

Rating: NC-17, eventually. (Yes, 'eventually' IS one of my favourite words. LOL)

*Disclaimer: Joss said they were mine... no really. Uh... crap. No he didn't. *grumps**

*A/N: My brain is a place which is both scary AND weird. Just in case you guys hadn't figured that out yet. *snerk* Set early in season 7 (Buffy); quickly goes AU. In like paragraph one... or maybe two.*

Hearts in the Balance

**by
Tisienne Blue**

Part One

Xander was sleeping face down in the book he was supposed to be using for research. Of course, that wasn't exactly a new thing, considering the kind of hours he'd been putting in at the new job site... the job site of which he was the foreman, meaning anything that went wrong was his fault. He'd definitely been taking the position seriously, and they all knew it. Understood it, even.

So no, the fact that Xander Harris—onetime doughnut-

fetcher, former fiance to the once again non-vengeance-y Anya, and all around funny guy—was nodding off wasn't exactly surprising. In fact, they'd more or less come to expect it over the last few months.

Buffy stifled a giggle at the odd mutters her friend was making, though she made a mental note to ask him later whether the 'bad puppy' he kept mumbling annoyed-sounding threats towards was housebroken.

"What are we looking for again," she whispered to Willow, doing her best to let Xander enjoy his nap.

The redhead frowned slightly and turned a few more pages in the truly enormous tome she was searching. "Um, I can't be sure, but... anything related to a... thumbolwaithe ratcheticon...?" She bit her lip and sighed. "It's hopeless, Buffy. We've been looking for *days*, and none of us have even found the tiniest little thing that sounds even remotely like what Giles said, and I'm starting to think that Xan has the right idea, because... sleep? SO wants to be my friend right now." Not to mention the little fact that when she was sleeping she didn't feel the urge to open herself to the energies flowing around her and use them in ways that might possibly be... wrong.

Dawn snorted. “Yeah? Try being fifteen and having Sister-Slayer forcing you to do *Geometry* instead of reading the cool demon-y books, Wills, cuz I’m pretty sure I win in the ‘this is so pointless’ [sweepstakes](#).”

Buffy was a mere second away from lying to her little sister again and telling her that she really *would* need Geometry and Algebra when she was older, but fortunately the front door of the Magic Box flew open just then with a loud bang.

“Right,” the just-arrived platinum blond announced with a tiny smirk at having made them all jump, “checked about. No word at all on the tumbelty thingy Watcher’s got us looking for.”

Xander blinked and forced himself upright. “What’d I miss?” He looked around and frowned grumpily, rubbing his forehead. “Thumbelty thingy, Spike?”

The vampire shrugged. “Ya know... the whatever we’re supposed ta be looking inta?”

Brown eyes danced, even as Xander’s lips twitched into a sweet smile. “You mean the Thaemba’al Wraith

Rac'etscia'an, baby? Of course you didn't find it. It's pure energy. No shape or form *to* find."

Buffy blinked. "Huh?"

Willow blinked. "Wha'... but, Xander, how...?"

Dawn blinked. "*That's* what it's called?"

Spike blinked, too. "Did..." He looked at the girls. "Did droopy here just call me *baby*?"

Xander rolled his eyes and laughed. "In order... Buffy- what we're looking for is a being of energy. It can exist in more than one place... even in more than one *time*, for that matter. So looking for it physically isn't really gonna do much good." He grinned. "Willow- 'how' what? It's right here in the book. Says so. And okay, it says it in Protheriant Lascopitet, but it still says it."

He ignored the completely confused look on his two friends' faces and scratched the itchy spot just beyond his hairline. Some reaction to the ink in the book, he thought, and it wouldn't be the first time.

"Yes, Dawn, that's what it's called. The glottal stops can

be a bi... uh, a female dog... until you get used to them, so I get why you might not have remembered. And Spike...?”

He turned his soft, deep eyes to the still and shocked form near the door. “Of *course* I called you baby. The girls might not like it when we get all touchy-feely in public, but they’ve never minded our little nicknames.” He looked again at the girls in question and frowned slightly at the wide-eyed stares they were giving him. “Or has something changed?”

The others didn’t know what to say, except of course for Willow, whose response was exactly what could be expected of her.

“And how the *heck* is it that you can read Protheriant Lascopitet?” she demanded almost jealously. The language had been giving her trouble for close to three years, after all.

Part Two

The interesting thing to Spike was that even after the emergency call to the Summers' home had brought Giles running like the good dog he was, Harris was the only one not casting thinly veiled accusatory looks at Red. Hell, the boy looked as confused as the rest of them, although clearly for different reasons.

"I swear, Giles," the redhead was saying yet again, as though repetition would force the suspicious look from the Watcher's face, "I didn't even *think* anything like... whatever's going on! I mean, come on! Why would I want Xander to think he was involved with *Spike* of all... people? And... and he can read Protheriant Lascopitet! If I was gonna make someone be able to do that—even without meaning to—it would be *me*, and I can't, so..."

"Hey," the boy said, his brow still creased, "Why is everybody ganging up on Willow? She didn't do anything! She *wouldn't* do anything! Gods, she's been the High Priestess of the Sunnydale Coven for like... five years now, right? I mean, she's only twenty-two and she's got pagans from all over the *world* coming here to study with her. The *last* thing she'd ever do is misuse her

Gods-given abilities!”

And again Spike found himself blinking, though this time it was in a silence so loud, it echoed.

“Right, then. All those in favor of living in Harris’s fantasy, raise your hand. Those who want ta stay here on planet Earth, don’t move.” He looked around and smirked at the way Willow’s hand was twitching, then turned to the boy again.

“That’s *no* votes for your side, pet. Meaning *zero*. ‘Your side’ being the world where Red’s in control of her powers and I’m somehow—fuck knows why—your snuggle-bunny.”

It had to be the soul that was making him regret putting the stunned and nearly destroyed look on the boy’s face, but even *it* knew the truth.

He was not—never had been—anything more to Xander Harris than just another bloodsucking fiend.

Even living with the boy had only made Harris more civil, but never *friendly* as such, and definitely nothing that would even suggest any stronger interest.

No, the boy was clearly delusional.

“Off his rocker, he is,” Spike announced as though that put an end to it, and maybe it did, except...

The whelp *could* suddenly read whatever the hell language it was; Watcher had confirmed it. And if that was so, then... how?

Even while deep in thought, he'd clearly been following the conversation—which was more of a free for all if he were going to be honest—because when he finally turned his attention back to the rest of the group, the boy was speaking on exactly that subject.

“You guys do realize,” Harris was saying, “that this is *so* not funny, right? Okay, I fell asleep during research again, but trying to completely freak me out? *Not* cool. But fine.” He sighed and scratched his head. “I’ll play along.”

“I was still working at Dog on a Stick, remember? Oh, wait. Of course you don’t. ‘cause I’ve been living in a fantasy, right?” The boy glared at them all. “*You*,” he sharpened the look, directing it solely at Buffy, “kept trying to stake Spike, even though you knew how I felt

about him.”

The Slayer smirked then shrugged. “Vampire. Kinda my job, Xan.”

“Uh-huh... except when it came to Angel, right?” Xander’s brown eyes became as smug as the look on his face. “Anyway, Spike thought it might help if I learned some of the languages we were struggling with in research sessions. I guess he figured it would help win you all over.”

Willow blinked and shot a glance at the vampire and Spike shrugged.

“Might be something I’d do,” he admitted. “You know, if I was actually involved with the boy and wanted ta cozy up ta you lot. Better strategy than trying ta keep him from spending time with you, anyway, which would likely have me meeting the pointy end of a sharp stick sooner rather than later, yeah?”

Giles frowned yet again and polished his glasses for possibly the twentieth time in as many minutes. If he kept it up, Spike figured the lenses would last maybe another hour at best.

“Turned out, I’m good with languages,” Xander went on, smiling sheepishly. “Or at least the non-human kind. I had Lamboscan, Rashpthitinam, Bustingla and Harshethian down in like... three months. That’s when you,” he looked at Giles, “started me on Protheriant Lascopitet.”

Xander laughed quietly. “Man, I felt like a moron for the first few months. I mean, the word structure alone! And let’s not get into the sentences... or should I say the skip-diagramming of them!” He shook his head. “Gods, it took me close to a *year* to get it straight! But I was lucky. Spike helped me more than I ever thought he would. It was like... as soon as he knew it really mattered to me, he was on board. Well, as long as it didn’t cut into our shagging time too much.”

What the vampire found fascinating was that the boy didn’t blush until *after* the assembled ‘ewwwwww’-s from the girls and the Watcher’s disturbed throat-clearing. It was like Harris hadn’t even thought about the words before the reaction to them, and that meant...

Whoever had done this to the boy, they’d done a bloody good job of it. Harris truly *believed* that he and Spike had

been involved since before the chip, and that being so...

“Wait,” Spike ordered. “What about your demon-chit? Are you trying ta tell me you picked me over her?”

Xander blinked, confusion clear on his face as he finally pulled his fingers from his hair. “Demon-chit? What demon-chit? Come on, baby, you know there’s never been anyone else for me. I mean, ever since Buffy’s *boyfriend* tried to give me to you as a snack, I’ve known I’m gay. And so have you!” He growled. “This game is really getting fucking *old!* I’m *done!*”

Spike’s eyes widened as Harris jumped up in a very uncharacteristic way, with enough force that the chair he’d been sitting in skidded a few feet across the floor before toppling over in a clatter of wood on wood.

“I fell asleep,” the brunette snarled angrily. “I’m *sorry!* But this whole ‘make Xander think he’s crazy’ routine is *way* out of line! I’m out of here... and fuck you all! Fuck you very much!”

Spike shrugged at the looks that were suddenly cast his way. “What? I don’t know what bug’s crawled into his brain and made him all ‘Spike’s my bloke’ either, do I?”

He growled softly when Red pouted, quickly followed by Dawn. Then Buffy arched one brow in that 'I'm demanding that you do something about this, but since I'm not saying it out loud it doesn't count' way of hers and he growled again.

"Fine!" he snapped, "but if he makes a pass at me, I'm gonna hit him, got it?"

Giles cleaned his glasses yet again, finally placing them back on his nose as the door closed behind Spike. "Well. That was..."

"If you say 'interesting', I'm gonna sneak in here tomorrow and mix up all the cards in your catalogue," Dawn threatened suddenly. "That was *not* 'interesting'. That was..."

"Freaky," Willow finished when Dawn seemed lost for words.

"Ohhhhh, yeah," Buffy added, "a mega-dose of wiggins, here."

Willow ducked her head and gave them all a skittish

glance. “Um, you guys know I didn’t... *do* anything, right? I mean, ‘cause I wouldn’t! Didn’t! I’ve been all no-magic-girl for ages now, and...”

Giles sighed, then frowned, then nodded. “Yes. I do believe you, Willow. I should not have simply assumed... but you must admit that in the past...”

The redhead blushed deeply. “I’m better now.”

And as that was more or less true, they all settled down to spend still more time researching, although this time it was into what sort of creatures could enter a sleeping mind and change the memories it contained.

Sadly, none of them thought to check the text Xander had been sleeping on... and even if they had, none of them were familiar enough with it to have noticed that one glyph—which had been written in the margin of the page he’d napped on—was missing.

Part Three

“Hey! Bloody hell,” Spike growled, “Cool your bloody jets, mate! You forget it’s bleeding midnight? All manner of creepy-crawlies about in the dark on the sodding Hellmouth that would love ta get their... bits... inta you!”

Xander frowned and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, though he slowed his rapid strides just a bit. “So what?” he mumbled back, hoping he didn’t sound as dejected as he felt. “You... *all of you!*... don’t mind making me think I’m nuts, but you don’t want me to end my misery by becoming a midnight morsel for some peckish Promerat?”

The vampire arched his scarred brow as he reached the boy and fell into step beside him. “And who’s been telling you ‘bout Promerati, mate? Didn’t think Watcher knew of them...”

The brunette snorted. “*You* told me, Spike! Gods, we’d only been together for like... three days when you warned me about them!”

Blue eyes narrowed under a suddenly furrowed brow.

“Yah...? What’d I say, then?” Because he’d be damned if he’d ever even considered telling *Buffy* about the Promerati, and he loved her! Didn’t he...?

Xander sighed, tired of going along with the game his friends had somehow managed to rope his lover into joining. “You know what you told me,” he almost whispered, sounding defeated. “They look like humans, act like humans, even seem to age like humans. But they feed on emotions, and if they can manage to get you to run through a *series* of emotions, they can pretty much suck the humanity out of you.” He sighed. “Usually, they’ll try to do that by making you think they like you, then that they *need* you... even love you. And once you believe that, even in the short-term, they tear you down to nothing. Only they do it faster than, say... your friends and your vampire lover playing some stupid *game* with you... and when the Promerati are finished with you, you don’t feel anything ever again. You’re just a shell, going through the... motions.” He swallowed hard. “*Fuck!* Why can’t I find one?”

And somehow the idea of the boy—no matter how annoying Spike sometimes found him—becoming a shadow of himself was just... wrong. Besides which, Harris—Xander—seemed so sincere. The whole time in

the shop, he'd been oozing truth and confusion and finally despair and fear. Even the fury at the end had been liberally laced with terror.

When Spike added all of that to the fact that what the boy had just said was pretty much exactly the way he would have described the demons in question, had he been going to describe them to anyone, he came to one inescapable conclusion.

Xander Harris was insane, yes.

But he'd been made that way in less than a few hours, from what Buffy and Red had said, so that meant... 'Dru', he thought.

But why would his ex want to make Harris nuts? To get *his* attention, maybe?

No. That didn't make any sense. At all.

If Drusilla were going to use her skills to make *anyone* loopy, it would have been Buffy, because it was Buffy that he loved. So what the hell was wrong with Harris?

Whatever it was, there was something inside of him that

had both demon and soul objecting to the notion of the boy being emotionless. Cold. Heartless.

“Can’t find one because you’re being escorted by a vampire, mate,” he finally said, answering the rhetorical question deliberately, “And you’re gonna *keep* bein’ escorted thus until I find out what the bloody fuck is going on!”

Xander jumped a bit then shifted away when he felt one well-remembered hand at the small of his back. “Don’t... touch me,” he gritted out. “Not until you admit that you’re fucking *playing* me... and say you’re sorry. Or more to the point, *prove* you’re sorry!”

The blond sighed and shook his head. “Right, then. Hard way, it is.” He grabbed Harris by the back of his shirt and literally dragged him down the street to the small park-like area in the middle of the traffic circle off of Main Street.

He snarled at Sunnydale’s three homeless people, then gave in to the soul’s badgering and threw them a twenty before tossing the boy onto the bench and settling down beside him.

Xander's eyes widened at suddenly finding himself on the bench, then he glared at the vampire. "No fair! We agreed you wouldn't use your 'special skills' outside the bedroom! Or not against me, anyway!" He scratched his head violently with one hand, the other caught in the vampire's cool grasp.

The fact that he was holding thick, strong, warm fingers in a laced grip was irrelevant, Spike figured. In fact, if he chose to see it as his method of keeping the boy there, then who would doubt it? Bloke wasn't going to run off without his hand, after all.

"That's just the thing, mate," he murmured after a moment in which he found and held sable eyes with his own. "I never agreed ta that." Spike frowned. "Know you think me and your mates are having one on, yah? But we're not, Harris. Something's *wrong* with you and you just don't see it!" He chose to ignore the 'bedroom' comment, even though he was suddenly picturing just what he could make the boy want, what with his 'special skills' and all.

The human's eyes softened, then softened more, until Spike thought they might melt entirely and leak out of their sockets.

“Y-you... really m-mean that, d-don’t you?” Xander whispered. He’d never seen Spike look like this, after all. Not even when they’d had their very serious talk about claiming and mating and consorts and what it all meant. “Y-you... don’t have any i-d-dea of wh-h-h-at I’m t-talking ab-b-bou-out...”

And oh, fuck... suddenly he wished he really *was* Xander’s lover. If only so he could say ‘psyche!’ and snog the bloke into smiling again. But he wasn’t, so...

“Sorry, mate,” he said softly, shifting just a few inches closer on the park bench, “I really don’t. *My world...?* Yeah, the great poof offered you ta me that time. But nothing came of it. Made a deal with Slayer, took Dru and left so Buffy could send Angelus... Angel... to Hell. Came back and kidnapped you and Red so Red’d do a spell ta get my Dru back for me. You were involved with that Cordelia chit at the time.”

Spike almost laughed at the look of combined horror, amazement, fascination and disgust that got him.

“Me and *Cordelia*? Like... *Cordelia Chase*?” Xander yelped, “Oh, my Gods! I am so not a glutton for

punishment!” He blushed. “Um... well. Uh. Not that kind, anyway...”

Well, well... boy was like an onion. Layer upon layer. But he'd think about that later. For now...

“Left again. Came back for a ring, I did.” And if vampires could have blushed, Spike would have then. That had definitely been his most embarrassing debacle ever.

Xander couldn't help smiling. “The Gem of Amarra! I remember that. You wanted to come to that stupid picnic with me.” He laughed. “I *told* you I didn't mind missing it, but off you went to find that damned ring!”

Tanned skin grew slightly pinkish. “I didn't see you for almost a week and I was so sure you'd hooked up with some vamp or other... but there I was at the Harris family picnic, trying to keep from being flattened by one passing-out relative or another, and when Uncle Jimmy threw up in the potato salad I looked away, and... there you were.”

He ducked his head, brown locks flopping over his eyes. “Even my Dad sobered up enough to admit that you were fucking gorgeous... of course, he also asked how

much I was paying you to be seen in public with *me...*”

He laughed softly at the angry growl he heard.

“The rest of the picnic was amazing,” Xander admitted quietly. “Everyone wanted to impress you. Then you made that comment about not being attracted to ‘pickled people’ and...” his fingers squeezed lightly at the cooler ones his own were tangled with, forgetting for the moment that Spike didn’t remember their past, “I think that was the first time *ever* that the ‘clan’ didn’t drain all the kegs.”

He turned to give Spike a kiss, only to stop short at the stunned look on the vampire’s face.

“Didn’t lose the ring ta Buffy in your fantasyland, then?” Spike whispered, only realizing that he’d fucked things up when the hand in his tried to tug away—violently.

“Stop... stop it, mate!” He held tighter. “Didn’t say it wasn’t a *good* fantasy, did I?”

Xander struggled a bit more, though he knew it was pointless. He’d had years to get used to the idea that when Spike wanted him to stay, he would ‘bloody well stay’, after all. “Fine. Stopped. But you don’t believe me,

so what now?”

Spike frowned and sidled just a wee bit closer again. “ ‘s not that I don’t believe you, mate. Know *you* believe everything you’re saying, don’t I? Can sense a lie, I can.” His brow furrowed. “Figure it has ta be you... or else it’s all the rest of us, yah?”

And while Xander truly wanted to shake his head and walk away, he just... couldn’t.

“Fine,” he ground out, “What’ll it take, Spike? How do I convince you? Because I’m starting to think maybe I should just... go. Away.” And it was true. His lover didn’t remember their life! Didn’t remember everything they’d...

He swallowed hard. “I can’t live like this,” he whispered, scratching the itchy spot in his hair again.

Spike cocked his head, ignoring the deep-seated *need* to keep the boy right where he was. “Tell me...” he began, then shook his head.

“If I told you about the Promerati after three days, mate,” he said, starting again, “then you must know

other things that I've never told anyone, yah? Things that even bleeding *Angel* wouldn't know..."

Xander considered that, then nodded. "Okay... um, there's this spot on the back of your left knee that makes you..." He frowned when Spike shook his head. "You used to have your nipples pierced because Dru... fuck. Dru knew, so... no secret from anyone who knows how to interpret what she uses as English..."

The vampire sighed but squeezed the long, warm fingers.

Brown eyes dropped for a good minute or two and Spike was sure he'd made the boy see reason, but then Xander's head rose again and wide, sparkling eyes met his triumphantly.

"You have a scar on your right inner thigh," Xander announced, "and you've always said it was from a mugging when you were like twenty-three. But it's really from when you were ten years old and your cousin John sicced his dog on you. You said you'd never told anyone else the truth about that!"

Spike blinked. "I... I told you that...?"

It was inconceivable that the whelp could know that from anywhere other than his own lips. It wasn't in the Watcher's Chronicles, wasn't even in the Aurelius Histories. He'd never told *anyone* how he'd really gotten that scar—not Angelus, not Dru, not... anyone—and that meant... what?

Xander shivered slightly as Spike went silent, but then he rallied. If Spike didn't know him the way he remembered them, then maybe he'd want to hide the shame of Xander knowing the truth, and... and clearly this wasn't *his* Spike, because *his* Spike would have had him ass up and begging by then, just for bringing up that story, and...

“Uh, or maybe I'm just crazy, like you said. Yeah, that's it... crazy Xander... I guess I'd better go home and get me an appointment with a Doctor with lots of drugs. Yeah. Many drugs to keep me from being so insane...”

Spike shook his head slowly, giving the panicking young man an appraising gaze. “No, mate... sorry. Can't let you go away. Not when you know *that*.”

Xander paled, caught in those wicked blue eyes. “Wh-what are y-you g-g-gonna d-do...?” he whispered, unable to speak any louder.

Spike's head spun, even as he lost himself in wide brown eyes.

'I love Buffy...' he heard himself thinking, 'but she'll never love me... even with this soul, I'm not good enough, not *pure* enough... and he *does* love me! I can see it. *Feel* it! And he knows things he shouldn't know... things he *didn't* know this time yesterday, and none of them are simple things, and maybe it's...'

"Maybe it's not you, pet," Spike whispered, unsurprised to find his lips a mere inch from the boy's. "Maybe it's the rest of us who've been magicked... made to know something that isn't..." He gasped and shook his head at a sharp pain in what had once been his heart, then shook it off and met those hopeful eyes again.

"Let's get you home," was what Spike finally said, though Xander was almost entirely sure that he meant 'us'. 'Let's get *us* home.'

"Y-yeah," he answered, wishing the blond had actually kissed him, considering how close their lips had been.

Part Four

The books had brought them no clue as to what in the hell was wrong with Xander. In fact, they'd discovered absolutely nothing that could even lead them in the right direction aside from a few very vague references to a mythical demon dimension. Mythical because there was no actual record of it ever being accessed; demon dimension because the solitary whispers that *had* been heard over the course of recorded history implied just that.

“This is useless!” Buffy said grumpily for approximately the fifteenth time in as many minutes. “And... and pointless! And... can't we just pick something for me to kill and hope for the best?”

Willow sighed, catching the blonde girl's quick glance from the corner of her eye and closed her own book. “It's

okay, Buffy. I know you're just trying to cheer me up with the whole 'ditzy blonde' thing, but it's not really gonna work. We had classes together, remember?"

The Slayer pouted, then shrugged. "Fine. Whatever. But this really *is* pointless, Wills. We don't even know what we're looking for."

Giles frowned, even as he came out of his small office with tea for them all. "Perhaps..." his brow furrowed as he sat down at the table and flipped a few pages, scanning what he'd already read one more time.

"Perhaps we're looking for the wrong thing. It says... this demon dimension."

"But nobody goes there or comes from there and I don't think there's anything that ever said that they send out random... memory thingies... to screw with good guys like Xander, and I don't see why they would, either, so what about it...?"

Buffy blinked, trying not to laugh. "Way to kick that nasty breathing addiction, Wills!"

Willow frowned. "Pffft... I'm just saying, there's nothing to support..."

Tired fingers removed his glasses and pinched his nose as Giles heaved a long, deep sigh. “Yes, Willow, you’re quite right. However, if you had allowed me to finish...”

The redhead ‘eep’-ed. “S-sorry, Giles.”

Another sigh. “Yes. Well.” Giles rubbed his eyes, wondering just how many more grey hairs he was acquiring due to this latest bizarre happenstance. “I was merely going to suggest that... the mention of this demon dimension brought something to mind. Actually, I’m surprised that neither of you has thought of it. It’s quite... obvious, really.”

The two girls exchanged an annoyed look—Willow because she wasn’t used to missing things, especially obvious ones, and Buffy because Giles wasn’t getting to the point.

“It’s simple,” Giles went on, polishing his glasses quickly. “Do you girls remember the Vampire version of Willow that was drawn here from another dimension? And Anya’s theory of a world without shrimp, as well?”

Willow bounced. “It’s not our Xan! It’s some *other*

Xander and he's here by accident!" Her excitement faded as swiftly as it had appeared. "But that can't be it, Giles. He was right here. *Right here in front of us!* He fell asleep and then... poof! Different guy when he woke up! No... extra Xander or anything!"

Giles suddenly found himself frowning, as well. "Sod all."

Buffy sighed and shrugged. "It was a good idea, Giles. But it's just his mind that's all... messed up. Too bad that dimension-thingy is a full-body thing. 'Cause if it was just his brain, then..."

The bespectacled man and the young redhead blinked, then Willow grabbed her blonde friend and hugged her hard. "That's it! Buffy, you figured it out! I *knew* you were smart! Told you, even! But did you believe me? Pfffffffftttt! Of course not! But you'll have to now!"

The Watcher released one more put-upon sigh. "Yes, we are all in agreement that Buffy is much brighter than she gives herself credit for. That said, perhaps we might begin to look into who or what might have reason, means, and opportunity to effect such a thing, and upon Xander, of all people."

Willow nodded, still bouncing. “I’ll get the psyche-topical texts from upstairs.”

“Are you *sure* there isn’t something I can go out and kill?” Buffy asked hopefully, only to fall back into her chair with a disappointed grunt. “Fine... I’ll *read*. Hey, maybe we should get Xander to help us! He reads all those freaky demon languages now, right?”

Giles closed his eyes and truly wished he could bang his head against the table without worrying the girls. As he couldn’t, though, he merely forced himself to take a sip of his tea.

“It is going to be a very *long* night,” he murmured, even though it was already close to one in the morning.

Xander turned around slowly in the living room of the

small but somewhat nice apartment that was apparently *his*, baffled by the fact that he recognized his couch, his favorite lamp... his chest against the wall. Baffled because... "I don't live here," he said yet again, just as he'd been saying since Spike had first directed him down Twin Oaks Drive and away from the University, rather than taking him to Sherwood Street and towards the campus.

Spike growled softly, looking around the boy's flat. "You do, mate. Have for more than a year now. Got this place because demon-girl..." he frowned. "Because *Anya* liked it. Was this whole thing where you got split apart and... bloody hell. Never mind."

Brown eyes stared hard at the obviously cheap knock-off of an Oriental rug under the coffee table. "If we were... split up... this Anya and I, I mean... then why did we get back together?"

The vampire growled again. "Not you and Anya, you enormous twit. *You*." He sighed silently, hating the fact that he was treating the bloke this way, but... during the walk to the flat, Spike had come to some unpleasant conclusions.

First was that... whatever was wrong—whether it was with the boy or with the rest of them—eventually it would be fixed. And if it *was* Xander who was... off, he'd be likely to hate Spike if he took advantage, no matter how much he might want to.

Secondly, if it *wasn't* the bloke who was skewed from true, then Spike couldn't be entirely sure of who he really was. How would he—his soul—feel later, if he did something that violated whatever relationship he and the boy had? What if he took things too far... or not far enough? What if he misjudged what the bloke wanted... needed?

And finally, Spike had a plan.

It wasn't a *good* plan, but it was a plan, none the less.

He would wait and see what happened. And if Xander ended up going back to the boy Spike remembered, there would be nothing but goodwill on the other man's end... for not taking advantage, and for *not* making fun.

And then... then Spike could woo the boy, and when Xander finally gave in? It would be the human's own decision, while of sound mind.

It was the fact that Spike *knew* how well he followed his own plans that made 'THE plan' not good. Still, he was going to do his best to follow it.

"Look,' he went on, "there was thing... with a demon in the dump. Had a stick. Split you in two. Red fixed it, so stop gaping like a fish."

Xander swallowed hard. "I... look, S-spike. I'm kind of lost, okay?" He glanced at his lover, then away. "Th-this... I... this isn't... what the *hell* happened? How can I remember my whole *life* and know it's real when you... you're not..." He swallowed a sob, but his voice was still thick with it when he spoke again. "You're not... mine...?"

Bloody fuck. That tone was almost enough to have him pulling the boy close and 'reassuring' him until he passed out. Then again, Spike reminded himself, he'd always been a sucker for being needed.

Drusilla had needed him and he'd existed entirely for her for more than a hundred years.

Buffy had needed him to help her *feel*, and he'd belonged entirely to her for...

“Bloody hell,” he whispered, only then realizing that deep inside, he *knew*... he *had* belonged to her. *Had!* Not did, but *had!* And he’d never noticed, had missed the moment when ‘belonging’ had passed to ‘once belonged to’... had even missed the momentous instant when ‘I love’ had shifted to ‘I love... but I’m not *in love with*’.

It was a stunning and shattering moment, regardless of having known she would never—*could* never— love him.

“I... what?” Spike managed to grunt, “I... missed that, mate.”

He could feel his eyes tearing, feel his heart... breaking. But one thing Alexander Lavelle Harris had never been was pathetic. Or not for the last few years, anyway, and there was fuck-all chance that he was going to start again now, so he just turned away from the vampire and shook his head. “Nothing. It... wasn’t important. I just don’t understand how I could live... *here*. It’s so... not me.”

The blond forced himself to grunt and assume a somewhat normal tone of voice—for him. “What? Too clean? Not enough mold and mildew?” He slapped on a half-hearted smirk and looked around. “Not quite like the

basement of Casa de Drunken Harris, is it? Happy ta say I minded staying here less than there. Then again, you didn't tie me ta a chair in *this* place."

Xander blinked, unable to keep himself from looking at his... *the* vampire. "I tied you to a *chair*? And... when did I live in a basement? Because Dad sold the house after Mom and I left him." He frowned, then sighed deeply at the look on Spike's face. "But you don't think I did, right? Even though you lived with me and Mom while she was making up with her family, and even though you ended up calling her 'Jess-Mum', and she always called you 'son'. Or did I stay with Dad in this bizarre fantasy of yours..." he blinked as the full reality suddenly swarmed over him, "of everyone's?" And it was obviously *everyone's*.

Xander frowned again. "I... I'm crazy, aren't I?"

It was the defeated tone to his boy's voice that had Spike finally moving to his side and wrapping long, slender arms around him. "Hush... hush, mate," the vampire whispered, rocking the young man slightly. "Didn't say that. Just... didn't happen for me, yeah?" He let loose a wistful sigh. "Sounds like a bloody lovely world, though."

As much as Xander wanted to relax into the so-familiar hold on him... as much as he wanted to let himself drown in that comfort, he just couldn't. Spike... wasn't *Spike*, or wasn't the Spike he remembered, and... he wanted *his* Spike, damn it!

And so he stood, stiff and unyielding within the arms he knew and loved. "It is," he agreed, the words emerging through gritted teeth. "Unfortunately, it's not *this* world, so I really need for you to let me go now, ba... Spike."

"No," the vampire murmured, throwing the 'plan' fully out the window. "Seems I don't *care* if you're bug-shagging crazy, mate. Been there myself, haven't I? But you're about a minute away from breaking. Can smell it, yeah?" And that was true enough. The boy reeked of despair and loss. "Not letting you run me off so you can break alone."

And those were possibly the worst words Xander had heard since he'd woken up to find things... wrong. He couldn't afford the *hope* those words made him feel, after all.

Part Five

Spike smirked as he barreled into the Magic Box, his entry earning the usual jumps from those assembled.

“Right, then,” he said with a false grin, “what’d we find out about Chubs and his magically un-licious memory problem?”

Willow and Buffy exchanged glances before turning back to their books. “Uh, maybe you should talk to Giles,” the redhead whispered, sure Spike would hear her, “Because it’s probably not Xander at all... or not *our* Xander...”

Buffy glared at her friend, not even remotely fooled when the girl lowered her head further towards the dusty pages. “Willow!”

Pale blue eyes rolled as Spike pushed his equally pale self away from the chair he’d been leaning against. “Fine. Not like I have any right to know what’s up with the git I

spent the last twelve hours being *pawed* by.”

He gave Willow a short, thankful look. “Nice to see *one* of you gives a rat’s ass about the boy, anyway. Thanks, Red.”

Both girls stared after the blond, wide-eyed.

“Did he just say...” Buffy said slowly.

“Pawed by? *Pawed?*” Willow added, blinking wildly, “Oh, we are *so* right! Not our Xander! *Our* Xander likes girls! ‘Cause, you know...”

“Uh-huh,” Buffy finished, “but... aside from Faith and Cordy, kinda all demons, so...”

They fell into silence, pretending to themselves that they were researching when all the while they were actually staring at the door to Giles’ office, which had been closed ever since the vampire had stalked through it and shut it too quietly behind him.

“You’re gonna *what?*” Spike growled, his eyes wide and golden as the Watcher repeated his words. “You *can’t!* Do you have any sodding idea of how bloody *dangerous* that’d be? Not just for Xan but for... bloody hell, for *everyone!*”

The sad part, Giles would realize later, was that if it had been anyone other than Spike asking him those questions, he would have given them more serious consideration, right from the start. As it was, however, he merely gave the vampire a sharp gaze before responding.

“Really, Spike, I understand your concerns, but quite frankly I *don’t* understand why you believe this to be any of your business.” He gave the blond a short and very fake smile. “Xander has obviously had his conscious mind scrambled with that of a *different* Xander, and as the one he is now seems convinced that you are his... what did you call it? *Snuggle-bunny?*... I’d think you’d be just as anxious as the rest of us to reverse the process. It’s not

as though you have any love for the boy.” Giles chuckled. “Or even liking. Simply allow us to do our job and you’ll be relieved of the... groping advances we were all witness to last night.” Exaggeration or not, Giles figured that would make the vampire see reason.

It took an enormous effort, but Spike finally managed to unclench his fists and let his hands hang loose at his sides. “Can’t say I’d be sorry to see those go,” he lied, “but what if you’re wrong, Watcher? What if you do your bloody *spell* and the Xander we’ve got isn’t from somewhere else? What if he’s just... delusional, yeah? Hit his head, got hit by a bad mix of demon juice... whatever.” He frowned. “What happens then? What’ll your bloody *spell do ta him?*”

Giles frowned. “I... well, honestly! We’d know if Xander had been injured recently. Granted, he works in construction, but he would surely have *said* something if...”

“If he’d had an accident that made him even less useful to you lot than you usually make him feel?” The vampire snorted. “Yeah, I’m betting he’d be running in, shouting about how he got hit on the head by a... whatever they have at those bloody sites. Wouldn’t be at all concerned

that he'd be left out and such."

The frown on Giles' face grew deeper as he admitted silently that Spike was right.

It wasn't entirely unheard of for a strong blow to the head to cause delusions... and Xander *had* been sleeping rather a lot, which was often another sign of head trauma.

"I..." Giles began, swallowing hard at the thought of what actually *could* happen if the spell was performed and Xander wasn't actually... some *other* Xander. "Perhaps we should wait. We'll take him to hospital and see whether there has been some damage we've not been made aware of."

Spike found himself relaxing just a bit at the words, though he made a point of growling more. "Bloody right you will. And who's going to look after the git for the week or so before you can get a sodding appointment?" He smirked at Giles' stunned glance. "What? Boy's not bleeding, not a danger to himself or others, aside from his determination to grab my ass. Take him in to the ER and they'll bloody well laugh at you." He smirked more. "I vote he stays with *you*, Ripper! Not like you couldn't

use his handy delusional demon-language skills, after all... and with any luck, he'll start to think *you're* his fantasy lover," he added when it looked like the man might take him up on it.

Glasses were removed and polished with care as Giles considered the pros and cons of Spike's suggestion. The boy wasn't unattractive, after all, but as Buffy and Willow had pointed out, Xander wasn't gay, and... regardless of whether it was an alternate Xander or *their* Xander with some sort of amnesia, he couldn't bear it if the boy looked at him with horror once he was his proper self again.

Giles cleared his throat uncomfortably, even as he shifted behind his desk to provide himself more... leg room.

"No... perhaps you might consider... that is, I will *require* you to look after him, Spike. And before you ask, there is a hundred dollars a day in it for you. Just... keep him out of trouble."

The vampire smirked and held out his hand. "Payable in advance, Watcher. If I'm going to have to fend off his bloody horrendous advances for a week, I want the cash

up front!”

The older looking but in truth much younger man sighed and gave the blond a *look*. “Turn around. I’m not so much of a fool as to open the safe while you’re watching.”

He waited until Spike was definitely looking the other way, then turned and manipulated what appeared to be a stack of books behind him, darting glances over his shoulder the entire time.

Spike was grinning when he turned back around at Rupert’s announcement of being finished and held out his hand, letting the Watcher count seven hundred dollars into it without comment. It was only after he’d put the money in his pocket that he spoke.

“Guess this means *you’ll* be taking my place on patrol, mate... since I’m goin’ ta be watching over the whelp...” He grinned even more. “Don’t envy you the task.”

Giles sat up straighter and looked a bit put out. “I assure you that I am more than capable of assisting the children in whatever *you* might be able to...”

Spike snorted softly. "Right, then. I'll just take Chubs up the coast or something until you lot know what's wrong with him."

"That's fine," the human said, his mind still running in circles over what they'd almost done to Xander... if it *was* Xander. "Just don't take him too far. If we find proof that he's not really *him*, the spell has a limited area. Perhaps... a hundred miles or so."

It was then that Buffy's voice rang through the shop, easily loud enough to be heard in the office. "Giles... Robin's here! Tell Spike it's time to patrol!"

One scarred brow rose and Spike smirked as he sauntered out into the main room. "Sorry, ducks," he told the impatient Slayer, "but I've been put on whelp-watch. Guess you'll have to muddle through with *him* and old Rupes."

He tossed them a smirk as he left the store, then dashed as quickly as he could to a pay phone on the next block.

He dialed the number frantically, body vibrating as it rang once... twice... three times...

“Xander!” he gasped when it was finally answered, “Luv, I don’t have time to explain, yeah? Just... pack a bag. I’m heading to the house to do the same. I’ll be at your place in an hour. Be ready to *go* or you won’t like what happens.”

He slammed the receiver into its cradle without waiting for a reply and focused entirely upon getting to Buffy’s house and the basement, grabbing the few things that mattered to him—the head he’d torn from Dru’s first Miss Edith, the ribbon he’d managed to claw from Angelus’ hair after one of their more... tender encounters... his clothes, the journal he’d started keeping again after the chip, and even more after the soul.

He spent a bare moment looking at the space and marveling at how very little he owned that he actually cared about; then he left, darting up the stairs without a backward glance.

It was only when he was ready to walk out of the house that he thought of the Bit.

How could he just ditch her, abandon her, leave her with nothing?

The soul answered the question very quickly with a 'can't', while the demon grumbled but agreed.

He took a good ten minutes to write her a note that quickly turned into an actual letter, and then he ran up the stairs to slide it under her pillow with just one tiny edge poking out. She'd see it, he knew, especially with as hyper-aware as she was these days with all the bloody potentials in the house.

He just thanked every God that would listen to him for the fact that they were all out. There wasn't a one of them that liked him, and he was happy to say that the feeling was mutual.

His few bags were left in the cab he'd called and Spike walked jauntily up to the door of the Magic Box, smirking as he grasped the knob and by all appearances simply

turned it and entered, when in actuality, he'd broken the lock and the deadbolt.

He turned and gave the cabby a smile before raising one hand, fingers spread and mouthing 'five minutes'.

Of course, it didn't take him anything close to that long. He'd been listening as the foolishly silent Watcher had spun the dial on the safe.

Three minutes later, the vampire strolled from the shop and pulled the door flush.

He climbed back into the cab and gave an address a few blocks away from Xander's apartment.

His fingers danced slowly over the dark-colored tote which held close to fifty thousand dollars in cash and he wondered why exactly Rupert had been making his own Slayer struggle when he'd had so much of the ready.

Still, that wasn't his problem, though it made him sad for the Slayer who'd put so much trust in her Watcher, and he made a mental note to wire most of that cash to Buffy once he and Xander had gotten somewhere... safe for the boy.

If not for her sake, then for Dawn's, and... well, for *both* of them... but that was something to think of later because right then he was at Xander's building, and...

"C'mon, mate," he growled as he slammed through the door, "time ta go!"

Xander looked up from his spot on the couch and shook his head. "Not until you tell me what's going on."

Spike growled.

Xander frowned.

Spike flashed vamp-face.

Xander snorted.

Spike gave the begging eyes.

Xander almost caved.

And finally, Spike told Xander what Giles and the others had been planning, and Xander...

Shrugged.

“Would... would it be so bad?” he asked softly, “I mean, what if they’re right? I could just... go back to *my* world and...”

The vampire snarled and dragged the boy from the couch, pulling him tightly against him. “I don’t believe that and neither do you! Now, c’mon, pet... need ta get you a good hundred miles from here before Ripper knows we’ve gone that far, yah? And that’ll be sooner, rather than later.”

He ignored the boy’s questions as he grabbed Xander’s bag and dragged him from the apartment, pushing him to the car and into the passenger seat before dashing quickly to the driver’s side and getting in. “Buckle up,” he ordered, “It’s th’ *law!*” And with that, Spike started the car and peeled off down the street like he was being chased by the very fires of Hell.

Part Six

Three hours, four speeding tickets and six near-collisions later, Xander finally made Spike pull over.

Their flight from Sunnydale had been sudden, sure, but somehow the brunette doubted that the vampire had an actual plan. At first Xander had thought the blond had something in mind, but as their mad dash to so-called safety continued, it had become clear to him that Spike was just being... Spike.

He became certain of that when his constant demanding, begging, pleading and threatening finally had the car stopped at the beach, south of L.A. ... with no destination that Spike would admit to.

“Look,” Xander said softly after a few very unsettling moments of silence, “I get why you thought we should run, okay? But... I’ve always been fonder of running *to*, not away. So... where are we going, baby?” He blushed. “Um. Spike. I meant to say Spike. Not baby.”

The vampire frowned and stared out at the starlit sea, watching the slow, steady swells roll in towards the shore, then out again after breaking on the sand. “Don’t think you really *do* get it, Xander,” he muttered, sure the human would hear him. “Told you what they wanted to do and you didn’t *care!*”

He turned, spearing warm brown eyes with sharp gold ones.

“If they’re wrong, mate... if it’s something wrong with *us*, not you... the spell they were talking about?” Spike shuddered, fingers going whiter than white on the steering wheel and only easing when he heard the first small, subtle ‘crack’ of the high-tensile plastic starting to give way. “Would have sent your spirit... soul, if you will... off into nothingness, yah? Trying to switch you with someone who doesn’t exist...” He paled until he was probably almost transparent, he figured, as an even worse thought occurred to him. “Or... heard about that vamp version of you. How’d you feel if you suddenly woke up in a demon’s body but with your soul... and no way back, ‘ey? And what do you think a demon in *your* body would do, first off?”

Oddly enough, Xander figured that was the one thing that he couldn’t bear. The one thing that made him entirely certain that Spike had done the right thing in taking him—them—away from Sunnydale. Because a vampiric him, waking in a human body on the Hellmouth? Well, it wouldn’t be hard to get turned and then... no more Scoobies.

He found himself shivering and reaching out for Spike's hand before he remembered that this wasn't *his* Spike. "I..." he began, pulling back and clenching his fingers tightly against the temptation, "Okay. You've made your point. But we still should know where we're going. Because just driving? Not getting us much of anywhere except for lost."

Six more hours had them well on their way to Scottsdale, Arizona; mostly because Xander said his mother's family business was headquartered there. 'They might not remember me,' he'd added, 'but I'm still family and I doubt... well, I *hope* they won't turn me away, and since you're with me, then maybe you too...'

Spike was entirely unimpressed by the idea that the whelp's Mum had family with some sort of money. He figured it couldn't be much of anything, after all, or why

would Mrs. Harris have put up with so much crap from that fucker she'd married. Auto shop, maybe... or carwash. Still, any port in a storm, he figured.

Xander almost felt badly for the blond while he navigated, but then again, Spike had been so very high-handed about things since he'd called after the 'talk' with Giles. None the less, he'd clearly had Xander's best interests at heart, and with that in mind, Xander flushed slightly and suggested a roadside motel that he remembered frequenting very often in the last few years.

Of course, nobody there remembered him, which seemed not to bode well for his 'it's not me, it's *you*' theory, but they weren't that far from their destination, and...

"I hate this!" he snarled, throwing his bag onto the bed and glaring at Spike. "I hate that I don't... fuck, Spike! I *know* who I am! I know what happened in my *life*! But every single step I take is telling me that I'm fucking *crazy*!"

Spike frowned and tossed the duffel containing his clothes onto the bed, as well.

“Not crazy, pet,” he finally said, looking at the bed itself even as he spoke... the one king-sized bed the room held... the one and only room that the motel had still had, due to the ‘renovations’ being made on half of the place, which Spike figured meant *fumigations*.

“Not bloody nuts, luv,” he repeated. “See, thing is... I believe you.” He smiled a bit crookedly at the stunned look on the human’s face. “I believe you, Xander. If only because I can’t imagine that there’s another dimension where Broody the Wonder-Git got himself a soul... where he offered you to me. Not something that prat would do ordinarily; not even as a trap.” He smiled a bit more. “Besides... always wondered why Watcher never bothered to train you lot to fight once he knew you weren’t going to leave Buffy on her own, you know? Wondered why a ‘former’ Chaos-Mage wouldn’t teach Red at least enough about her powers to control them. Wasn’t my place to ask, of course, what with being the bloody *charity case*... but I wondered.”

Maybe it was the look on Spike’s face that had Xander letting go of his anger and irritation... or maybe it was the fact that he could hear the sincerity in the vampire’s voice.

Either way, he found himself sitting down very suddenly, quite grateful that he'd managed to do so on the edge of the bed.

“He... he didn't teach us... anything...?” he nearly whispered, fingers gripping the spread-covered edge of the mattress as he gazed disbelievingly at the blond. “I mean... not even... not *anything*?”

Spike sighed and shrugged out of his duster, then made sure the curtains were thick enough and drawn tightly enough to keep him from a dusty dawn before settling down beside his bloke and resting one hand on a clenched and trembling warm fist.

“Believe you, I do,” he said again, watching the boy's face. “Whole lot of things don't make sense when I think about it... including the part where I never much thought on it before aside from the wondering, yah?”

Xander heard him. Of course he heard him. He was simply too caught up in trying to breathe and *not* start screaming to respond right away, but finally... finally, he felt the fingers covering his own; felt the frank blue eyes watching him, and he couldn't help but release one shaky breath.

“I... I know my memories are different from yours, Spike, but I don’t...” he swallowed hard, “I don’t think I really appreciated *how* different until now. I... will you tell me...?”

Spike cocked his head slightly then chuckled as Xander turned to face him fully, but he had to ask... had to be sure he was right about what he saw in the human’s gaze. “You trust me, pet?” he demanded, “Trust me to tell you the truth as I know it?”

Xander nodded slowly, not because he’d needed to think about it but because he wasn’t entirely sure he *wanted* the truth, even if he’d asked for it. “I... yeah... I trust you, Spike. With anything. Everything.”

He listened, eyes growing wider as the vampire spoke, and he scratched at the itchy spot on his head, a small part of his mind wondering just what kind of ink he was still having a reaction to, even after having showered.

Even when Xander woke up that evening, he was still baffled by what Spike had told him.

Of course, the confusion wasn't the first thing on his mind because he was in bed with Spike, wrapped tightly around him, and fuck if he couldn't feel an erection matching his own against his thigh.

In fact, if Xander was going to be honest, he'd felt himself rubbing lightly against that long, thick shaft even in his sleep, and... the rubbing was what had woken him since he still remembered the last five years with his...

But this Spike *wasn't* his, and once he managed to recall that little fact he tried to pull away. "No..." he mumbled.

"Yesssssss," Spike groaned, refusing to let the boy go. He held him close, hips shifting and rocking against that stunning heat. He hadn't felt anything like it since...

His mind flashed back to the Slayer and the falling-down

building... his crypt... the alley behind the Doublemeat Palace...

And no. That wasn't even close to what he was feeling.

His arms tightened around the heated and toned form beside him and he opened his eyes to meet sad brown.

"Xander," he murmured, "Luv... know it's you, yah? Not trying to hurt you. Not thinking you're someone else." He swallowed hard. "Might not be the Spike you recall, but... still *Spike*, aren't I? And... want you, pet. Want you, luv... don't think I can stop now, a'right...?"

And it *was* alright. And at the same time it just... *wasn't*. Spike was Spike, but not *his* Spike, and if he was wrong about what was happening, if he was *wrong* about this being his world, then... he'd be cheating on his lover, and even if it was *with* his lover—or his lover's alternate—it was still *wrong*, and Spike would never... never... forgive...

Xander's body moved automatically, rolling to press groin-to-groin against the blond's, and the sharp gasp he released when two shafts covered by thin cotton met was matched by Spike's.

Arms wound tightly around ribs, waists... then necks and shoulders... and when one voice rose in a high-pitched cry of completion, another followed—lower, softer, but no less stunned.

He couldn't look at him.

Not even when they'd checked out of the motel and hit the road again.

He'd taken advantage and he *knew* it. Manipulated and used the completely innocent arousal to try to create some sort of bond.

Of course, there was already a bond, but he didn't know why or how, considering.

“Turn there,” he whispered, hating himself for what he had done.

Spike followed the vague gesture of Xander’s hand, making a right onto what appeared to be a slightly more-traveled stretch of sandy earth. “Uh, pet?” he tried, wondering if the words would get any more response than his numerous other attempts, “Are you that upset about tonight that you want to drive us into the middle of nowhere to die? Because if it comes down to it, I can still drain you and walk out of here...”

Xander sighed. “We’re not in ‘the middle of nowhere’. It’s just... a back door, so to speak.”

The vampire frowned, even as he continued along the roadway. “And about tonight...? Pet...?”

“What about it, Spike?” the brunette asked wearily, still looking out the window. “I’m sorry. Okay? Now, can we just get there?”

The tires of the car would have screeched if it had been moving faster... or been on a paved road.

As it was, the vehicle slid a few inches as Spike swerved

from the center of the packed sand 'road' and stopped the car.

"You're sorry," he growled, turning full vamp-face on his boy. "What the bloody fucking hell are you *sorry* for!"

Xander gave his irate lover a slightly quirked smile.

"Everything, Spike. I'm sorry for... everything. But especially tonight."

Part Seven

Spike was still fuming as he pulled into what was apparently a very private parking area behind the enormous building Xander had clearly directed him to.

He was *sorry*?

Xander was bloody well *sorry* about some of the best sex Spike had ever experienced, regardless of the fact that

they'd both been somewhat clothed?

It was insupportable, he figured.

He'd spent a good twenty years being buggered by Angelus, then a hundred or so wrapped around-and-in his Princess, and months on end being the Slayer's fuck-toy so she could '*feel*', but...

That night, laying in a relatively cheap bed in a decidedly third-rate motel, he'd experienced a sort of completion that he'd never known *existed* before, and he'd be damned if he was going to let the boy shrug it off with an 'I'm sorry'.

Of course, the whelp wouldn't listen when he tried to explain, and that was how Spike found himself following the human into the building, which was clearly labeled as 'LV Cosmetics'... and *why* they were crashing a corporate office building at close to midnight was a question Spike wasn't going to ask, not to mention the question—also unasked—of how Xander knew the punch code to get in. He only hoped they'd be able to make it back to the motel after security held them for hours, trying to find out why they were there.

“Pet,” he murmured, one hand finding the small of the human’s back, “maybe we should come back later, yah? Or, you know, not at all...?”

Xander snorted, fully aware of the fact that his vampi... that *Spike* was trying to distract him.

“No.” His voice was as hard as he could make it. “I know I should just...” Xander stopped and shivered before darting a glance at the blond beside him.

“I should just accept things, right? But I can’t! I...” soft brown eyes closed and one tiny tear left the corner of one. “I want my life, Spike! I want *my* life!”

And as Spike could understand that, he couldn’t help but take the bloke into his arms and hold him close, once again noticing and appreciating the difference between the intimacy he felt holding Xander—fully clothed—in his arms and the few times he’d held Buffy, naked.

“Guess we don’t need to be going back,” he heard himself saying. “Got everything that matters, right? Clothes, cash... car...”

If it had been *his* Spike saying those words, Xander would

have leapt at the offer. As it was, though...

He pulled away and started walking deliberately down the long, narrow hallway, giving appropriate signals at the proper points. Security might not recognize him, but they knew the signs... and seeing them, wouldn't launch any of the defensive devices he knew were ready and waiting.

Finally they reached the plain, nondescript door that led to the lobby of the building, and if Spike hung back a bit when his human approached the front desk, he wasn't going to admit it.

"Alexander Harris to see Mister LaVelle," Xander said softly, smiling at the pink-haired young woman behind the desk.

Violet eyes looked first at the tanned fingers on the surface before her, then up cotton-clad arms to broad, strong shoulders... and followed the line of swarthy flesh to a gentle but stunningly strong face. "I... I... d-do you have an ap-ointment?" the girl asked, barely able to find the words.

Xander laughed and leaned closer still. Susie had always

had a bit of a thing for him, and even though she obviously didn't remember him, he was pretty sure he could use it to his advantage... and take her to lunch later as thanks.

"I don't," he admitted, "but I think he'll be willing to see me anyway... if you'll just call up and tell Doris it's me?"

Susie's face clenched slightly at the mention of the dragon-lady. "Um, I..." She looked again at the tall, stunning specimen before her and nodded. "I... okay."

Xander waited while the girl rang up to the top floor, then waited even more while Doris apparently went to ask whether Xander was welcome, although he knew he was. Hell, his Uncle Jareth had been aware of him for his entire life, and even if the man didn't know him now, he knew he existed.

He felt himself tensing, simply because this was the final test.

If Jareth didn't remember his existence, then his friends back in Sunnydale had been right.

But if he did...

“You can go right up,” Susie said, sounding awed. “D-doris s-says you should use the p-private elevator...”

Spike blinked, then moved closer to his bloke, taking one overly-warm and sweaty hand in his own.

He smiled winningly at the pink-haired girl, then gave her a wink.

“Right, then. Guess we’ll just be... movin’ on up, yah?”

Susie swallowed hard, then sighed as the two men strolled away towards the elevators. Of course they were together. Looking like *that*, she couldn’t imagine anyone else being good enough for either of them.

Something—possibly a migraine—pulsed at the edge of her mind but she shrugged it off.

Bad enough that she was part demon, and wasn’t she just lucky that pink hair could be considered a fashion choice now? And violet eyes...? Well, they sold contacts that matched her natural ones. ‘Liz Taylor Violet’, she’d seen them called.

But visions, instinctive knowledge... *seeing*? Well, that wasn't human... and Susie was *human*, or so she told herself.

She smiled slightly as the men stepped into the private elevator that would take them to Mister LaVelle's office... and tried not to wonder whether she'd ever see the two guys again. Sometimes his visitors never came back, after all.

To say that Spike was surprised when a tall, extremely skinny woman met them at the elevator and called them both by name would have been an understatement; especially since he knew for *certain* that Xander hadn't said anything about Spike even being there to the pink-haired chit in the lobby.

That didn't change the fact that the woman did meet

them, her eyes hard, lips unsmiling as she gazed them up and down. “Alexander. William. Follow me. Himself will see you *now*.”

And why the bloody fuck would whoever ‘himself’ was even be there so late at night? Unless there was something Spike didn’t know, which obviously there was because Xander didn’t seem at all surprised.

He fought the impulse to take Xander’s hand and hold it tightly for comfort—the human’s or his own, Spike didn’t know—as they followed the spindly-looking woman past what was clearly her desk.

“Hold on, here,” the vampire finally hissed, ignoring the fact that he was *following* his impulse to touch the slightly larger man by taking his hand in a hard grip. “Don’t like this, Xander. Something’s not bloody right.”

Gods, he was so used to trusting Spike that it took Xander a good few moments to remember that things had changed, and... and the vampire had had the same exact reaction the first time they’d gone to see Jareth, which could be either a good thing or a very bad one. Still, he couldn’t quite manage to pull away from the cool fingers tangled so tightly with his own thicker, warmer

ones.

Xander darted a swift glance at Doris, his eyes begging for just a moment to talk with his... with Spike... before she showed them to his Uncle's office and whatever was waiting for them there.

"Spike," he murmured after pulling the blond a few feet to the wall, leaning close, "Please. We need... *I* need to do this. I can't... if he doesn't know who I am, then..."

"Bloody hell, you daft git! Of *course* he doesn't know who you are! Something's happened to the whole bloody world—except *you* for some bollocksed up reason—and you think this fucking *twat* is likely ta prove different?" The blond growled, eyes flashing gold for just a moment. "This is bloody well *wrong*, mate, and I can feel it even if you can't! Not goin' ta let you put yourself in the middle of whatever the fuck is happening here, am I?"

"So, what then?" the brunette demanded hopelessly. "We just... leave? And *then* what? I mean, according to you, the entire world thinks I'm some... pathetic, helpless, *straight* guy without a single brain cell and I can't *be* that, Spike! I have a business degree, for fuck's sake! I've been teaching at University level for over a

year now and I was about to test for my brown belt in karate and you think I can just forget all that? Go back to fucking Sunnydale to be *what...*? The doughnut-guy, like you said? To be 'straight-Xander' who isn't in love with his vampire, who isn't gay and who almost married a vengeance demon, of all things? I won't!" he yelled into the pale, shocked face. "I *won't* do that! I worked too hard, too fucking *long* to just... accept that that's my life now!"

There might have been an impasse right then, or there might have been more shouting, more bitter words from one or both of them... but they'd never know, and simply because that was the moment when the loud, sharp sounds of slow but steady applause began.

Spike blinked, still growling softly as his head whipped around to focus on the tall, solid man standing in the doorway of 'Mister LaVelle's' office. "What the bloody fuckin' hell..."

Xander sighed and met brightly green eyes over Spike's shoulder. "Uncle Jareth. Um, hi. I, uh... I'm your nephew, Ale..."

The claps slowed then stopped and the golden-haired

man with the poison-green eyes chuckled softly and a touch bitterly. "Alexander. It's good to see you again. Please. Come in." Those eyes shifted, finding his assistant's. "Doris, please make the arrangements I requested. After the necessary... items are here, feel free to return to your... rest."

The tall woman nodded quickly and made her way to her desk, clearly ignoring the two new arrivals now that she'd been given leave to do so.

"Please," Jareth said again, his tone obviously ordering rather than requesting, "Come *in*, nephew. You and your... vampire."

Blue eyes met brown for a bare moment, both sets holding the same shock and worry, but as they'd been invited, Spike and Xander found their feet stepping determinedly across the floor and through the open doorway, and it wasn't until the thick slab of wood slammed closed with an ominous sound that they realized they'd even moved. Of course, they also didn't realize that they were holding each others' hands in a grip that should have been painful but instead was only comforting.

Jareth LaVelle took his seat behind the high-tech desk and rested his elbows on it, fingers steepled before him.

He gazed dispassionately at the blond and brunette, then sighed and nodded to the two chairs in front of his desk.

“Maybe,” he said conversationally, looking at his nephew, “You’d like to explain why you’re here. *We had a DEAL, Alexander!* You weren’t to return until you’d either gotten rid of that *parasite*,” he nodded slightly towards Spike, “or *finished the bonding!*”

Spike snarled loudly, every instinct of both soul and demon demanding that he dive across the glassy desk and wring the fuckwad’s neck. He was actually in the process of pulling his hand from Xander’s when the full meaning of the prat’s words registered.

“Wait!” he growled, true-face slipping to the fore, “you *know him!* You bloody well *know my bloke!*”

Jareth arched one sleek brow and nodded, giving the vampire a searching gaze before relaxing just a bit and laughing to himself. “Oh... the Powers must be pissed off, right about now,” he said. “*Two souled vampires, and neither of them remember the real... never mind.*” And

that was all he'd say on that subject, no matter how much the two men pried.

Part Eight

Xander's nose wrinkled slightly, even as he sipped the acidic tea his Uncle favored. Not that he noticed, really. He was too busy trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Jareth knew him... remembered him! Not just as the nephew he'd never met, which was what he'd been expecting, but actually *remembered him...* in the same way Xander remembered himself.

For his part, Spike was still growling slightly, though the tea had gone a long way towards calming him. It had been ages since he'd had a proper cuppa, after all, which didn't surprise him. It wasn't as though the Watcher had ever bothered to share with him. Why be civil with a vampire, after all? Except... if this bloke Jareth wasn't pissing in the wind, then none of what Spike remembered had actually happened and while he'd admitted to believing Xander, it was something else again to hear the same story from a separate party, and...

“Not sure I understand, mate,” he said, golden eyes flickering between the blond man behind the desk and the brunette sitting at his own side. “If the whole world was affected by whatever the fuck happened, why is it that *you* weren’t?” Spike glared. “And you can stop with the come-hither thing, too. ‘m not interested, am I?”

The man behind the desk sighed and shook his head, deliberately not looking at his nephew. “It’s a very long story, William, but be that as it may. You seem to be suffering from a rather large misunderstanding. It isn’t the *world* that’s been affected. That would require far too much... energy. But then, Alexander isn’t known to the entire world, is he?”

Despite the fact that the words weren’t directed to him, Xander found himself sitting up straighter. “You’re right,” he agreed, mind racing. “And I spent most of my life in Sunnydale, so the people who knew me...” He swallowed hard. “It’s much easier to effect a change on just those who had personal contact with me, isn’t it Uncle? Tweak a neuron here, shift an electron there... change one single memory for all of them and...”

“And *everything* changes, Alexander. Yes. And in this case...” Jareth began, outlining what had happened the

way he recalled it.

Spike frowned and held more tightly to the warm, slightly damp hand in his own as his eyes closed and the darker blond's words appeared almost as images behind his lids.

Xander and his Mum—and *Spike*—coming to this same office building years earlier... the moment Jessica and Jareth met again after far too long... meeting Jareth's son Mathry, Xander's one and only cousin...

Spike didn't remember the boy in question, of course, but somehow he just knew he didn't like him.

His eyelids pressed tighter as he listened on, wishing silently that he really *could* remember the past Xander's Uncle was relating. It sounded... better than what *he* recalled. He'd been loved. Adored. *Needed*. And he'd apparently been happy, which was almost too incredible to be believed.

"It was the final test that pushed him so far," Jareth allowed softly, "or so I believe. Do you remember, nephew?"

Xander frowned and shook his head, setting his stone-

cold cup of tea on the corner of his Uncle's desk. "What test? What are you talking about?"

The older man smiled a little bit shakily.

"I forgot. You didn't know." Jareth nodded slowly to himself. "You left so quickly, I didn't have a chance to tell you."

Dark eyes blinked for a moment, then grew wide. "That so-called *choice* you gave me?" Xander demanded, "That was a *TEST*? 'You can have everything being a LaVelle entitles you to, but only if you get rid of the vampire'...? A fucking *TEST*? A test! You... bastard!"

Green eyes met angry brown unapologetically. "It's tradition, Alexander. And I needed to know if..." Jareth sighed. "I needed to know whether you were serious about him. Yes, he was a vampire and evil. That was... well, rather to be expected, considering our family tree. And you two were at most a few steps away from Mating in the Vampiric sense."

"Hey! Still evil, you know!" Spike inserted desperately, his eyes opening to find his bloke glaring at the truly annoying prat behind the desk. "Soul or not, still a bloody

vampire, aren't I?"

One sleek dark blond brow arched in response, though Jareth's next words were again directed to his nephew.

"You didn't know, Alexander, but it truly *was* a test. It was meant to seek and find the true depths of your emotions... your ability to *feel*." He frowned again and pulled his eyes from the dark, accusing ones that had been spearing him so deeply. "It was the same test that Mathry... failed. I just never expected that you'd react so strongly!" Jareth chuckled bitterly. "You know, I told your mother she was an idiot for running off with Anthony. Told her that any children she had with him would be defective and *wrong*. But she was right because... there you are, Alexander, with the ability to feel things more deeply than *any of us*! And you did that night, too. You..."

Xander swallowed hard, his own grip on Spike's hand tightening slightly as he relived that experience in less than a moment. "I told you to keep your company *and* your money... that Spike and I would be just fine without you. And that was when you said all that about... breaking up with him or making things... completed."

Spike was frowning, his eyes flashing from Xander to his

Uncle and back again so quickly that he was almost dizzy and he wanted to jump in, to ask questions about the past he didn't know, but he had no idea of *what* to ask, or how, or even why. He chose to chalk it up to the soul when he stayed quiet and sipped the last of his cold, bitter tea, just listening.

Jareth nodded again, even more slowly than the last time. "I never expected you to simply pack up and leave, though. I'd thought you and William would just lay low until I reconsidered. But by the following night, you were gone." His small smile bore not a bit of amusement when it appeared. "Jessie tried to tell me she didn't know where you'd gone but it wasn't at all difficult to make a few inquiries..."

It was then that his eyes finally shifted to Spike.

"I have to admit," he added softly, sounding bemused, "I wasn't expecting to hear that you'd gone to Africa. It didn't seem the sort of place that would appeal to a vampire who so enjoyed life's comforts... and you got a soul! That was just..." Jareth shook his head, still unable to find words to describe how unprecedented such an action was for a demon.

Spike growled. “ ‘s none of your business, is it, mate?” He hadn’t gotten his soul for Buffy? But that was... Well, it actually almost made sense, if he took what Xander and his Uncle were saying as truth. But he still remembered *his* world, and while he could tell the other blokes weren’t lying, he just couldn’t seem to...

“And *you* remember all this why?” he demanded. “*You* know Xander—and he likes ta be called ‘Xander’, by the way, not bloody ‘ALEX-xander’—but no one else does... *why!*”

Thin lips twitched and Jareth laughed softly. “I’m the head of a Fortune 200 company, William. Long story short? I’m warded, spelled, protected and guarded six ways to Sunday. And...” he lost his smile, slight as it had been, “And it was my *son* who changed things.” He looked at his nephew again. “I’m sorry, Alexander, but... it was Mathry who made the wish.”

Xander’s eyes narrowed and he gave his Uncle a brittle grin. “Speaking of Mathry, where is he? I’d *love* to say hello...” ‘and beat the shit out of the little fucker,” he added silently, rage flowing through him. His own cousin had done this to him? Relegated him to life as a fucking *loser*? Stolen his vampire’s memory of what they were to

each other? Fuck it, he was going to “kill him,” he muttered.

“I’m afraid you’re too late for that, nephew,” Jareth said softly, a good bit of his earlier bitterness returning to his voice. “He wouldn’t know you now. Not even if he saw you. He doesn’t know... anybody anymore. *He* did it, before you ask.”

Spike’s brow furrowed and he shifted, meeting Xander’s eyes. “Didn’t, Xan! Swear! Never even met the fucker, did I? Or... *this* me didn’t, and...”

“No,” Jareth said quietly, his low tone somehow filling the room, “I didn’t mean you, William. I meant Mathry. *He* did it... to himself.” His eyes dropped to the desk in front of him and he swallowed a few times. “I was there, Alexander. He was so... jealous of you. You’d... come out of nowhere, my sister’s child! And you were taller, stronger, smarter... and then you passed the test, nephew, and...”

“And your bloody jealous spawn decided that meant he had ta take out the sodding competition. That what you’re saying, mate?” Spike growled, eyes golden again after a bare few minutes of being their more human

blue. “Didn’t work out for him? Good, then. Deserved it! Not Xan’s fault he’s the better bloke, is it?”

Even if he’d been thinking about the fact that this Spike wasn’t *his* Spike—which he wasn’t—Xander still wouldn’t have been able to keep himself from sliding from his chair and onto the floor in front of the vampire.

He knelt there and wrapped his arms hard around the somewhat slighter form, holding the blond close and hard and tight.

“It’s okay, baby,” he murmured, hands roaming up and down the blond’s tense spine, “It’s okay... please, baby, please... calm down, okay...? It’s... we’re... fine, Spike. We’re fine...” Except they weren’t, of course, and Xander knew it just as much as Spike so obviously did. “How did... what happened?” he asked over his shoulder, afraid of letting go of the vampire in his arms... afraid of what he might see if he met Spike’s eyes.

“He wished that Jessie and you forgot all about leaving Anthony and coming here,” Jareth said softly. “He wasn’t thinking, I suppose... and when his wish was granted, you *weren’t* here to stop him from taking the drug. You weren’t here to keep him from going insane like his...

friend... who nearly decapitated you after *he* took the dosage.” He frowned. “Mathry firmly believes that he *took* the so-called mind-opening drug. He’s being cared for to the extent that is possible.”

And even while most of him was focused on the way Xander was touching him; on those strong, warm hands finding every single tension point as though they knew his body better than even he did, himself... Spike heard those words and pulled back, snarling into wide brown eyes. “You did bloody fucking *what? Almost got yourself killed?* Jumped in on *purpose* when some bloke was going bat-shit? You bloody, fucking moron! Could have gotten yourself *killed!* Or worse! Vegetable-ized! Are you off your bloody nut?”

While the words and tone were harsh, Xander couldn’t help grinning, because... it actually sounded like Spike cared, and that... well, it wasn’t entirely unexpected, considering everything that had happened in the last few days, but... it was nice.

Part Nine

He'd snuck out of the rooms Xander's Uncle had given them once he'd been sure his bloke was asleep and not likely to be waking and wandering any time soon. Not that Xander was likely to check *Spike's* room even if he did wake, but better safe, he figured.

His feet moved silently down the carpeted hallway, and while he supposed he could have—maybe should have—had himself announced, he was more interested in seeing how the so-called 'Jareth LaVelle' reacted to his unexpected presence.

There had been something bothering him about the man since before he'd even met him, and while it had taken a good day and a half, Spike thought he might have finally figured out what it was, but there was only one way to be sure. Thus he found himself ducking into the stairwell at the end of the hall and dashing up, up, up the six floors and using the security code he'd seen Xander use the last time.

His eyes hardened, even as he stalked across the large, open space between the stairway door and the 'Big Man's' office, tossing a glare and flashing a bit of fang at the spindly-looking Doris. "Might want ta go ta your 'rest', bint," he snarled, his ego not at all complimented

by the disdainful gaze she sent his way. “Don’t think you’re likely ta be needed any more tonight.”

“That’s hardly your call to make,” she answered smugly, standing and looking down her thin, pointed nose at him, “But I *do* want to go to my rest now. Go in, he’s waiting for you.”

Her smile was both proud and nasty, and Spike couldn’t quite help respecting that. “Wait,” he said quickly. “He... Jareth, I mean... remembers. Do... do you?”

Thin arched brows rose slightly and the woman nodded. “As Himself’s executive assistant, I enjoy all the same protections Himself does.”

Spike let his vampiric features recede and chuckled just a bit. “I’m guessing we’re great mates, you and me, yeah?” His chuckle grew louder when Doris simply repeated her odd smile and turned away.

“Right, then,” he muttered, moving to the door to ‘Himself’s’ office.

His hand hovered over the knob for a moment but then he shrugged and grasped it, pushing the door open firmly.

Jareth LaVelle wasn't sitting behind his desk this time; in fact, he was standing in front of it, leaning back with his arms crossed over his chest. It wasn't a defensive position, but a waiting one. "Well. I'd expected you last night, William. Still, I suppose it's better late than never."

The vampire snorted, true face flashing to the fore again. "Wasn't aware that we had an appointment, wanker. Then again, maybe 'wanker' 's not the right word for a bloody *angel*."

"*Part* angel," the man qualified, sounding annoyed. "Hell, William, I'm probably more human than *you* are. It just leaves a... taint... which you, as a vampire, can... sense."

Xander groaned and rolled over in his sleep, hands seeking the cool, strong form of his love. It wasn't until

he'd sought repeatedly that he woke, feeling the sense of loss washing through him yet again.

Small, hot tears slid from the corners of his eyes even as he got out of the too-warm, too-empty bed and made his way out and to the door on the other side of the small living room.

One hand rose, palm resting flat against the wood, and Xander closed his eyes, imagining Spike's pale, smooth body spread out in his usual cat-sprawl over the sheets.

He swallowed hard, wanting nothing more than to push the door open just a crack... to look—for just a moment—at the shape he knew so well, needed so badly. But he couldn't. He knew he couldn't. It was bad enough *seeing* Spike when his vampire wasn't *his* anymore. Seeing him like that—probably naked and so fucking beautiful—would be more than he could stand. He'd have to touch, to feel, to... love... and that wasn't an option. It just... wasn't.

Brown eyes closed and Xander didn't even notice the whimper that broke from his throat as he turned and ran back to his own room, stumbling over the edge of the rug, barking his shin on the coffee table, and nearly

falling when he collided with the arm chair.

He flung himself desperately onto his lonely, tangled sheets, ending up on his back with one forearm pressed to his still-seeping eyes.

“I can’t do this,” he whispered to the still air around him. “I just can’t. He’s my *Mate*! Except, he... he’s not, and I...”

There was nothing he could do, no way out. Mathry had fucked him over and somehow he knew it when nobody else did, except his Uncle and Doris, and... maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if he didn’t remember, himself. Maybe... if he could forget his real life and live the life everyone believed in, it wouldn’t be so bad.

He wouldn’t be gay... or not openly, anyway... and he’d be some kind of a moron, apparently... but he wouldn’t feel so empty, would he?

He wouldn’t be lost and aching on the inside, missing his Mate, knowing he should *feel* him. And maybe he’d know there was something missing, but as long as he didn’t know what it was, he’d be fine. Empty, but fine. Bitter, but fine. And not lost.

His mind turned and twisted, just as his body did, and while he truly wanted *his* Spike, *his* life, he didn't see any way he could have those things, and... and if the gang had been planning on doing some sort of spell to return him to his own dimension before, then maybe if he explained things to them they could do something to make him believe what *they* believed, and wouldn't that be better? Wouldn't that be... right and easy and so much less... painful... than living the way he was?

It was an angry decision, a desperate decision... the *only* decision he could make... and the only decision that let him slowly, deliberately sink back into sleep with the knowledge that it would all be over soon and he'd be... normal, as far as the world was concerned.

And if a part of him was screaming and wailing, terrified of being extinguished, well... Xander could ignore that. It wouldn't matter, soon enough. Soon enough.

“I don’t like you,” Spike announced with a frown. “Doubt I liked you before, either. Think you’re a bloody prat, don’t I?”

Jareth smirked just a little and nodded. “You do. And no, you didn’t like me, William. Mostly because you wanted me so badly and it bothered you. You were in love with my nephew, after all. I think it offended you that you could want me so much when you were so very *deeply* in love with someone else.”

The thing that bothered Spike the most right in that moment was that he wasn’t surprised to hear that he’d wanted someone he hadn’t loved... and he should have been.

Even in the memories he *did* have, he’d loved Dru, been true for more than a century even when she hadn’t been... hell, he’d even loved Angelus in a way, although being with him had generally involved Drusilla as well, and that was vampire custom anyway. Family, so to speak, and no violation or betrayal of the love he bore his Sire. Dru had *liked* that he and her Sire were close that way, after all.

But he couldn't imagine wanting someone other than whomever he was in love with; not without their encouragement and consent, not to mention participation, and... no. Xander wasn't the sort to play incest-games, and definitely not with some Uncle he'd just met, and... "that makes no bloody sense!" he snarled. "Wouldn't want you. Couldn't. Not if I felt what you say I did. Pillock." He frowned to himself and ignored the tiny voice whispering 'Harmony' in the back of his head. He'd been on his own then. It didn't count.

Jareth chuckled quietly and shook his head. "For a bright guy, you can be incredibly stupid sometimes. It's the angel blood. It makes us—meaning my family line—attractive to evil, I suppose you could say. That innate urge to corrupt, to... tarnish. Now, sit down, William. If you're going to insist upon wasting your time—and more importantly *mine*—we might as well be relatively comfortable."

"Stop calling me that," the vampire countered, his tone just as demanding as the sort-of human's. "Don't use that name, do I? Just like your bloody nephew doesn't call himself Alexander."

The older-looking man shrugged and smirked. “True enough. But it does manage to piss you off, so I see no reason to stop... William.”

And this was getting him nowhere, Spike knew. He’d come here for answers, not a round of hiss-and-spit-and-see-who-has-the-bigger-wrinklies. “Whatever,” he finally grunted, leaning against the back of the chair he’d occupied that first night he and Xander had arrived. “Need ta know a few things and as you seem ta be the only one around here who has a clue, other than Xander, figured you’d tell me.”

“And why would I want to do that, William? Out of the sheer goodness of my heart?”

Spike snorted, glaring at the man. “Hardly. Soul knows goodness when it sees it, you know. Xander? He’s a good one. You... not so much, as Slayer would say.” He cocked his head a little, still glaring. “Think you’ll tell me whatever you think I need ta know anyway, though. Because you care for the boy, yah? Because he’s all you’ve got left, what with your own spawn making himself nuts through blatant stupidity. And I don’t remember what *Xander* does, but the boy loves me. Wouldn’t take but a word ta have him leaving this place

forever, would it?”

Jareth frowned. “Even with a soul, you’re still a bastard.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, mate.” With that, Spike finally took the seat he’d been ordered to, but not before crossing the room and liberating a large decanter of liquor from the small bar against the wall. “And be quick about it. Xander’s likely ta be up and about soon enough. Don’t want him knowing I’m here.”

Part Ten

It was when Xander stopped walking for the fifth time in as many minutes to scratch his head yet again that Spike finally had enough.

“Look, mate,” he growled, “I’m trying here, yeah? But if you’ve someplace you’d rather be, then bloody well *go*! Want ta know more about how we were, I do, but you don’t seem too bloody interested!” And damn the bleeding soul for not letting him just throw the boy down and *make* him talk.

Xander blinked, his fingers leaving his hair. “Huh?” he

muttered distractedly, his eyes gazing curiously at the slight discoloration on his fingertips, “What, baby...?”

“And what the bloody fuck is wrong with your sodding head!” Spike demanded. “Been bloody well scratching at it for days! Nothing could possibly itch for that long!” He frowned slightly. “Or nothing that wouldn’t require a dose of antibiotics to make it better, but that’s not likely ta be on your noggin of all places.”

Brown eyes blinked again and Xander shook his head sharply, clearing the increasingly common mental fog away. “Oh, I... nothing, ba... Spike. It’s just...” he shrugged sheepishly and wiped the dark grey smudges onto his pants. “Nothing. Sorry. I... I got something in my hair a while ago and I think I’m allergic ‘cause it still itches and... but we were talking, right? Uh, what was I...”

It was the closest Spike had heard to what he considered standard Xander-babble since before this whole thing began, and while it was somewhat comforting, it was also a little frightening. He’d gotten *used* to this new Xander—the one who loved him, wanted him, remembered him as a different being than he thought he was... and the new Xander didn’t babble... or not much, and definitely not like this.

And then Spike caught a whiff of something... odd, acrid, almost hidden by the scents of the desert and the boy, and his eyes narrowed. He *knew* that smell; he just didn't know from where. Maybe from when he'd been human, but... whatever it was, something inside him was screaming that it wasn't good.

"Spike?" Xander said again, the silence and furrowed brow entirely *not* like the Spike he'd known before or the one he knew now. "Spike, what's...?"

The vampire growled softly and opened his eyes, fangs flashing unintentionally when he saw the boy's fingers buried in that dark hair again. One hand darted out quicker than a thought and grabbed Xander's wrist, pulling the bloke towards him. "Gonna get yourself an infection if you keep that up," he started to say, only to lose the words, half-spoken, as that disturbing smell grew stronger and... "What's that on your fingers?" he demanded instead.

The brunette shrugged and looked away, eyes finding the tiny sliver of moon over the night-pale sand beyond the high chain link fence. "Probably just some of that ink that's been making me itch. I must have picked it up from

one of Giles's books but I don't know when." He shrugged. "It'll go away, soon enough."

Connections were made quickly in Spike's mind, because while he'd perhaps never had the patience to follow through on any of his grandiose plans, he'd always been much smarter than he'd let on.

'Ink. Books. And where was the boy when he remembered all of this? His life—his *real* life, not whatever his wanker of a cousin made us all believe? Researching. That's what they said. Fell asleep as the goofy bloke we all knew and woke up knowing... *this*. And he's been itching and now something's... coming off when he scratches, and... and I know that *smell*! Like... brimstone and innocence lost.'

"Right," Spike announced sharply, "Time ta go see your pissant Uncle, mate."

Xander was still complaining, even as Spike dragged him into the building and across the lobby. He turned pleading eyes to Susie, then frowned when the girl simply ducked her head down behind the desk, pink hair shaking slightly above it as though she was crying. Or laughing, he realized when he heard the first small, muffled titter.

“Damn it, Spike! Just tell me what’s crawled up your ass!” he demanded, then groaned as the words brought several cherished memories to mind.

“Shut up,” the vampire said, almost kindly. “Got a theory, I do, but... need ta run it by the prat first,” and that was all he’d say on the subject.

“Doris,” Spike said with a nod, “Keep an eye on my boy, yeah? Don’t let him go wandering off. Need ta have a word with the Great Wanker.”

Xander blinked as Spike disappeared into his Uncle’s office, then he frowned and turned. He stalked towards the elevator, only to be stopped by the slow, low rumble he heard coming from behind him.

“You might want to have a seat, Alexander,” Doris rumbled, scraping the file in her hand over one sharp, talon-like nail. “I’m fairly sure you don’t want me to have to hunt you down and drag you back. Again.”

He turned slowly, eyes widening at the claw she was letting him see. “I’m not his, Doris. Not as far as *he* knows, anyway. He doesn’t get to just... tell me what to do!”

One thin brow rose and Doris moved on to the next talon, carefully honing it to a razor-like edge. “He left here. For you. He got a *soul*, Alexander. Also for you. He’s given up on his fantasies of having a future with that Slayer you all love so much, and that’s for you, too.” She gave him one expressionless gaze and returned to her task, still listing her observations.

“He lied to your friends on the Hellmouth, took you far enough away that they can’t do anything stupid, and he’s likely burned whatever bridges he’d managed to build. He believed you—believed *in* you—when no one else would even listen.”

She glanced up again, meeting wet brown eyes. “He’s thrown away whatever hope for a decent future he had in the world Mathry caused, Alexander, and all he’s asked you to do is talk to him and *wait here*. Do you really think that’s too much? Too big of a burden?”

His mouth moved, opening and closing a few times before Xander blushed deeply and shook his head. “I... no,” he whispered, even as he walked slowly back to the lounge area and sat down.

“Good,” Doris smiled. “Let me know if you’d like something to drink. I don’t imagine they’ll be very long, in any case.”

Brown hair shifted with Xander’s nod, but he honestly wasn’t paying any attention to the offer. He was too busy realizing that... while he’d been so caught up in what he’d lost and how he could get it back—or baring that,

lose the rest of it for his own *comfort*—he'd never even considered how Spike's actions would effect the vampire's life.

From what the blond had told him, it had taken ages to get the Scooby gang to trust him even to the extent they did, and even so it wasn't a sure thing. It hadn't been too much of a stretch to imagine *his* Spike and how he'd have reacted in similar circumstances, and... if this Spike had put up with all that just to be grudgingly accepted, then... then Spike considered them to be much more than friends. Spike *had* to think of them all as family, or as close to it as the blond would ever have since Angel was apparently a big brooding fucker in Los Angeles and Drusilla was off doing Gods knew what.

Spike had fought that hard, for that long, just to have a place to *belong*... and he'd thrown it all away for a guy he didn't remember even liking much, much less loving?

Well, yeah. He had. And without so much as a second thought, as far as Xander could tell, and he'd *never even noticed!* He'd been so... "selfish."

Doris smiled again, entirely to herself this time. Good. The boy was finally figuring it out. Maybe there was hope

for the world, yet.

She closed her eyes and retracted her claws, letting the more human fingernails reemerge as she focused on the maybes-to-come, a small nod of satisfaction dipping her head when she saw that the possible futures which included the First actually making a bid for dominion over the physical plane had diminished by half.

If the boys kept this up, those futures might disappear altogether, and demon or not, nobody would ever find Doris crying over *that*. She *liked* this plane, after all... enough that she hadn't even wanted to leave when Mathry had made his biggest mistake of many.

Spike was right, after all. Her son *was* relatively stupid... but it was his selfishness that had truly been his undoing. Still, it didn't look as though Alexander was cut of the same cloth, and that was good. Without a LaVelle at the helm of LaVelle Enterprises, more than just the company and its many subsidiaries would be doomed.

It was a consoling thought, and one Doris was quite happy to dwell upon.

Jareth wasn't entirely sure of what he'd been expecting when the vampire had stalked into his office, although he could say with a fair degree of certainty that it hadn't been for the blond to basically hold up one grey-smearred finger and announce 'I've solved the case'... in much more graphic and epithet-laden terms, of course.

That the solution of sorts came down to a smell was something else he hadn't thought of. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure he believed it enough to actually sniff the finger the vampire was forcing under his nose. For all he knew, this could be some strange joke the blond was playing. It wouldn't be the first time, after all.

But then again, it would. *This* version of the vampire had no recollection of getting his jollies by trying to make Jareth eat, drink, touch—or whatever—various things that nobody had any business getting close to. Not anybody mostly human, anyway.

It took a good few seconds of steeling himself to whatever might happen before Jareth finally forced himself to breathe through his nose, but when he did his eyes narrowed and he gripped the blond's wrist tightly, taking another, deeper whiff. "It's the same," he murmured after exhaling. "William, it's the *same!*"

Spike glared at the name but nodded slightly. "'s familiar, prat. I'll give you that. But I can't bloody place it!"

The man nodded, too. "I can. But first I need to know... William, where did that come from?"

"My boy's hair." Gold-tinged eyes faded to their more normal blue, even as Spike perched on the edge of Jareth's desk. "Been scratching at it mighty fierce, he has. Finally though ta ask why." He didn't mention that he'd been yelling and impatient at the time, of course. "Xan says he got some kinda ink or something on him; he thought he was allergic, yeah? But... figure it's more than that. All those bloody dusty old books Ripper's got? Would have known he was sensitive ta the ink long before now, right?"

Jareth's brows rose. "You actually made a point, William.

I'm so proud."

"Bugger off, you sodding pillock. Don't have time ta take the piss with you, now do I? Would have smelled it before if it'd been coming off, right? Got a good sense of smell, I do. But I *didn't*, and that means something's changed. And... and Xander, he... bloody hell, he *babbled at me!* Like I remember him doing!"

A shrug. "That's hardly unusual, William. My nephew has been prone to fits of... excessive speech in the past."

Spike growled, true-face emerging completely as he leaned over the desk, face a mere inch or two from the bastard's. "You're not getting it, mate. Babbled like I remember him doing! Like... like the whelp-that-was!"

It still took Jareth a moment to figure out what had the vampire so intent, but when he did, he blanched. "Whatever it was that made him remember..." he whispered, eyes closing...

"It's going *away*." Spike finished for him. "Now you need ta tell me where you know this bloody fucking *smell* from!" he demanded, thrusting his smeared finger under the wanker's nose again. "Before I get Doris in here and

tell her what a fucking *prat* you're being!"

The darker blond stood and pushed away from the desk and the irate vampire. "Halfrek," he announced. "The so-called 'justice demon' Mathry called up for his... revenge. That's *her* scent, or at least the one she exudes when she's on official business."

And just like that, Spike remembered the demon. Anyanka's friend, Dawn's 'guidance councilor'... Cecily.

"Oh... *bloody hell!*"

Part Eleven

The main complication was, of course, that Halfrek was *dead*.

They couldn't summon her and ask—or force—her to change things back.

Hell, they couldn't even call up her boss! D'Hoffryn didn't respond to summonses from the mortal realm... or he wouldn't for *them*, anyway.

Finally, Spike did the only thing he could think of, much as he hated the idea.

He borrowed Jareth's cell phone and placed a call.

"Xander needs you," was what he said by way of greeting. "The 'Welcome to Sunnydale' sign. Two hours. Come alone."

He closed the phone and tossed it back to the man across the desk.

"That's it?" Jareth demanded, a frown deep on his face.

Spike shrugged. "Can't think of anyone else who could help, [mate](#). Still loves him, she does, no matter that she thinks he's barmy. She'll come... and she'll help. Not gonna be giving her a choice on that."

And Jareth had to be satisfied with that because it was all the vampire would say. He sighed and nodded, then picked up his private line and ordered his personal helicopter to the location the other blond had named.

"This had better work, William," he murmured, the soft tone no less threatening than a louder one would have

been, “because you were right. Alexander *is* all I have left now.”

The vampire sneered, taking great care not to voice the words running through his mind.

‘All I have left too, my boy is...’

Xander was still thinking about everything Doris had made so clear when Spike finally reappeared, and if his greeting to the vampire was a bit more... demonstrative... than it might have been otherwise, well, he figured he owed the blond that much. He looked up, then stood, and when Spike came closer, he pulled him suddenly and roughly into a tight hug.

Spike blinked, although that didn't stop him from returning the action, his arms wrapping hard around the

solid, warm back. “What’s all this, then?” he nearly whispered. “Not that I’m complaining, mind...”

One tanned cheek brushed softly against a pale ear as Xander shook his head. “Nothing, Spike. Just... thanks, okay? For... well, for everything. You didn’t have to... believe me, but you did. I guess I owe you one, okay?”

The demon was entirely ready to tell the bloke *exactly* what was owed, but the soul... Oh, the soul was touched. So much so that it kept the demon from speaking as Spike simply held the man close, one hand skimming lightly up and down that heated, strong spine. “ ‘s a’right, Xan,” he finally murmured, and much as he wanted to let this simple yet incredibly complex moment continue, he couldn’t. “Need ta talk, mate. You, me and the enormous prat.”

Xander sighed but let his arms relax, and he deliberately didn’t shiver at the loss of contact when the vampire pulled away. “And why does that statement *not* have me dancing a jig?” he asked just a touch sardonically.

Spike snorted and gave the boy a smirk. “Seen you dance,” he answered. “Might be a good idea if you held off, even when you think you’ve got a good reason ta do

it.”

A laugh, then a sigh as he followed the bleached blond through the door of Uncle Jareth’s office. “I have a feeling I won’t be wanting to dance again anytime soon,” he whispered to himself, only Spike’s hand closing around his own and squeezing telling him that the blond had heard.

Could they be right?

It was a question Xander couldn’t ignore.

He *had* been feeling... fuzzy lately. The last couple of days, anyway.

And he’d been losing track of his thoughts from time to time, too.

Like earlier, when he and Spike had been walking around the building.

He remembered that he'd been telling the vampire... something. Something about *them*. About their past together. And then he'd just... lost what he'd been saying, and that wasn't normal for him, wasn't something that happened at all unless he was sick or incredibly tired, but he'd been neither of those things then, and... and suddenly, Xander was sure that Spike and Jareth were right. He was losing himself as whatever it was under his hair bled out.

It scared the fuck out of him.

Sure, he'd decided in a fit of depression that things would be easier if he could become the Xander everyone back in Sunnydale thought he was, but... he hadn't meant it! And knowing that he was somehow getting what he'd hoped for during that fit of despair had him... dying inside, a little more with each passing moment.

His fingers clenched hard at Spike's as he tried not to break down.

Spike could almost literally see the wheels turning in his bloke's head, and it was only in that moment that he realized... both demon and soul *did* consider Xander to be his. And maybe it had something to do with what the fuckwad had said about the family being part angel, but there was no possible way that he was going to let Xander go. His goodness might appeal to Spike's demon half... but it also engaged his soul in a way that nobody else ever had, including Buffy.

He glanced at the clock on the desk and frowned slightly. "Gonna be another few hours til she's here, yeah?" he demanded, nodding sharply when Jareth agreed. "Right, then. Taking my boy back ta our rooms. Ring when it's time."

Jareth frowned, green eyes narrowing. "We need to talk about this some more, William. Alexander has to understand..."

"*Look at him, you bloody git!*" Spike snarled. "Boy knows what's what! About ta make himself sick over it, with nothing for it until she's *here*! Think he really needs another few hours of hearing how he's losing himself? Bloody hell! No wonder your boy Mathry was such a sodding wanker if you treated him like this!"

Xander jumped slightly, Spike's angry voice startling him out of his thoughts. "What? I... what?"

The vampire glared at the darker blond; then he stood, tugging Xander's hand lightly. "Nothing, Xan. Just saying we could wait downstairs just as easy as here, yeah? Maybe see what's on telly."

Well, he could definitely use a distraction, so Xander nodded and followed the pull. "O-okay..." He gave his Uncle a shaky smile. "Uh, I guess we'll see you in a while?"

The last thing Jareth wanted was for his nephew to be any more distressed, so he simply nodded. "I'll call," he added, his eyes hard on the vampire to let the man know he wouldn't forget the comment about his son... regardless of how true in might be. "Go. Try to relax. Have a nap."

He sighed deeply as the men left his office, then let his head drop to the desk. He was entirely unsurprised when he felt the long, strong fingers on the tops of his shoulders.

“Is he right?” he mumbled helplessly. “Is it my fault that Mathry was so...”

“No,” Doris said softly, fingers digging deeper to release the built-up tension in Jareth’s back, “No, beloved... or only to the extent that you chose *me* for his mother. An empath might have suited better...”

Jareth shook his head as much as he could while it was still down against the desk. “No empath would have had me,” he admitted softly. “An empath would have known how much I...” he swallowed hard, still unable to say the words, even after more than twenty-five years.

Doris smiled gently—so gently that anyone other than Jareth would have thought her possessed had they seen her—and leaned down, resting her cheek against the back of Jareth’s head. “I know, beloved... and I love you, too. I always will; even after you’re gone. Still, it wouldn’t hurt if you bred again. I think... maybe Susie.”

Green eyes opened for a moment, then closed again as the strong hands continued down his spine. “We’re a very loyal group, we LaVelles,” he reminded her with a small moan of pleasure. “I could no more breed with Susie than you could survive another cross-breed child,

treasure...”

And that was true, Doris knew. Hell, staying in human form for long enough to bear Mathry had almost killed her. And maybe being unable to go to her rest for that long a period of time had been just as responsible for their son’s... shortcomings... as anything else. “I know, beloved,” she murmured softly, “I know...”

Her human-looking fingernails lengthened slightly, growing to points, and when they shredded Jareth’s shirt before pushing the fabric away and then dug into flesh, pulling down, he moaned.

“Gods, treasure... do that again...”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me!” Xander announced, looking at Spike as though he’d grown another head. “I

thought you wanted to watch TV!”

The blond chuckled and shifted closer on the couch, his fingertips scraping lightly against his bloke’s palm.

“Forgot the time, didn’t I? Nothing on now but spray-hair and bad skin shows, yeah? That bloody Ron Popeil is out of his sodding mind.” He smirked. “C’mon, Xander... tell me! I’ll stay right here and not interrupt or anything, mate. Promise.”

Brown eyes closed despairingly for a moment, but he knew it was hopeless. He’d never been able to say no to Spike, after all.

“Fine,” Xander agreed, “but no laughing, okay? I was just a kid. And I’d never had sex with *anyone*, much less a fucking beautiful vampire who’d owned me ever since the first time I saw him.” He blushed slightly. “Uh, meaning *you*.”

Another, deeper smirk as Spike fully understood exactly what his boy was saying. Sure, he’d heard Xander when he’d said they’d been together since Broody the Wonder Git had offered the lad up that night, but he hadn’t really thought about what it meant, and... “You were a *virgin*!” he said delightedly. “I was your first?”

The brunette groaned. “Yes, okay? My first, my last, my... everything, to quote a song I’ll never admit was playing when we finally...”

Spike grinned then shifted, laying on the couch and putting his head in Xander’s lap. He pulled the boy’s big, warm hand onto his chest and covered it with his own. “Story-time, mate,” he murmured. “First time we ever fu... made love, yeah?”

Xander was already kicking himself for letting Spike talk him into this, but... his love’s head was on his thigh and he could feel the strong, toned muscles beneath the t-shirt, and... “It happened like this,” he began.

Part Twelve

Xander closed his eyes, breathing slowly.

“Okay,” he said after another moment, his fingers flexing lightly against Spike’s tight, cotton-covered chest, “I told you how Angel offered me to you that one night. Hell, you even remember it from Mathry’s wish-world. But

things happened... really differently in *my* world.”

He smiled a bit.

“In the life I remember, you took him up on it, Spike. Gods, I’d already been wondering about my own sexuality before I met you. I mean, what straight guy owns that many horrifyingly floral shirts, right? But, seriously... it was that night—seeing you for the first time...” Xander blushed slightly. “I could lie and say that the um... crotch-shot... didn’t have anything to do with it, but I never did like to lie to you, so...”

Spike chuckled, stroking the long, strong fingers on his chest. “Yeah... Broody had you all bent over, didn’t he? Wish I’d noticed you checking out the goods, though.”

Another, deeper blush. “You did. I mean, when... well, just trust me. You definitely noticed. Hell, *Angel* even noticed, judging by how fast he let go of me, anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s Peaches for you. Always was an uptight bugger. After the soul, anyway. Angelus, now...” the vampire frowned. “Never mind, Xan. Go on, yeah?”

Xander groaned softly as Spike’s head shifted on his leg

but nodded, his eyes still closed against the light coming from the lamp on the table.

“You fought. You and Angel did. And then he heard Buffy calling him and took off. Some of your minions had her and her Mom cornered in the Library. I still say that’s when Giles and Joyce started their... thing.” His nose wrinkled at the idea of Giles and Buffy’s Mom, though they’d been happy together once Buffy had given her okay.

“Anyway, Angel went to help her out. He *left me there!* With a soulless, evil vampire who would have killed me for all he knew, and you...” Xander laughed breathlessly, remembering, “You grabbed me, Spike. And next thing I knew, I had a mouth full of vamp-tongue and I was so fucking *hard!* Then you pushed me away.”

A small disbelieving sound came from the blond’s throat, only to become a soft rumble when his boy’s fingers moved to his head, stroking through his hair lightly.

“You did,” Xander insisted, amusement coloring his voice. “One minute, I was being held tight against you, being kissed like I’d never even *dreamt of...* and the next second I was on my ass, staring up at you. And you

grinned.” He smiled, barking a small laugh. “You said I was too tasty to be dinner and you just... walked off with a ‘be seeing you, pet’.” His fingers tangled in the short blond locks and he sighed softly. “I was crushed... that you left *and* that I could literally feel the last bits of ratty denial abandoning the sinking ship of Xander’s heterosexuality.”

Spike smirked against the thick, warm thigh beneath him and let his hand rest on Xander’s knee. “Wanted me, yeah? Don’t blame you. I’m bloody well stunning. Not ta mention good in bed.”

A laugh. “Kinda found that out, Spike. You made me wait until I thought I was gonna *die* from wanting you, but sweet Zeus, did you ever make it worth the wait!”

Another smirk and a slow, hard nip through denim and Spike nearly purred at the overwhelming cloud of arousal that swamped his senses. “Tell me, Xan,” he murmured hopefully. “Tell me...?”

Xander swallowed hard, the memory playing behind his eyes as he spoke on.

“It wasn’t until four nights later that I saw you again,

baby. That was the same night I found out that when a Sire's gift is accepted and the... gift... doesn't mind, that whole 'you're not invited' thing? Not so effective. Or at all. I'd accepted you, somehow, and that... made you welcome." He chuckled softly. "I got home from yet another research session and when I went to my room... there you were, Spike. I... you slipped right past my folks. Of course, they were passed out, but still."

Spike grinned. "That when we did it, pet? First time I slid into your hot, tight body?"

If he blushed any more, Xander figured he'd glow in the dark. Still, this was Spike, even if a different Spike, and... if what they thought was right and he really *was* losing his memories, then... he wanted Spike to know what had happened before Mathry's wish. His vampire would live forever, after all, or close to it, and... if Spike remembered even *hearing* about it, then it wasn't lost. Not like *he* would be.

"Not... exactly," Xander admitted finally. "But it was definitely the first time anyone had ever sucked me off, baby. Gods, your lips, your tongue... your teeth," he whispered the last a bit sheepishly. "It was the first time I realized how much I like a little pain with my

overwhelming and mind-boggling pleasure.”

He blushed again but continued.

“You didn’t even let me speak when I saw you, Spike. I walked into my room and you... pounced. I didn’t even have enough time to be scared. You just... pressed me hard against the door and I swear it felt like you crawled into me from the lips down. I could taste you, feel you so hard against me, even through my pants and your jeans...” He shivered roughly. “And then...” The memory overwhelmed him.

“Gonna show you what it means ta be mine, pet,” he heard through the ringing in his ears, even as he tried to pull that long, cool form against him again.

He whimpered loudly when his hands were batted away and then pressed against the wood above his head.

“Leave them there... don’t want ta piss me off, yeah?”

*And then there were cool, strong hands sliding down his arms, pulling at the buttons of his shirt... tearing the omnipresent t-shirt beneath it to shreds... working at his pants like they were nothing... a mouth—**that mouth**—on his chest, teeth scraping roughly at his nipples; then more*

roughly when he couldn't hold in a happy grunt at the sensation.

Fabric sliding down his thighs, pooling around the tops of his trainers as those lips slid lower, lower... teeth biting bluntly at his navel, tongue dipping inside and pressing rhythmically... fingers, long and elegant, doing things to him that nobody but himself had ever done, and so much better than his own could ever be, and then...

*His entire body arched and strained, his spine bowed from the door behind him as he tried to get closer, closer, **closer** to the lips that had blown one small breath against his seeping tip. "P-please..." he groaned. "S-spike, please!"*

Those fingers moved, gripping his hips and squeezing, and Xander couldn't help gasping as he looked down to see white-blond hair above pale blue eyes.

"Tell me what you want, pet," Spike murmured, meeting the hot brown gaze. "Just tell me... and you can have it, yeah? Treat my prezzies right, I do."

And his brain was so derailed, so short-circuited, that all Xander could do was answer with the truth as he knew it

in that moment.

*“You. I want **you**...”*

Spike grinned, nothing mocking or taunting in the expression. “Not ta worry, Xan-luv... gonna have me.” He leaned in, eyes still locked on Xander’s, and when that perfect, cool mouth closed over his tip, Xander came.

“It was embarrassing at first,” he admitted, trying to ignore the fact that the memory alone had him straining in his slacks; especially with Spike’s head so very... close. “But then you were swallowing me down, pulling me deeper into your mouth, and... Gods, I didn’t have enough energy to spare for embarrassment. It was all I could do not to come again.”

It was only the fact that he was lying in a slightly odd but comfortable position that kept his bloke from noticing his own raging hard on, Spike figured... and damned if he was going to take the chance of Xander seeing and stopping the story, so he shifted just a bit, pulling his leg up a bit more until the shadow of his thigh made observation even less likely. “Yeah... and then what, pet?” he murmured, his own eyes closing finally.

Xander had told him a few things about their life together before, but it had been less... detailed. 'We didn't exchange gifts our first Christmas because you were afraid I'd slip you a cross as a joke... but you got my Mom a pin that she still wears. Wore. Fuck.' And 'There's this little bar we go to every once in a while... down the street from the Bronze. It's not a *gay* bar, but they for damned sure never have a problem with us dancing together, or kissing... and that one time we ended up in the corner? They wrote off our tab.' But this... fond and wistful reciting of memories was new and he'd walk into the sun before he stopped it, even by the reaction of his body.

Xander laughed and let his hand travel from Spike's hair down to one lean shoulder. "And then? What do you think, baby? We ended up on the floor and you gave me my very first lesson in how to suck vampire cock." He laughed again, fingers stroking the fabric-wrapped arm. "You said I was a quick learner. It was the first time anyone had ever accused me of *that*... You were responsible for a whole *lot* of firsts for me, Spike."

Hands in his hair, fingers rubbing small, slow circles against his scalp as he tried his best. That voice—that fucking amazing voice—moaning his name. "Xander," he

heard, “Xander... pet... bloody hell, luv, you’re so sodding hot!”

He felt himself blushing when he realized it wasn’t just a reference to his body heat.

*His hands closed more tightly on the pale skin of Spike’s thighs, even as he dragged his tongue across the tiny, leaking slit... and when he finally got up enough nerve to close his lips over the bulbous head, he could have cried at the sensation of **peace** he found. Not that he wanted to roll over and go to sleep or anything, but something about what he was doing just **clicked**. This was where he belonged. This was what he’d been missing.*

*He had no idea of whether it Spike’s... cock—he shivered slightly as the thought made it that much more real—in his mouth, or if it was just that it was **a** cock in his mouth, but... he was home. For once in his life, he was at peace. Inside. He’d found... himself. This was what he’d been trying so hard to deny and now that it was right there in front of him, or in his mouth, rather...*

“Faster, pet,” he heard, and he moved his mouth up and down, increasing the pace and moaning as the speed drew more dribbles of sweet-bitter-coppery liquid from

the shaft between his lips.

“My sac, luv... gently, now... roll it, yeah...?” almost stuttered, the suggestion had his palm cupping the lightly haired pouch. “Bloody... take me deeper, Xander... want you ta taste me when I come... want your throat around me... gonna be soon, luv... so fucking soon... harder, pet, faster... yeah, just like that, luv...”

*And those hands were suddenly hard on his head, pulling him down until he thought he’d gag, but it was so good at the same time and he couldn’t help moaning, and that made **Spike** moan, and the next thing he’d known, the vampire—**his vampire**—was pressing up into him and his throat was opening somehow... and as Xander felt-tasted-knew the spurts of thick, rich seed, he came again himself, painting stripes of white-ish heat on the floor and Spike’s bunched jeans.*

“I... wow,” he managed to murmur once he was finally willing to let the flaccid shaft go, “That... Spike, I... is it always...? I mean, is that... is that what it’s like being gay...?”

He listened to the shaky laughter coming from the older man, eyes locked on wide gold-flecked blue.

“Oh, pet...” Spike said, his tone enough to make Xander shiver again, “That’s just the beginning, yeah...? So much ta bloody teach you... but later, luv. You need ta be at school bright and early, making nice with Slayer and your friends.”

Xander groaned and forced himself to crawl to his bed then looked back at the languid blond on the floor. “I thought you wanted to kill her,” he managed to grunt, heaving himself from the floor and onto the mattress.

Blue eyes became warmer, though Xander hadn’t thought that was possible.

“You’re mine, luv,” the vampire said quietly, one hand rubbing his own abdomen as he kicked his way out of boots and jeans. “And she’s your friend. You love her, I dare say.”

Xander nodded slowly, breath coming faster as the blond duplicated his own crawl, though much more appealingly, the human was sure.

“Can’t kill her, then,” Spike muttered, slinking up onto the bed to press his cooler body onto Xander’s still slightly

sweaty form. "Your friends are safe from me. Besides, Sire's stink is all over her. Now go to sleep, brat. Tomorrow's Friday. Means the weekend's all mine."

Xander chuckled again, stroking Spike's hair. "I still can't believe I actually fell asleep with you on top of me," he murmured. "Then again, it had been a really long day..."

Spike smirked and shifted a bit, faking a yawn that brought the back of his head into contact with the large, hard bulge in his bloke's pants. "Yeah," he allowed, chuckling silently at the groan the motion earned, "Couldn't have anything to do with the two bloody orgasms in what sounds like twenty minutes..."

The brunette groaned again, fingers digging deeper into platinum hair. "I... fuck. This is *such* a bad idea..."

"Or a good one," Spike answered, sitting up to press his lips hard against Xander's heated mouth. 'Might be the best idea yet,' he finished silently, rumbling happily when his boy didn't fight him.

Part Thirteen

“Remember you as being a good bit less chiseled,” Spike murmured against soft tanned skin, his tongue tracing the small but very clear impressions between the muscles of his bloke’s abdomen. “You know... in the world that wasn’t. Before the whole construction thing...”

Xander moaned deeply, his fingers digging hard into the sheets beneath him. “No, I... fuck, Spike! That’s... Oh, hell...” He stared at the ceiling for a good few moments as the slow, wet exploration continued. “Four... years... of tae kwon do... does a body... good...”

If anything, Spike was surprised that they were even in Xander’s room. He’d been entirely ready for the brunette to change his mind about what they were doing the minute they’d nearly fallen from the couch. But here they were, and though Xander was speaking, he wasn’t saying ‘stop’ or ‘don’t’ or any of the myriad other things he might have said.

No, instead of words that would call a halt to their actions, his bloke was answering his comments and that was... good. A little disturbing because in a perfect world, Xander wouldn’t be able to think clearly enough to talk, but still.

“Didn’t mind you a bit on the puffy side,” he murmured, grinning against Xander’s stomach when the boy yelped ‘hey!’, “was bloody well hot, even if I wasn’t about ta say so, yeah?”

He almost wished he could remember the past Spike did, but if he had to choose, he’d rather recall his own. For as long as possible, anyway. He moaned again, fingers releasing soft, strong cotton to wrap roughly in even softer hair as he pulled the cool lips away from his skin. “Shut up, Spike,” he ordered, “and get up here. I want... Gods, just kiss me again, okay?”

And seeing as that first kiss on the couch had been so bloody stunning, Spike didn’t really have a problem with that.

He crawled slowly up the long, toned form, the tip of his shaft sliding wetly against one hot thigh, and when he leaned down, joining his lips to his boy’s, they both groaned.

Arms wrapped tight around strong torsos, lips met and opened... tongues tangled fiercely, not battling at all, simply expressing need, want, heat... and when long,

thick, ready cocks slid against each other, the loud, longing moans echoed from one man's mouth to the other's before being swallowed completely.

His mind might not remember this, but his body surely did, and Spike knew it even as he slid a second finger slowly into his bloke's tight ass, his digits moving automatically to stroke the boy's prostate. If he thought about it, though, he felt awkward... worried that he might ruin things this first time that wasn't their first for Xander.

"Was it like this, then?" he murmured, lips grazing lightly against one tense thigh, "When we finally got down to it, pet. Was it this... hot?" His eyes closed although his fingers continued moving within the brunette's tightness, letting the groaned words distract him just enough.

“Oh... Gods...” Spike really thought he could talk?

Well, apparently so because those two words were met with an inquisitive sound that had him gasping. Or maybe it was the fingers stretching him for what he knew was a truly impressive erection. Either way, when Spike’s motions slowed, Xander found himself speaking... relatively coherently, too.

“G-gods... no, it was... fuck, baby! That’s... unnngh...” He arched slowly, dragging in a shaky breath. “Y-you... came back the next... fuck, the next night, and... oh, Gods, yes... I-love it when you... yeah, just I-like th-that...”

“The next night,” Spike reminded his bloke, slowing the rhythm his nail was tapping against that hard little nub inside the hot channel.

“Took me aw-way,” Xander managed, and if there was a bit of a needy whimper in his voice, he figured that was fine. “Th-there was this old f-factory... and you and D-dru were staying there... do that again!” His hips rolled as Spike complied and Xander whined softly at the third finger circling his prostate.

“Some kid-v-vamp... dust already... built-in minions, you

said... and Dru w-was... p-playing with a Cheslow demon... y-you l-liked him... said he was a-almosst good enough f-for your s-s-sister... fuck, Spike, I can't..." he yelped as a fourth digit entered him, then pressed down onto the invading flesh as much as he could with his hands holding his own knees up and wide.

That explained a lot, Spike realized. Dru really had been more of a sister than a Sire to him, after all... a sister he adored passionately and had wild, bloody, *nasty* sex with, but still. "Go on, luv," he rumbled, nipping his way up Xander's thigh and laying one swift lick over the already tense, lightly haired sac. He smirked when his bloke jumped, then did it again just for the hell of it.

"I... am so... gonna... kill you..." Xander grunted.

"There's a reason they call it 'the little death', pet... go on. Want ta hear how it was, yeah?"

A long, ragged breath later, Xander finally spoke again.

"You w-wanted to... w-wait, baby, but I was so... fuck, Spike, so ready, so *hot*... so much need pouring th-through m-me..." He gazed down then closed his eyes tightly as Spike's long, elegant fingers made him squirm.

“C-couldn’t wait to get you n-naked... and th-then you were... fuck, baby, just like th-that... y-you were over m-me, t-touching me, and I begged you, Spike! B-begged you! And you d-didn’t w-want to... h-hurt me, but I couldn’t w-w-wait, and...”

And he’d never been the most patient vampire, Spike admitted, and he still wasn’t, because hearing his boy’s voice stuttering, feeling that incredible ass so tight around his fingers, he couldn’t help but pull away.

“Sssshhh... hush, pet,” he nearly crooned when Xander would have sat up and reached for him—and he didn’t know how he knew that was what the boy would have done, but he was bloody well *sure* of it—“Not going anywhere, pet... promise you that much, a’right...?” His slick fingers stroked roughly at his own seeping cock, even as he shifted over the bloke laying there all spread out and open for him.

Black-nailed hands rested on the mattress to either side of the brunette’s shoulders and Spike hovered, his tip just barely brushing the somewhat loosened bud it wanted to live in... and the vampire growled softly.

“Open your eyes, luv. Want you ta see me when I slide deep inta you, yeah...? Please, pet. Xan. Look at me...”

Gods, he was dying... dying and being reborn, it felt like. It had been... fuck, close to a week since he'd felt his love inside him and if he'd thought their little episode at the hotel was a betrayal of his Spike, then this was even worse, but... it really *was* the same vampire... and somehow, knowing that made all the difference.

Burning brown eyes opened, catching gold-flecked blue and Xander nodded. "I... I see you, Spike. I... oh, Gods..." His breath caught on a soft sob as that thick, slightly cool bulb pressed harder, and his mouth opened slowly, just as his body did to accept the beloved intrusion. "Spike..." he whimpered, releasing his own knees to press hands hard to his vampire's trembling ass. "Spike..."

'Mine,' the demon growled, his 'voice' sounding just as surprised as the rest of him was. It was true, though. Regardless of memory or anything else, there was a... bond of some sort between him—them, meaning demon and soul—and the bloke he was slowly sliding to flush within. "Xander," he managed to sigh, the name striking him as a revelation.

Long, tanned legs closed around Spike's body, one at the waist, the other slightly higher, and when Spike found

himself balls-deep and held motionless, he truly didn't mind his captivity. His eyes merely held the rich sable stare and he nodded, acknowledging that he was exactly where he belonged... or that he'd been wrong to doubt. Either way, it was truth.

He pressed himself harder into the yielding hole, the swallowed hard and nodded again. "I do," he admitted, though he was a good bit shocked at the realization. "I do too, Xander... I see you. *Love you.*" And when arms and legs loosened around him, allowing him free rein, he moved.

Slowly. Carefully. Tenderly. But desperately, all the same.

Too long, Xander felt himself thinking. Too long, too long, too long... too long since he'd felt this, known this, and even with it being only five days, it was still four and a half days longer than he'd ever gone between since that first time when he'd been so anxious, so desirous that he'd forced Spike to make him bleed. "Missed... you..." he mumbled between small grunts as his vampire's hips moved faster, harder, stroking him perfectly with the ease of long practice. "Missed you... love you... so... much..."

Slayer was nothing to him, he finally understood. Never had been, aside from being Xander's friend and one of the humans on his 'don't kill' list. He still remembered loving her, shagging her, wanting her... but when he was buried deep inside his boy, he saw it for what it was.

Even with what his bloke's cousin had done, he *knew*.

He was supposed to be with Xander. *Should* be. And all the false memories in the world couldn't change that.

His lips pressed down hard onto the full, heated ones before him and he moved faster still, sliding easily in and out of Xander's precious body, and when he felt himself tensing, felt that hole tightening rhythmically around him, felt his features shifting, he... ended the kiss and let himself fall to his elbows, staring deep into wide, loving chocolate eyes. "Bloody... love this, Xan... love you, love this," he whispered, both demon and soul stilling for just a bare moment when the boy smiled a watery smile and arched his neck to the side.

"L-love you, S-spike," Xander whispered equally quietly, bowing and heaving beneath the perfect weight, and "please... please, baby..." as he felt the thickness piercing him swell still more. "Please!" louder and more a

demand than a request at the first sensation of cool fluid bathing his bowels.

‘Mine,’ the demon said again, crowing this time.

‘Mine,’ the soul disagreed.

‘Ours,’ the combined spirit announced, even as Spike took the offering, sinking sharp, jagged teeth deep into the juncture of neck and shoulder, letting the full essence of Xander Harris enter his body and fill him with a sense of belonging and contentment he’d never known... that he knew of.

And when he felt the wonderfully long, thick shaft trapped between his body and his bloke’s jerk and throb and pulse and begin to spill long, copious shots of hot seed against his skin, he knew he’d found home.

“Love you, Xan,” he whispered, unsure of whether he’d managed to actually say it out loud or not, as he was still swallowing slow, rich draughts of love-laden blood. Either way, though, he had a feeling that Xander had heard him.

One exhausted hand reached out, slapping for the truly annoying alarm that was going off.

It wasn't until the thing making the noise was knocked from the bedside table and a small, tinny voice started softly then became louder and louder that Spike realized it had been the phone he'd tried to kill.

He leaned over the side of the bed and stretched, his groan echoed by his boy's as their bodies rubbed together in a very interesting manner, then picked up the receiver and snarled at it.

"What?" he demanded, his eyes closing as one big, warm hand stroked slowly up and down his spine. "Oh. Yeah." He sighed silently. "Almost forgot about that. No, not like *that*... well, give us a bloody minute, yeah? Told you we were gonna watch... bloody hell, fell asleep, didn't we? Boy's had a rough few days!"

Xander frowned as the words went on, his mind slowly swimming up through layers of subconscious thought until finally the words made sense. “Baby...?” he murmured, smiling at the feel of silken skin beneath his fingertips, “is that Uncle Jareth...?”

Spike pressed one soft, fast and silent kiss to Xander’s chest then grumbled into the phone again. “Give us half an hour, pissant... well, offer her some bloody tea, why don’t you? Chit rarely had the nerve ta tell sodding Rupert ‘no’, even if she *doesn’t* like it.” With that he pulled the body of the phone to him by the cord and hung up.

“It *was* your bloody fucking Uncle, luv,” he admitted with a small smile as he sat up, already mourning the loss of the warmth against his skin, “and we need ta get showered and dressed, pet.” Spike’s eyes found the already scabbed-over bite on his boy’s neck and he smirked. “Might want ta wear something with a high neck. Wouldn’t want the chit pitching a fit, right? Never know what might happen if she did.”

Rather than making Xander laugh, the comment simply reminded him that he and Spike were still living in different worlds, the mind blowing sex—love making—

aside. And so he smiled the best he could and let go of the blond.

“Okay,” he made himself say, surprised by the steadiness of his own voice, “I’ll use the shower here. Meet you in the living room in ten?”

He didn’t even wait for an answer. He just rolled from the bed and moved quickly to the bathroom.

It was only when the door was closed and locked behind him and he was under the hot spray that he let himself cry nearly silent tears.

No matter what had happened only a little while earlier, he was still alone. He could fool himself for a short period of time, as he’d just proven, but... he was still alone.

Spike frowned, staring at the closed bathroom door. He'd actually been thinking of sharing it, but... no. Xander was right. If they got in there together, it would take *much* longer than the thirty minutes he'd told Jareth they'd be. Better to follow his boy's lead and use the shower in the other bedroom.

He grumbled softly as he got up and left the room. He'd been looking forward to running his hands all over Xander's wet body under the hot water, after all.

Then again, they had plenty of time for that once everything was straightened out. And if for some reason it *wasn't* sorted, well... Spike knew now, and... he could still court the boy, woo him.

It wouldn't be the same, but it would be better than nothing. Or so he told himself, even as he stepped into his own shower and rushed. He didn't want to leave Xander waiting, after all.

Part Fourteen

Jareth closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as the young woman seated across from him continued her apparently endless and one-sided conversation, ignoring the cup of tea he'd been hoping would slow her down.

If this was any sort of indication of what his nephew and William dealt with on a daily basis in Sunnydale, it was no wonder the both of them were so anxious to return things to their normal state. The girl was going to drive even *him* crazy, and she'd been there for less than an hour!

"You know, Buffy is *not* gonna be happy about that tranquilizer dart," the girl said, continuing her monologue. "I mean, really. You had the Slayer drugged unconscious on the Hellmouth at night and your people tried to just leave her there? Just be glad that one guy agreed to take her back to the Magic Box or you'd be in *real* trouble. Do you have any idea of what happens when a Slayer gets turned? Well, neither do I since it's never happened, but I'm fairly sure it can't be good."

"Look, Miss," Jareth inserted desperately when the young woman paused for breath, only to sigh and move his fingers to his temples when she started again.

“And Spike, with the calling? ‘Xander needs you, come alone’?” her eyes rolled. “Do you think that could sound just a little more ominous? I mean, considering. Vampire, right? Soul, schmole. And he just... grabbed Xander and ran off without saying a word and Giles is definitely pissed but also worried, and he’s been muttering something about Council money when he thinks I can’t hear, and...”

“*ENOUGH!*” Jareth finally roared. “They’ll be here in... Gods help me, five more minutes! Until then, shut up and drink your damned *tea!*”

Surprised blinking was followed by a suspicious gaze at the tea cup. “Why?” the girl demanded. “Is there... did you put something in the tea? It doesn’t *smell* like there’s anything wrong with it, just bitter and sort of... sharp. And I know I’m chattering but I’m nervous, okay? It’s not every day that I’m hauled off to meet with some guy who’s in charge of stuff like... helicopters and guys with tranquilizer guns and oh, yeah, a great big building that belongs to like the second largest cosmetics company in the *world*, and...”

Jareth groaned quietly and pressed the tab for the

intercom on his desk.

“Yes?” he heard Doris say, and the sound of her low, no nonsense voice made him smile.

“Doris, would you mind doing me a favor?” he replied, not waiting for her agreement. “Please take the key to the weapons safe from your drawer, unlock it... get the gun. It’ll need loading, treasure... then make sure the safety is off, bring it in here, and *shoot me in the head!*”

He sighed again at the soft laugh he heard coming through the speaker.

“I would, *sir,*” he was told, “But William and Alexander have just arrived. I believe you’d like to speak with them *before* your untimely demise.”

Jareth groaned again and closed the intercom connection, then met the stunned eyes of the woman across from him. “Well. Perhaps you’ll save the rest of your... comments... for my nephew and his... William.”

The young woman blushed slightly then took a sip of the tea she’d avoided until then. She didn’t think she’d ever

driven anyone to the brink of assisted suicide before, but... there was really no telling.

The last little while had been entirely bizarre for Spike.

He'd shagged his bloke, well and righteously; they'd showered and dressed and met up in the living room area of the rooms Jareth had given them... and while Xander had accepted his kiss on meeting, and even responded, there was something... wrong.

He didn't know what it was, or even when it had come about, but his boy wasn't acting the way Spike had expected him to after what had happened.

'Told him I love him,' he catalogued. 'He said the same to me. Got cleaned up... and now he's bloody well...' And that was the problem. He didn't know *what* Xander was

acting like, but it wasn't what Spike expected from a bloke who said he was in love.

The mystery of it had him barely acknowledging Doris's greeting when the private elevator opened on the foyer of Jareth's office, and he knew he'd be paying for that later but right there in the moment, he didn't care.

Hell, his bloke was barely letting him hold his hand and Spike had the feeling that he was merely allowing it to avoid talking about whatever was bothering him, and...

"Go right in," Doris said, giving the vampire a worried gaze. William had never passed up the opportunity for some sort of banter. Not even without remembering her. Then she noticed the shuttered look on the other man's face and sighed. "Gods help us all," she whispered, even as the door to her Mate's office closed with a soft gust of displaced air.

For his part, Xander was trying his hardest not to scream.

He'd cried in the shower. He knew that much.

He'd cried and wailed silently, beating himself up in the psychological sense.

How could he have slept with Spike?

How could he have held him and nearly begged and wanted him so much he'd thought he'd die if he didn't feel him inside him?

How could he have let himself take that comfort, that... love... when Spike still didn't *know him*?

And how... fuck, how could he have enjoyed it so fucking much, even *knowing* it was wrong?

He must have done something, he figured. Done something or said something that made Spike...

No.

No, he hadn't.

Spike was the one who'd initiated things by asking just those questions, demanding just those stories.

Spike was the one who'd pressed his head against Xander's automatic erection.

Hell, Xander reminded himself, it had been *Spike* who'd decided to rest his head on his thigh!

And okay. They remembered the last five or six years differently, but... having Spike inside him again had been... amazing. It had felt like life and death and taxes—something necessary... required, even.

He didn't even notice that they were on his Uncle's office-floor until the door closed between them and the lobby area, but when he *did* notice, he finally let himself squeeze Spike's fingers, answering the hopeful pressure. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I do love you, baby."

He felt himself grinning hugely to match the sudden burst of light from his vampire's lips, only to be distracted by a smallish form barreling into him... and the sensation of lukewarm tea soaking into his back.

“Uh... hi, Wills,” he said slowly, sounding just as surprised as he actually was. “Uh... hi.”

Willow burrowed her head harder against her friend’s chest and held him even tighter. “Xander! Oh, Gods, we’ve been so *worried*! You went all crazy and stuff and then Spike said he’d look after you and then POOF, you were gone and we thought he did something but we couldn’t find either one of you and Giles *tried*! He *did*! Locator spells and even like-to-like spells, though why he’d use a fifty dollar bill is still a question, but you were gone and...”

Spike snorted and let go of his bloke’s hand before stepping away. “Nice ta know you lot think so highly of me, Red. Wouldn’t hurt the bloke. Love him, don’t I?”

If Jareth’s brows hadn’t already been up close to his hairline, the vampire’s matter-of-fact declaration would have had them there. He’d known William had loved his nephew, but that William wasn’t *this* William, and... “Fell asleep watching TV?” he grumbled, “My *ass*.”

It took a good few hours to explain things to Willow, and by the time they'd been repeated three times over, Spike was ready to explode.

Still, his bloke was holding his hand and keeping him tight on his lap, willfully ignoring the moue of distaste the redhead threw their way every few minutes, so he figured it could have been worse.

Finally, though, the chit seemed to understand that they were all serious.

Willow frowned, deliberately not looking at her best friend and his... lover, she supposed, and didn't that have her thrown for a loop?

Not that she'd never suspected, of course, because Xander had always gone for dominant women who were usually demonic, so why wouldn't he fall for a demonic guy once he came out of the closet?

No, it wasn't that Xander was gay. It was that *Spike* was.

She remembered him with Drusilla and how much he'd wanted her back... remembered that he'd had that weird and *so wrong* thing with Harmony, because how could *anything* with *Harmony* ever be right?... remembered getting the up-close-and-personal view of him and Anya that time...

And she remembered that he was in love with Buffy. The Slayer. Had stalked her, chased her, *loved her*... and tried to rape her.

Herself, too, she supposed, if trying to forcibly feed from her on her bed in the dorms could be considered attempted rape... which it could, as far as she was concerned.

But all that aside, looking at Spike in Xander's lap, their hands entwined so easily and comfortably...

She wanted to believe.

She truly wanted to believe in the world both Xander and his Uncle—and wasn't it strange to think of Xander as

having cousins on the LaVelle side, since she'd only ever heard of the Harris cousins—she wanted to believe in the world they spoke of.

She *wanted* to live in a world where Kendra hadn't died and was one of her closest friends... where she'd gone to Oxford for a semester abroad and Oz had gone with her and never met that Veruca bitch... where Angel had left, but not forever, and had come back with his 'curse' firmly in place, along with his soul...

Where she'd never lost Tara, never gone crazy and killed Warren, never almost ended the world because she'd thought her own grief was more important, more *pertinent* than a good—or bad—twelve billion lives, demons included.

Oh, yes... she wanted that world. And she'd do whatever it took to live in it.

“What do I have to do?” she chirped, trying not to sound too anxious.

After a moment or two of waiting for Jareth to speak, Spike finally shrugged.

“Still got that bauble from D’Hoffryn on your keychain, pet?”

Part Fifteen

Buffy sighed softly even as she logged in to the webpage for Sunnydale Savings and Loan. If she was lucky, there’d be enough in her account to at least make partial payments on the utilities for the house... enough to keep the power and water on, anyway.

Sure she was working now, but her pay was still less than she needed; especially with more potential Slayers appearing on a near daily basis.

Plus Dawn was in school and Buffy remembered very well how important it was to keep up with—or surpass—the fashions of the other kids, and... she had no idea of how her Mother had managed it.

It didn’t help that her Father was pretty much MIA, either. Hell, he was their Dad and he hadn’t even come to Mom’s funeral. He’d sent a card. Like that was enough

or the same... and with Joyce gone, there was no alimony, no child support, no... anything from him, and Father or not, she was entirely willing to track him down and beat him within an inch of his life for not loving them enough to help. Of course, she couldn't afford to do that, either, so...

She sighed again and finally remembered her password.

If she could just give fifty bucks each to the electric, the phone and the water companies, she'd be good for another few weeks, she figured, and...

"G-giles!" she yelled when the page finally opened to show the balance in her household account, "*Giles!* This... this can't be right!"

The Watcher glanced quickly at the screen, unwilling to take time out from his careful perusal of the same text Xander had been reading days ago; then he groaned and looked again. "That is... rather a large increase, Buffy," he muttered, silently cursing a certain blond vampire.

The girl blinked again, then refreshed the page. "It... it's got to be a mistake," she whispered sadly. "There's no way I have over forty-five thousand dollars. I mean, forty-

five *dollars*, sure. But forty-five *thousand*?”

“Perhaps,” Giles said slowly, suddenly seeing a way out of the mess he was in, “if you were to authorize me to deal with the bank on your behalf... I might be able to sort whatever mistake has been made...?”

That would definitely make things easier, Buffy admitted silently, but... “No,” she answered, forcing herself to sit up straight. “This is life stuff, not Slayer stuff. I guess I need to handle it myself. Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to tell me for the last year now?” She signed out of the site and stood, slinging her small backpack over one shoulder. “I’ll deal with it. And hey!” she added brightly, “maybe there’s a reward for reporting an error, right? I’ll bet there is. And then I can maybe pay a *whole* bill for a change!”

Giles groaned and collapsed in the chair his Slayer had just vacated. “And of course she chooses *now* to start listening to me. The bloody Council is going to *kill* me.”

“Yes, Giles. That seems likely,” Anya agreed, even as she bustled out from behind the counter. “However, as all your policies are in order, you won’t have to worry about the shop. I’m sure I’ll be able to keep it open. After a

suitable two day mourning period. Oh! I'll have a sale in your honor!"

The Englishman groaned again and let his head fall forward onto the keyboard. "Yes. That makes me feel much better, Anya. And not at all as though I might be worth more dead than alive."

The former demon shrugged and set about affixing new price stickers over the old ones, marking the Spatharian Orbs up by five dollars a piece. "Technically, you are."

"Jareth LaVelle," D'Hoffryn said, a tone of long suffering in his voice when he appeared. "How did you manage to call me here?"

Willow cleared her throat carefully, giving the demon a sheepish smile when he turned his attention to her. "Um,

he didn't. I... you gave me..."

"My token," he remembered, eyes closing wearily. "So you've changed your mind, then. Good. Come, child. Arashmahar awaits your potential." He frowned slightly and muttered, mostly to himself, "We *do* have a few openings."

Spike snorted from his spot on the edge of Jareth's desk. "Hardly surprising, mate, seeing as you killed one of your own and let Anyanka go back ta being human. In *this* reality, anyway."

Inhuman eyes narrowed and D'Hoffryn's nostrils flared as he took one delicate sniff in the man's direction.

"Vampire. You shouldn't even *be* here. Don't you belong in Sunnydale chasing after that little blonde girl you love so much?" He smirked.

Xander came as close to growling as a human could. "He *belongs* wherever he wants to be," he snarled, moving from the other side of the circle to wrap an arm around Spike's waist.

The demon couldn't help himself. He laughed. "Well, well. If it isn't the demon magnet. I see some things

never change.” Still, he couldn’t control a tiny shiver of concern at seeing the boy there.

Jareth arched one sleek brow and crossed his arms.

“Indeed. You still aren’t doing your homework, are you?” His smile was just a little bit nasty as he continued. “I see you’ve met my nephew—and the heir to LV Enterprises—Alexander. And his...”

“Mate,” Spike inserted, giving Xander a careful look from the corner of his eye.

“His Mate,” Jareth repeated. “William the Bloody.”

For her part, Willow wasn’t entirely sure of whether to laugh at the look on the ancient demon’s face or hide for the same reason. “Um, okay, maybe when Halfrek did the thing for Xander’s cousin, you forgot the really real world, too. That could be why you remember that, right? Because Jareth doesn’t really remember that world even though he lives in it and Xander knows the truth too, so maybe if you... wish or something, you’ll remember, and... sorry. Nervous again, ‘cause... well, D’Hoffryn!”

“Silence, girl!” Gnarled hands rose to cover equally gnarled ears and the demon shook his head until the

building headache faded a little. “You’re telling me that *Halfrek* granted a wish from a LaVelle? And that this... *boy*... IS a LaVelle?” He sighed. “I’ll need to look into this. *And* see why this... Alexander... remembers a world that shouldn’t exist for him.”

Spike growled. “Something in one of Watcher’s books,” he snapped. “Witch was there too. Know that much already, you great prancing gi... mmmmp...”

“Sorry, he doesn’t really mean...” Xander’s hand fastened harder over his lover’s mouth and he shook his head. “Well, yes he does. We’re all kinda mad at you. Spike’s just more vocal about it.”

D’Hoffryn looked to Jareth, then frowned and turned his gaze to the redhead. “Tell me. Slowly! What happened. Where he was. What he did. It will help me to... *see*.”

Xander slowly released his vampire’s mouth, even as Willow spoke. Her voice was tight and stilted, but then again, he could tell just by looking at her that she was fighting the urge to babble the way she usually...

He swallowed hard. *His* Willow babbled, sure. But not the way this Willow did and if he was remembering...

expecting and recognizing *this* Willow's babbles, then Spike and Jareth were right. He really *was* losing himself, and while he'd sort of known that already, it was still... frightening.

His arm tightened around Spike's slender back and forced himself to breathe deeply and evenly, the smoke-leather-copper scent of his blond soothing as well as arousing him.

"Gonna be a'right, pet," Spike whispered, "Fix things or not, / know who you really are, yeah? Worse comes ta worse, luv... I'll remind you. Not letting you go this time, Xander. Not ever again."

And that was comforting, and yet... not. Still, when Spike's arm went around his own back, mimicking his hold, Xander could do nothing but lean into his vampire and try not to shiver.

The fact that Jareth refused to release him from the circle was annoying, but at that moment, D'Hoffryn was far more interested in what had happened.

He watched, along with the others, as the little redhead's words created a direction for the images of the past that appeared in the opaque section of air he'd created.

He saw the boy—young man, really—enter the shop, bumbling and joking and clearly playing up his own goofy nature... saw the same young man go out for a short time and return with various beverages and pastries, offering a smile at the apparently usual lack of thanks.

He watched while Alexander closed one book and reached for another, already yawning... watched his eyes glaze over when he realized he didn't know the language on the pages before him...

And finally, D'Hoffryn saw the head of dark hair nod forward, meeting the open book, and...

“Wait. There.”

He twitched one finger, changing the view.

“That glyph. That was Halfrek’s sigil. See how it appears when Alexander turns to that page? It was keyed specifically to him. And look.” He sped the vision forward, then paused it again when the boy’s image sat up. “It’s gone now. That’s how it happened. That’s why he remembers.”

Spike frowned. “Yeah, so? Told you it was a bloody book, didn’t I? And he’s forgetting now! Starting to... bloody hell, I don’t know!”

D’Hoffryn nodded. “He’s starting to become the boy he was before he slept. Halfrek’s glyph is losing strength. She’s dead, after all.”

“Well bring her back, you great barmy pillock! Boy loses himself and...”

“And there will be no one to helm LaVelle,” Jareth finished. He shot a glare at the vampire when he would have added to that. D’Hoffryn wouldn’t much care if Alexander and William weren’t together because of the memories. But LV Enterprises without a head? That was another matter entirely and the ancient demon knew it.

D'Hoffryn frowned then shook his head slowly. "I can't bring her back, William. She's gone. I could only bring her back if she'd violated her oaths to me, and... she was the price for Anyanka's humanity."

Xander frowned and closed his eyes, holding back the tears that prickled behind his lids. "It's... okay," he nearly sobbed on a shaky breath. "I... I'll just go back to b-being... m-me. The me everyone knows, I mean..."

"You will *not!*" Spike snarled, pulling his bloke tight against him and staring hard at him until damp brown eyes finally opened. "Find a way, we will, pet. Told you. Not letting you go, yeah?"

"You heard him, Spike! There's n-nothing we can do! Nothing *he* can do! It... it's *over!*" One small sob did escape him when his blond pulled him even closer, strong, elegant hands hard on his spine. "I love you, Spike... love you, baby... always will, even when I don't know it, okay...?"

"No... no, pet. No, luv. Won't let you forget. Not now. Not when I finally know... can't do this without you, Xan... can't go back ta being that bloke I was before you woke

up *knowing* what we are ta each other... what we're supposed ta be... please, pet, please Xan... fight this for me, yeah? Fight it *with* me! Don't just let me go, luv... couldn't stand it if you..." he swallowed hard and bowed his head, hiding his face against one broad shoulder. "Don't give up, Xander... please, luv... please..."

Willow blinked, staring wide-eyed at the two men. It took her a moment to remember what Spike's words reminded her of, but when she did... oh, when she did she remembered blood on her shirt and Tara's limp body in her arms... remembered wanting to die and kill and rend and break the world wide open because it had let it happen, let her *reason for being*... die.

Her fingers clenched into tight, small fists and her eyes narrowed dangerously as she turned back to the demon in the circle. "Let's hear about these *oaths*, Mister! 'Cause if there's a loophole, we're for damned sure gonna find it!" She leveled her best resolved-face at D'Hoffryn then nodded when he blinked. "Start talking!"

Part Sixteen

The ancient demon couldn't help being surprised at the way the boy—Alexander LaVelle, he reminded himself—had rallied.

He'd broken down in the vampire's arms for all of five minutes before that strong spine straightened, and determined but still wet eyes turned to him. So yeah. D'Hoffryn was impressed.

Then again, if the young man was truly the heir to Jareth LaVelle's empire, then that sort of resiliency was a necessary component of his personality. It was simply that the demon was having a hard time reconciling *this* boy with the one he recalled in passing.

"Hey!" Willow called out stridently, even as she snapped her fingers in front of the gnarled-looking creature's face, "Focus! I may not know the whole story but it's kinda clear that something *bad* is gonna happen if we don't figure this out, right?"

"You could say that," Jareth muttered, fingers playing idly with the pen and some paper clips on his desk.

The redhead glared. "I *did* say that. And you can either help or just *go away*."

And it was Jareth's turn to be surprised. The girl had nearly driven him crazy when she'd first arrived, what with her endless prattling on and on, but now that she felt like she was truly needed and had a purpose...? Well, she was like an entirely different girl and he suddenly understood how she'd stood as Maiden in the real world while also ruling the Coven in Sunnydale. Ordinarily, that task would have fallen to an older and much more experienced witch, but... when the girl wasn't entirely beset by nerves, she was clearly effective.

Xander frowned then shook his head. "He didn't mean anything by it, Wills. That's just... how Uncle Jareth is."

"Yah... condescending, annoying prat. Git can't seem ta help himself, Red."

D'Hoffryn's frown was more frightening than Xander's or Spike's, but also less intent. "Perhaps the young witch and I should speak alone," he suggested. "We don't seem to be getting far with all these... interruptions. And I *do* have a service to perform in Arashmahar."

"Are you *insane*?" Xander demanded, unwilling to leave *this* Willow alone with a demon of D'Hoffryn's standing.

The Willow *he* knew, he wouldn't have worried about, but... he wasn't sure he had that sort of faith in this version.

"I hardly think that's necessary," Jareth added, glancing at his nephew. "If you're going to talk about Alexander, he should be here." Besides, the fact that the girl had had D'Hoffyn's token in the first place implied some sort of a connection between them... and he wasn't sure he trusted the demon not to take advantage of that.

Willow sighed and closed her eyes for just a moment and when she opened them again, they were glassy, still pools of sheer black. "I can take care of myself, guys. And D'Hoffryn's right. None of you know how to keep your mouths shut and we're under a deadline here, even if we don't know how close it is. Go."

Jareth had no idea of how he found himself standing in the outer office, though he clearly recalled showing the girl which switch on his desk would open the intercom connection.

"Sir?" Doris murmured, "do I smell my..."

He nodded quickly then took her chair when she offered

it.

“I thought you couldn’t...” she said, sounding stunned.

“I can’t,” Jareth agreed, “but apparently the Maiden *could*. And since we’ve been put out for the moment, I surmise that all we can do is wait.”

One slender brow arched and Doris looked at the closed office door. “That irritating little girl...”

“Is *the* Maiden. Apparently so.” One arm reached out, catching Doris around the waist when she swayed. “She’ll buzz us if she needs us, treasure. Although I’m not entirely sure we’re worried about the right person at the moment. That ‘irritating little girl’ is strong enough—even in *this* reality—to summon the night-eyes with less than a thought.”

The slow, almost purely evil smile that spread across Doris’s lips had Spike chuckling. “Knew we were mates, pet,” he said with a smirk. “And if all we can do now is wait for whatever’s goin’ on in there ta be done, me and my bloke are gonna head back downstairs. Think there might be something good on telly.”

Xander shook his head, looking stubborn. “No. There is no way I’m leaving Willow up here all by herself while we go and fu... watch TV, Spike!” He blushed at his slip. “What if she...”

“You suddenly a Mage, luv?” the vampire asked gently, “or a bizarrely butch Slayer?” He raised one hand, cupping a hot cheek. “Red’s strong enough ta handle herself, yeah? Did her time in England with Watcher’s pets. Won’t lose herself or let herself be beaten.” His brow furrowed. “Not that you know what I’m talking about, but... need you ta trust me on this one.”

Brown eyes closed and when they opened again, Xander wore the trust he bore his vampire right there in his gaze. “Okay, Spike. I... I do trust you.”

“And...?” the blond prodded.

“And we’ll go watch TV. For *real*. No... funny business, okay?”

Spike chuckled again, steering his boy to the elevator. “Believe me, pet. Last thing you’re gonna be doin’ is *laughing*.”

Jareth smiled just a bit as the doors closed on his nephew's outraged response. "I don't think I was *ever* that young, treasure," he said seriously.

Doris laughed, a full, sharp sound with only a tinge of bitterness to it. "Really? Because I seem to recall Mathry being conceived in the copy room on the third floor. If that wasn't youthful lust and exuberance, I don't know what is."

"Point," the blond man agreed after a moment.

"Yes, I know. I'm keeping score, beloved." And she was, too. Sixty-three more points and he'd owe her that new plane she'd had her eye on. It made for an amusing game.

"You know," Willow said after a fruitless half hour,

“maybe I’m asking the wrong questions. And it’s not like you’re helping any, either.”

D’Hoffryn sighed and leaned back against the invisible wall of the containing circle, his arms crossed over his chest. “It’s not my *job* to help you, little girl. I wouldn’t even be here if I hadn’t given you my token, and what was I *thinking* when I did that? I’m disgusted.”

He waited for anger or dejection to settle over the witch, but when she looked at him again, he saw only an odd sort of realization.

“Oh... oh!” the girl chirped entirely too brightly for the demon’s liking. “What you just said. It made me think, and... it wasn’t Halfrek’s job to leave that glyph for Xander, was it? I mean, do vengeance demons usually do that? Give someone an out?”

“No,” the demon snarled, horny nails digging deep into his own arms. “I have no idea why Halfrek would have even considered doing such a thing.”

“Unless...” Willow went on, her eyes glazing slightly as she thought aloud, “Hallie always called herself a ‘justice’ demon. Maybe she didn’t like Mathry’s wish? Or... or

maybe he forced her to grant it somehow and she left the glyph for Xander because she knew he'd try to make it better! Maybe she didn't think the wish *was* just!"

As much as it rankled, D'Hoffryn had to admit—silently, of course—that the little human *child* might be right. Of course... "Even if you're right, that doesn't change anything. Halfrek is still dead and Mathry LaVelle's wish is still in effect."

Willow nodded slowly and settled back in Jareth's chair. "Yeah, but if we know *why* she did it and we know *how* she did it... we should be able to find some way to fix it! We just haven't been trying hard enough!"

"So help me, if you tell me to 'focus' one more time..."

"Keep it up, Mister, and I'll get Jareth to keep you in there forever," the redhead announced with a sweet smile. "Now... *focus*."

D'Hoffryn groaned.

Close to an hour after leaving the office, Spike was a very grumpy vampire.

Not only had his boy neatly sidestepped his every advance, but Xander was actually *watching telly* with every sign of interest, and Spike had had enough.

He'd tried being coy, tried being seductive. Hell, he'd even offered to give the bloke a massage! Anything to get his boy's skin against his own, and... as none of it had worked, it was time to stop being nice. Hell, even the soul agreed. It was just as... frustrated as the rest of him.

"Right, then," he grumbled, glancing at the dark-haired temptation from the corner of his eye, "Been nice... been all gentle-like. Time ta..."

Xander rolled his eyes. "If the next words out of your mouth are 'stop being polite and start getting real', we're gonna have to have a talk about your 'Real World' obsession, Spike."

‘Hey! ‘s bleeding funny, pet. Can always tell which of the prats is going ta be the troublemaker, can’t I?’ And apparently, Spike realized, some things were the same no matter *what* world they were in because Xander was nodding. At least that’s what Spike *hoped* his boy was nodding at, and that it wasn’t the false memories seeping in.

Brown eyes crinkled at the edges as Xander smiled and heaved a silent sigh of relief. He couldn’t stop worrying about Willow, no matter how distracting the blond on the couch beside him was. And Spike was definitely distracting. Hell, it was taking every ounce of restraint Xander possessed to just sit there and not give in to the desires his lover had made perfectly clear.

Still... “It’s been an hour, baby. Maybe we should call Doris. She... they might have heard...”

Spike shook his head. “Would have let us know, luv. And if you get any more bloody tense, you’re going ta vibrate right off the sofa, yeah?” His lips twitched slightly. “And speaking of vibrating, Xan... we ever play around with... things?”

“Things,” Xander echoed, his momentary relief fleeing quickly. “I don’t know what you mean,” he lied, the image—of his blond in restraints and nipple clamps, with the long, thick dildo filling that cool ass while he sucked the vampire’s brain out through his cock—appearing behind his eyes as though it had happened hours earlier instead of weeks.

The slow, wicked smirk waited for Xander’s eyes to close before spreading across Spike’s lips. “Pity, that,” he murmured, sliding a bit closer on the couch. “Guess the me you remember doesn’t have a thing for fisting you hard while you’ve got a vibrating jelly plug shoved deep in your bum, then.” His hand slid out, finding one cotton-covered thigh and he stroked it firmly.

“Seems a shame,” he went on, letting a small rumbling purr-like tone enter his voice at the tiny, hitched moan his boy swallowed. “Didn’t we even have a paddle, pet? Something... hard. Maybe leather?” His smirk grew when the brunette shook his head and blushed.

“No? Seems a bit shortsighted of us, doesn’t it? I’m betting you’d look a treat, Xander, all bent over the end of our bed, that lovely ass of yours all pink and glowing for me.” He moaned himself. “Can hear you begging, pet.

Know you'd beg so pretty, Xan. Wanting me to make you burn for it, need it so bad you could taste it..."

"G-gods," Xander groaned, hips shifting a little as the cool pressure on his leg moved higher, "Spike, don't... Gods..."

"Yeah, figured we'd have a whole bloody box of toys, I did," Spike continued, fingers ghosting lightly over the fabric-cloaked bulge his boy was sporting. "Nice, soft flail for those times we wanted ta just play at playing... run that all over your skin, pet. Let the long, soft bits trail down your chest, drag them slow and sweet over that gorgeous shaft of yours... and it *is* gorgeous, mate. Long and thick and so bloody red... was touch and go before, luv... wanted ta be in you so bad, Xander... could have come before I even touched you..."

A picture appeared full-grown in his mind, of his boy between his legs, that hot, human cock sliding deep into him and Spike blinked when he realized... a part of him might possibly want... *did* want that.

And fuck if that wasn't the truth, he realized with a shock. He never would have thought that he'd be willing to play the bottom, and especially not for a human, but

there was something about this bloke... this bloke he'd named Mate to the boy's own Uncle, and maybe that had been more than just talk.

"Can't imagine it more than poorly, luv," he whispered, even as his fingers moved cleverly at button and zip before slipping inside the opening to touch that hard piece of flesh. "Want ta remember... want ta know everything we've done, everything we've *been*, Xander... ever had you in me, pet? Want ta know..."

"I... I... Gods, Spike... y-you will, baby. Once this is all fixed..." Xander shivered, his head dropping back against the top of the couch as that strong, cool hand moved on his naked flesh. "Please..."

Oh, yeah. He could definitely handle his boy begging and pleading. He might even do a bit of begging himself, he figured. But not right then because Xander was shaking, aching with want, and... "Touch me, luv," he whispered, groaning at the sensual sight of the human fully clothed but for his exposed erection. "Pet, precious... touch me, yeah?"

If Xander had been more capable of thought, he would have resisted. As it was, though, it seemed the simplest

thing in the world to open Spike's jeans with the ease of long practice and take that well-known and much loved shaft into his hand. As always, he marveled silently at the coolness, but that didn't slow him even slightly as he began the fast, rough rhythm he knew his vampire liked. "Love... touching you, baby... fuck... love it..."

He wasn't entirely sure of when they'd gotten naked.

Hell, he didn't even know how he'd ended up on the floor.

Of course, he didn't much care because the rug was soft against his back and Spike's cock was hard in his mouth, sliding between his lips with a restraint he truly appreciated, even as his own hips arched against the floor, driving his shaft deeper into the cool, wet cavern that surrounded him from above.

His fingers dug deep into tense, flexing buttocks, pulling his blond deeper, harder, his throat opening as easily as the nearly hairless thighs to either side of his head had done.

If it hadn't been for the thick cock in his mouth, Spike would have gasped as his boy swallowed him whole, it felt like. As it was, though, all he could do was groan around that heated flesh and try not to explode before the human below him.

It was a lost cause for both men a minute or so later, because when the phone rang, it was like a signal.

Throats flexed roughly and two loud whimpers echoed as bodies arched, heaved, rocked against each other... and lips closed tight, catching each and every precious drop of fluid offered.

The ringing stopped for a few blissful seconds, and Xander reluctantly let his vampire's slightly softened shaft slip from his mouth.

He breathed hard against the juncture of thigh and groin, his body shaking a bit as the last shudders of reaction

flowed through him, and when the phone started again, he sighed. "We should get that," he whispered into musky pale skin.

The vampire frowned and pulled himself away from Xander's quickly relaxing penis as he snaked one hand out and grabbed the phone cord, pulling the entire assemblage to the floor.

"What?" he demanded crossly when he finally found the receiver.

The brunette lay there, still somewhat dazed as Spike rolled from his body and shifted enough to meet him, eye to eye. "Uhm..." he managed to mumble helplessly.

Spike smirked, even as he listened to the voice on the line. "Right, then," he said after close to a minute, "Give us five, yeah?" His eyes rolled. "No, I really mean it. Five bloody minutes, you pillock!"

Xander smiled slightly and forced himself to speak. "Hi, Uncle Jareth," he called out, "We'll be right there." And "Well?" he demanded once Spike ended the call.

The vampire shrugged then pressed a slow, deep kiss to

his bloke's lips, groaning as he tasted himself there. "Bloke says Red and the demon might have figured something out, luv. Sad as it may be, think we need ta get dressed again."

On the one hand, Xander didn't really want to. He was naked with his vampire, after all, and that had never been a bad thing. On the other hand, though... "Yeah... let's see if we can make this... last," he answered, amazed by the odd combination of fear and hope that swamped him.

"Not ta worry," Spike murmured, getting to his knees and sorting the tangle of clothing into his and... his. "It's going ta last, pet. Even if it ends, it's going ta last. Won't let it do anything else, will I?"

Part Seventeen

"Okay," Willow announced, without preamble or greeting when the men—and Doris—entered the office again, "We don't have it all figured out, guys. But!" She glared at Spike, the look cutting off whatever words had been about to come from him, and she just *knew* he'd been about to say something snarky and mean.

“But,” she said again when the vampire restrained himself and only glared back at her, “I think... we think we might have an idea.”

“She was right the first time,” D’Hoffryn muttered, ignoring the female demon who’d come in with the men. “*She* thinks. I think she’s insane, but witches. What can you do?” he shrugged.

Xander frowned, looking from the redhead to the demon and back again. “Uh-huh... in this case, I think *you*,” he said anxiously, “can shut the hell up and let Willow talk. I don’t know what she’s come up with but it has to be better than just sitting—or standing—around waiting to completely lose my mind and my *past*, you big gnarly-looking *freak!*” He blinked, then frowned deeply. “Uh... and maybe we should step on it, okay? Because that was so not something I’d usually say and...”

“Get on with it,” Spike snapped, just beating Jareth to similar though more polite words. One arm wrapped tightly around his boy’s back, hand pressing rhythmically and soothingly against his side.

“Red might be a lot of things, you git, but stupid’s not

one of them. Had plenty of good ideas in her time.” Of course, most of them had involved magic and hadn’t turned out quite the way she’d planned, but that was neither here nor there, the vampire figured. The *ideas* had been good, regardless of the outcomes.

Willow’s eyes were wide and once again hazel when she turned a slightly suspicious gaze on Spike, but then she smiled. “Th-thank you, Spike,” she murmured, sounding stunned. “I... your plans were always kinda good, too. If you were more patient, I mean...”

Jareth sighed silently and shook his head before clearing his throat. “You two can compliment each other all you like later. For the moment, however, perhaps we might get to the business at hand?”

The witch jumped slightly and blushed. “Oh, right. Sorry. It’s just... Spike said something nice. Um, about me. I’m kinda giddy.” She grinned sheepishly. “But you’re right. Okay. The idea.”

Doris watched, her eyes hard, as D'Hoffryn created yet another opaque space in the air, only this time... well, this time it was going to be Alexander's memories that played out and while she wasn't sure of what good that would do, she had a feeling it might be important.

Of course, none of the others knew to look for what *she* would recognize; not even D'Hoffryn. He was management, after all. He might have the ultimate power of life or death over his demons, but he didn't work in the field.

Then again, neither did she, or not anymore. Still, she watched. She'd known a fair number of vengeance demons in her day. She knew how they operated.

Spike stared, fascinated by the regrettably brief view of his early days with his bloke. He almost wanted to make the pillock of a demon go back and show him again, slowly, but... if this worked, then maybe they could fix things, and in that case... he'd remember the events

himself. That didn't keep him from smirking every time a momentary flash of his boy—younger and definitely not so toned; naked and obviously under him or riding him or whatever other position they chose—appeared. His arm tightened around the brunette, just reminding the boy he was there.

D'Hoffryn found himself trapped by the images as well, although for different reasons than the vampire. Until that moment when the young LaVelle's true memories had appeared and began to scroll forward, he hadn't entirely believed that one of his underlings could have granted a wish that would affect *his* memory. Now he saw that he'd been wrong and he made a mental note to examine the levels of power they had access to, once he got home. Assuming he ever *did* make it back to Arashmahar because the little redheaded witch was showing every sign of determination to keep him there until things were better.

No appreciation, he mused. Not even after he'd done as she'd asked and made her friends back in Sunnydale believe that she and Alexander had been sent to Los Angeles to deliver some sort of book to yet another souled vampire. And that was something else again. How many vampires with souls *were* there? It was starting to

look like an epidemic and that... worried him.

He added it to his list of things to look into, when and if he got home. Perhaps he'd contact the Powers. Again.

"Wait!" Xander said loudly, "That's Mathry, the last time I saw him..."

All eyes returned to the display and D'Hoffryn tweaked his scrying circle just a bit, letting sound join the images.

Late night, on the roof of a building... the moon shining full over the desert... two young men, one blond; the other brunette and slightly taller...

"No." Xander said, closing his eyes as though that would stop the memory. "I don't want to see this. I... don't want *anyone* to see this..."

Jareth frowned, even as Doris shook her head. "I think we have to Alexander," she said quietly. "If only because it seems to be important to you and might have bearing on why Mathry made that damnable wish."

"Gonna be alright, pet," Spike murmured, his other arm joining the first to hold his bloke tightly. "Whatever it is,

if it can help, then...”

Xander sighed and finally swallowed hard before nodding and looking to his Uncle and Doris. “O-okay... fine. Just don’t... hate me? It wasn’t my finest hour...”

The slight haziness that had begun to obscure the sharpness of the images faded, although Xander refused to look at what was revealed.

“Damn it, Alex! Why? It makes sense, doesn’t it?” Mathry demanded, sounding both hurt and petulant.

Xander’s eyes widened, only then understanding that his cousin was serious. “Uh, NO. An entire WORLD of no, Mathry! That’s just... gross. You’re my COUSIN! Like... related to me, okay? And I’m with...”

“What? That VAMPIRE?” the blond young man sneered. “Come on! You can’t really be SERIOUS about him. He’s dead, for one thing.”

“And yet still managing to rock my world on a near-hourly basis,” Xander answered with a subconscious leer. “Oh, yeah. Bring on the dead.”

Already shifty eyes narrowed further still and when Mathry spoke again, it was merely to spew venomous but sincere words.

“Vampires are dead, Alex. They don’t age, so I guess he’ll always look just like that. Almost like being immortal, right? Too bad there are so many ways to destroy them, isn’t it?” His smile was nasty... darkly amused. “You never know when he might ‘accidentally’ leave the curtains open one night. Or slip on the stairs and WHOOOPS! Land on a pencil or something. Wouldn’t that be a shame, Alex? No more world-rocking THEN...”

Suddenly wet brown eyes stared with horror at the other young man. “You wouldn’t,” he said, cringing at the knowledge in his own voice.

“Try me.”

The office was entirely silent but for the small sounds of shallow breaths from the humans as they watched Xander and Mathry simply stare at each other for what seemed like an eternity.

“It’s not over yet,” Xander whispered hopelessly, closing his eyes again. “Gods... I wish it were...”

What do you want, Mathry,” the image of Xander stated, his voice hollow and almost defeated sounding.

Mathry smirked, triumph clear in his tone as well as being written across his face. “I WANT what I’ve ALWAYS wanted, Alex. Father’s Company. MY Father’s company, in case you forgot that part... COUSIN. And he seems to be favouring YOU as his heir now, so. It’s simple. You send that vampire of yours away and take ME as your consort. Your Spike will live—I’m sorry, I mean EXIST—as long as you make it convincing. And when Father steps aside to let YOU have the reins, you’ll do exactly as I say, or...”

The next smirk was even nastier.

“Well, let’s just say you won’t have to wonder about the ashes in our fireplace.”

Xander cringed in on himself, trying to shrink as small as he could when he heard his Uncle and Doris gasp. He shook slightly when Spike growled, although he couldn’t quite bring himself to even *try* pulling away from his vamp.

“I told you I didn’t want to...”

“Hush, luv,” the blond snarled softly, holding his bloke even closer while both demon and soul painted daydreams of violent retribution in his head, the demon helping the soul when it faltered. “Need ta see how this pans out, don’t I?”

Willow frowned, glaring at the image of her best friend’s cousin as though she could burn holes through him. “Oh, yeah... so do I, Spike.”

The two exchanged one long, agreeing look, then pulled their eyes apart. When things were fixed, they’d both be paying a visit to Mathry... and he’d never even *think* about threatening anyone again.

“I didn’t know, beloved,” Doris sighed softly against Jareth’s ear. “I didn’t know he’d taken so very much after...”

“Quiet, treasure,” the man answered immediately, cutting her off. “This is *not* your fault. *He* is not your fault. I was the one who spoiled him.”

D’Hoffryn rolled his eyes. “If we’re finished, boys and

girls? We're looking for... something. And I'm obviously not going to go home until we find it, so to quote the witch, *focus!*" He gestured quickly, resuming the playback.

I have connections," Mathry went on, sounding smug. "I have people in Security who want ME to be in charge. They'll do whatever I tell them to, Alex. Even dust their 'poker buddy'. You see, COUSIN, they know which side of the bread THEIR butter's on."

Xander's face made it clear that he believed his cousin's words... just as it announced the nausea he was experiencing. "So I... what? Tell everyone that I don't love Spike anymore?" He swallowed hard. "Somehow convince them that I'm some sort of... incest-loving freak?"

Another smirk. "They already think you're a freak, Alex. You're fucking the undead. At least I'M human."

"That's a matter of opinion," the brunette muttered, mostly to himself.

"Fuck you, Alex!" Mathry screamed, going from amused to enraged in less than a second.

His hand darted out, slamming roughly against the taller man's cheek. "I was gonna be nice to you! I was gonna let the whole thing be for convenience! But you just had to go opening that smart fucking mouth of yours! To HELL with being your consort in name only! Just because of that, I'm gonna FUCK YOU, Alex! So hard and so often that you won't even be able to WALK, much less think enough to have fucking OPINIONS!"

This time, Willow's gasp joined Jareth's and Doris's, and even D'Hoffryn blinked.

Spike, on the other hand, found himself chuckling and when four sets of surprised eyes turned to him, he merely shrugged and held his bloke closer. "Think the sodding fucktard just bollocksed himself up," was all he said before turning wicked eyes back to the show.

One large tanned hand rose to touch lightly at the reddened area on and around his cheekbone and Xander stared at Mathry for a good ten seconds before he started to shake.

First it was his shoulders. Then his stomach. Then his knees shook just a bit.

Mathry's smirk grew even deeper and he gave the brunette a raking gaze down, then up. It was when he reached his cousin's face again that he obviously found cause to frown, because...

Xander was laughing. He was laughing so hard and from so deep inside himself that his entire body was shaking from trying to suppress it.

Small, choked sounds left his lips, swiftly growing into enormous, full-body-rocking spasms of laughter.

"Y-you..." he managed to gasp a moment or three later, "Th-think you're going to f-fuck me? ME?" He swayed, almost falling over, he was laughing so hard. "Why would I I-let you do that? Because you th-threatened my L-LOVER?" Xander snorted, still chuckling. "It CAN'T be because you'll beat me up, because... I have to tell you Mathry, that slap? Nowhere near what Dad used to give me for breathing too loud, even when I was like... five. Hell, I've had worse from Buffy by ACCIDENT. And frankly, you've just managed to piss me off."

And just like that, Xander wasn't laughing anymore.

Mathry paled as his cousin's eyes hardened and the larger man stalked the few feet to him, staring into his eyes coldly from mere inches away. "I..." Mathry started, only to be stopped by that look becoming even more arctic.

" 'You' NOTHING." The words were harsh and spoken softly but plainly. "You don't get to make demands here, Mathry. You think you can make me do whatever you want by threatening Spike? Well, you were nearly right. If you'd stopped there, we might have worked something out. But you didn't. YOU had to be all 'I'm gonna fuck you'. To ME."

Mathry shuddered at the matter of fact tone and tried to look away, but something in those cold brown eyes held him. "I..." he said again, then stopped.

"Yes. You." Xander frowned and pushed his cousin roughly, and by the time Mathry had managed to straighten against the cement wall of the roof-access door, Xander was right there, pressing him hard against it. "Understand this, cousin," he said almost conversationally, "The only one who gets to fuck me is SPIKE. I belong to him, just as he belongs to me. YOU... aren't even the vaguest concept of a possible THOUGHT

as far as fucking goes. I'd slam a broken bottle up my own ass before I'd even let you KISS ME."

"And as for the COMPANY," he went on, smiling slow and cruelly, "It's Uncle Jareth's to do with AS HE SEES FIT! And if you weren't such a pathetic, half-assed WANNABE KING, he'd probably be more than happy to give it to you! Hell, I wish he would! Do you really think I want to spend all my time running some damned conglomerate when I could be fucking my vampire instead? Not seeing the logic there, COUSIN. And a word of warning." Xander gave the young man a harsh but sincere look. "If anything—and I DO mean ANYTHING—happens to Spike...? I WILL kill you. Slowly. Painfully. And as messily as possible. That's a promise."

He snorted and pushed himself away from the blond with a pitying look.

"I didn't do anything to make your Father think you're incompetent and selfish, Mathry... or to make him want someone other than YOU in charge of his Company. You did that on your own."

Xander groaned and buried his face in the crook of Spike's neck, entirely unwilling to look at his Uncle or

Doris right then. “I... That was only a couple weeks before the ‘test’. When you made me choose, Uncle. I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I... it was *me* who made Mathry make that wish, wasn’t it?”

Most eyes were locked on the brunette human at that point, although D’Hoffryn’s were not.

Instead, the ancient demon was still watching his scrying circle as the last words Alexander heard—although the boy’s conscious mind hadn’t registered them—allowed him to see what the other LaVelle did next, and that was to cast a venomous stare at the door, then recite a passage that *no* boy of that age and temperament had any business knowing.

He frowned, which on his seamed and gnarled face looked truly frightening, and let the plane of opaqued air return to its usual state. He knew what had happened. He even knew why. But most importantly... now D’Hoffryn knew *how*.

The question was... would he tell the others.

A lifetime’s worth of thought went into that question, although mere seconds passed in the outside world, but

finally D'Hoffryn made a decision based upon many factors.

Firstly, if he didn't tell them, then LaVelle Enterprises would be without an heir-titular, and that was a situation that could have incredibly horrific ramifications for the world in general.

Second, if he held his silence, Mathry LaVelle would never know what he'd almost done. And the boy—selfish or not—*might* actually care, once he understood.

Third... although he hadn't acknowledged her in any way, shape or form, Dorres'h'caht would likely kick his ass once her bondmate died and she returned home...

And lastly... well, if he didn't talk, he'd *still* be woefully understaffed. He shuddered to think of how many truly deserving cries for vengeance weren't being answered simply because in this reality Anyanka and Halfrek were out of the rotation. He had a job to do, and... his two best demons were *gone*! It was insupportable!

His eyes refocused and sought out the redheaded witch, and somehow he was entirely unsurprised to find her hazel gaze hard upon him.

D'Hoffryn sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “I know how he did it. How he got around the restrictions on LaVelles making wishes. And there’s a very *slight* chance that we’ll be able to change things.”

He almost hated to dim the sudden and happy glow in the girl’s eyes. She really *would* have made a fine vengeance demon... in the sense that Ferrari made a fine car.

“It all depends upon Alexander,” he added, “and what he meant and *didn’t* mean.”

Even the vampire looked stunned at that announcement, D'Hoffryn realized with a frown.

Part Eighteen

One phrase.

It all came down to one phrase in his admittedly angry and clearly ill-advised diatribe to his cousin on the roof

that night.

‘Hell, I wish he would,’ he’d said, referring to his Uncle and the Company and the possibility of everything being bestowed upon his cousin... and Mathry had used that. Taken advantage of those words, regardless of the intent behind them.

How the boy had known the spell he’d spoken was entirely unknown, as well as being rather irrelevant. The fact was, Mathry *had* known the words to speak... and Xander had somehow allowed everything else to happen, damned by his own thoughtless words.

“So it really *is* my fault,” he said flatly, his voice barely above a whisper.

“No.” Spike’s tone was equally emotionless, although in his case it was because he was holding so tightly to his impulse to tear and rend... rip things apart until the world realized it would be easier and far simpler to just give in and do things the vampire’s way.

“Not even a little bit your fault, luv,” he added, pulling his bloke to stand between his legs where he sat on the edge of Jareth’s desk. “ ‘s the fault of that bloody fucking

shitwad cousin of yours, yeah? Bloke was a sodding moron, Xan... though I'm right pleased with how much you were willing to put up with for my sake. Would have done the same for you, I would." And that was true enough, even if he never would have thought it even a week earlier.

Willow frowned, looking again at D'Hoffryn. "I don't get it," she announced, her hands twisting against each other as she bit her lip. "How could..."

D'Hoffryn sighed and reminded himself yet again that offering his token to witches who refused his offer of demonhood was a very poor notion. It wasn't a mistake he'd be making again, but still... a mental note was never a bad idea.

"It's simple, witch," he answered, sounding just as impatient as he actually was. "Alexander made a wish. His cousin used that fact to connect his own wish to Alexander. Thus, Alexander's wish allowed his LaVelle cousin to make a wish that would grant *both* their desires. Probably not in the way Alexander meant, but that *is* the nature of wishes, isn't it?"

The redhead's frown grew deeper. "No... I got that part.

What I *don't* get is... Xander lives somewhere else. Oz left. Tara... died. Joyce is gone, too... and Angel's in Los Angeles doing... whatever he's doing, so..." Hazel eyes met D'Hoffryn's boldly and Willow tilted her head just a bit. "I don't see how changing *memories* could do all of that, is all."

Jareth and Doris smiled into each others' eyes, their arms tightening their comforting hug. "I'll take this one, Beloved," Doris murmured, smiling a bit more when her love simply nodded and gave her a soft 'As you wish, treasure.'

"It wasn't just memories, Maiden," she said softly as she pulled away from Jareth's arms. "Yes, the memories are... different. There is no denying that. But in this particular case, changing the memories changed the reality. This is still the same world. It hasn't been... off... for long enough to create an alternate dimension. Yet."

She nodded at the still slightly confused look in the witch's eyes.

"My son made his wish less than a week ago. This... reality... with all the associated memories, has only existed for that long. Still, the results were

instantaneous.” Doris sighed. “The world as it relates to Alexander was... rearranged. Everything *you* recall actually happened as far as you and everyone else associated with him is concerned. Your lover left you. People died who wouldn’t have otherwise. And yet, it is not irrevocable. Not yet.”

D’Hoffryn nodded slowly, finally acknowledging the non-human woman’s presence. “Halfrek’s sigil has given us a bit of leeway,” he admitted. “But the more Alexander loses his memories, the more solid and immutable this particular history becomes. This reality *will* replace the one that originally existed.”

Jareth was still reeling inside from the knowledge of what his son had tried to do to Alexander and William. In fact, at that moment he would have been satisfied to leave things as they were, aside from the part where Alexander wouldn’t be himself and would likely be less than qualified to assume the responsibility that faced him.

How had he messed things up so badly? Let his *son* become the sort of person who would threaten... *that*? Had he been too strict?

Jareth couldn't even think that with a straight face.

If anything, he'd been too lenient. *Far* too lenient.

He'd have done better to have been a complete and utter bastard to the boy, the way Tony Harris had been to Alexander. At least his nephew understood about responsibility and duty...

"We can't let that happen," Jareth said, filling the small silence following D'Hoffryn's words. "And not because I want my son back and sane... or as sane as he ever was." The last was said with an apologetic gaze towards nephew and nephew's Mate.

Spike snorted. "Why then, git? Getting tired of being all large and in charge?"

"Spike!" Xander blushed slightly but didn't try to move away from his vampire's hold, "Stop it! I... I'm sure Uncle Jareth doesn't want... I mean... just stop it, okay? There's enough... drama already, okay?"

It was only then that Spike realized just how much being Jareth's heir meant to his boy.

He surprised himself by smiling and laying one slow, deep kiss against Xander's lips and nodding. "Consider me stopped, luv," he whispered, even as the demon railed at him for being a ponce. Then the soul reminded it that Xander could easily choose to leave them, and... just like that, the demon was on board with the kindness to the boy.

"I love you, Spike," Xander said softly from his spot within the summoning circle. "No matter what happens... even if this doesn't work. I *love you!* Don't... don't let me go, okay? I told you I was always gay. It's true. You just... might have to remind me, okay baby?"

The vampire tried to smile around his own worry, then nodded. "Not ta worry, luv. Won't ever forget. Find a way ta make you my own, I will... but this is gonna work, Xan. Gonna know our past, the both of us. Bloody hell,

luv. Want ta... you sure we can't wait a few hours ta do this? That... thing we wanted ta see is on telly and all..."

D'Hoffryn groaned at the waves of arousal filling the room from vampire and LaVelle. "Later," he snapped. "Unless you really *do* want to have to seduce your own Mate, William the Bloody?"

Spike growled and took a step forward, only to be restrained by one small, warm hand on his arm and he looked down at it for a moment before following it up a slender arm and finally meeting hopeful hazel eyes. "Red...?" he demanded, puzzled by the look on her face.

Willow smiled and tightened her fingers slightly. "It's okay," she said softly. "I... know you now, Spike. And I see how you are when you *really* love someone." She blushed brightly. "You know I... never *got* the whole you and Buffy thing. And that's because it wasn't real. But you and Xander...? That I can... see." She blushed even more. "If this... doesn't work? I'll be right there to help you, okay? Because you and Xander... fit. You work. And I'm... so sorry, Spike. For being such a b-i-t-c-h to you."

There was nothing Spike could say to that; nothing he could *do* other than give the girl a smile and pull her into

a tight, grateful hug. Maybe all the Scoobies *didn't* hate him after all.

Jareth couldn't help smiling at the blond and the redhead. It amazed him that two people who had so clearly been at loggerheads just a day or so earlier were now vowing friendship, and all because of his nephew. Then again, he realized, everyone loved Alexander. Xander. And why wouldn't they?

"Perhaps we should get started?" he suggested quietly, his chin resting on Doris's shoulder as he held her in his lap. After all, standing and twitching wouldn't help... and it comforted him to have his treasure there with him.

It comforted her, too, judging by the way her arm was wrapped so firmly around his back.

In the end, it was simple enough.

D'Hoffryn stood within the summoning circle with Xander and called upon the essence of Halfrek... and when she appeared as a rather wavery spirit, he questioned her.

Yes, she had answered Mathry's call.

Yes, she had wondered at the justice he'd demanded.

Yes, she had known he was a LaVelle.

Yes, his wish had been granted because he'd had the implicit agreement of the other LaVelle affected.

Yes, she had... planted her sigil as a glyph, knowing Alexander LaVelle Harris would eventually come into contact with it; created a small loop of time in which the wish could be changed...

And although it wasn't asked, Halfrek's shade supplied the information that she thought the world was better off without Mathry LaVelle as he was when he'd made his wish.

“But maybe he wouldn’t be like that now,” Xander offered. “You know, if he remembered everything and came out of the crazy? Uh, is that... can that be done?”

The rather transparent form of Halfrek shimmered like heat coming off of a sidewalk, the head-like blob at the top moving from side to side.

A wish, once granted, was sacrosanct.

“Your turn then, pet,” Spike called from his spot a mere inch outside the circle.

And that was a thought, Xander realized. One wish *could* technically cancel out another. In theory. So all he had to do was... require vengeance.

D’Hoffryn groaned as the wide and speaking brown eyes turned to him. “Fine,” he grumbled. “One wish. Then I’m through with you and yours. Agreed?”

Those brown eyes closed for a moment, spearing the demon harshly when they opened again.

“No,” Xander announced loudly, “One wish from *you*... and one act of vengeance. You fucking demons owe me

that much.”

Spike frowned but couldn't manage to look away. 'You fucking demons'. His boy had said 'you fucking demons' and he *was* a demon. He was losing his bloke. It was obvious. And why shouldn't he lose Xander? The boy was far too good for him. Even more too good for him than the Slayer had been in his deluded times... and he'd been able to let her go and accept that, but there was no way he'd ever be able to let Xander go, and...

“Gods damned vengeance demons,” Xander went on. “Not satisfied with being strong and pure like my Spike. Always having to be tricky and *pretending* to be friendly.” He grimaced. “A wish and an act of vengeance,” he said again, giving D'Hoffryn a hard look.

The demon sighed and finally nodded. “If it'll get me out of this circle, then fine. A wish and *ONE* act of vengeance.”

Xander smiled. “Good. Then I wish Halfrek alive again... as a demon with all the powers she had before she was used as payment for another demon's humanity.” And he'd be damned if he could remember the name of his supposed ex-girlfriend. “The one I almost married in this

reality.”

Well, that still left some room for interpretation, but D’Hoffryn really wanted *out*, so he merely nodded and waved his hand, smiling slightly as Halfrek shrieked while her body was rebuilt from the inside out.

“And your act of vengeance?” he asked while the mostly human young man was watching the re-creation and looking sick, “What would you like, Alexander?”

Xander forced himself to look away from Halfrek’s reforming body.

“I said ‘one act of vengeance’,” he mumbled. “I didn’t say I wanted *you* to perform that act. It’s Halfrek’s right. She was the one who made this world... less than permanent.”

The reborn vengeance demon was still breathing hard when the young man’s words registered, but even so she shook her head. “Oh, no. I *can’t*. You’re a LaVelle. My level of demon is expressly forbidden from granting wishes to your family. I only did the other one because...”

“I know. Because I’d kind of, sort of agreed to it, right?”

Xander frowned at the woman. “You really need to pay closer attention, Halfrek. Did I say anything about a *wish*?”

Willow startled slightly, then laughed. “You know, Xander, I always thought you were smarter than you acted. I was right!”

“Of course my bloke’s smart,” Spike answered. “Managed ta stay alive on the bloody Mouth of Hell, didn’t he? *And* he’s with me. Can’t get much smarter than that, yeah?”

“An act of vengeance, Halfrek,” Xander continued as though Willow and Spike hadn’t even spoken. “Justice, if you’d prefer.”

He waited until the shaken and still shuddering demon nodded, then smiled just a bit nastily.

“You will return this world to its normal state, Halfrek... and my cousin Mathry, as well as those of us in this room, will remember everything about the false world he tried to create... and what could have happened because of him. That’s all. That’s my act of vengeance.”

D'Hoffryn's eyes widened slightly and he murmured "Perhaps I offered the wrong child a position in Arahmahar. That is truly inspired, Alexander."

Halfrek frowned, but in the end she sighed and made her usual showy gesture. "It is done!" she announced, "And Gods help me if I ever so much as see another LaVelle."

The rest of the 'meeting' went simply enough.

Jareth released D'Hoffryn from the circle and heaved a sigh of relief when the ancient demon and his newly reformed underling vanished, leaving a charred circle on the rug.

He assigned the Maiden a room on the same floor as his nephew and William, where they'd all be safe until the returning memories fully emerged.

And finally, finally he let himself smile with a sincerity that was rare to him as he took Doris's hand and left his office with her.

"I was thinking, Doris," he said softly, leading her to the elevator, "Once Alexander has had time to... catch up with his vampire, perhaps we might take a few days away. It's been... far too long since we've done that. The beach, maybe?"

Doris couldn't help chuckling quietly. "You have always been remarkably... edible... by moonlight, my love," she murmured, letting just a small flash of her true nature shine through.

Jareth shivered at the reminder. "Mmmm... yes, treasure. So you've said before. Just... this time, try not to..."

"Alright, beloved," she replied huskily, "no *literal* pounds of flesh... this time."

"A few ounces here, a few ounces there..." he groaned, and by the time the elevator stopped, it was a question as to which of them was more anxious to get home.

Part Nineteen

It would take a few days, D'Hoffryn had said, before the true memories fully returned, and while Xander was a little bit disappointed by that, at least they *would* return and his vampire and the rest would know the real past.

And the actual world—as it had been before Mathry's wish—was already rearranging itself, he thought. Not all of a sudden, but slowly shifting to true.

That didn't explain the looks Spike and Willow kept exchanging, though.

He almost thought he should be worried about that as he had a feeling it didn't bode well for his cousin's health once everything went back to normal, but Mathry had made his own proverbial bed, and... as long as they didn't actually kill the slightly older young man, maybe it would teach him a lesson.

Of course, he really had more pressing matters to deal with at the moment. Like getting Spike to their rooms and naked. Now that he knew for sure that he wasn't

going to lose himself to whatever fucked up and useless version of him had existed so briefly, he'd be damned if he wasn't going to do exactly what Spike had wanted and let him know *everything* they'd done and been... and when his Mate remembered for himself, they'd just have to do it all again... and again.

Spike smirked, his eyes glittering gold for just a moment when he caught the wonderful array of scents pouring from his boy and his fingers tightened around the thicker, warmer ones in his hand. He gave one more look at the little witch then nodded and stepped away from her, leaving her to open the door to the rooms she'd been loaned for the duration.

“Right, then. See you later, Red. Have us some things ta... discuss, you and I. But not now. Got me a bloke ta shag, right?”

Willow couldn't help the tiny surprised giggle that flew from her lips when Xander only laughed.

“Um, okay... you guys go and... do that. Um, I'll just... television! Yeah! Um, I'm sure there is one and they probably have cable here and... and good night!”

She was still bright red when she let herself into her rooms, though she suspected it might have something to do with the way Spike and Xander were kissing in the hallway and stumbling towards what she assumed was their room. “Okay, memories... hurry up and get here already. ‘Cause I am so not used to seeing them like that!”

Then again, they both looked incredibly happy, so she’d just learn to deal. They *deserved* to be happy, after all... especially Xander.

The door almost broke before they managed to get it open. Then the couch nearly suffered a similar fate on their way to the bedroom.

One end table *did* make the ultimate sacrifice, but neither man cared. They were too focused on each other

and the far too many layers of cloth separating them.

Cotton was no suitable foe for an amorous vampire, of course, as was proven when Spike literally tore the clothes from his bloke's flesh and threw him onto the bed. "Stay there," he ordered, eyes raking tight, soft skin over hard muscle, his hands nearly flying as he treated his own clothing to the same treatment as his boy's.

"Fuck, Spike," Xander groaned, eyes hard on the flesh being revealed with such haste, "You're a vampire! I know you can move faster than that!"

"Piss off, luv," the blond growled, kicking boots and jeans away and literally pouncing.

Pale and tan entwined and tangled, lips, hands and teeth finding sensitive spots as though for the first time, and when two hard, seeping shafts met, wanton, needy gasps filled the air.

"Tell me, Xan," Spike moaned, rocking against that heated form helplessly. "Never answered before, luv. You ever fill me with your hot cock, pet? Make me... shiver...?"

And since Spike was going to remember it eventually anyway, Xander simply groaned and rolled them, lifting his head to meet lust-glazed blue eyes. “The first time was f-for my birthday, baby... you were acting like it was some huge sacrifice and I almost wouldn’t d-do it, and...” He moaned softly when long, pale legs separated and wrapped around him.

“And what, luv?” Spike gasped, shifting until that thick cock was sliding between his legs, the seeping tip brushing his skin wetly. “Did I... do this, Xander? Make you want it so bad you couldn’t think straight?”

Brown eyes closed as another deep moan spilled forth. “I haven’t been able to think straight since the first time we met, Spike... and yes. You were so d-determined to g-give me that, and you j-just... drove me nuts. And then f-finally, you j-just...”

And if that wasn’t his bloke *asking for it*, Spike didn’t know what was, and... and he wanted this. Wanted Xander. Wanted his human deep inside him, filling him with that heat, that... joy, he supposed, because there was no way it could be anything *but* joyful when they both wanted it so much, and...

“Right, then,” he mumbled, shifting his heels higher and arching just so, and when the change in position had that round, heavy tip pressing against his tiny entrance, Spike simply arched harder, relaxing as much as he could.

His gasp was echoed by his boy’s when the thick head slipped in and somehow the vampire knew that he hadn’t stopped with Xander’s birthday... and then the wide, burning shaft pressed deeper, spearing him fully, and... “B-bloody... hell...” he whimpered, eyes wide at the sudden and unexplainable sense of paradise found.

“Love you, Spike,” Xander breathed, his body frozen by the much loved and entirely necessary sensation of his Mate’s body holding him like a velvet glove. “Gods, baby... love you so much... and not just because I have my dick in your ass...”

“L-last of the romantics, aren’t you, luv?” the vampire grunted, pulling his boy down for a deep, hard kiss. “Now fuck me, pet... fuck me like I’ve been a very bad bloke, yeah? Want ta feel you for *days*, Xan... weeks, even...”

And what else could he do other than obey his Mate? Xander asked himself with a wry grin.

His body moved, following the rhythm started by the long, toned legs wrapped around him, and when he changed his angle and pulled the first sharp cry from his lover, Xander groaned and did it again.

Wordless moans surrounded them, leaving both their mouths in harmony, and when he could hold back no longer, when he couldn't even imagine forcing himself to last, Xander whimpered and moved faster, harder still, eyes locked on bright gold. "Can't... wait, baby," he muttered between nearly sobbing breaths.

"Don't." That was the extent of his ability to speak, Spike realized. Just 'don't', although he knew his boy could hear the rest of it. 'Don't stop, don't wait... don't make *me* wait... come for me, Xander-luv-pet-precious... come in me...'

Teeth found skin, the sharper vampiric ones slicing more cleanly than the human's, but that was to be expected... in fact, Spike thought he might even remember this... remember Xander biting him before, the first time they'd Mated in Africa. Still, he'd ponder that later because right then...

Oh, right then he was shaking and shuddering, bursting

into purely figurative flames as he pulsed roughly, throbbed wildly, and finally spilled in an almost violent burst between his body and his love's, even as he felt that long, thick shaft inside him return the favor, bathing his insides with hot spurts of thick, rich seed.

Four days later, Spike was sure he remembered almost everything. In fact, he truly had trouble believing he'd ever not know.

He remembered with crystal clarity every single thing his bloke had told him about, but because he'd been there, rather than simply had heard of it.

He remembered fighting with Angel about Xander, and the way his acting Sire had tried to claim he hadn't truly meant the boy to be a gift. 'Shouldn't have offered him, then, wanker,' he'd answered, and enjoyed the sensation

of making the big broody pissant speechless for the first time in... over a hundred years.

He remembered slowly being accepted by Xander's little band of not-so-merry pals, and finally—a good week after Angel had left—the moment he'd known they thought of him as one of them, because Buffy had come to him for advice about *her* vampire.

He recalled the looks on all of their faces when his boy had announced his acceptance in the accelerated program at UC Sunnydale, and how proud they all been—especially himself—when the boy had graduated only two years later.

He'd lived with Xander and his Mum ever since Dru had left with the demon he'd liked for her... and Xander was right. Jess-Mum was a good one. She'd recovered from the need to spend her days fairly well sloshed, and oddly enough that recovery had started within hours of leaving Tony Harris to his sad and unlamented fate.

Oh, the man was still alive as far as Spike knew, but he was for damned sure not working in any sort of construction anymore. Not after he'd nearly killed the rest of his crew a few years back.

And most importantly—to the vampire, anyway—he remembered every single moment he'd spent with his love... his Mate twice over, now.

So yeah. He was sure he recalled everything that mattered. What he *wasn't* sure of was whether his bloke was going to let him have his own 'act of vengeance' against that fuckwad cousin of his. Still, between himself and Red, he figured they had a shot at it.

He was striding quickly down the hall to meet that same young witch when he smelled his bloke nearby, and by the time he reached Willow's door, he knew Xander was inside.

"No," he heard the witch say, her voice hard... or as hard as it ever got, which really wasn't very... "I *can't* just let it go, Xander! It wasn't just you he screwed around with, and even if it *was*, do you really think I'd let that slide? I love you, Xander. I can't... *won't* let him get away with trying to hurt you!"

Yeah... the little girl had returned to her better self, and as far as Spike was concerned, she was entirely right. If the cousin wasn't punished in some tangible way, he'd

likely think he'd always escape unscathed and the last thing Spike would tolerate was spending the rest of his existence looking over his shoulder and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Bad enough that his bloke was going to someday be in charge of the fucking company. Bad enough that he'd have to share him with *work* of all things, although that was unavoidable, considering what LaVelle Enterprises as a whole actually did.

He understood that part. Understood how his boy's family line was entrusted with part of the battle. Hell, he even knew that odds were good for himself and his bloke becoming targets of that bloody evil law firm if they did their jobs right in opposing it.

But that didn't mean he wanted to spend forever waiting for fucking Mathry LaVelle to try some other half-witted scheme.

So he was definitely on Red's side in the little argument that seemed to have been going on for quite some time, judging by the weary tone to Xander's voice when he replied.

“Come on, Willow. He remembers being crazy, okay? Tearing his own hair out. Being restrained almost all day, every day because he kept trying to dig whatever it was he was imagining out from under his own skin. He’s suffered. He’ll always remember that and he’ll always know why it happened, too. Just... leave it alone. Please? For me?”

Spike smirked and chuckled to himself when Willow snorted. He opened the door slowly, pleased to find that it wasn’t locked, and became even more amused at what he saw.

Willow stood in the middle of the living room area, her arms crossed and back stiff as she gave her best friend—aside from Oz, of course, because he was her fiance and knew literally everything about her—a stony glare.

“Oh, no you don’t, mister!” she said sharply, “You do *not* use the puppy-dog-eyes and lip-quiver to get your way. Not about this. I don’t care *what* he remembers. He’s still dangerous, and you know it! If you really think I’m gonna leave here without putting at least the fear of... me into him, you’re sadly, *sadly* mistaken!”

It wasn’t until Spike started clapping that either of the

two noticed he was there, which just spoke to the fact that they accepted him completely. Any other vampire would have been dust by then, after all. Of course, any other vamp wouldn't have had an invitation into the witch's room, so that was neither here nor there.

"Red's right, luv," Spike said simply, nodding at the girl in a show of support. "And just so we're clear on this, Xan... it's the witch or me for the prat. *She's* more likely ta let him live."

"After a fashion," the redhead muttered, her eyes darkening swiftly.

"After a fashion," Spike agreed.

Xander frowned and shook his head. "You don't get it. Neither of you does. I... fuck, I hate this but... I *need* him. Mathry, I mean. I need him. LaVelle Enterprises needs him."

He sighed softly and straightened in the soft chair. "I... don't think you guys have thought this through. If Mathry is... damaged... then what? I'd be the last of my line unless Mom or Uncle Jareth had another kid. Do you really think I want to be stuck with this damned

corporation forever? The angel blood makes us live a really long time, but..." he sighed again. "I've Mated to Spike. *Twice*. And I don't like women, okay? I mean, I *do*, but not like that, and..."

"Bollocks."

"You said it, Mister."

In the end, they compromised.

Mathry would live, undamaged, but only as long as he didn't do more than *think* about harming Xander or anyone important to him.

The idea was inspired, Willow said, by the chip the military had put in Spike's head in the now-vanished reality Mathry had created himself, although it was

magical, not physical.

“You can contemplate destroying me as much as you like, *cousin*,” Xander explained, flanked by Spike and Willow on one side... and his Uncle and Doris on the other. “Hell, you can have whatever little fantasies you want. But the moment you so much as try to mention them to one of ‘your people’... the *instant* you try to strike against me or your Father or anybody else I care about...? Well, let’s just say you won’t like it. Of course, you’ll be a vegetable soon after, so I suppose you won’t have much opportunity for regret.”

That Mathry’s eyes had narrowed with loathing simply proved that Spike and Willow had been right about him, as they reminded Xander frequently over the next few years.

Jareth had washed his hands of his own son after seeing that look, himself, and he could only be glad that Doris had chosen to take on the role of Teacher where Mathry was concerned. Of course, she was better able to handle the boy since her own heritage—that of bane sidhe and vengeance demon—was as mixed as any and gave her a truly... interesting take on punishment and reward.

He'd been expecting it to happen sooner or later, but the day he woke up to discover that his nephew, William, and the Maiden were gone, along with their few personal effects, he was sorry.

He was also *not* sorry because it meant the world had finally returned to its pre-wish state.

A phone call on his private line just a few hours later confirmed that all was right with the world.

The Maiden was with her coven, and Alexander and William had gone to sleep in their rooms a few floors below him but woken up in their apartment in Sunnydale and Alexander took great joy in telling him that Joyce Summers-Giles was alive and well... again... while Buffy Summers was quite happily shackled up with her own vampire.

The Slayer and the Watcher had no idea that anything unusual had happened at all, but that was fit.

It was only the small sound of rustling cloth that drew his eyes to the couch by the wall, but when he looked, he smiled.

“Perhaps another ten years, treasure... and we’ll be on that beach.”

Doris smiled in return. “Oh, I think less than that. Alexander and William may well return once the classes your nephew teaches are out for the summer. Two months of running just this portion of the company may very well be good for them.”

Jareth arched his brows, surprised by the suggestion, although he didn’t know why. “And Mathry?”

The woman’s smile became just a touch less pleasant. “I believe our son would benefit from overseeing your mine, beloved. Spell or not, I think he’d like to feel... useful.”

“Alaska it is, then,” he announced, even as Susie buzzed up.

“There’s a... man... here to see Mister LaVelle,” her voice rang through loud and clear and somewhat... disgusted. “From Wolfram and Hart.”

“Have him deep-scanned and then send him up,” Doris answered, leaning over Jareth’s desk to do so. She smiled

and kisses her male slowly before pulling away. “You *have* read the dossier on Mister MacDonald, haven’t you, my love?”

Spike purred quietly, stretching against his bloke’s warm skin.

Yeah, things were just the way they were meant to be and he’d never give this up.

“Mmmm... what’s going on, baby,” Xander mumbled sleepily, pulling his vampire closer. “You okay?”

“Never been better, luv,” Spike answered sincerely.

“Never been better...”

The End