leaned his forehead against the solid oak frame and whispered the necessary permissions to allow the armed men to pass through. Twin expressions of shock were his only thanks as they moved forward into their previous flanking positions, and he pushed the open unlocked doors and entered the house.

"Father?"

The door to the library opened and Wesley Wyndam-Pryce shuffled out into the hallway, swamped in a huge woollen robe that Xander knew usually hung on the back of the master bedroom door. Wesley wearing it could only mean one thing: he'd had another one of his visions,
and without his lover there to support him he had decided to take comfort in the man's favourite ratty old robe. A slight smile touched Xander's lips as he watched the fragile Seer bury his nose in the frayed collar and sniff deeply before speaking.

"You're home! We weren't expecting you back so soon. Rupert was hoping..." Wesley finally noticed the two hulking guards hovering in the hall and unconsciously took a nervous step backwards. "I... You..." He paused and shook his head as if to clear it. "Rupert is going to kill him for this, and most likely the rest of the Council too. Xander, you did what you thought was best! They can't mean to...

Ignoring the threatening noises coming from the guards, Xander moved forward and pulled Wesley into a hug.

"I'm not being banished Wes, I don't plan on dying any time soon. Ethan wanted to send me to the Valley of the Moon as a consort to any vampire that would have me, but I made a deal. D'you hear me, Wes? I made a deal with Ethan. I have to leave, but I'll be safe. I'm going to sleep in the Mouth of Hell until a vampire comes to claim me. You know as well as I do that there's no vampire on this planet that would pass through a wall of fire just to
claim me as their Consort. Maybe if I was Giles' true son I'd be a more tempting morsel, but everyone knows my magic is learned and not blood-borne, and no demon is going to risk combustion for that."

"Get your things, Harris, and let's go. Some of us would like to be home before dark."

The interruption came from Riley, who relished the expression of loathing on Xander's face at the use of his birth name.

"I haven't answered to that name in over ten years, Riley, and I don't intend to start now. I am a Giles, and you will afford me the courtesy that name affords or Wesley here will make certain that your time as a guard is short-lived and very uncomfortable." With a wink to the wide-eyed Seer, Xander stepped back and glanced back at his entourage. "Well?"

"My apologies, Master Giles." The words were ground out between clenched teeth, but Xander accepted them with a gracious nod.

"I'll just get what I need and then we can be on our way."
A quick trip was made to the kitchen for bread, meat and water, and another to his room for a few of life's necessities, the guards never letting him move beyond arm's reach, and then they were back in the hallway, where they discovered that Wesley still stood as he had been left, though he was trembling slightly, and shifting from foot to foot.

"Please, gentlemen, I beseech you. Can you not wait a little while longer? Rupert would want to be here to say farewell to his eldest son. And Jesse and Willow are with him, and they will be heartbroken at losing their brother in this way. Please, I beg you..."

Graham, as always, deferred to Riley, who made a show of thinking for a few moments before refusing, as Xander had known he would.

"Like I said before, some of us want to be home before dark." And with that he pushed Xander out of the door, not even pausing to allow him to reset the wards. A glance back over one shoulder showed Wesley shivering in the doorway, hands clasped tightly beneath his chin. Xander wondered if he was praying to one of the many deities he'd studied in the past. It was small comfort.
The Mouth of Hell was an hour's ride away by horse, and took almost two in the battered cart the Council had supplied. Every bump and jostle along the rutted path increased Xander's misery. The guards rode upfront and conversed in muted voices that never quite carried over the rattle of the wheels. The young witch Amy was sitting in the back with him, and watched him like a hawk to make sure he didn't attempt any casting. She rebuffed all attempts he made to pass the time with mindless chatter, so Xander was once again left alone with his thoughts. They weren't happy ones.

What the hell had he been thinking, offering to do this? He'd known about the Mouth of Hell since childhood, everyone did, but he'd never been fool enough to go near it. The land around the ring of fire was barren for a thousand paces. Nothing was able to grow so close to that much raw magic, not that much ever actually tried. And now he was going to walk in there and lie down to sleep, not knowing if or when he'd ever awaken?

Too soon, for Xander, they reached the edge of the barrens, and everyone scrambled down from the cart. The horses were fractious, snorting loudly and pawing at
the ground, heads tossing wildly as they tried to shake off the ominous, crawling feel of untamed energies sparking off their life-forces. Nothing on this earth would make them move any closer to the Mouth of Hell, so the rest of the journey was completed on foot.

Ten paces from the wall of fire, the party scuffled to a halt. Settling his pack higher on his shoulders, and checking the water-skin hanging around his neck to make sure the waxed stopper was securely jammed into the spout, Xander turned to look at his companions.

"I don't blame you for any of this, you know? You're just doing your jobs. And if I had the chance to go back and change anything about what I did to end up here... I wouldn't. I did what I had to do, and now I'll pay the price."

None of the others said a word as he turned and stepped up to the flickering barrier, lips moving slightly in a whispered plea for admittance. The curtains of flame parted just enough to allow him to slip through and then closed behind him, cutting him off from the rest of the world. He barely had time to set down his water and pack and roll out his bedding before a wave of exhaustion swept through him, weighting down limbs
and eyelids. Scant moments later he was in the depths of sleep, taking breaths so slow and shallow that they were hardly visible.

"Well?"

The young witch cowered beneath Riley's glare.

"He's asleep. It's not natural, so the tales must be true. He'll sleep until something undead comes for him. There was no time to cast any spells or wards. Lord Rayne will be pleased?"

Graham sneered. "I'm sure you will be well rewarded for your time. You usually are. Now let us be on our way. We may yet make it home before the sun is fully set. I have no wish to be out here after dark, there are too many demons on the loose."

And so our hero, Alexander of the Giles Clan, lately of the Valley of the Sun, slept, and as he slept he dreamed, and as he dreamed the magic of the place surrounded him.
and slowly sank into his bones and blood and mind.

Ten years passed, in which his loss was mourned. His siblings, the young witch Willow and the budding mage Jesse, tried, repeatedly at first, to rescue him from his endless slumber, but neither spells nor any incantation or supplication could open a doorway into the Mouth of Hell, and eventually their fervour was worn down. The wild magic guarded its treasure too well. Only one of the undead could steal that treasure away, and there was no vampire willing to risk unlife for a look behind the flames.

And then, one day, there was.

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William the Bloody, of the Clan Aurelius, more recently known as Spike, tethered his demon-reared horse to the last living tree on the edge of the barrens and studied the column of fire that stretched up to the sky. He'd been away from his undead family for over one hundred years, since that unfortunate incident with the gypsy and his Grandsire's damnable soul, and he was only returning now because of the odd dreams he had been having, dreams he believed had been sent to him by his insane Sire Drusilla.
The dreams were confusing, full of kittens, and fires, old family, and little burning fishes. That was how he knew it was Dru. And he had seen this very image behind closed eyes a dozen times. A ring of flames the locals called the Mouth of Hell held that which he'd been sent to find. His grail was the eldest son of the greatest mage in the land, or so he had been told by those unlucky enough to cross his path. A youth who had enclosed himself within the flame to wait for a vampire fearless enough to claim him as Consort.

Spike wasn't so sure about the Consort bit, but he'd always been cursed with more than his fair share of curiosity, and he'd been around long enough to trust that Dru usually knew what she was doing, so here he was. Of course, the fearless bit was neither here nor there now he'd been blessed by the kiss of Amara. One hand moved absently to trace the permanent scar on his left collarbone in the shape of a pair of pouting lips. It had been agony to receive, but the benefits were more than worth it. He was almost completely immortal. Neither sun nor fire nor holy water nor stake could truly kill him. The only way he would lose his life was if he lost his head. Literally. And as he would rather keep the secret of his new status from his estranged clan, Spike made
certain he was never seen travelling in daylight.

Shaking off his moment of deep thought, Spike sauntered across the moonlit barrens, right up to the wall of fire that rippled as he moved closer, like the surface of water when it was disturbed. Curious, he reached out and poked one finger into the flickering sheet and watched in awe as it disappeared into the flames without causing even a twinge. With a wicked grin he leapt forward, passing easily through the red-blue-yellow-orange wall into the enchanted land within.

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Light flickered beyond Xander's eyelids, and, after a joint-popping, ligament-creaking stretch, he opened them to look around. Fire. And more fire. And, yes, behind him there was yet more fire. Memories rushed in to fill the gaps left by fading dreams, and he twisted back around, reaching out for the jug of water, and instead wrapping one hand around a black-clad leg. He almost swallowed his tongue.

"Who the... What the...? Huh?"

Spike had watched the languid stretch as the young man
slowly woke from his lengthy sleep, and had silently admitted to himself that he liked what he'd seen. Then he'd decided to see if the sleeping beauty was as wily and clever and fearless as the stories told, and had moved silently to stand beside the makeshift pallet, grinning when a warm hand clasped around his ankle.

"Hello, Pet."

Xander scrabbled backwards off the bedroll onto the loose shale and felt his hands slide out from under him.

"Shi...!"

As quick as lightning a pale hand shot out and latched onto the front of his shirt, stopping him just before he smashed the back of his head into the unforgiving ground. Silently, he was hauled to his feet and brushed off, and he found himself in the befuddling position of trying to ignore the reactions generated by the occasional lingering stroke across his butt.

Once he was thoroughly dust-free, he was released and then examined from head to toe. Spike made no effort to hide his pleased reaction at what he saw. A shaggy mop of tobacco brown hair hung down over eyes as dark and
shiny as freshly hulled chestnuts. The ragged curls just brushed the tops of a pair of broad, lightly muscled shoulders, and Spike slowly dragged his gaze down the narrowing torso, wilfully ignoring the harshly coloured shirt as he mentally sketched out the sculpted pecs the atrocity was hiding. The pants were just as bad, there looked to be enough of the coarse brown fabric to make two pairs that would fit the boy well, but with an expert eye he traced the faintest hints of solid thighs and well-muscled calves. Dru's gift was looking better by the second.

Xander mirrored the curious gaze, taking in his unknown visitor, from the head bedecked with a mass of sandy curls, past eyes of a glorious blue, over cheekbones as sharp as knives and pouting lips that made his stomach flip, down the full length of a slim, muscular body clad entirely in expertly tailored rich black clothing, to narrow feet tucked into leather boots bound up with braided thongs. Gulp.

"So..."

Blue eyes locked onto his and Xander forgot any other words he had planned to use. One thin, scarred eyebrow arched in query, and Xander lost himself in wondering
how his visitor had incurred the damage and whether he knew how devastatingly attractive it was.

"Alexander Giles, I presume?"

It took a moment for the question to filter past the lust that still held Xander in its unexpected grasp, but eventually the sound of his own name being repeated shook him out of his stupor.

"Um, yeah? That'd be... me. Ah, Xander, really, if you'd like." Spike smiled a smile of way too many teeth, and something clicked inside Xander's mind. "And that would make you one of the undead, right?"

Spike nodded and plopped himself down on one end of the thin sleeping pad.

"I'd have a seat, if I were you, this might take a while."

And take a while it did.

Spike, who had spent much of the last century alone, was quite willing to sit and talk as Xander drank the water and ate the bread and meat that were all as fresh as they had been when he carried them into his 'sanctuary' over
ten years ago. That, of course had been his very first question, and Spike had been surprised by the reaction he'd received upon his answer. Apparently the boy had been sure he'd sleep for much, much longer, awaiting a vampire of sufficient courage to dare the flames. He was joyous to learn that his family was still alive and indeed in better circumstances than they had been before. The details Spike provided were sketchy, at best, but Xander hung on each and every one.

But eventually Spike grew bored of being the font of all recent knowledge, and called a halt to the hesitant questioning.

"I've been in here for hours recounting tales of what's long gone. I left my horse tied to a tree and it needs water and probably food. The sun will be rising shortly and I need to find shelter for the day, but I promise to return again tomorrow so we can talk more."

Xander looked down at his hands and then back into the face of Wi... Spike.

"One more question, please?" Spike nodded and Xander continued. "Why did you come for me?"
Spike had been expecting and dreading the question since the moment he'd stepped through the fire. He hadn't managed to come up with a believable lie, and so fell back on the honest, but ultimately unhelpful, truth.

"I dreamed of you, pretty one. I saw you every dawn when I closed my eyes, so here I am."

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It wasn't until Spike returned that he realised what must have happened the previous night when he had left Xander standing just a few feet from the wall of flame as he passed through to the outside world.

He re-entered the circle to see Xander slumped in a heap on the floor, only just beginning to stir as Spike removed himself completely from the fire.

"Bloody stupid spell! I'm sorry, pet, I never thought..." And quite before he realised it, Spike was helping Xander to his feet again, brushing him off again and offering to massage away the kinks developed from a day spent scrunched on the ground.

"Just... Help me sit down, please? On my bedding? It's
not much, but I swear I'll be forever grateful to the guardsmen for allowing me to bring it along. If this what it feels like to spend one day sleeping on this ground I'd hate to think what kind of knots I'd have after ten years. Did you bring me water? And... maybe food?"

The barrage of babble left Spike blinking in surprise. Somehow, since his first visit, his sleeping beauty had gone from hesitant questions and long silences to being able to breathe through his ears while talking incessantly. It would appear that the magical sleep that held him fast was not the same as the sleep of the dead. The body might be trapped in repose, but the brain obviously still retained function enough to process new data. While he slumbered, Xander had moved on, from the muted shock of being woken, to the eagerness of receiving a visitor after a long period of solitude. Spike wondered what else had gone on inside Xander's head while his body was unaware.

Spike returned every night for a month, and slowly they grew closer. Shared smiles turned into kisses and caresses and soft sighs. And eventually that turned into more.

Each visit Spike brought food and wine or water, and
occasionally he also bore small gifts. He growled whenever Xander tried to thank him, and then one day -

"'S just junk, Xander, pieces I picked up along the way. That knife you're fiddling with is all chipped and twisted, barely worth a second glance. Give it here and I'll find a better one tomorrow, if I can."

They both glanced down to look again at the battle-scarred weapon, and what they saw instead stunned them both. As they had passed time talking, Xander's fingers had been stroking along the blade, feeling out each scratch and nick and every tiny kink. The magic that had seeped into his mind and blood and bones had heard his wish to make the blade as it once was, and so it did. Beneath fingers full of power the iron had heated and reshaped, and the blade they looked at now was sharp and true and red-white hot.

"Whoa!" The knife went flying into the air as Xander's shock transmuted into mindless 'get-it-away' panic, and Spike reached out and snatched it from the air by the still cold hilt.

"That's... quite a party trick you've got there, pet. Care to share what other secrets you've been hiding?"
"I... What... H-Holy..."

Xander threw a glare down at his hands. "I swear, Spike, I never knew I could do that. In fact, I'd swear I couldn't. You know Giles took me in when my father was banished for his crimes, I'm not his real son. I never learned more than simple tricks and curses and a minor spell or two to keep me safe. This is..." Xander raised his eyes to Spike's in dawning realisation. "This is fire magic, Spike, I can feel it in my veins."

The vampire's grin was wide and full of fangs.

"Oh, luv, I think I'm keeping you. How does being Consort to William the Bloody sound to you?"

It took Spike another couple of hours to wheedle Xander out of his stunned stupor and convince him to repeat his trick with coins and a few brass nails, but eventually the evidence was in. Xander was full to the brim with fire magic, and metal was like putty in his hands. Twigs and leaves combusted on his palm with just a thought and water boiled and bubbled on his skin. And it didn't hurt a bit.
"C-Consort, Spike? You sure? I mean, it could just be this place. What happens if we leave and I go back to what I was? Will you still love me if I can no longer make you pretty rings from nails?"

Spike caressed the brass and copper twist around his finger, then pulled it off and passed it to the human he now loved.

"You wear this, keep it safe till I return, it says you're mine. I have to go and make nice to the bitch and her brood before I take a pretty thing like you back home with me. I'll make sure they don't stab us in the back."

"I'll wait. I'll miss you... Well, okay I'll sleep while you're gone, but I'll gladly be the Consort of the vampire who next appears through those flames. I'll kneel at his feet and pledge my troth with this very ring, this I swear."

They shared a final smile, and then Spike watched as Xander carefully placed the ring he'd wrought by magic on the finger reserved for wedding bands, right beside its twin. He pressed a lingering kiss on those lush lips and then helped Xander to the ground and smoothed the blanket into place.
"I'll be back before you know it, my love. I promise."

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So, finally, Spike completed his return to the heart of his family, the Clan Aurelius, and after debts of blood and pain had been repaid, he was welcomed into their homestead in the Valley of the Moon.

His insane Sire, Drusilla, was very pleased to see him, and whispered in dark corners about kittens and fires and rings. She told him there were trials still to come, that he must listen now and wait, but he had always been the impatient type.

The matriarch, the elder of the clan, the bitch called Darla, overheard Spike speaking to his Sire. She'd heard the human stories of the boy who hid in flames, and she knew his clan was not without great power in the neighbouring valley. The thought of William gaining that much influence made her hiss and spit and she devised a plan to give the boy to Angel, her soul-cursed Childe. She knew he'd never dare to use the power for himself and he'd still be loyal only unto her, while his crazy spawn Drusilla and her brat would sooner see her turned to dust.
The spell was cast that night; it threw a veil across Spike's memories. He only knew he'd travelled hard to reach his clan's new home. The boy he loved was locked behind dark shutters in his mind, and in his place was planted lust for another of his kind.

And so it came to be that Spike took Harmony for a mate, a self-obsessive blonde who had been turned by Darla when Dru got bored and demanded a life-sized dolly of her own. But neither spells nor threats nor even promises could make Spike take the bubble-headed bimbo as his Consort for all time. And nobody could make him explain why.

"Tell me again what we're doing here, Angel? Are you honestly telling me a troublesome human is worth all this fuss? Do you even know he's still within the flames?"

"Darla explained it all, before we left, you know that, Wil. The Giles Clan wields much power in the Valley of the Sun. The boy we've been sent to find is of their kin, so
when I claim him as my own they'll take care to keep us sweet. Trade negotiations will be made on Darla's terms from this time on. Now let's be on our way and get this done."

The embarrassing reminder of just how weak his Grandsire really was had Spike trying to figure out why he had decided to return from his solitary wanderings. He'd only ever left because he'd become sick of the way the vampire who had once been his hero was now treated like a disobedient puppy by his Sire.

The firewall surged and flickereded as they approached to within arm's reach, and Angel stretched one out and then leapt back.

"It sears my skin before I'm even close!"

Spike stifled a grin at his Grandsire's whining complaint, and then brushed his hand though the flame and drew it out unharmed. Angel gaped, and Spike could cheerfully have kicked himself. He'd spent all that time keeping the Kiss of Amara secret. Was he going to have to explain it all now and lose that edge, or was there another way? He thought hard and fast...
"It must be that bloody great soul of yours that's making a mess of it all. To cross the flames and claim the boy you have to be undead. The magic must see the spark in you and think you're still alive."

Angel looked away in shame. He'd carried around this curse for a hundred years and more, and knew, because Darla said, that it made him weak. His demon cried out daily for its freedom, promising to end the guilt and grief and constant pain, but Angel knew he had to suffer for his sins. But...

"You'll have to get the boy. Darla says he must be ours. If he's mine I can make sure he isn't harmed... so much."

"I..."

"And you have to wear my face; he must believe that you are me. If Darla learns I failed she'll blame us both."

The stink of fear and self-loathing was heavy in the air and Spike struggled to keep from gagging. The great and mighty Angelus was a brief and dimming memory, growing weaker every time Spike saw the travesty that remained. This piss-poor souled anomaly was terrified of angering his Sire. But, Spike knew, not because he was
worried for himself. What scared him most of all was being responsible for causing pain to others, which of course was how the bitch kept him in line.

Spike sighed heavily. Despite his many faults, Angel was right. Darla would be furious if they returned without the boy. She was already calculating just what his continued survival would be worth to the rest of his family. The bloodstock they kept in the pens all tasted flat, the will to live deserted every one of them within a year, and yet she wanted fresh blood at the table every night. She'd been talking about rotating out the stock when they'd finally left. Harmony had been hanging on very word.

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Angel knew an ancient oral spell to cast a glamour, he needed no ingredients or help. But being such a basic chant he knew it wouldn't last, so as soon as it was cast they'd have to move. However, once his Grandchildde was be-spelled he had to pause. He hadn't seen his likeness in an age. A hand flew up to straighten out the hair and Spike drew back.

"Get back on your horse and ride for home, and don't be seen. I'll bring him to your rooms and then I'll leave."
Once you've gone in and done the dreadful deed you can show Darla what a clever little puppy dog you are."

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Xander's eyelids fluttered open and a welcoming smile bloomed on his lips.

"S... Oh."

*Spike. It should be Spike. It should be William the Bloody standing there, and yet it's not. What do I do?"

The brass and copper rings on his left hand began to burn, reminding him of the oath he'd sworn when last he was awake. This stranger was here in Spike's place, how could he...? The words he'd uttered echoed around his head and then he knew.

"I'll gladly be the Consort of the vampire who next appears through those flames. I'll kneel at his feet and pledge my troth with this very ring, this I swear."

The words he'd thought amusing and romantic had turned around and torn away his heart. He'd sworn an oath and nothing short of death would make him break
it, so he rose to one knee and slipped the ring from where it sat, holding it up on his palm as an offering.

"I swore to become the consort of the vampire who walked through the flames. I am Alexander Giles and I am yours if it is your wish, my lord."

Spike in the guise of Angel took the ring and put it on. It burned against his skin for one short moment that was cool again. He watched the boy raise his head and the ring was forgotten.

He'd never seen such grief, such loss and pain in eyes so young. He had to fight the urge to offer comfort. Instead he nodded once and helped the young man to his feet.

"I am Angel, of the Clan Aurelius, and I accept your gift. You will become my Consort in the Valley of the Moon before the night is done. Gather up that which you wish to take with you and then we'll ride for home."

The looming vampire watched as Xander picked through his things, slipping that knife into his boot, as he turned away. He knew he could not in good conscience kill the vampire he was promised to, but he'd heard strange things about the Aurelius clan and knew he'd best be
well prepared.

The bedroll and water-skin he left on the stony ground, sure that he would have no need for either. As Consort he would sleep where he was told and eat and drink what he was given by the vampire at his side. He was now wholly dependent on the whims of a demon.

Spike watched and saw the blade being tucked away, and bit his tongue to stop the laughter that bubbled up inside his chest. He hoped this pretty boy would run Angel ragged, and Darla too. He admired the daring soul behind sad eyes.

For a moment his thoughts ran wild. If not for Harmony might he want this charming treasure for his own? A scream of 'no-no-no!' within his head made him step back, and then as fast as it flared up it died away. No memory remained of it, or of the previous thoughts; the spell that Darla had cast was still too strong.

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Xander had tried to start a conversation as they rode beneath the stars, but every word he'd spoken had been ignored or frowned upon. Eventually Angel twisted in his
saddle and actually spoke.

"We'll talk when we are safe within the Valley of the Moon. Once home I'll tell you all you need to know. Until then I'd rather you be silent. We are not the only ones out on this night."

His words were quite prophetic. Within an hour they came upon a horde of vicious Knarrl who chased them back towards the Mouth of Hell. They rode for hours until they'd left the demons far behind, then galloped like the wind to beat the dawn.

Xander, never the greatest horsemen of his clan, was sore and out of breath, and required help with his dismount. Angel lifted him down and stepped away with a puzzled frown.

"I'll let you into the house and find someone to put the horses up, then I'll be back to do what's to be done. Wait for me in the hall. Don't wander off, you might get lost. Or worse."

So Xander did exactly as he was told.

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Spike, still guised as Angel, slipped silently around the back of the building and in through what used to be the kitchen. He found his worried Grandsire at the table gripping a book so tight his fingernails were embedded in the spine.

"What took you...?"

"A horde of Knarrl decided we looked tasty so we ran. We rode hard and finally lost them near the mines. Your pretty future Consort is waiting the hall, you'd best see to him before he turns tail and runs. Now give me back my face or Harm will screech at me for hours, she's never liked the look of you at all."

The spell was quickly lifted, and Spike was on his way, not remembering the token the boy had given with his pledge. Once home he slipped the ring into a drawer and quite forgot about it, though Harmony took notice, just in case, as was her way.

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Next evening Xander walked at Angel's side to the meeting hall, the fang marks on his neck still red and
sore. One bite and then a guttural incantation he'd been urged to mimic back had been the culmination of those waiting years. He felt let down.

He'd expected to be sore in places other than his neck this evening, but the vampire in whose bed he'd slept had left him on his own and stayed elsewhere after explaining that they didn't have to rush. It was obvious to Xander that the vampire who had claimed him was the oddest of the bunch, and that meant odd. He wondered if his claimant meant to court him just like Spike had done, and then wondered if the pain he felt around his heart each time he thought that name would ever fade or go away.

And then they stepped in through the doorway, and Xander learned fast that that pain would not so easily die. The very first person he saw when he entered the room was his lover, his demon, his Spike, in the arms of a blonde. And when he looked up and their eyes met, a new blow was struck. For Spike's eyes held nothing but plain curiosity, not a hint of their love or of promises broken at all.

And as Xander's heart broke into tiny crystalline pieces, his claimant led him forward and made introductions,
oblivious to his Consort's pain, Spike's confusion, and Harmony's calculations.

Food was provided for Xander to eat as the vampires discussed their new bargaining chip, but the smells and the tastes and the sights and the memories made for a very bad mix. Fighting his stomach to keep it in place, Xander surrendered to shock. His love looked right through him, as though they'd not met, and his claimant was of the same Clan. If he didn't know better he'd swear that Lord Rayne had come up with this cruel, twisted plan.

"I'm... I'm feeling unwell, my lord, please may I leave? I'd like to go back to the house and lie down. I fear that I'm missing my circlet of flame." He smiled, weakly, and then paled as Darla turned to the blonde who was sitting on Spike's lap.

"Harmony, take him back to Angel's house and lock him in. We'll introduce him to the rest of the clan tomorrow, when he's fit. Don't be long, you know how William pines when he's without you."

Obediently Harmony bounded over and took Xander's arm in a pinching grip, long sharp talons curled into his
flesh, but he didn't flinch.

"You know how I love to snuggle with you, Spikey, so be good. I'll walk the puppy home and come straight back."

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The couple walked in silence across the courtyard, each one deeply focussed on their private thoughts. Xander wondered whether he'd survive the pain of seeing Spike so very often in the company of another, while Harmony tried to understand the look this human had worn when he'd seen her in the arms of Spike.

They reached the house and Harmony pushed him in, and down the hall towards a door with solid bolts and bars attached.

"Just remember, puppy, you belong to Angel and Spike's mine. You stay away from him and we'll get on fine. Now, Darla said to lock you in so you don't go wandering off, and this is the only room I know that bolts from the outside."

She shoved him hard into the unlit, totally unfurnished room and closed the door up tight.
"I'm sure Angel will let you out when he goes to bed!"

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Xander spent an hour in tearful silence wishing for what might have been, before finally taking heed of the whispers in his head that told of burning fishes and molten iron and loudly snapping twigs.

The words made little sense, but when the twisted ring of shiny copper he had created with fire magic began to warm and then to glow upon his finger he had a thought. Each time he'd tried to exercise his power back there, with Spike, he'd worked upon a twig or knife or nail. The time had come to try and form an independent flame, a torch to chase away his prison's gloom.

It took him several tries and some frustration but, eventually, there grew a flickering spark upon his palm. With focus and determination, very soon it grew, resolving to a ball that he could hold in both cupped hands. The fire flared and danced and shifted, almost seemed alive, and never tried to disobey his will. The magic had indeed stayed with him once he'd left the flame, and Xander knew that somehow this was meant
to be a sign.

A rattle of the door gave Xander time enough to douse the flame, confident in the knowledge that he could call it back at will. When Angel stumbled in, too drunk to stand without some help, Xander scrambled to his feet and helped the vampire to his bed. A hand locked round his wrist made it impossible to leave, so Xander took his place beside his snoring lord and master, mouthing prayers that he might sleep the whole day through.

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Time moved on, slowly, and Angel began to grow fond of his Consort. Before the month was out he was sleeping curled around the warm body next to him, replete and purring.

Xander began to adjust to the stabbing pain that pierced his heart each time he caught sight of Spike, whether he was with Harmony or alone. The blankness on his face was hard to take, made even worse by occasional expressions of remembrance and love, though they faded fast.

And then came the day that Harmony took an interest in
the ring he'd made so many months ago. She asked to know who'd made it, what he'd traded for it, where the ring was from, and he had brushed off every question, quite determined she would never learn the truth. But then she struck the fatal blow by uttering these words:

"My Spikey's got a prettier one than that, all copper and brass. The one you have is like a piece of junk compared to his."

Xander's heart stopped beating, and then resumed at a furious pace.

"You lie! I made this ring myself and one other band besides. I gave that as a token gift to Angel when he braved the Mouth of Hell to claim me as his Consort."

In answer, Harmony reached into her dress and withdrew a length of braided leather, hanging from which was a ring that Xander recognised immediately.

"But... When? How did he get this? Did Angel...?"

Harmony smiled, all teeth and viciousness as she shook her pretty head.
"My darling came back wearing it with you right by his side. He told me the funny secret in our bed. He said that Angel's soul had stopped him passing through the flame. Instead he spelled my Spikey so they looked just like real twins, and then he sent Spike in to get you out. Angel came home quietly so that Darla didn't see; he really is a coward underneath all that handsome brooding. Once Spike was home, he came to me and took your old ring off without a thought. Your Angel's not a hero, not even close, and you were tricked!"

*He kept the ring. He tricked me. He kept the ring. He tricked me. He kept the ring. He tricked me...*

The words looped round and round inside Xander's head, a constant screaming refrain. Spike had kept the ring; he must have known how that would look, especially after tricking the man he claimed to love by wearing the face of another just to make sure he was no longer free to cause trouble.

Logic had no place in Xander's thoughts now, he was convinced that Spike had planned everything after getting bored with him and taking Harmony as his mate. What better way to get rid of the ex than to trick him into blood-bond slavery with a fellow demon? He had to
know that Xander would never willingly break his oath.

Xander's feet carried him swiftly to Angel's side as he sat talking with Darla, Spike and Drusilla in the great hall, and he wasted no time in getting his revenge.

"My lord, I can be silent about this no longer. Harmony has told me the truth about the night I was rescued from the Mouth of Hell, and now I feel I must return the favour. All this time I have wondered why you waited so long to take me when you knew that I was willing and eager for more after that night, and now I understand the reason why. That night we rode home beneath the stars it was not you who stopped the horses and bade me to dismount. It was not you who laid me down and touched me until I begged for mercy, and for more. It was not you who stole my innocence and replaced it with despair." He swallowed hard, and looked across the table at his open-mouthed audience. "It was Spike."

Before Darla's fury had time to focus, before Angel had begun to move from his seat towards the Grandchilde he wished to rend limb from limb in jealous rage, Drusilla turned in her seat and with a piercing shriek threw Spike onto the floor.
"You wicked Childe! You broke my Daddy's heart and you must pay!" A litany of ancient dialects and something else, spewed from snarling lips as she cast her curse. When she'd done, Spike's body was as stiff as stone; his wide blue eyes the last remaining outlet for his screams.

"Drusilla, what have you done?"

The insane vampire turned a ripe-plum smile upon her Sire. "Why Daddy, I turned my baby boy to stone, all for you. He'll stay like this until we burn him up, and burn we will. We'll build a giant bonfire just for him, and we'll dance and sing. And there'll be games and gifts and burning baby fishes for everyone!" Drusilla whirled like a dervish around the prostrate body of her only childe, singing gleefully of watching him turn to ash.

Angel looked angry but confused, and Darla's smile stretched from ear to ear as she realised she was finally free of the hateful brat who had never missed a chance to needle her.

Xander felt sick. He couldn't understand how everything had gone so very wrong so very fast. The demon he loved was going to burn alive and it was all his fault. No matter how badly he'd been treated it was no excuse. A hand
pulled on his arm, and a sweet voice singsonged in his ear.

"Dance with me, my Kitten, dance with crazy Dru. I have a secret, but I'll share with you."

Xander glanced to his left where Angel and Darla stood head to head, discussing something, Spike? in sibilantly subsonic hisses. No help would come from that quarter, he surmised, so he allowed himself to be led around the table to stand beside Spike. Dru pulled him into her arms and began to sway to the music in her head.

"Oh, Kitten, you are so brave and gleaming; there's such pretty fire in your soul. You make me proud. But you have to stay true, Kitten, don't let Daddy crumble or it's all for naught. My Spike is in his headspace now, breaking down locked doors. Pretty soon he'll find the key to open Grandmama's work, and then he'll scream so loud that all will surely see. There has to be a fire, a glorious fire as tall as trees. And you must throw yourself into the flames." Xander tried to pull away in horror, but Drusilla held him fast, determined to share the secret she had kept so very long.

"You are the fire, Kitten, you are the flame. You are the
heart of it all. Grandmama hid behind blue eyes and gave my baby to my greedy little doll. Left me all alone again, they did. Wasn't fair. I couldn't see the knots she'd made, I couldn't pick them free, but now you've burned them all to crumbling ashes. Soon my boy will know his heart again and you'll be free. And one day it will just be Daddy and me."

Drusilla spun away from him and twirled across the floor towards the rest of her family, singing as she went.

"So build it high, and build it fast, and set my boy to burn. Everyone shall see what they shall see."

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Drusilla's words scattered and regrouped in Xander's mind, each time forming a different shape. He knew she was trying to tell him something important. Spike had told him his Sire was a Seer, though she had been driven insane by Angelus' attentions well before he'd gifted her with a demon.

A heavy hand landing on his shoulder broke his concentration, and he glanced up to see that Angel was crouched before him, looking upset.
"I'm sorry that my actions, or my lack of action, hurt you. I trusted Spike with much more than I should have. Darla and Drusilla have resolved to see this through, but..."

Xander heard him waver and stepped in, as Dru had said.

"Let him burn. Set the fire and watch him turn to dust. You know he only brought this on himself. There's nothing you can do to call a halt, it's much too late. Darla's looking forward to the time when he is gone, she's never made a secret of her hate."

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From the setting of the sun to the partying hour of midnight, every minion was out collecting wood. The bonfire grew and grew until it was taller than every man, and then finally Drusilla said enough. Then, with pompous ceremony, Spike was carried out and laid in frozen repose at the very top.

Harmony wailed and screamed her grief so loudly Xander finally tried to tell the truth. Drusilla pulled him back, touched a finger to his lips and shook her head.
"Don't do it Kitten, don't give up the game until it's through. You have to let the flames climb to the roof before you turn. Then you tell my Angel, tell my darling Daddy what is true. You love your blue-eyed demon still, you do, and he loves you."

She moved to let him go, and then leaned in for one last note.

"I've one more secret left and then I'm done, so listen close. The bite my Daddy gave you and the words you shared are false. A Consort can't be claimed without a demon. And Angel has my Angelus, my Black Prince, locked up tight. He'd never speak a word of any claim. The truth, my darling Kitten, is that you're just another boy. A boy whose kiss can steal a love from stone."

Drusilla pushed him away towards Angel and skipped off to find a better place to watch the coming show. Xander slowly walked towards the vampire who apparently had no real claim on him, if he were to believe what he'd just been told. And if he believed that, he would have to accept that Spike did love him and that meant...

Everything crashed in on him at once, and the meaning of every rambling word Drusilla had tossed his way
suddenly became painfully clear.

Spike did love him. Grandmama, Darla, must have learned of that and cast a memory spell so she could pair him off with Harmony, keeping Xander free for Angel. Everything he'd seen and heard since his arrival, from the rapid escalation of numbers in the bloodstock pens to the overheard calculation of how many 'non-renewables' they could claim each month, suddenly gelled and he realised he had been nothing but a pawn in Darla's game. He wondered how many people had died to keep him alive, and how his family could justify the cost, but he understood, finally, that people will do unimaginable things for the one they love. Including scaling a burning pyre for one last kiss.

"Angel, I'm sorry. I've loved Spike longer than you know, and he loves... loved me. I know you've come to care for me, but you've never touched my heart. That belongs to he who is set to burn. My family will make sure Darla pays for what she's done."

Whatever Angel was about to say was lost when a gleeful yell went up.

"Burn him! Burn him! Burn him! Burn him!" And then a
second cry ran through the crowd as the pile was lit all around its base.

"I don't want to live without him!" Xander screamed, and took off running, scrambling over the flames that were eagerly licking up the sides of the rough construction until he reached the platform at the top.

Once there he took the rigid form of his true love in his arms and gently placed a kiss on cold hard lips. And then he waited. And watched, as the fire took hold around him and began to creep ever closer to their perch.

The very first movement Spike made was to tangle one of his hands in Xander's shirt and tug him closer.

"Love you."

The words, whispered in a cracked and creaky voice, were a benediction and Xander's smile was filled to the brim with joy.

"Love you too, and I'll prove it just as soon as we get out of this mess."

"What exactly do you...?"
"Shhh, I've got a plan. I really like your Sire, by the way, I think she's mad but sweet. She told me I'm the fire and the flame. I hope she's right. Now close your eyes and hold on tight, please don't let me go. If I'm right, the only way out is in."

The centre of the wooden structure that was supporting the weight of both bodies slowly began to sink as the heat below intensified and burned through with a fury. Soon the two were in the very heart of the inferno, flickering walls of flame at every side, yet neither one was touched by a single spark.

They stayed curled up together as the conflagration raged, and then slowly died out, leaving them to lie on a bed of superheated ash within a skeleton of partially burnt up logs. The party had broken up as dawn drew near, and now, as the sun began to creep above the horizon, the pair crept out and brushed each other down.

"Pet, we're a mess."

"Well, yes, but that can hardly come as any great surprise. We've spent the night being toasted after all." Xander looked around and began to panic. "Oh gods, we
have to find somewhere to hide until it's dark. The sun's near up and I won't have you dust now that we're free."

"Xander, love, you'll have to wait for any explanations, but it's enough to know I'm not going to combust. It's magic, pet, so trust it, yeah? You've got a heavy touch of it yourself. Now let's pick out our rides and we'll be off."

As they moved towards the stables, Xander nibbled nervously on his lip.

"About that 'off'. Do you have any particular place in mind, because I know my family would love a visit, and I'm sure they'd like you once they got to know you. Even though you're a vampire, you're..."

"I'm evil, Xander. Never doubt it."

"Couldn't you be evil while you helped them get rid of Darla?"

Spike sighed. "You're gonna be nothing but trouble, aren't you, Pet?"

~~~~~Fade to Black~~~~~