

28,112 words

The Hidden, Revealed

by
Spikedluv

Part One A

“This is very important, Buffy.” Giles’ voice was more urgent than normal. “You need to remember.”

“I know, Giles, I’m sorry,” Buffy replied. “I’m trying.”

“We need to know what night the ritual is going to take place, otherwise we’ll be forced to stake out the Hellmouth every night until it occurs,” Giles mused, taking his glasses off and rubbing the bridge of his nose tiredly.

“I’m not bloody well staking out the Hellmouth,” Spike muttered, rolling his eyes. “You know, slayer, you’re not really blonde, you should be able to”

“Shut up, Spike.” Xander whacked Spike upside the back of the head as he walked past him.

“Watch it, git,” Spike snarled.

“Or what?” Xander taunted the chipped vampire. “You’ll bite me?”

Spike's eyes flashed yellow. "I get this chip out"

"Hey, why don't we do a spell?" Willow chirped, interrupting Spike's threat. Spike gave her a dirty look for ignoring him, which was also ignored.

"What k-kind of spell?" Tara asked, wringing her hands.

"A memory boosting kind of spell, to help Buffy remember when the ritual is going to take place," Willow said, bouncing with excitement. "I mean, the information's in there, we just need a super-duper dose of magical ginkgo biloba."

"Oh, uh, I don't know about that, Will," Buffy said. "I remember the last time you did a spell." Buffy glanced over at Spike with trepidation.

"That was different," Willow huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "I didn't know the spell had worked when I made those wishes. Besides, both Giles and Tara are here. They can look the spell over, and help me with it, so no chance that it'll go all . . . wonky. Besides, I've done plenty of other spells since then," she pouted.

"But not on me," Buffy muttered.

Tara made soothing noises and patted Willow's back.

"Did you have a specific spell in mind, Willow?" Giles slipped his glasses back on.

"Giles!" Buffy objected.

"I'm sorry, Buffy," Giles said without looking at her. "Trust me when I say I understand how you feel, but we really need this information, and it is locked somewhere in that head of yours," he said distractedly, as he took the spell book Willow handed him and began to peruse the memory spell she'd chosen. "Hmm, this actually looks like it might work," he said.

"Don't sound so surprised!" Willow complained.

"Yeah!" Buffy added her two cents.

Giles handed the book off to Tara so that she could also check over the spell. “I believe I even have all the necessary ingredients here at the shop.” He moved off to check the shelves, ignoring Buffy’s continued sputters of protest.

While Tara read the spell, Willow helped Giles gather the necessary ingredients. Within minutes, they were ready to perform the spell. Willow and a reluctant Buffy sat cross-legged inside a chalked circle, lit candles surrounding them and a pouch of herbs that Giles had mixed for the incantation in Willow’s hand. The others stood closely around the circle to watch, except for Spike, who didn’t want to chance kissing the slayer again.

Willow began to speak the short spell.

*“The eye cannot see,
What the mind holds deep;
Reveal what is hidden,
The secrets it keeps.”*

As she spoke, Willow drew a handful of herbs out of the pouch and sprinkled them over Buffy. No one noticed that Xander had leaned forward and breached the sacred circle, or that some of the herbs Willow flung landed on him.

Willow thanked the God and Goddess, then put out the candles, ending the ceremony.

“Well?” Giles asked. “Did it work?”

Buffy looked up, eyes wide with horror. “Tonight!” she said. “The ritual takes place tonight.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Spike swore.

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The training room erupted in chaos, with everyone shouting and running around in circles. Giles stuck his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle that halted everyone in their tracks. "Thank you!" he said, when silence reigned once again. "Now, we need to be a bit more organized." He turned to Buffy. "What *time* is the ritual supposed to start?" he asked.

"Midnight," Buffy responded immediately. "You know, it's a real turn-on when you take charge like that," she added. Everyone turned to stare at her. "What?" she asked. "Oh, please, don't tell me you don't agree . . . *Willow!*" she turned to the girl she knew had a crush on Giles during high school.

"Traitor," Willow hissed at her best friend. "It is kinda sexy," she admitted, when Giles caught her eyes. She glanced at her girlfriend. "Don't you think so?"

"W-well . . . ,” Tara stammered.

"I do," Anya heartily agreed.

"Ahn!" Xander was broken out of his stunned silence by Anya's proclamation.

"Well, it is," Anya said. "Kinda like how you get all take-charge-y when we play . . ."

"Never mind," Xander said, quickly covering Anya's mouth with his hand.

"Can we get back to the ritual, now?" Giles asked sarcastically, slightly embarrassed.

"Please," Spike murmured.

"Sure, Giles," Buffy replied.

"Sorry, G-man," Xander said.

"Now," he started again. "We'll need weapons. You two." He pointed to Willow and Tara. "Gather the ingredients you'll require for spells. The rest of you, choose

your weapons from the trunk.”

Buffy was there first, snagging a broadsword; Spike took an axe; Anya chose the baseball bat she was becoming quite proficient with; and Xander grabbed a short sword. Giles reached for his axe, a bit smaller than the one Spike carried, and said, “Don’t forget your stakes.” Everyone scrambled to fill their pockets with stakes.

When they were all ready, they headed for the Hellmouth, which lay beneath the ruins of the old Sunnydale High School. They snuck into the school and the old library without being seen, and looked down into the chasm created when they’d blown up the school. A group of thirteen demons wearing flowing black robes with voluminous hoods formed a circle, and chanting filled the air.

“The ritual,” Buffy hissed worriedly.

“Yes, it looks like they’ve started early,” Giles replied evenly. “Perhaps now would be a good time to stop them,” he suggested.

“Gee, ya think?” Spike asked sarcastically, and then jumped down into the rent in the floor without waiting for anyone else.

“Hey! Wait for me!” Buffy yelled. “You can’t have all the fun.”

Giles shook his head as Buffy also jumped down into the pit.

“You don’t expect me to do that, do you?” Xander asked.

“No, Xander,” Giles assured him. “I think we lesser humans should climb down a little more carefully. You girls stay up here out of the fighting and, uh, do your spells.”

Giles, Xander, and Anya climbed down into the hole where Buffy and Spike were already fighting. The demons were a little pissed that their ritual had been interrupted. One of the demons broke off its attack on Spike and Buffy, and rushed the three newcomers. Xander met it head on. When the demon was too close to change its course, Xander squatted, and grabbed the demon around its legs. In a fluid motion, he stood and tossed the demon over his head, hearing it hit the wall

with a satisfying ‘crunch!’

“Holy moly,” Xander thought he heard Willow say, but was too caught up in staying alive to check. He waded further into the fight, taking one demon with a stab through the heart with the short sword he carried, and another with a punch to the face followed by a series of kicks to the ribs and a beheading.

He looked around and saw that, between their fighting, and Willow and Tara’s spells, the number of demons had been halved. He came back to the fight just in time to see another demon charging towards him. Xander hesitated, and then turned and ran away from the demon, which gave a mighty roar and chased him. When he reached the wall, Xander jumped up and placed one foot on the rock face. Using his momentum, he pushed off the wall and back towards the demon. He kicked out, hitting the demon in the head and knocking it to the floor, where Giles finished it off.

Xander landed lightly in a crouch, and quickly looked up. Fewer demons still, but two of those remaining had backed Spike into a crevice where he was unable to swing his axe. One of the demons was struggling with Spike’s axe hand, while the other looked like it was going to choke Spike until his head popped off. Xander stood and ran towards them.

“Nooooo!” he screamed, in an attempt to distract the demons holding Spike. Both of them turned, and Xander barreled into the one holding Spike’s wrist. He slammed it into the unyielding rock wall, causing it to relinquish its hold on Spike, and then stabbed it with his short sword. Spike, who was now able to move out of the tight spot he’d been trapped in, and whose axe hand had been freed, shoved the head of the axe into the stomach of the demon still choking him, knocking the air out of it. The demon doubled over, gasping for air, and Spike decapitated it with one swing.

“You all right?” Xander asked frantically, looking Spike over.

“Uh, yeah,” Spike said, confused. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Xander said, and then turned to look around them. All of the demons were dead, and all of his friends were staring at him. “What?” he asked, with a

shrug.

“You fought,” Buffy said.

“I always fight,” Xander replied, a little annoyed.

“I think she means, you fought *well*,” Giles said, though not unkindly.

Xander wanted to take offense at that, but knew that normally he didn’t fight well.

“And you s-saved Spike,” Tara added.

“Hey, now!” Spike said, not wanting it to get around that the puny human had saved his bum. “I’d’ve taken ‘em.”

“I didn’t do anything special,” Xander said, trying to shrug it off. He had no idea what had just happened, how he’d been able to fight . . . and fight well. Nor did he know what made him rush to Spike’s rescue.

“Xander!” Willow chastised his dissembling. “You threw that demon over your head!”

“A-and you stabbed the one,” Tara offered.

“And punched and kicked the other,” Anya added.

“And you did that jump-thing up on the wall,” Giles said with wonder.

“And you saved *Spike!*” Buffy said in disbelief.

“Hey!” Spike cried.

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Without replying, Xander clambered up the stone wall. He laid on his stomach and extended his hand to help pull Anya up. His friends watched silently as he

practically hoisted her up unassisted. Anya squealed, and then kissed Xander when she reached the top and they were both standing. The trip back to the Magic Box was made in stunned silence.

When Xander and Anya finally got inside their apartment, she immediately fell on him, ravenous with desire. She pushed him back against the recently closed door and kissed him, hard and heated, her hands squeezing his shoulders, and then moving down his body. Xander, having spent the entire short drive home listening to Anya tell him how turned-on she'd become watching him fight, and exactly what she was going to do with him when they got home - in wonderfully explicit detail - was very receptive to her vigorous attentions.

Anya pulled his shirt out of his pants and splayed her hands over his stomach, kneading his muscles, teasingly slipping her thumbs beneath his waistband as she continued to kiss him. Xander groaned and cupped her ass, squeezed her buttocks as his prick reacted to her touch much the same way it had reacted to her words earlier. She unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, then pushed them down his legs.

Pulling out of his hands, Anya went to her knees. She took him in her hands, wrapping the fingers of one hand around the shaft and running her thumb over the moist tip as she reached between his legs and gently cupped and squeezed his balls. Xander groaned, his legs shaking as he watched her take him into her mouth. He threw his head back against the door and closed his eyes as she sucked him off.

Later that night, Xander lay awake in bed, Anya snoring softly beside him. There was no logical reason for him to be awake. After sex with Anya, especially hot and heavy sex like they'd had tonight, his body was always worn out. But he couldn't shut down his mind, was afraid to close his eyes. Because every time he did, he pictured Spike. Instead of Anya. Spike on his knees, sucking him, moaning around him; Spike on his back, his legs drawn up as Xander thrust into him, begging him for more, and harder, and deeper.

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Xander didn't sleep much over the next week. He went from work, to research, to patrol, and then home with Anya. He spent the days wondering why he could

suddenly fight; why his reflexes were faster, his instinct sharper, his senses more acute. Why, when he had sex with Anya, he pictured Spike's face. He spent the nights fighting sleep, afraid what he would see when he closed his eyes.

Tonight's patrol was especially difficult. Spike had spotted a couple of Fyarl demons at Willy's bar, so they were searching for them to find out what brought them to town. Buffy took Willow and Tara with her, while Anya and Xander got paired with Spike. Despite his newfound agility and grace, Xander found himself awkward and clumsy around Spike. Until they found the Fyarl demons.

The pair of Fyarl demons seemed to appear from out of nowhere. Xander hadn't seen them, nor sensed their presence. It was obvious that Spike, who looked just as surprised as he felt, hadn't either.

"Are you the vampire known as Spike, William the Bloody?" one of the Fyarl asked, its voice deep and rumbly.

"Who's askin'?" Spike responded, adopting a deceptively casual stance.

"You must come with us," the other demon intoned.

"Uh, yeah, right," Spike replied sarcastically. "I don't think so, mate."

"You do not have a choice," the other spoke again. "We must not return without you."

"Then you won't be returning," Xander broke in. He stepped forward, swinging the small axe he carried, not sure exactly where this protective feeling for Spike was coming from.

"Wait!" Spike yelled, but one of the demons stepped towards Xander and the fight was on.

Xander hacked and twirled and kicked, while Anya screamed and battered the demon with the bat. Spike took on the other demon, doing his best to beat it, while keeping it alive. His battle was against his own demon, which was raging with blood lust, as much as it was against the Fyarl.

After Xander and Anya killed their demon, they stood back and watched Spike. When it looked like the demon was getting the better of him, Xander joined the fight and planted the blade of his axe in the demon's back. When the demon dropped dead to the ground, Spike turned his own demon on Xander.

“What in bloody hell do you think you were doing?” Spike growled around his fangs, amber eyes blazing.

“Saving your life!” Xander yelled back.

“Saving my life?” Spike asked in disbelief. “I don't need you to save my life, human,” he snarled.

“Hey, don't you yell at him!” Anya yelled at Spike.

“Then why didn't you finish it off yourself?” Xander asked angrily.

“Because I wanted it *alive*, you moron,” Spike snapped.

“Bullshit!” Xander responded with a little less force, suddenly unsure. “Why would you want him alive?” he asked, subdued.

“To find out who sent them,” Spike explained slowly, as if he was talking to an idiot.

“Ohhh, God,” Xander moaned. He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hand. Christ, he'd really screwed up. What had he been thinking? That was the problem, he hadn't been thinking. He'd seen a threat to Spike, and dealt with it. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

And he was, sorry that he'd screwed up, sorry that he couldn't control this . . . whatever it was that had him thinking about Spike at inappropriate times, and rushing to his rescue, like he really needed *Xander* to rescue him.

“What's that?” Spike asked in surprise.

“I said,” Xander said, lowering his hand and raising his head. “I’m sorry. Let’s just get back to the Magic Box,” he said, then took Anya’s hand in his and started walking back the way they’d come, not looking to see if Spike followed them, almost hoping that he wouldn’t.

That night, for the first time in their relationship, and despite Anya’s valiant attempts to make it otherwise, Xander was unable to perform. Regardless of Xander’s fear of closing his eyes, and his self-flagellation over his screw-up that night, he fell asleep. And dreamt of Spike. Though his waking thoughts of Spike usually consisted of the vampire naked and sweating beneath him, his dream was less, and yet so much more.

Spike smiled at him before kissing him tenderly, and then held his hand while they snuggled on the couch watching television; Xander woke with tears dried on his cheeks.

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Before Xander left for work the next morning, he asked Anya to beg off research and patrol that night when she saw Giles at work. He knew she was hoping they’d have a romantic evening in, but he knew that they needed to talk. When he got home, Anya already had scented candles lit, and a bottle of cheap champagne cooling in a dishpan full of ice, in lieu of a proper ice bucket.

Xander gave her a sad kiss, and then took a shower. As the water washed the day’s dirt and sweat away, Xander beat himself up. He knew that no matter how he handled this, he was going to hurt Anya, but he couldn’t continue to live with this inside him. He needed to tell someone, and this affected Anya almost as much as it affected him.

Cleaned up and dressed in a pair of jeans, a little baggy because he didn’t have much of an appetite these days, Xander emerged into the living room. Anya was sitting on the couch, playing with the chain around her neck. “Is something wrong, Xander?” she asked, direct as always.

Xander sat on the couch and took one of her hands in both of his. He played with

her fingers while he considered the best way to say what needed saying. “I think I know why I can fight,” he said, starting with the seemingly innocuous.

“Really?” Anya’s eyes sparkled with interest as she leaned towards him. “Why?”

“Remember that spell Willow did so Buffy would remember when the ritual was taking place?” he asked, without taking his eyes off her fingers.

“Yeah,” she replied, sounding a little confused.

“Do you remember the words of the spell?” Xander looked up at her. Anya shook her head ‘no’. “I looked them up,” he continued, and then quoted the spell to her.

*“The eye cannot see,
What the mind holds deep;
Reveal what is hidden,
The secrets it keeps.”*

“Why is that important, Xander?” Anya asked with a frown.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I was possessed by the spirit of a hyena back in high school?” Xander asked, with a twist of his lips.

“No.” She shook her head again. Xander told her about the hyena. “And you think...what exactly?” she asked when he was done.

“I think I can fight better now, because I . . . remember.” He motioned to his head. “I remember what it’s like to *be* a hyena. How to move . . . it’s just instinct now. And my senses are more . . . keen.”

“What senses?” Anya asked.

“Hearing, smell, sight”

“Does this have something to do with last night?” Anya asked.

“Yes. And no,” Xander said. Anya cocked her head in confusion. “I think the spell did something else.”

“Another memory?” she asked.

“Not exactly. More like . . . suppressed . . . desires,” Xander replied. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. God, this was going to be difficult.

“You’re gay!” Anya said. “I *knew* it!”

What? “Y-you did?” Xander squeaked. He wasn’t *gay*! Where did she get that idea? All right, he was attracted to Spike, but that didn’t make him *gay*! Did it?

“When you were unable to respond to me last night, I knew it must be something like that, because it certainly couldn’t be me. Right?” she asked worriedly.

“Of course not!” Xander found himself agreeing with her. Maybe it was better this way. Much easier telling her he was gay than that he was attracted to the evil undead. And how could that *possibly* be? He *hated* Spike. Always had, always would. Right?

“Oh, Xander,” Anya said sadly, and hugged him. “It’ll be all right.”

“Will it?” Xander asked, letting her comfort him. His emotions overwhelmed him, and the dam holding back the flood of tears broke. “I’ve never You’re the only one Please don’t tell anyone else about this,” he finally got out.

“Of course not, Xander. And I won’t forget, either. Not like the other times. Promise,” Anya assured him. After a couple of minutes of rocking Xander in her arms, she asked, “Do you want me to move out?”

“No!” Xander said, pulling back a little to look at her. “I mean, obviously we can’t . . . you know. But I’m not seeing anyone else, and you’re not . . . at least, not yet. I don’t see why we can’t stay here as roommates, as long as you’re not uncomfortable with that.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Anya, I like you. I even love you. You’re a very good friend, and the only person

I've mentioned this to, of course I don't mind if we live together for a little while longer. You know, until some guy smarter than me sweeps you off your feet," he added.

"All right," she said. "Thank you."

"Besides." He gave her the patented Xander-grin. "Saves me having to lie to my friends when I tell them why we broke up."

"You're not going to tell them?" she asked.

"Nah," he said. "Not until you find yourself another guy. This is all kinda new to me, and I'm still feeling a bit"

"Fragile?" she supplied.

"Yeah," Xander said, with a bitter-sounding chuckle and a sickly smile. "Fragile." Like the wrong word, the wrong *look*, might shatter him.

"That's how I felt when I found out I was human again," Anya said.

Xander looked around the candle-lit living room. "Want some champagne?" he asked.

"It was for a special night," Anya said sadly.

"It has been a special night," Xander said, squeezing her hand. Getting that off his chest didn't really change anything, but for some reason it made him feel a whole lot better. Lighter, like he wasn't the only one carrying that burden, now that he'd shared it.

Anya grinned as she rose from the couch. "Let's use the special glasses instead of the plastic cups, then."

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The next night at the Magic Box, Xander took Giles aside and explained what he thought had happened to make him a better fighter; that the spell Willow performed on Buffy somehow affected him and made him “remember” the hyena possession. He didn’t mention the part about being attracted to Spike.

“Oh, dear lord,” Giles said, removing his glasses and wiping the lenses with a cloth he produced almost magically from his pocket. “I’ll have to see what we can do about reversing it,” he said thoughtfully, almost speaking to himself.

“Do we have to?” Xander asked. “I mean, I can fight better now. That’s good, right?” The last thing he wanted was to go back to being the one everyone else had to protect. Being able to fight, to actually contribute, felt good.

“Yes, of course it is,” Giles agreed. “But there could be other side-effects of the spell we’re not aware of. We don’t even know why it affected you, Xander.”

Xander almost laughed. Other side-effects, indeed. If he thought reversing the spell would make him forget his attraction to the aggravating bleached-blond vampire, he’d do it in a heartbeat. His luck, he’d lose his ability to fight, and remember being attracted to Spike. That didn’t bear thinking about.

When they returned to the front room where everyone, including Spike, was now gathered around the research table, Giles repeated what Xander had just told him. Willow, though excited that she had been able to release the hyena’s knowledge -- which they thought had been purged from Xander’s mind, but must have been deeply buried instead -- was horrified that yet another spell had gone wrong. Xander tried to comfort her, assuring her that everything was good, and that he wasn’t upset.

Things went smoothly over the next week. Xander was needed for little more than research and the occasional vamp dusting. He was amazed at how quickly he’d adjusted to his new abilities. The night Willow had performed the spell, Xander already noticed increased speed, agility, and strength, and over the last two weeks he’d just become even more adept. He and Anya spent some time alone, talking; learning how to be friends.

When Saturday rolled around again, Buffy wanted to go to The Bronze, so Xander and Anya agreed to meet her, Willow, and Tara there. When they arrived, the place was already crowded, the band in full swing. They pushed their way through the throng and found the three girls already at their table. Each girl had a cup of soda in front of them; a pitcher and two more plastic cups sat in the center of the table.

“Ladies,” Xander greeted the three giggling women.

“Hey, Xan!” they called over the noise. “Anya.”

“Hello,” Anya replied as she took the chair Xander held out for her. He sat beside her, and poured soda into the two cups. When it was empty, he motioned to the waitress for a refill. After she took the pitcher, Xander sat back and looked around the table at his girls. Willow and Tara sat with their heads close together, whispering, while Buffy scouted the club for an unsuspecting victim to be her dance partner.

Xander looked at Anya, who was also searching the crowd. He leaned closer to her. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Looking for a man,” she said.

“Ah.” Xander nodded.

“For you, not me,” she assured him.

“Ahh!” he squealed. “That’s really not necessary,” he said. “Especially with my friends right here.”

“You do realize they’ll find out eventually; once you do find someone?” Anya asked. “Besides,” she said, “we’re just looking.”

“No,” Xander corrected, “you’re looking. Why don’t we dance instead?” he asked, when he heard the first strains of a slow song. He stood and took her hand, pulling her out of the chair. “We’re hitting the dance floor,” he told the others. “Join us?”

Willow and Tara jumped up, hand-in-hand, and preceded them to the dance floor.

“Buff?” Xander asked. Buffy’s eyes alighted on a likely prospect, and she nodded, detouring to ask him to dance as Xander and Anya made their way to a spot near Willow and Tara. When Buffy joined them, she introduced the guy she’d snagged, and then each couple concentrated on their partner.

Xander was relaxed and having fun, chatting with the girls and the different guys Buffy danced with in her search for Mr. Right, until Spike showed up. He watched as Spike pulled up a chair and straddled it, studying the group sitting around the table while he tilted the beer bottle to his lips. Hmm, Spike’s lips, Xander thought. They looked kissable.

Xander shook himself and stared at his cup, determined not to look at Spike again. When he glanced up, he noticed that Spike was watching him, a quizzical expression on his face. Xander frowned at him, and turned away. The rest of the night passed smoothly despite Xander’s preoccupation with Spike, and his inability to actually keep his eyes off the other man. Part of him made note of Spike’s not inconsiderable assets, while the other part was berating him for feelings he couldn’t control.

Then Anya leaned over to him. “How about that one?” she asked, not for the first time that night. Xander automatically raised his eyes to where Anya was pointing, and then groaned. He didn’t realize he’d groaned aloud, until he turned his attention back to the table and saw his friends all staring at him. “What?” he asked.

“What’s wrong?” Buffy asked.

“Nothing,” Xander denied, even as he felt heat suffuse his skin.

Spike, though, hadn’t missed the byplay between Xander and Anya. He looked over at the guy Anya had pointed out to Xander, and then back at Xander. “Something you want to tell us, Harris?” he asked with a smirk.

Xander didn’t think he could blush any more, nor could he think of anything to say in response. Anya leapt into the breach. “I’ve been trying to convince Xander that a threesome would be fun. He’s not being very cooperative.”

Xander was wrong; he could blush more. He wanted to crawl into a hole at the

looks of disbelief and disgust Buffy and Willow gave Anya. Well, actually, Willow looked more intrigued than disgusted, and that didn't even bear thinking about. When Xander looked at Anya and she gave him a little shrug of her shoulders and a 'sorry' face, he couldn't be angry with her. He realized that she'd said the first thing she could think of to cover for him.

Although, a part of him pointed out, she wouldn't have had to cover if she hadn't been pointing out possible guys for him. If only he could tell her that the guy he wanted, the only guy he wanted, was sitting right here at the table with them. But he didn't think he could ever do that. Xander did the only thing he could; he put his arm around Anya's shoulders and leaned down to give her a kiss.

"Why don't we talk about this later?" he asked, loud enough for his friends to hear him, to believe that he and Anya were actually discussing the possibility of a threesome. Xander found himself enjoying the shocked looks on his friend's faces at the thought that he might really be considering Anya's proposal. But the relieved look on Anya's face was worth it.

"Really?" she asked. "I mean, you're not mad?"

"I'm not mad," Xander assured her. He was pretty certain, however, that he wouldn't be able to sit at the table with Spike any longer without giving something away. So far he'd managed to avoid soulful looks and deep sighs, but you never knew. "In fact, why don't we go home and talk about it now?"

"Now?" Anya asked in surprise.

"Yeah," Xander said, rising to his feet and helping Anya out of her chair. "You can try again to convince me." Anya giggled. "Goodbye, ladies," he said, looking around the table. "Spike." The vampire looked back at him with narrowed eyes, barely visible through a cloud of smoke.

When they got outside, Anya apologized. "I'm sorry, Xander. I didn't realize I was being so obvious. I just, I love you. I've never had a best friend before. And I want you to find somebody who makes you happy."

"I know, Ahn," Xander said, as he led her to the car. "Nice save, by the way."

Anya giggled again. “It was the first thing that popped into my head,” she admitted. “And I figured they’d believe it since I, well, have a tendency to say those private things when I shouldn’t, and”

Xander silenced her with a chaste kiss on the lips. “It’s okay,” he said, and opened the car door for her. “Why don’t we go home and see if there are any old black and whites on television?”

“Okay!” Anya agreed, as she slid into the car.

Neither of them saw Spike step from the shadows as they drove away, a look of contemplation on his face.

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Three weeks later, Xander and Anya were still living together, and his friends remained ignorant of the fact that they were now just friends. On Friday night, they went to the movies. As they were walking back to the car, Xander’s more sensitive hearing picked up raised voices and the sounds of a scuffle from the alley beside the movie theater.

“Ahn, go get in the car,” Xander said, pulling a stake out of his pocket and heading towards the alley.

“Xander!” Anya hissed worriedly.

“I’ll be all right,” he said, looking briefly over his shoulder at her. “Go!” He turned back to the alley and moved stealthily towards the entrance. He didn’t know how many vampires there were, but he couldn’t leave an innocent in their clutches. The scene that met him when he poked his head around the wall was unexpected.

Spike was on his knees, clutching his head while three men kicked and punched him, laughing and taunting him. One man - obviously the man Spike had managed to hit before he went down when the chip kicked in - was lying on the ground. Christ, Xander thought, humans. Since they were hitting and kicking Spike, he

hoped that meant they weren't carrying weapons. He replaced the stake in his pocket, and snuck down the alley.

Fuck, he thought, when the dim light from the street glinted off the blade of a very sharp looking knife. The thug's arm flashed, and Xander thought he heard the blade slice through the t-shirt and skin covering Spike's chest. He lifted his arm for another slash while his two buddies laughed. Before he could strike, Xander moved in and grabbed his wrist.

"That would be a bad idea," he growled as he squeezed the man's wrist. Xander found that he found altogether too much enjoyment from the grimace of pain that covered the other man's face as he crushed his wrist; nearly as much as he enjoyed the howl of pain and the clatter as the knife hit the pavement.

One of his friends moved in to assist him. Xander *felt* his approach, and without looking, punched him in the face. When he angrily charged Xander again, Xander kicked him hard enough to send him crashing into the brick wall on the other side of the alley. He slid down the wall and ended up slumped on the ground. The fourth man made a move towards Xander, but Anya's voice stayed him.

"I wouldn't," she said. Xander glanced over his shoulder to see her standing with her feet spread, the baseball bat they carried in the car held in both hands, like she was ready to take a swing.

Xander looked back at the man now kneeling before him. "If you want to keep this hand," he snarled, squeezing harder, "you'll disappear. I don't want to see you again." Xander let go of him and he staggered to his feet, cradling his wrist against his chest. The man Anya stood off picked up the man Spike had downed before Xander showed up, then helped the one Xander had kicked into the wall regain his feet. The four of them stumbled out of the alley and Xander heaved a sigh of relief.

He turned his attention back to Spike. He kicked the knife away and slowly went to his knees. Spike was now lying face-down on the pavement, his eyes closed. "Spike," Xander called softly. "Spike?"

Xander carefully rolled Spike to his back, and hissed. Spike must have been in this alley with those men for a while before Xander found them. His face was swollen,

and covered with cuts and bruises. He was bleeding from the cut on his chest, and Xander was afraid to see what kinds of wounds were hidden by the clothes he was wearing. Without conscious thought, Xander lifted Spike in his arms and carried him out of the alley.

“Is he all right?” Anya asked as she looked around them to make sure the thugs had actually left and weren’t waiting to ambush them.

“I don’t know,” Xander said. “He’s not dust, at least.”

Anya opened the backseat door, and Xander carefully levered Spike into the car. He drove back to their apartment as quickly as he could. When they got Spike upstairs, Anya helped Xander remove his duster, and then he laid him on the couch. Spike was still unconscious. Anya gathered their first aid kit while Xander cut Spike’s t-shirt off him. He gasped at the bruises covering Spike’s torso. It was impossible that his ribs survived this beating intact.

When Anya returned, Xander took the first aid kit from her and carefully cleaned the cuts covering Spike’s face and the slash on his chest. While he was doing that, Anya removed Spike’s boots to make him more comfortable. Xander hemmed and hawed about removing Spike’s jeans to check for injuries to his legs. He finally looked up at Anya.

“Should we” Xander gestured. “. . . remove his jeans?”

“Yes,” Anya replied immediately. “He’s bleeding.” She pointed to a damp spot on the leg of Spike’s jeans. Xander pressed his finger to it, and it came away red.

“Shit,” he said, quickly and mechanically undoing Spike’s jeans and pulling them off him with Anya’s assistance. “Throw these in the washer, would you?” Xander asked, as he set to cleaning the cuts on Spike’s legs. Those bastards must have been wearing steel toed boots, he thought, wishing he’d hurt them worse when he’d had the opportunity.

When all the cuts had been doctored, Xander took a moment to let his eyes wander over Spike’s naked body. He’d never seen Spike without his t-shirt, much less without his jeans, and the sight of his muscular chest and strong legs was enticing.

Despite the severity of Spike's injuries, Xander found himself getting aroused.

"He's very nicely shaped," Anya commented from behind him, and Xander's unseemly erection deflated.

"I'm going to get him a pair of sweats," Xander said, and hobbled into the bedroom. Anya helped him dress the vampire in the sweat pants, and then pulled the curtains while Xander placed a blanket over the unconscious form. He sat on the coffee table and studied Spike while he had the chance.

"I'll just go get ready for bed," Anya whispered. Xander acknowledged her with a nod, though he barely heard her. His thoughts were concentrated on the man lying on his couch. The man he felt a sudden, inexplicable attraction to. Tears burned his eyes as he thought about how he'd almost lost Spike tonight. Lost him before Xander had a chance to tell him how he felt. Not that he ever would. Xander could just imagine Spike's reaction; the horror, the amusement, the contempt.

Xander didn't think he could face that, so Spike would never know how he felt. And how, exactly, was he supposed to re-bury those feelings? Perhaps he should see if Giles had come up with a way to reverse the spell. He'd miss being able to fight, because that gave him such a rush, but it might be worth it to no longer have feelings for Spike. Feelings that he could never admit; that would never be returned.

He reached out and lightly brushed his fingers over Spike's face. His chest ached, feeling the loss of something he'd never even had. With a low moan -- of pain, of sorrow, Xander didn't know -- he leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on Spike's lips. A soft sound caught his attention, and Xander whirled his head towards it. Anya stood just inside the living room, her hand over her lips, her eyes wide.

"Oh, Xander," she said once he'd spotted her. "Not Spike?"

Xander couldn't speak, everything suddenly seemed overwhelming and unfair, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

"Oh, Xander," she repeated, as she walked over to him. She sat down on the coffee table and pulled him into her arms. Xander rested his head on her shoulder and let

the tears fall. He wrapped his arms around her as soft cries turned to sobs, and her hold on him tightened as she whispered nonsense words of comfort. Tears of confusion, and fear, and unhappiness that had been building up over the last month spilled out of him.

When the tears finally stopped Xander wiped his face with the hem of his t-shirt. “Tomorrow I’m going to see if Giles has found a way to reverse the spell.”

“Do you think that’ll work?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Xander found the box of tissues and blew his nose.

“Do you really think you can un-remember all of this, Xander?”

“God, I hope so,” Xander said despairingly.

Anya’s brow crinkled in confusion. “But, I thought you liked being able to fight?”

“I do,” Xander admitted. “And I’ll miss that, if I even remember that I could, but it’s very difficult suddenly being attracted to someone you’ve hated, someone who still hates you. I don’t know if I can do it anymore.”

Part One B

Xander was sitting at the kitchen table drawing patterns in spilled sugar with his finger when Spike finally woke up. Bleary-eyed and fully-healed, Spike sauntered into the kitchen. “What ‘m I doing here?” he asked.

Xander jumped. “Jesus, Spike!” he cried, grabbing at his chest where his heart galloped out of control.

“And where’re my clothes?” Spike added, looking down at the sweats that were nearly sliding off his hips.

They were interrupted by the sound of a key in the front door. Anya was already talking as she pushed the door open. “Xander? I got the blood, and a new t-shirt.

Has he wok—. Oh!” she said, when she caught sight of Spike standing in the kitchen with Xander. “I guess he’s awake. And completely healed. Nice chest.” Anya placed the bags and the Styrofoam container of blood from Willy’s on the table. “And those sweats look very sexy, too.”

Xander was in hell. He just knew it. His life could not have gotten this complicated, even on the Hellmouth. He watched, unable to tear his eyes away as Spike tugged the sweats up.

“What do you mean, completely healed?” Spike asked, narrowed eyes trained on Anya.

“You got beat up last night,” Anya explained as she got a mug out of the cupboard and poured some blood into it. “Xander saved you. Again. You were unconscious, so we brought you back here.” She put the mug in the microwave and set the timer.

Xander groaned at Anya’s wording, though he realized she was just sticking up for him. He knew it would piss Spike off to think that he had to be saved by anyone, much less one Xander Harris . . . and not for the first time. Spike closed his eyes and a frown of concentration marred his beautiful face. *And did I really just think that?* Xander asked himself.

“Humans,” Spike growled, and opened eyes that flashed amber. “Well, don’t expect me to thank you,” he snarled at Xander.

“I really don’t,” Xander replied sadly. He found the bag with the t-shirt in it, pulled it out and tossed the package at Spike. “Here’s a new t-shirt. Your jeans are on the chair in the living room.” The microwave dinged. Xander got the mug out and set it on the table in front of Spike. “Drink your blood, then take a shower. The sun’s up, so you’re stuck here for a couple hours.”

“Oh, bloody hell!” Spike swore. “There’s gotta be a sewer entrance near here, ‘cause I don’t plan on spending the rest of the day with you gits.”

“You won’t have to,” Xander said, trying to keep his voice from cracking. Spike’s insults were nothing new, but he couldn’t help taking them more personally now that he had heretofore unrealized feelings for the irritating blond menace. He

grabbed his jacket off the coat rack near the door, and Anya followed him from the kitchen.

“Xander.”

Xander grabbed her shoulders and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. “I’m going to the Magic Box to see Giles. Stay here with Spike, please?”

“Oh, Xander, no.”

“Please?” Xander interrupted her again.

Anya made a face that told Xander she really wanted to argue the point, but finally she relented. She pulled him into a hug and said, “All right,” against his shoulder.

Xander pulled away. He had to get out of here before he started doing something unforgivable, like crying in front of Spike. He glanced over where Spike leaned against the counter drinking his blood as he watched the by-play between Xander and Anya. “Don’t steal anything,” he said, and then pulled the door open and left.

~*~*~*~*~

When Xander arrived at the Magic Box, Giles, who had let Anya leave early, was swamped. He was forced to pitch in, helping customers find items and bagging purchases while Giles rang them up. After the rush ended, Xander sat at the research table and looked through the books piled in the middle, while Giles helped the last few stragglers. In addition to magic and spell books, there were books on psychology, hypnosis and false memories, and the physiology of the brain.

“Oh, dear lord,” Giles sighed, as he finally dropped into a chair across from Xander. “And how are you this afternoon, Xander?”

Xander got right to the point of his visit. “Have you found anything about reversing that spell?” he asked.

Giles sighed. He took his glasses off and cleaned the lenses as he raised his eyes to

the ceiling. “No,” he said as he slipped the glasses back on. “Willow and I have been doing some research, and we’ve determined that, since the memories were merely *revealed*, and not given to you, or planted, like false memories, there’s really nothing we can do. The brain is very complex, and trying to make you forget something you’ve now remembered could have unforeseen consequences that are very dangerous.” His tone turned worried. “Why? Are you having side-effects from the original spell?”

“No,” Xander lied, shaking his head as his heart contracted painfully in his chest. “I was just -- curious.”

Xander didn’t know what to do next. He didn’t feel like staying at the Magic Box where Giles might be able to figure out that he was lying to him, and he couldn’t go home because Spike would be there. Xander wandered down the street until he got to the park. He took a seat on one of the benches, and people-watched. He needed to figure out what to do.

If he was going to be this sensitive to Spike’s snarky comments, he wasn’t going to be able to ignore him like usual, or give it back to him in-kind. He wondered if he would be able to avoid Spike, and then laughed at that thought. Between research and patrol at least five nights a week, there was no way Xander would be able to avoid him. He’d just have to build up a thick skin; hide his pain behind laughter. He’d done it before; he could do it again.

By the time he came to this determination, the sun had set. Xander looked around him; in the dusk, the park still looked friendly. If you didn’t know what lurked in the dark. Xander shifted and made himself comfortable as he waited for something he could kill to show up.

“What’re you doin’ sittin’ out here in the dark?” Spike asked from behind him.

Xander sighed, closed his eyes, and shook his head. He just couldn’t win. “I’m waiting for something I can fight,” Xander said.

“Hmm! Looks like somebody grew a pair,” Spike said, pulling the pack of a cigarettes and his lighter out of his duster pocket, and then sitting on the other end of the bench.

Xander didn't respond or give any indication that he'd heard the comment.

"Talkin' to you, Harris," Spike growled as he lit the cigarette and took a drag off it.

"Look, Spike," Xander said. "I need a fight with an opponent who can actually fight back. Now, unless you got rid of that chip, that's not you, so why don't you just . . . bugger off?"

"Hey, now!" Spike said, taking offense. "I was just tryin' to make conversation. No need to get personal!" Xander snorted at the irony of Spike getting upset with him. "Was just gonna say I appreciate the blood and the t-shirt."

Xander looked at Spike in disbelief, and then smiled knowingly. "Anya bitched at you all afternoon, didn't she?"

"Bleedin' hell! The silly chit wouldn't *shut up*! I almost threw myself out the balcony into the sunlight at one point. Thank all that's unholy the sun finally set," Spike complained, placing the cigarette between his lips and inhaling deeply. Xander felt his lips twitch as he imagined Anya making Spike's unlife hell for being mean to him.

"Gotta love a girl who'll stick up for you with the evil undead," Xander mused.

"You think I'm evil?" Spike asked.

"Yeah, Spike," Xander sighed. "I think you're evil."

"Course I am." Spike nodded his head.

"Company," Xander said softly, when he sensed a group of five vampires approaching.

"Oh, bollocks," Spike swore, with a look at his half-smoked cigarette. "Can't you morons wait until I've finished my fag?" he asked the approaching vampires.

"You playing with your food, or is this a buffet?" one of the vampires asked.

“I think you mean ‘take-out’, mate,” Spike said, as he drew on the cigarette.

“Whatever.” The vampire rolled its amber eyes. “You gonna fight us for him?”

“Oh, no!” Spike said with a smirk. “He’s all yours.” He turned to Xander. “Have fun, Harris. Tag me when you need a break, ‘kay?”

“Sure thing, fangl—.” Xander broke off. He suddenly felt like a heel making fun of Spike’s chipped status, despite the fact that he was glad the vampire hadn’t killed any of them, and just now realized that he’d never have had the opportunity to get to know Spike without it. “Spike,” he finished, and stood.

“So, how do you want to do this?” he asked the vampire who had spoken.

“Do what?” the vampire asked.

“Fight,” Xander replied. “One at a time, two, all five . . . what?”

The lead vampire laughed. “There’s not going to be a fight! We’re going to drain you dry, and then you’re gonna die.” It turned to look at the other four vampires. “Like this is even gonna be a challenge!” The smile was still on its face when Xander twisted its head and pulled it off its neck.

“What was that?” Xander asked the now-silent vampire as it turned to dust. “Hmm,” he said as he dusted his hands off. “He doesn’t seem to be laughing anymore. Now, who’s next?” He grinned. This was just what he needed.

The four vampires looked at each other and charged as one. Xander’s grin grew. Yeah, this was gonna be fun. He pulled his stake as he concentrated on one vampire, and then ducked as their hands reached for him, grabbing the vampire around the legs and lifting it off its feet. Xander stood and tossed the vampire over his head. It connected with one of the other vampires, and they both tumbled to the ground, stunned.

Xander turned around just as the two vampires that remained on their feet swung back around toward him. He didn’t wait for them to reach him. With a yell, Xander

charged them. Just before he reached them, he jumped into the air and kicked one of them in the chest, knocking it down. Xander put his hands out to break his fall, and then did a somersault and vaulted to his feet from the momentum.

The two vampires he'd knocked down were back on their feet. Xander punched one, and kicked out at the other, then twirled and kicked the only vampire he'd left standing so far. He elbowed one of the vampires in the throat, then brought his hand forward and punched another. He looked up and saw Spike standing by the bench, affecting boredom.

"You gonna actually stake any of 'em?" he asked sarcastically.

"Sure," Xander said, then slammed his hand behind him and staked the vampire he'd kicked to the ground as it tried to sneak up on him. "That's two for Xander, zero for Spike," he said with a grin.

"Pillock!" Spike said, and then jumped into the fray.

The battle was short-lived after that. When it was over, both men were breathing heavily, and Xander wondered at that. They both grinned at each other, feeling the camaraderie of the fight. Spike sobered first.

"Well," he said, wiping the smile off his face. "I should get going. Got better things to do than hang out in the park with you, Harris."

"Right," Xander said with a nod, letting his own smile fade. 'See ya,' he wanted to say, but instead said nothing, just turned and walked away, trying to keep his shoulders from slumping. He headed to his apartment. He hoped Anya wasn't worried about him.

~*~*~*~*~

When Xander finally made it home that night, his lip was cut and swollen, his cheek sported a large bruise, and the knuckles of his right hand were scraped raw. Anya hissed in a breath at the sight of him.

“Xander! Where have you been?” she asked as she seated him at the table to clean his wounds. “Giles said you left the Magic Box before sundown.”

“Didn’t want to come back while Spike was still here,” Xander said, feeling kinda punchy after the fights he’d managed to find on the way to the apartment.

“What about after?” she asked.

“Needed to work off some frustration,” Xander replied. He’d felt so good after fighting with Spike at his side, and then, with just one well-placed barb, Spike had erased it all, and Xander had been back to feeling lousy.

“What did Giles say?” Anya asked.

“He said it’s too dangerous to mess with the brain, and since they’re *my* memories, trying to make me forget them could have . . . consequences,” Xander answered, then gave a bitter chuckle. “Like there aren’t already consequences.”

“I’m sorry, Xander. About the spell, about Spike.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Xander said, stopping Anya before she could apply the ointment. “I’m going to take a shower first.”

“Okay,” she said, stepping back to let him stand. Xander stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He removed his dirty and bloodied clothes and then stepped under the warm spray, wishing he could wash away his cares as easily as he did the dirt covering his body.

The next evening, Xander met Buffy at the Magic Box for patrol. She took one look at him, and went into mother hen mode. “It’s nothing,” Xander tried to assure her. “I just don’t have slayer healing.”

“It may be nothing this time, Xander,” she said, her voice raised in worry, “but it could have been something bad. I know you’ve got this hyena-thing going on now, but you can’t go off fighting without backup!”

“Who’s fighting without backup?” Spike asked.

Xander and Buffy turned in surprise to stare at Spike, both having been too involved in their argument to sense him come in.

“Bloody hell! What happened to you, Harris?” Spike asked.

“He’s been fighting. Alone,” Buffy growled.

“Thought you were going home?” Spike asked, ignoring Buffy.

“Took the scenic route,” Xander said. “Look, are we gonna patrol tonight, or what?” he changed the subject.

“Giles!” Buffy turned to her watcher for support.

“You really shouldn’t patrol on your own, Xander,” Giles said. “It isn’t safe. You . . . we all need to have backup.”

“Fine!” Xander said, holding his hands up in defeat. “No more going out and looking for fights without backup. Can we go patrol now?” He pushed past Spike and out the door.

“You went looking for a fight?” Spike asked, as he whirled to follow him. Xander heard Spike’s question, and felt Spike right behind him, but didn’t answer him. “I’m talking to you, Harris,” Spike snarled, reaching out and grabbing Xander’s arm and pulling him around.

Xander tugged his arm out of Spike’s grasp. “Yes, I went looking for a fight. Do you have a problem with that?”

Spike shrugged. “You’re gonna get yourself killed, you keep going off half-cocked,” he said.

“And that would concern you . . . how?” Xander asked.

“Didn’t say it would,” Spike retorted.

“Exactly,” Xander said, turning away.

“Birds’d miss you, though,” he added.

Xander froze. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. God, he felt like such a . . . big old girl! He was so emotional, and he hated it. He’d had no time to get used to his feelings; they didn’t gradually sneak up on him. Instead, in one moment, ‘whammo!’, he’d gotten slammed with feelings for Spike from out of the blue. They confused him, and set him on this emotional roller coaster from which there seemed to be no escape.

“Xander?” Buffy called his name softly.

Xander took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. “Let’s just go find something to kill,” he said.

That night he fought like a man possessed. And then he went home and jerked off in the shower to images of Spike. When he was done, he leaned against the tiled wall and cried for the things he’d never have. He wondered if these feelings would go away with time, or if he’d be stuck pining for Spike for the rest of his life.

~*~*~*~*~

On Friday, they hit The Bronze again. Xander was sitting alone at the table watching the four girls on the dance floor when Spike sat down beside him.

“Where’re the chits?” he asked. Xander inclined his head towards the dance floor, and Spike followed the motion. He grunted when he found the girls, then took a long swallow of beer. “Wanna play pool?”

Xander just looked at him for a long moment before he spoke. “Me? You’re asking *me* to play pool with you?”

“Yeah,” Spike drawled. “No need to make a bloody big deal out of it. ‘S just pool,” he added.

“All right,” Xander agreed. Spike grabbed two quarters off Xander’s pile of change and went up to claim the next spot. Xander just rolled his eyes. When their turn came, Xander racked the balls while Spike chose his cue stick. Spike chalked his cue while Xander looked the remaining sticks over. He could never tell the difference between them, so he just grabbed one. When he turned around, Spike was placing the cue ball on the felt to break.

Xander watched him bend over as he lined up the shot, belatedly remembering to look at the table to see what balls went in when he heard the ‘clunk, clunk!’ of several balls falling in the pockets. When the girls finished dancing, they grabbed their drinks off the table and came over to join them around the pool table. Anya cheered loudly for Xander, though he lost all three games he played against Spike. After losing the third game, Xander gave up and handed his stick to Buffy.

“Good luck,” he said wryly. He sat next to Anya, holding her hand as he watched a smirking Spike take on the slayer.

An hour later, Buffy had managed to take one game out of three from Spike. On a high from her win, she declared that she had to get home as she and her mother had a girl’s day planned for the next day. As they were leaving, Xander noticed Anya waving goodbye to someone. He turned his head and saw a man with light brown hair leaning against the bar.

“Meet someone?” he asked softly. Anya just shrugged and shook her head ‘no’, but the light pinking of her skin made Xander believe otherwise.

The six of them stood in the parking lot making small talk for a couple of minutes before saying goodnight, and Spike took the opportunity to light a cigarette. “Need a ride home?” Xander asked Buffy.

“No, Will and Tara are giving me a lift. Thanks, though,” she said, then gave Xander a hug.

“Welcome,” Xander said, hugging her back tightly.

“Spike?” he asked, turning to face him.

“Nah,” Spike said. “Gonna walk through the bad side of town, see if I can’t find some action.”

Xander nodded. “Goodnight,” he said to everyone, giving Willow and Tara quick hugs before taking Anya’s hand and leading her to the car. “So, who was that at the bar?” he teased as they walked across the parking lot.

“Just some guy who wanted to dance with me,” she said, shrugging it off.

“He looked all right,” Xander said. “He wasn’t a demon, or anything, was he?”

“No,” Anya assured him with a smile. “But you’re one to talk,” she added.

“Got me there,” Xander agreed, opening the car door.

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Buffy called Xander the next morning and asked him to take patrol for her that night so she could spend the whole day with her mother. Xander agreed. She then made him promise to take Spike as backup. Given how well they got along the night before, Xander was quick to assent. Leaving Anya with a movie they’d picked up that afternoon and a pitcher of margaritas, Xander headed out just before sundown to meet Spike at the Magic Box.

Xander had grabbed an extra stake and was twirling a small axe in his hand to get the feel for it when Spike came into the training room.

“Hey! Watch it with that thing, Harris,” he said, ducking out of the way in an exaggerated movement.

“Very funny, Spike,” Xander said. He gave the axe one last swing before holding it down at his side and waiting for Spike to choose his own weapon, a large broadaxe. He followed Spike back out into the shop, and took a moment to tell Giles they were off.

“Coming, nit?” Spike groused from his place by the front door.

Xander just shook his head, said a quick goodbye to Giles, and followed Spike out the door. “Would it kill you to call me Xander?” he asked.

Spike gave him a look. “Might. If I weren’t already dead,” he replied.

“You’re a laugh a minute, William,” Xander responded.

“Don’t call me that,” Spike growled.

“Why not?” Xander asked. “You have a million nicknames for us, only about two of which can be said in polite company. Why can’t I call you by your real name?”

“Because William is dead,” Spike snarled. “He was a bloody ponce, and he’s not *me*.”

“A ponce, huh?” Xander said thoughtfully. “What’s that mean, he was a nice guy?”

“And he got walked all over,” Spike said. “Nice guys never finish first,” he added, and spent the rest of the night proving to Xander that he was no longer a nice guy.

Xander couldn’t say or do anything right; he talked too much, he walked too heavy, he walked too slow, he walked too fast, he breathed too loud. Xander finally chose to remain silent and try to ignore Spike’s bitching and complaining. Note to self, he thought, never call Spike William.

They managed to find a couple fights that should have allowed Xander to work off his frustration with the way the evening had unfolded, but it just grew as the evening progressed. Spike was like a burr in his side, and he continued to poke at him. By the time they finished, he was ready to scream in annoyance. He managed to clean his weapon without using it on Spike, and talked to himself the entire drive home.

Anya was still awake when he unlocked the door and pushed it open. “How’d it go?” she asked, after muting the sound on the television.

“I’m going to kill him,” Xander said, as he took his jacket off and hung it up. “That,

or he's gonna be the death of *me*."

"What happened?" Anya asked.

"*Nothing* happened!" Xander said, dropping onto the couch. "He was just . . . picking..." He made a violent motion with his hands. "All night long. Pick, pick, pick! It's like he was trying to get on my nerves and start an argument. I just don't *get* it!" Xander threw himself back, his head resting on the back of the couch.

"Maybe that's *his* problem," Anya suggested.

"What?" Xander asked, looking sharply at her. "That I don't get it?"

"No. Maybe *he* doesn't get it," she clarified.

"Get what?" Xander asked, confused.

"Why you're suddenly being nice to him."

Xander opened his mouth, and closed it. "What do you mean?" he finally got out.

"One day, you and Spike hate each other; all you do snipe at each other. Next thing you know, you realize you're attracted to Spike, so you start being nice to him, saving his life and stuff. Spike doesn't know what caused your change of heart, nor does he know if it's real, or if it's going to last. Maybe he just expects you to start being hateful again, and he wants to be ready for it," she finished with a shrug.

Xander was silent for a long moment as he thought about that. "Was I that mean to him before?" he asked.

"Well, consider your nicknames for him," Anya offered. "Fangless, evil undead Neither one of you had a nice thing to say about the other. I understand that this . . . attraction you have for Spike wasn't something that grew gradually, it was just, one day it was there, but have you ever given any thought to *why* you're attracted to him?" she asked.

"I've wondered 'why me?', but that's probably not what you meant," Xander tried

to make a joke.

“No, Xander, that’s not what I meant,” Anya agreed dryly. “I understand that this repressed feeling, or whatever it is, hit you all of a sudden, but have you given any thought to when, or how, it started? The attraction, I mean.”

“No,” Xander said, shaking his head. “Really just been doing the whole ‘woe is me, I’m attracted to someone who hates me’ bit.” He looked at Anya, a frown of concentration marring his brow. “Do you think I was so mean to him *because* I was attracted to him? You know, subconsciously covering up something I didn’t even know. Heh, that even sounds to weird to me.”

“No! That’s possible,” Anya said. “Your mind worked very hard to bury this attraction, it’s very possible you overcompensated by being nasty to—.”

“Nasty?” Xander yelped.

“Well, uh, unkind?”

“So now I have to convince Spike that my friendly demeanor is sincere?” he asked. “How?”

“I think you have to figure that out on your own,” Anya said. “I’m going to bed.” She leaned over and kissed Xander lightly on the cheek, then turned the television off and set the remote on the coffee table.

Xander took her hand when she stood. “How did you get to be so smart?” he asked.

“Eleven hundred years and lots of experience with failed relationships,” Anya said, her tone matter-of-fact.

“Right,” Xander said, shaking his head. He just *had* to ask, didn’t he?

After Anya went to bed, Xander stayed up and thought about his relationship with Spike, the mutual hatred, and the sudden appeal the vampire held for him. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d looked at Spike and consciously thought the vampire was attractive. And wasn’t it odd that he never questioned the existence of

these new feelings? Never doubted the attraction he now acknowledged feeling for someone he's recently hated?

Granted, it helped that he knew the hyena-memory was his own. But shouldn't he have been a little more wigged about being attracted to another guy? About being attracted to *Spike*? Was he so accepting of it because his mind recognized it as familiar? Or was it because it was more than a repressed feeling now? Surely the mere suggestion of repressed feelings of attraction to Spike wouldn't make him feel an attraction *now*. Would it?

And he certainly did feel an attraction. He let himself remember Spike's grin when he'd won the first game from Xander the night before; the way his blue eyes glinted with suppressed laughter when Xander knocked in one of Spike's balls; the tight fit of his t-shirt over his chest; the peek of bare skin when he'd itched his stomach; the way his jeans pulled snug over his ass when he'd bent over the table to take a shot.

Xander groaned as his body reacted to the thoughts of Spike that were running through his mind. Heat coiled low in his belly and he stiffened inside his jeans. Xander pressed the heel of his hand against the base of his cock, his touch both quelling and stimulating at the same time. He dragged his hand over his growing erection, stroking himself through the denim. Xander dropped his head back against the couch, closed his eyes and opened his mind to more images of Spike: his smirk when he said something he thought was funny, the delighted look on his face in the middle of a fight, the accent that sent a shiver up Xander's spine.

Xander frantically unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, then reached inside his boxers. He bit his lip to hold in the moan when his fingers brushed the swollen head. He stroked his thumb up and down the hard length, trying to calm himself, then swiped the pad of his thumb over the tip, where a pearlescent drop had gathered in the slit. Xander spread the fluid over the head, pressed his thumb into the slit and gasped at the jolt of sensation that rushed through him.

Xander wondered what it would be like to have Spike touching him like this. Would his hand feel warm or cool to the touch? Would his grasp be rough? Did he have callouses? Did he like it fast or slow? Would he forget that he didn't need to breathe, as he had after the fight? Imagining that it was Spike touching him, Xander took himself in hand and pulled.

He alternated a loose fist with a tight grip, hard and fast with slow and gentle. Xander pushed his jeans and boxers down further, reached back with his other hand and cupped his balls, gently squeezing them. He pressed his finger against the sweet spot with each upward stroke, gasping and panting at the electric shock that shot through his cock and into his balls with each touch. Xander tasted blood as he bit through his lower lip to keep from groaning out loud.

Xander's balls tightened in his hand and his entire body tensed. Blue eyes, chiseled cheekbones, and a sexy smirk filled his vision, and then he came, his cock pulsing as it dragged his release from him, warm, sticky fluid spurted onto his hand and stomach. He moaned as his muscles unclenched, and stayed sprawled on the couch for a moment to recover from having his brains shot out his dick, and then Xander wove his way to the bathroom and a hot shower.

~*~*~*~*~

Over the next week, Xander made a point of being nice to Spike. He included him in conversations, cut out the most hurtful of his nicknames, and listened when the vampire had something to say. No matter what he did, Spike continued to make snarky comments and belittle him whenever the opportunity presented itself. By the end of the week Xander had reached the end of his rope and allowed himself to daydream about staking the most annoying vampire on the face of the earth. Not counting Angel. Those daydreams quickly turned to wet dreams where Xander tied Spike up naked and forced him to admit his attraction to Xander while Xander jerked himself off.

On the following Monday night, Xander and Spike were paired for patrol, while Buffy took the two witches, and Anya stayed in the Magic Box with Giles to research the demon they were on the lookout for. After listening to Spike's insults and cocky rejoinders for nearly two hours, Xander, whose nerves were already frayed, lost his patience and his temper. He grabbed Spike by the lapels of his duster, and shoved him against the nearest hard surface, which turned out to be a tree in the middle of the cemetery they were patrolling.

“What is your problem?” he hissed, shaking Spike. “With me personally, I mean,

not in general, because we don't have that much time. I have gone out of my way to be pleasant to you, and you have been nothing but a complete and total pain in the ass!"

"Yeah, why is that, anyway?" Spike asked, shoving Xander's hands off him with just enough force to get the job done and not activate the chip.

"Why have you been a pain in the ass?" Xander asked, momentarily confused by the query, but thinking, good question!

"Why have you been 'pleasant' to me? It's bloody disturbing," Spike said.

"Disturbing," Xander repeated, taking a step back. "I was under the obviously ill-conceived notion that we could be friends." He ignored Spike's snort of disbelief. "We are the only two guys in a sea of girls, except Giles. I thought it would be nice to have a guy friend." Xander wasn't lying, exactly. He figured he'd have to be friends with Spike before he could be more, and on a scale of one to ten, that now looked like it would happen *never*.

"I don't need friends," Spike said. "Especially a human, and the slayer's pet at that."

"Okay, pot, meet kettle," Xander replied with enough snark to make even Spike proud.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Spike asked.

"You've joined Buffy's little band of do-gooders," Xander said. "As much as you deny it, you're one of us now. Is that what's put the burr under your saddle?" he asked. "Or have you always been this much of an asshole?"

"Now is that very friendly, Xander?" Spike mock-pouted and blinked big blue eyes at Xander.

"I'm not feeling very friendly towards you right now, Spike," Xander said, and since he couldn't think of anything more to say, turned and walked away.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?” Spike called after him. “This is just getting good, ya twit.”

Xander didn’t respond to Spike’s taunts, too busy with self-recrimination. He heard Spike approaching him, but ignored him, hoping he’d make it home Where Spike had an invite. Shit! He wouldn’t even be able to hide in his apartment. Xander got a sudden whiff of something horrible, and stopped walking. Spike, who had been following him closer than he thought, ran into him with an ‘oomph!’.

“What are you doing?” the vampire complained, steadying himself with a hand on Xander’s shoulder.

“Shhh,” Xander hissed. “You smell that?”

Spike took a deep breath. “Oh, bloody That’s disgusting! What is it?”

“I don’t know! I think it’s coming from over there,” Xander replied, pointing.

“Well, go look.” Spike gave him a little push.

“I’m not going!” Xander squeaked, his hyena-abilities forgotten with the olfactory-offending smell.

And then they didn’t need to go looking for the cause of the horrible, disgusting stench, because it came to them. At the first sight of it, Xander backed away. Spike grabbed hold of his jacket with the hand not holding his axe, backing up with him step-for-step.

“What are you doing?” Xander hissed over his shoulder.

“Hiding behind you,” Spike replied. “If you were really my friend, you’d take this one,” he added.

“Fuck you, Spike,” Xander muttered, watching the stench-monster lumber inexorably towards them.

Xander realized they couldn’t just keep backing away from the smelly demon, so he

stopped walking and stood his ground.

“*Now* what are you doing?” Spike yelled in his ear, nearly deafening him.

“Taking a stand,” Xander said. “You go right, I’ll go left.”

“What?” Spike asked, and then the demon was upon them and Xander was diving to the left. “Oh, bollocks!” Spike yelled as he lunged to the right.

Xander rolled to his feet and swung around, slicing the demon with the short sword that had been belted to his waist. A hiss of putrid air escaped from the open wound and Xander gagged on it.

“Holy fucking hell!” Spike cried, as he hacked at the demon with his axe. “What are you doing back there?”

“I think my nasal passages have just been burned out,” Xander said, his voice muffled through the hand that now covered the bottom half of his face.

“Oh, bugger!” Spike swore.

“What . . . ?” Xander peeked around the demon to see what had happened to Spike. He was covered with a slimy green goop. Xander made the mistake of removing his hand from his face to laugh, and immediately started coughing and choking on the smell.

“Serves you right, pillock!”

While the angry demon was preoccupied with Spike, Xander took the opportunity to drive his sword through the demon’s back where he thought the heart might be. As soon as he pierced the demon’s tough hide, a stream of the same slimy green goop that covered Spike squirted out and landed on Xander.

“Oh fuck me!” Xander cried as the smell intensified.

“Just desserts, tosser,” Spike muttered as he hacked at the demon’s neck.

“Do you think that’s such a good idea?” Xander asked, and then the demon’s head went flying from it’s body and more slimy green gore spurted out of the demon’s severed neck and covered Spike and Xander. “Jesus! Plah, phah,” he spat. “Gaaahh!” He shuddered.

“Green’s your color, mate,” Spike said, and then looked down at himself.

“It looks pretty good on you, too,” Xander said, looking Spike over. “Which is rather fortuitous.”

“Why’s that?” Spike asked, his smirk fading.

“Cause you’ll be wearing it for a while, and I, on the other hand, will be going home to take a shower,” Xander said with his own smirk.

Spike thought for a minute. “A friend would let me use his shower. And maybe even wash my clothes,” he said.

Xander looked him over again, and shook his head, trying not to laugh at the green goo dripping off Spike’s nose. “Too bad you don’t need any friends,” he reminded Spike of his earlier words.

Spike gritted his teeth. “I might have been a bit hasty with that,” he said.

“I don’t believe you,” Xander replied archly. “I don’t think you really want to be my friend. In fact, I think you just want to use me for my shower.” Xander batted his eyelashes for affect.

“And washer,” Spike added.

Xander turned his back on Spike, and began the long, smelly walk back to the Magic Box.

“Yo, Harris!” Spike called to him.

Xander turned around. “Xander,” he said.

“Huh?”

“My name. It’s Xander,” he repeated.

Spike stared at him for a long moment, and Xander thought he’d refuse this request. “Xander,” Spike finally said, as though the name felt weird on his tongue.

Xander smiled. “Yes, Spike?” he asked pleasantly.

“May I. Please. Use your shower?” Spike asked, and Xander thought Spike was going to crack his jaw as he ground his teeth together.

He grinned. “I’ll think about it,” he said, and turned to resume his walk back to the magic shop. Spike growled behind him.

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When they reached the Magic Box, Xander let them in the back door so they didn’t track any of the green slime through the shop. “Giles,” he called into the shop.

“Xander?” Giles replied, sounding perplexed.

“Xander?” Anya queried.

Xander stepped away from the doorway when he heard two pair of approaching footsteps. Giles and Anya came through the doorway and halted almost immediately when they caught sight of the two men. And then their faces screwed up and they covered their noses.

“Eeuw!” Anya cried.

“Oh, dear lord!” Giles exclaimed. “What happened?”

“We found the demon,” Spike said as he cleaned the green gore off his axe.

“Yes, I see that,” Giles said.

“We’ve been slimed,” Xander said, removing the sword belt from his waist.

“Yes, I-I see that, as well,” Giles said.

“We’re going to walk to the apartment so we can shower,” Xander told Anya. “Will you take the car home?”

“Of course,” Anya replied, the words muffled through her hand.

Xander wiped as much of the slime from his hand as he could onto his already slimed pants, reached two fingers into his front pocket and pulled out his car keys. He handed them to Anya. “I just need the apartment key,” he said. Anya took the apartment key off the ring and handed it back to Xander, careful not to get too close to him.

“Thanks,” he said with a smile, feeling happy for the first time in a very long time.

“Welcome,” she said, stepping back quickly.

“Want a kiss goodbye?” Xander teased her.

“No, that’s all right,” she declined. “In fact, I’d better get back to research.” She motioned over her shoulder towards the shop.

“The demon’s dead,” Xander said.

“Still,” Anya said, “there can never be enough research.”

“Sure?” Xander took a step towards her.

“Eep! Very!” Anya skipped backwards. Xander just laughed.

“Let’s go, git!” Spike whacked him on the back. “This stuff’s starting to itch.”

Xander handed the slime-covered sword to Giles with a sheepish grin, and Giles took it from him with a grimace. “Thanks,” Xander said, then turned and followed

Spike out into the night.

Spike was leaning against the brick wall, puffing on the cigarette he'd just lit when Xander slipped into the alley and pulled the door shut behind him. "You know," he said, looking Spike over, "that stuff could be flammable." Xander just grinned at the look Spike shot him, and led the way to his apartment.

Just inside the front door, Xander made Spike stand still so he could wipe most of the green slime off his duster before allowing him to remove it and toss it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. While Spike was pulling off his boots, Xander took his jacket off and tossed it, sans stake, into the washer, then pulled his t-shirt off. He slipped into the bathroom and washed his hands, then got a fresh towel out for Spike to use.

"Just leave your clothes on the floor," Xander said as he passed Spike in the hallway. "I'll get you a pair of sweats, and throw your clothes in the washer." He had decided to let Spike shower first because he didn't want a bored Spike to get slime all over the furniture.

As he pulled the smallest pair of sweats he had out of the back of one of his drawers, Xander heard the shower turn on. He immediately imagined naked Spike in his shower. "Shit!" he hissed, closing his eyes and willing his erection down.

When Anya got home, both men were sitting on the couch drinking beers and watching television as Xander waited for the spin cycle so he could throw their de-slimed clothes in the dryer.

"I'm home!" Anya called, as she pushed the door open.

"Hey, Ahn!" Xander called over his shoulder. "Wanna watch football?"

"S not real football," Spike muttered in disgust. "Poncey buggers."

"Is that the game where they wear tight pants?" she asked, taking her coat off and hanging it up.

"That's the one," Xander grinned at Anya's predictable response.

“And nancy boy pads,” Spike continued his diatribe.

Xander heard Anya open the refrigerator. “You guys need another?” she called, beer bottles clinking as she pulled one out for herself.

“I’m good,” Xander said, and looked over at Spike. “Spike?”

“M good,” he snarled, slouching further down on the couch. “Can’t believe you’re making me watch this.”

“Feel free to go home anytime, Spike,” Xander said, then gave Spike his best butter wouldn’t melt expression. Spike flipped him the bird, which made Xander chuckle. When the washer ended the rinse cycle with a floor shaking rattle, Xander switched their clothes over to the dryer, first checking to make sure that all of the green goo had come out in the wash. He’d seen the results of mixing demon viscera and laundry detergent when Buffy had once ruined a new pair of pants, and it wasn’t pretty.

Part Two A

After that whole deal with the explosive goo demon, Xander had thought the rough patch with Spike was over and it would be smooth sailing from there on out. He’d thought wrong.

The downhill slide started the following Thursday night, which found Xander doing a cursory patrol while Anya was out on a date with Buzz. (Merely a nickname, Anya assured him, which nickname had nothing to do with chainsaws nor haircuts nor astronauts, but something to do with the way he went through girlfriends in high school. Not an auspicious indicator, in Xander’s opinion, but who was he to judge, he was in love with a vampire.)

Xander still wasn’t ready to tell anyone that he and Anya had broken up, so he was on his own tonight. Instead of sitting home in a dark apartment and not answering the phone or door, Xander had decided that a short patrol around the block where his apartment was located might be the thing to work off some of the excess energy

that came with his Hyena Powers, as Anya had started calling them, making little finger quotes to reinforce the fact that she was capitalizing the words as she spoke them, even though Xander could practically *hear* the capitalization. without that extra assistance.

Xander had strayed further away from his apartment than he'd planned, and was just about to call it quits when a sound, nearly inaudible, caught his attention. It appeared to come from the alley up ahead, so he automatically slowed his step and melted into the shadows. As he approached the mouth of the alley the sounds become more clear, and coalesced into moans of pleasure rather than cries of pain. Xander peeked around the corner just to be sure, and saw two people pressed together. The sounds of pleasure were even more distinct this close. He was embarrassed to think that he'd nearly interrupted a couple in the throes of passion, and determined to take more care in the future, interpreting the noises he heard.

Xander was just about to turn away when a flash of blond caught his eye. He only knew one person -- one vampire -- with hair that blindingly white. The thought of Spike here in the alley, with someone else, was like a sharp kick to Xander's stomach. He'd never thought of Spike as sexless, and he'd never expected Spike to be celibate, but the knowledge that Spike was actually *having* sex -- with someone who was not Xander -- came as an unwelcome surprise. Xander automatically took a step into the alley and Spike, as if he sensed an intruder, raised his head from the girl's neck. His forehead was ridged, his eyes yellow, and blood dripped from his fangs.

Xander was frozen in place. All he could think was, oh my god, Spike's biting someone! Betrayal and anger and fear slowed his brain, his reaction time, and when he heard the girl moan, "Don't stop," Xander realized that he'd been standing there long enough for Spike to take both him and the girl out, if that's what he'd wanted to do. Instead, Spike just looked back at him, then slowly, deliberately licked the blood off his lips.

"We've got company," Spike said, and pushed her away. Not gentle, but not hard enough to hurt her. Or to activate the chip.

She turned and looked at Xander, eyes wide and a little bit unfocused, and then she smiled. "He's cute. Is he a vampire, too?"

The question broke Xander out of his stupor, and he yelled, “No!” Who the hell was she, and how did she know about vampires? And more importantly, why was she letting Spike bite her? Speaking of biting. Xander turned on Spike. “What the hell are you doing?”

Spike’s face closed up. He ignored Xander’s question and said to the girl, “Fun’s over for tonight.”

The girl made a sound of protest, but Spike silenced her with a look. “All right. Thanks, Spike.”

Xander thought maybe his head might spin off.

“Get back inside, now.”

The girl shot an angry glare at Xander, then disappeared through a door set farther back in the alley that Xander hadn’t noticed.

Xander turned back to Spike, who had shaken off his game face and stared back at Xander with brilliant blue eyes. “The chip?”

Spike rolled his eyes and sauntered to the mouth of the alley, brushed past Xander and started down the sidewalk. It took Xander a second to realize that Spike had just blown him off. “Hey!”

By the time Xander caught up with him, Spike had put a couple blocks between himself and the alley. “What the hell was that?”

“Just fulfilling a need.”

Xander sputtered. “Fulfilling . . . ? She needed to be bitten?”

Spike shrugged. “Was talking about my need, but yeah, she wanted it.”

“Why?”

“Fresh blood, some dosh”

“Not you, her! Why would she want you to bite her?”

“You had a choice between Bubba the redneck, dog-faced vamp and yours truly, who would you choose?”

“I meant God damn it, Spike, stop walking!” Xander grabbed Spike’s arm and jerked him to a halt. Spike glared at the hand on his duster sleeve and Xander quickly removed it, but left it hovering in the air just in case Spike took off again. “I meant,” he continued, trying to remain calm. He’d just seen Spike feeding off someone, after all. He figured he deserved to feel a little bit thrown. “Why would she want *any* vamp to bite her?”

“Feels good, don’t it?” Off Xander’s look of ‘huh?’ Spike said, “Didn’t the watcher teach you gits anything?”

Now Xander did say, “Huh?”

Spike sighed and rolled his eyes, as if he felt put upon having to explain these basics of Vampire 101 to Xander. “Vampire bites can be very . . . sensual.”

Xander felt his brow crinkle up even more.

“They make you feel *really* good.”

Xander remembered the sounds of pleasure the girl had been making and finally got it, but he couldn’t believe what he was hearing, his mind just refused to wrap itself around the idea that a vampire bite could make anyone feel good, and he shook his head.

Spike smirked as understanding spread across Xander’s face, but clearly couldn’t resist adding, “You come before you go.”

“Oh, god, Spike, I did not need to know that!”

But Spike had already started off down the street.

“Damn it, Spike, quit walking away!”

Xander pulled Spike around again and Spike snarled at him. Xander shoved his shoulder. “Don’t start that crap with me, I want some answers.”

Spike shrugged Xander’s hand off his shoulder, but didn’t attempt to walk away. “Already answered your questions, Harris.”

“I’m not done. If the chip’s still working, how could you bite her?”

Spike gave Xander his patented ‘I’m really trying to piss you off’ smirk. “Wanted it, didn’t she?”

Xander refused to allow Spike to bait him. “It still had to hurt. The bite.”

“Wanted that, too.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“All part of the larger experience, pet. A little bit of pain makes the pleasure that much sweeter.”

Spike might be trying to piss him off, but Xander was certain he wasn’t lying to him. “Why do you do it?”

Spike raised one eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Pretend I’m an idiot.” Spike opened his mouth, but Xander added, “Shut up,” before Spike could actually *say* that he didn’t have to pretend.

“Warm human blood, fresh from the tap. That not a good enough reason for you, pet?”

“Quit calling me that, and why don’t you just kill them when you’re done?”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

“You let her go.”

“You were standing right there, wouldn’t have been too smart of me to kill the girl right in front of you, yeah?”

“Stop playing me, Spike, and answer the question.”

Spike just looked at him for long enough that Xander thought he wasn’t going to answer, but then he said, “Not sure the chip would allow that. No matter how good it feels, at some point they’d realize I wasn’t stopping and they’d start to struggle, and then it would be migraine time for old Spike. Not worth testing the theory. ‘Sides, if they were dead, they couldn’t make another donation.”

Xander’s voice rose in pitch a little when he said, “They come back for *more*?”

“Repeat business is the key to success,” Spike said, sounding just like one of those work-at-home infomercials. “Besides, I need the dosh. Not like I can live on the measly pittance you lot pay me.”

Xander’s voice squeaked. “Wait, they *pay* you to bite them? Why would anyone do that?”

Spike just stared at him, waiting.

“Okay, right, never mind.” Xander wondered briefly if it worked both ways, and even opened his mouth to ask, before realizing that a) it would be a very bad idea to give Spike any more ammunition, and b) he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know. “Just . . . let me think about this for a minute.”

Xander was pretty sure it would take more than a minute for him to wrap his mind around the idea of people actually *paying* vampires to bite them. Xander had so many questions they were all bouncing around in his head like little ball bearings, and he didn’t know which one to ask first.

“So, these people, how do they know about vampires?”

“Not everyone in this town turns a blind eye to the bloody obvious.”

“So they’re smart enough to see the truth about vampires, but stupid enough to let one bite them? Unless they know about the chip?”

Spike snorted. “Yeah, because I’d advertise to humans that I can’t really hurt them.”

“I just don’t understand why anyone would put themselves in that position. How they could trust you not to kill them.”

“Part of the thrill,” Spike said, and this time when he walked away, Xander let him go.

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Xander didn’t get much sleep that night, nor the next. He couldn’t stop thinking about the significance of everything he’d become aware of when he’d stumbled upon Spike in an alley, feeding upon a woman who apparently *wanted* it. Xander wasn’t sure what he found most disturbing, the fact that Spike could bite someone without the chip going off, or the idea that anyone would *want* him to, that the bite felt so good someone would not only pay for it, but put their own life at risk for the pleasure of it. It was quite possible that the woman he’d seen had a death wish, but it was just as likely that Spike was right, as with any thrill-seeker or addict, the danger was part of the rush.

Xander waffled on whether he should tell Buffy what he’d learned. He knew that if he did, Buffy would stake Spike, no questions asked. Buffy’s world was black and white; there wasn’t any room for grey in the monster killing business. Just knowing that Spike could bite, despite the fact that he hadn’t killed anyone -- to Xander’s knowledge, and he preferred not to think otherwise -- would be enough to get him staked. That was certainly not something Xander wanted, so he kept his silence, though the guilt of that silence weighed heavily on him. He consoled himself with the thought that Spike was currently one of the good guys, even if Spike would take umbrage with that description.

There was nothing brewing on Saturday, thankfully, because Xander wasn't at his best on patrol. He was tired and distracted, and Spike's bitching because there was nothing to kill was giving him the headache from hell. They ended their fruitless patrol -- during which Spike had staked one fledge and made plans for a game of poker that Xander realized he'd have to pretend to know nothing about if Willow ever got wind that there were games of kitten poker going on right under her nose. Unfortunately, Xander had never been able to tell a lie to Willow's face since the Barbie incident, which meant he'd be screwed if she found out -- at the Magic Box. Xander stuck his head in long enough to report to Giles, then planned on going home and settling in front of the television with a beer and a bag of something salty, and hoped he could shut his brain down and get some sleep.

Which was part of the reason he was slow to respond when Spike asked Xander if he wanted to head on over to the Bronze for a game of pool. That, plus the fact that he was struck speechless by the offer itself.

"Actually," Xander finally managed, "I'm kind of tired, and I've got this headache . . ."

The sneer on Spike's face told Xander that he'd screwed up. Big time. Before he could backtrack, Spike said, "Right. Knew that whole 'I wanna be friends' line was a load of bollocks. What's the matter, Xander," he said, letting his eyes flash yellow, "don't like being reminded who's the predator, and who's the prey?" With a snap and twirl of his duster, Spike was gone.

"No, Spike, wait!" But Spike had disappeared into the dark before Xander'd gotten his brain in gear, and now all he could think was, Shit! He'd have cut off his right hand -- well, maybe a finger off his right hand, or a fingernail -- for the opportunity to spend more time with Spike, and here Spike had not only been willing to spend time with Xander, voluntarily, he'd been the one to issue the invitation. Which Xander had turned down. How stupid could he possibly be?

Xander rolled the windows down and drove about 15 miles per hour the entire way to his apartment, hoping that he'd find something that needed killing. It felt like the entire Sunnydale High marching band had set up residence inside his head, but Xander had a lot of frustration to work off. Just his luck, when he was looking for a fight the night remained silent.

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Xander didn't get much sleep that night, and the next day his mood waffled from quiet and depressed to bitchy in the blink of an eye. Anya had finally had enough and confronted him, and that was all the incentive Xander needed. Glad to finally have someone he could unburden himself to, Xander told her everything that had happened since he'd discovered Spike feeding on the girl in the alley.

Xander wasn't surprised that Anya was perceptive regarding Spike's attitude and reaction, she had a unique perspective with respect to demon-human relations, especially when said demon was forced to turn to the very humans they'd once preyed upon for assistance. What was surprising, however, was Anya's lack of surprise when Xander told her that someone had paid Spike to bite them.

Anya actually sounded impressed that Spike had found a way around the chip. Then she remembered her own humanity, which she seemed to forget at times -- though after eleven hundred years of immortality, Xander figured he could understand how a couple of years of being human could be easily dismissed -- and made Xander assure her that Spike could only bite them because they wanted to be bitten.

When Xander asked her if she thought he should tell Buffy, she said, "Buffy would stake him if she knew. You don't want that, do you?" To which Xander had to admit that he didn't. "Besides, it's not like he's killing anyone. He's not, right?"

Xander repeated Spike's comment about repeat business, and Anya just nodded. Xander wondered if she was mentally calculating the possible profit in pimping out vampires to humans who wanted to experience the thrill -- if Spike was telling the truth -- and considering the odds on whether she'd live to spend it.

Xander, though, was able to breathe a sigh of relief. Anya had stated his own concern about telling Buffy, and repeated his own justification for not doing so. Having the decision made took a great weight off his shoulders. Until Anya shrugged and said, "Though who knows if the other vampires have the same incentive to leave those willing humans alive when they're done with them."

“Yeah, but if they were killing them, wouldn’t there be a bunch of bodies piling up, or reports of missing persons?” Xander argued. Then he said, “Wait, what other vamps?”

Turns out Xander had been giving Spike too much credit because, while he’d taken advantage of the humans who enjoyed being bitten, the idea hadn’t originated with him. Xander wasn’t altogether certain whether that made him feel better or worse about Spike’s participation. He’d been so shocked to find Spike biting someone that he hadn’t thought to question Spike’s comment about choosing him over some other, less appealing vamp. This new knowledge brought Xander’s concern for the humans back to the fore. Spike might not be able to kill them, but how trustworthy were the other vamps?

When Xander asked how she knew, Anya told him she kept an ear to the demon underground. She also told him where one of the houses was located, where the humans and vamps transacted their business. It was daylight, and before he decided what to do about this new information, Xander wanted to get a look at the area. He grabbed his jacket and made sure there was a stake in both pockets, just in case.

Anya asked if he wanted her to go with him, but Xander finally understood Buffy’s concern for those of the group who weren’t as strong as she was, so he reassured her that he was just going to have a look around and told her to stay home and indulge in her relaxing Sunday afternoon ritual. The television, which Anya had muted for their conversation, was already tuned to Lifetime, and it looked like her toenails were going to be a nice bright fuchsia this week.

Just before he pulled the door closed behind him, Anya said, “Do you think these humans will thank you for saving them?”

As he drove to the abandoned house Anya had told him about, which wasn’t too far away from where Xander had come upon Spike last week, he thought about why these humans would be willing to let vamps bite them. Spike had said it felt good, he’d also said that the initial pain of the bite had been part of the experience. Were they just thrill-seekers, like people who jumped out of planes or scaled rock faces? Did they make the choice to face the danger, or had they lost the ability to do that because they’d become addicted to the pleasure, just like with any other drug?

It felt odd to think of a vampire bite as a drug anyone could become addicted to, but weirder things had happened. And Xander knew from experience that people who were addicted to drugs or alcohol lost the ability to make clear-headed decisions regarding their own well-being, lost sight of the well-being of friends and family. If it looked like they were in immediate danger from the vamps, Xander couldn't let the fact that the humans would blame him for the loss of their next fix keep him from putting a stop to it.

Which meant he'd still have to decide what to do about Spike, and he couldn't let the fact that he was in love with him affect his decision. Could he?

The house looked abandoned; there was no movement, and no indication during the bright light of day, that it saw any action once the sun went down. Xander walked around the house. The grass was high, but there were no bodies piled up, nothing to indicate anything had been buried recently, and no obvious signs of violence.

Xander wanted to get a look inside the house. A few of the windows were boarded up, but not enough to make it a safe haven for vamps during the day. Unless they holed up in one well-protected room, or the basement. He tried the front door, which, surprisingly, remained locked despite the action reputed to take place in the house, then went around and tried the back door. It opened easily.

Xander withdrew a stake and gripped it tightly as he stepped inside. He paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim interior, then began a systematic search of the house; the first floor, the second, then the basement. There was no one in residence, though stained mattresses lay on the floor of each room, and some contained stuffed chairs, the upholstery ripped in places, tufts of stuffing sticking out.

There was no blood -- though Xander wouldn't have laid on one of those mattresses without hazmat gear if you paid him -- and no bodies. The worst scare he had was when he disturbed a rat in what had once been the kitchen, and it scurried across the torn linoleum and disappeared behind the doorless refrigerator.

While he was relieved that he hadn't discovered any evidence of foul play, Xander wasn't convinced. Later that night, while Anya was sniffing over the Sunday night movie on LMN, Xander went back to the house. Lights were on, but the boarded-up windows and grime from years of neglect kept anyone from noticing it unless they

were looking for it. Xander walked around to the back door, peering in the dirty windows in a futile attempt to see what was going on.

Xander wasn't sure what he expected when he pushed the door open -- he'd run any number of horrifying and embarrassing scenarios through his head all afternoon -- but it wasn't the pretty young blonde who was playing hostess. She didn't look like someone who'd seek out vampires, or want to be bitten by them -- no piercings or eyeliner, not a single piece of black clothing.

“Hi!” she said. “New here?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Are you looking for anything in particular?”

Xander wasn't sure that telling her he was checking for dead bodies was the right tack to take here, so he asked, “Like what?”

“Well, male, female, young, old.” She gave Xander an appraising once over which made him feel good until she said, “We have some who specialize in first times.”

“Oh. I, um, I'd just like to look around.”

“Still thinking about it, huh?” She sounded so normal for someone who routinely let vampires bite her. “Don't worry, it doesn't hurt. Unless you want it to.” She smiled bright and perky, which seemed so out of place here.

“Do you ever have any, uh . . . problems?”

Her eyes were shrewd, but she just said, “What kind of problems?”

“Things getting a little out of hand.” Xander wasn't sure people dying could be classified as ‘a little out of hand’ but he was afraid that Little Miss Bright and Perky could become angry if she thought he was here to disrupt their proceedings. Perhaps Xander hadn't thought this through; coming here alone might have been a bad idea.

She looked at Xander with new eyes now, no longer concerned with making him

feel welcome. “Nothing we haven’t been able to handle.”

Xander didn’t know what that meant, but it made him feel better because if a dozen vamps decided to go on a rampage, they wouldn’t have been able to handle that. What continued to worry Xander, though, was the thought that these people didn’t fully realize the possible danger. Xander gave the blonde a little smile, then moved through the house, following the path he’d taken that afternoon.

Xander saw sights and heard sounds that might scar him for life, but nothing that led him to believe any of the humans were in danger of anything more than gross stupidity.

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Xander showed up at the Magic Box for research everyday for the next week hoping to run into Spike. While the others researched actual demons, Xander carefully read the obits and police blotter, looking for any indication of additional vampire activity.

Buffy and Willow gave him strange looks, but Spike never showed up. Buffy said he’d been a no-show during patrol on Sunday and Monday, but had started just showing up whenever Buffy ran into a group of vamps larger than she could handle on her own. He’d bitch and complain about not getting paid for helping them out as he kicked and punched and staked, and then he’d disappear without a word, sometimes before the dust had even settled.

Xander knew it was his fault that Spike was pulling this weird Houdini act, but he didn’t know how to fix it. He considered bearding Spike in his crypt one day and apologizing, but Xander didn’t know if that would make him the bigger person, or just seem pathetic. So he waited, but the longer he went without seeing Spike, the harder it became to figure out what he was going to say when he did.

While he was waiting for Spike to stop avoiding him, Xander did a few patrols on his own. He kept them to the area surrounding his apartment, the other homes and the businesses within walking distance. Several nights during the week Xander stopped back at the House o’ Vamps to check up on the goings on there. No one

spoke to him, though he got a couple suspicious glances, but they didn't try to stop him, so Xander considered it a win. Especially when the only thing he found was more memories to be shoved into the 'do not open under pain of death' box in his head, and locked away forever.

On Tuesday, over a week after his misunderstanding with Spike, Xander went to the Magic Box straight from the construction site. Anya had called during his lunch break and told him that Buffy and Spike had come upon a demon they hadn't been able to kill the previous night. Giles had spent most of the morning doing research, and once he and Willow discovered how to kill the demon, they'd need everyone to hunt it down.

"Hey, Xander!" Buffy called when his entrance set the bell over the front door to ringing. "I figured no one would have time to eat, so I picked up some burgers. Come get some."

Xander sniffed, and the familiar scent of grease made him salivate. "You're my hero, Buf."

"Cool." She grinned, and Xander grinned back. He gave her a quick hug before snatching a burger out of the bag sitting in the middle of the table. He leaned over the counter where Anya was counting up the day's receipts and gave her a kiss on the cheek even as he was unwrapping the burger. Lunch had been a long time ago, and construction work was hard. Plus, he was still a growing boy.

He plopped down at the table. "Hello, ladies." He greeted Willow and Tara around a mouthful of burger. Tara gave him a shy smile, but Willow shot a mock glare his way.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Xander."

"Yes, and do try to keep the grease away from my books."

"Sure thing, G-man," Xander said, as a pickle slid out of his burger and landed on the paper with a splat. Xander waited for Giles to give him an exasperated look before asking, "So, what have we got?"

“Buffy, would you . . . ?”

“Sure, Giles.” Buffy slurped the last of her soda through the straw, then lobbed the empty cup towards the basket. It bounced off the side of the bookshelf and ricocheted in. She opened her mouth to speak, and belched.

“Five,” Xander said.

“And a half,” Willow allowed.

“No way! That was at least a seven!” When neither Xander nor Willow were willing to give it to her, Buffy turned to Tara. “Tara?”

“No more than a s-six,” Tara said. Willow chuckled and gave her a gentle elbow in the arm, and Tara returned it with a smile.

Buffy hugged. “I still sa—.”

“Fascinating as this is,” Giles said, in his snooty British tone that said it wasn’t really fascinating at all, “perhaps you could tell Xander about the demon you and Spike fought last night.”

As if the sound of his name had conjured him up, Spike was suddenly right there. The sun hadn’t finished going down, yet, and he wasn’t smoking, so he must have used the sewers, or stuck to the shadows. “Musta killed the bloody thing three times,” he said.

Spike wouldn’t look at him, so Xander took the opportunity to drink in the sight of him. God, he had it bad if not seeing Spike for a week turned him into such a girl.

“Problem is,” Buffy continued with the tale, “it wouldn’t *stay* dead. Much as I hate to say it, Spike’s right; we inflicted enough damage to kill it three times over, but the wounds, even wounds that should have been fatal, healed.”

“Stabbed it in the heart, it healed. Slit its throat, it healed. Cut off its weapon hand, regenerated a new one on the spot.”

“Holy crap! How do you kill something like that?”

Giles gave him a British look. “That’s what we’re”

“Silver blade dipped in the blood of an innocent,” Tara said, and everyone turned to look at her, mouth’s gaping. When she noticed them staring, she stammered, “Th-that’s what it says right here,” and pointed to the book she held.

“Let me see, sweetie.” Willow took the book and read the passage, then handed it across Tara to Giles. “That does sound like our demon.”

Giles read it, also, only with a lot more ‘hmm’s and ‘huh’s, and finally said, “Yes, it does. Good job, Tara.”

Buffy stretched her arms out and took a swing with an imaginary sword. “Does that mean I can go slay?”

“When you say ‘innocent’,” Xander said, wondering who would be called upon to donate. Surely no one in this room could be considered innocent any longer, and if they needed the blood of a virgin, or a child, that would certainly put a crimp in things.

“Anya, do we still have that lamb’s blood in stock?”

“Oooh, lamb’s blood?” Willow’s lips turned up in a pout and she gave Giles a look of disappointment.

“It was shipped to us by mistake,” Giles assured her, “but since it’s not a returnable item, we kept it, just in case.”

“Good thing,” Tara said softly, patting Willow’s hand. “I’m sure the Goddess appreciates the lamb’s sacrifice, sweetie.”

After that it was just a matter of digging out a couple of silver-bladed knives, making sure they were clean, sprinkling some herbs into the lamb’s blood, and then dipping the silver blades into the mixture. Willow’s eyes were still all big and sad, and her lips were turned down in a pouty frown, but she helped Tara pack up their

patrol bag, making sure they had all the spell ingredients they needed.

When everyone was armed and it was time to split up so they could cover more ground during their hunt for the demon, Buffy automatically sent Xander with Spike, while she went out with Willow and Tara. Ever since Xander had proven to Buffy that he could take care of himself, they'd fallen into the habit of dividing themselves up in this manner, but Xander couldn't help glancing over at Spike to see if he'd argue about being teamed with Xander this time.

Spike remained silent, but he was staring so hard at the floor that Xander thought he might actually be able to stare a hole right through it.

Giles sent them on their way with his usual, "Do be careful out there."

Spike was out the door before Giles had finished speaking. Buffy tilted her chin towards the door through which Spike had just exited. "What's up with him?"

Xander just shrugged. Somehow he knew that telling Buffy that Spike was mad at Xander because he thought Xander didn't really want to be his friend would not elicit the reaction he was going for, and Buffy laughing herself to death on the Magic Box floor wouldn't get them any closer to killing that demon.

"Want me to beat him up for you?" she asked, sounding a wee bit too hopeful for Xander's sense of comfort.

Xander tried to grin. "Nah. If it comes to that, I can do a pretty good job of it myself, now."

Buffy pouted. "Fine, take all my fun."

Willow gave Buffy a gentle push towards the door and patted Xander's arm as she passed. "Good luck, Xan." Tara just offered him a shy smile.

When he was alone with Giles and Anya, Anya pulled Xander into a hug and whispered, "Talk to him!"

"I'll try," Xander said, and then he held on to her for a minute because the hug felt

good, and he really needed one right about then.

Just before his hand touched the door knob, Anya added, “Oh, and be careful, Xander. I like all your parts right where they are.” Xander grinned at her over his shoulder and Anya actually blushed this time. “I mean, your fingers and arms, and your head, and stuff.”

Xander laughed as he headed out into the night to find a demon that was difficult to kill, and to apologize to Spike. Xander thought maybe killing the demon might be easier than apologizing, so he found himself hoping that they were the lucky ones to find the demon. And quickly.

Patrol was the horrible experience Xander had expected. Spike stayed close enough to Xander that Buffy couldn't accuse him of leaving Xander on his own, should anything untoward happen, but walked far enough ahead to make conversation -- unless Xander wanted to yell, which he did not -- impossible. Not that Xander was looking forward to apologizing, no guy did, but he did want things to get back to normal between him and Spike.

Well, maybe not normal, because normal actually looked a lot like today, but back to the friendly camaraderie it appeared -- for a total of about five minutes -- that they were heading towards. For weeks Xander had been hoping for something like that, and the memory of that brief taste was like an ache in his belly. He wanted it back, but he wasn't sure how to get it, wasn't sure it had ever been his to begin with, when you got right down to it.

Spike killed five vamps. After the first vamp -- when Xander had suggested that they find the demon they were supposed to be hunting first, and Spike had glared at him -- Xander had remained silent. He'd stood like a sentinel, stake in one hand, watching Spike's back, listening to the sounds of the night to make sure they weren't attacked while Spike took his time killing the second vamp, beating it to a pulp before finally staking it.

Xander figured it was a message about how upset with him Spike was, and he decided that, discretion being the better part of valor, it was best to let Spike take out his frustration on the vamps before trying to talk to him. Plus, he hoped that Spike would be in a more receptive mood if he allowed the blood lust to run its

course. As plans go, it wasn't a bad one, except that the second vamp Spike staked had a group of friends who showed up just in time for the finale, as the dust that was all that remained of their former friend rained down around Spike.

Xander had been completely ignored in favor of attacking the vamp who'd killed their friend, so he had an advantage. At least, until he took out the first vamp and drew attention to himself. In the heat of battle, everything else was forgotten -- his confused feelings about Spike, the fact that Spike was mad at him, his dread at having to apologize. The only thing that existed for him at that moment was the fight -- the sound of flesh pounding against flesh, the taste of blood in the air, and the scent of fear when the vamps realized that, though they'd outnumbered Spike and Xander by nearly three to one, they'd been outclassed right from the start.

When the fight ended, Xander was bent over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. He forced himself to straighten up when he remembered a far off gym teacher telling him that his lungs couldn't expand if he was bent over like that, and staggered over to a tree so he could lean against it while he recovered from the fight. It hadn't been a particularly difficult fight, though Xander thought he might have pulled a muscle in his side and he felt the sting as sweat dripped into a cut on his cheek, but he felt wrung out, with very little energy left to worry about whether Spike would accept his apology or not.

"Look," Xander said, between gasps for air, "I'm sorry, all right? I was not trying to blow you off last Saturday. I *was* tired, I hadn't slept very well the past two nights, and I was just thinking about going home and crashing on the couch with a beer, and, frankly, your invitation took me a little bit by surprise. But if you'd just given me a minute to think about it, I would have . . . well, okay, no, I probably wouldn't have accepted, but I'd have asked if you wanted to share a beer and whatever was on the television back at my place. So, could you just *please* stop avoiding me and treating me like I have the plague, or whatever?"

Spike's expression hadn't changed, and Xander still wasn't a hundred percent sure whether his apology would be accepted, when Spike suddenly tilted his head and listened. Remembering that they'd been sent out to hunt an unkillable demon, Xander did some listening of his own. What stepped into the clearing though, wasn't the demon.

“More vamps?” Xander asked.

Spike gave him a disgusted look. “Humans.”

“Hey.” The guy that spoke had dark hair and was pale enough to be a vamp. There was a large tattoo on his neck and a bar pierced his eyebrow. “Didn’t mean to interrupt the big make-up scene, which was really touching, by the way.”

“You two a bunch of fags?” the second guy asked. This one had tattoos running up both of his arms and had a stud in his nose, which he kept swiping at.

That hit too close to the truth for Xander’s liking, and he sucked in a breath as he pushed away from the tree. Great, he thought, druggies, as he watched nose-piercing guy sniffle and wipe at his nose.

“What’s it to you?” Spike said.

“Nothing,” the first guy said, “so long as you hand over all your cash without any problem.”

Spike just raised one eyebrow without responding. Xander knew that Spike was fully aware he couldn’t fight them, not without giving himself a migraine, but Xander also knew that Spike would take the migraine before he’d just give them what they wanted. Xander took a couple of steps closer to Spike, but not before brow-piercing landed a punch that cut Spike’s lip and sent him rocking back on his feet. Spike just licked the blood off his lip and stared at the guy, daring him to hit him again. So he did.

Just as Spike was pulling his arm back to swing in retaliation, Xander jumped between them and knocked brow-piercing to the ground. They rolled around on the ground, with Xander landing punches and kicks. He’d been winded from the fight with the vamps, but he was infused with a second wind at the thought of these humans hurting Spike.

Nose-piercing pulled Xander off his friend, and Spike got in a good, hard kick to brow-piercing’s ribs that sent Spike to the ground, grabbing his head and writhing in pain. Nose-piercing screamed his friend’s name, then started punching Xander in

a drug-infused and fear-fueled frenzy, but all Xander could hear was Spike's cry of pain as he went down. If it didn't sound ridiculous, Xander would have thought he'd heard the hyena howling just before he caught nose-piercing's fist in his hand and started to return blows.

Behind him, brow-piercing got to his feet. Nose-piercing's eyes rolled that way and Xander knew he would soon be double-teamed. He sensed brow-piercing come up behind him, and swung one arm out, knocking brow-piercing's raised arm down. At the last minute the gun brow-piercing had been holding went off. The noise so close made Xander's ears ring, and the smell of cordite filled his nostrils.

Xander felt no fear, but he knew he had to end this now. He shoved nose-piercing away and concentrated on brow-piercing's gun hand. One well-aimed kick snapped brow-piercing's wrist and sent the gun flying. Xander followed-up with a punch that broke brow-piercing's nose and sent him staggering back, screaming and trying to staunch the flow of blood and cradle his wrist at the same time.

Filled with blood rage, Xander had to struggle to end the fight. "Get out of here," he growled. He forced himself to wait until they were out of sight, and he could no longer hear or smell them, before turning to Spike. "Are you all right?"

Yellow eyes glared at Xander. "What the hell do you think you were doing?"

"Protecting you!" Xander said, and the moment the words left his mouth he knew he'd said the wrong thing. Spike was overly sensitive about the chip, about his reduced status in the demon community because he helped the slayer, about the fact that he couldn't harm one little hair on the heads of those he'd once called food without giving himself a migraine from hell, and Xander had just implied that he couldn't protect himself, which, while true, wasn't something Spike liked to be reminded of.

"I don't need your help," Spike snarled. "And I sure as bloody hell don't *want* your help." Spike gave Xander a shove that pushed him into a tree and knocked the remaining breath out of him. "You're nothing but the slayer's lapdog, bringer of donuts and stupid jokes. You're weak, Xander, and all threats aside, I wouldn't bite you if you were the last human on earth."

Xander knew that Spike's angry words were fueled by his own impotence, but that didn't make them hurt any less. He forced himself to keep his eyes open, keep them trained on Spike's face so he could see the anger and hatred directed at him. He wanted to be able to remember this, trot the memory out when he needed a reminder that Spike would never be his friend, much less anything more. Xander was caught unaware when Spike finally ran down, tilted his head to the side and sniffed the air.

Xander swallowed hard, made himself ask, "What is it?"

"Blood."

"Blood?"

Spike grabbed Xander's jacket and pulled it away from his side.

"Hey, what the hell are you . . . ? Oh, ow, ow!" There was a sting of pain in his side and Xander tried to look down at himself, but Spike's head was in the way. "What happened?"

"You've been shot, you big galloping moron." Spike continued to call Xander names as he lifted up both shirts so he could see the damage.

"Is it bad?"

"Can't tell, there's too much blood."

Xander got lightheaded. "Oh, god, I'm gonna die from saving your ass. That really sucks."

"You're not gonna die, git."

Somehow, Spike calling him names made Xander feel better. Xander watched, confused, as Spike went to his knees. Despite the stabbing pain in his side and the ache in his heart, Xander's body reacted to that sight. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Need to clean the blood off. No sense letting it go to waste."

Xander nearly hyperventilated when he realized that Spike was going to lick the blood off his side. “But, you said” Then Spike’s tongue touched his skin and all thought fled. He didn’t know why Spike was doing this, but right at that moment he didn’t care. Xander pushed his head back into the rough bark, using the pain to distract himself from the pleasure-pain rasp of Spike’s tongue, clenched and unclenched his fists to keep from reaching for Spike.

His hurt at Spike’s bitter words was a dull ache that dissipated like mist as arousal flooded Xander’s body. He bit his tongue until he could taste the blood in an attempt to clamp down on his desire. Spike’s tongue lapped up the blood and then bathed the wound. The pain of it was muted, as if that part of Xander’s brain had closed down, until Spike touched an especially sensitive spot and Xander flinched.

Spike jerked back. “Ow! Bloody hell!”

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean” But the moment was over; Spike, reminded of his impotence, glared at Xander as he rose to his feet, as if it was Xander’s fault that he’d been down there in the first place.

“Better get back to the Magic Box, let the watcher take a look at you.”

“But . . . the demon.”

“If it was around here, we’ve probably scared it off. ‘Sides, you’re no good like this.” The sneer was back, and so was Xander’s own anger. He’d seen the way his father had treated his mother all his life, the angry, hurtful words he’d hurled at her, telling her she couldn’t do anything right, that she was worthless. Xander had vowed that he’d never treat another person that way, and he certainly wasn’t going to stand being treated that way himself. Bullies picked on people they perceived as weaker to make themselves feel better, and that’s exactly what Spike was doing, taking his anger at the hand he’d been dealt out on Xander.

As much as it hurt him to do so, Xander knew he had put an end to it. He pulled his shirts down, grimacing as his movements pulled at the wound, then straightened, pushed away from the tree until he was standing on his own. “Fuck you, Spike,” Xander said, then turned and headed back to the Magic Box, not waiting to see if

Spike followed him.

His side ached, but Xander knew it was dampened by all the other emotions swirling around inside him. He was not looking forward to the inevitable crash that followed an adrenaline rush, because it would give the pain free reign.

By the time he reached the Magic Box, the dull ache had intensified. Each movement had pulled at the wound, and the rough cotton of his t-shirt had irritated it. He pushed the door open and walked into a cacophony of sound. Buffy, Willow and Tara had returned, and from the red in their cheeks and the glow in their eyes, it appeared that they'd found and dispatched the demon.

Buffy's happy, "Xander!" was soon followed by Anya's horrified, "Oh my god, Xander, what happened?"

Xander started to assure them all that he was fine, but Buffy saw the blood that had soaked through two shirts and was staining his jacket. He'd have been worried about the blood ruining the jacket if it didn't already have a bullet hole through it.

"You're bleeding," Buffy said.

"Just a scratch," Xander said, then promptly passed out.

When he came to, Xander's world was loud and painful. Gradually he was able to place the sounds, Willow and Anya worrying about him, asking if he was going to be all right, Buffy berating Spike for letting him get hurt, and the pain narrowed down to where Giles dabbing gently and carefully at the gunshot wound.

"What happened?" Giles asked, quietly. No one else appeared to realize yet that he'd regained consciousness. In the background Xander heard Spike tell Buffy how Xander had idiotically stepped in front of a gun, and Giles caught his eye.

Xander shrugged, grimaced as the movement jarred his side. "Human," he said, as if that explained it all. And for him, it did, though no one else would probably understand. Anya was suddenly beside him, kneeling on the floor, stroking his head. Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears. All right, maybe one person would

understand. Why did he break up with her again? Oh, yeah, Spike. Xander wondered if Giles had any of the really good drugs left.

Part Two B

Xander went to work the next day and claimed that a mugger had shot him. He hoped that they would not require a doctor's excuse, since he hadn't gone to the hospital, and he couldn't afford to take unpaid leave while he healed. The new foreman was a younger guy with blond hair and a mole above his upper lip. He'd replaced the guy who'd been there for years when the company discovered some discrepancies in the invoices.

Doug crossed his arms and stared hard at Xander, as if he could get the truth out of him by reading his mind. He pursed his lips, drawing attention to the mole, but Xander was too busy panicking as he wondered if the guy really *could* read minds, then Doug said, "I need some help straightening out the mess Roemer left behind. You willing?"

Xander's, "Uh, yeah, sure," wasn't a ringing endorsement, but it was good enough for Doug, who had him work half days in the office for the rest of the week. The following week he worked in the foreman's trailer full-time through Wednesday, then started dividing his time between the office and the construction site, doing small jobs that didn't require a lot of lifting or stretching.

Before Xander left for the day on Friday, Doug called him back into the office. Despite the fact that his new schedule had gone smoothly, Xander's first thought was that he was in trouble, possibly being fired. Instead, he was offered a promotion to assistant foreman. He'd spend part of each day in the office, and part on the construction site, and he'd be the middle man between Doug and the rest of the crew. It came with a nominal pay increase, but Xander was too surprised that he was being offered a promotion of any sort, much less one that put him on the management track, that he didn't care about that. Anya would scold him later for not thinking about the money, but for now Xander was just happy to still have a job.

Xander stopped for a bottle of champagne on the way home. Anya was getting ready for another date with Harold -- Xander had wormed Buzz's real name out of

her because he was having trouble taking anyone named Buzz seriously, though Harold was only a little bit better -- but she stopped long enough to squeal happily with Xander over the news, and when Harold arrived to pick her up, made him come in so they could all share a glass of congratulatory champagne.

It wasn't the first time Xander had met Harold, since he'd been home the few times he'd stopped by to pick Anya up, but it was the first time they said more to each other than the required, 'Hey, how you doing?' It turned out that Harold had a sharp wit and a great sense of humor, and his favorite Star Trek character was Worf, followed very closely by Deanna Troi, to which Xander could totally relate.

Xander had stayed away from the House o' Vamps for four days following his injury, afraid that the smell of blood would generate more interest than he was comfortable with, and that he'd be hampered by the wound should he need to fight. Not that it was likely, but Xander figured it was best to be prepared to fight, even if he didn't have to. During one of his visits Xander spoke with the blonde and found out that her name was Linda, and, ironically, she was a dental assistant.

After that first time, they frequently spoke during Xander's visits. "We're not weird," she told Xander one night. "It's just what turns us on." Which was way more information that Xander needed. When he asked her about addiction, she laughed. "It's not any more addicting than sex is normally, it just feels really, really good." Which made Xander blush. And when she brought it to his attention he realized that it wasn't the same group of humans every night, and sometimes it was several weeks before he saw the same face twice.

Though Xander had started back up with his regular visits to the House, he hadn't been by the Magic Box since he'd been shot last Tuesday, though all of his girls had been over to visit him and see how he was doing. And they'd been happy to tell him, in excruciating detail, how they'd killed the unkillable demon. Turns out the longest portion of their night had been spent finding it. Once they'd discovered its nest, Willow and Tara had only just linked hands and begun to spin their spell when Buffy had gotten close enough to nick the demon with the silver blade. It had deflated like the Goodyear blimp. The worst part had been the loud noise as all the air was sucked out of it. Once it lay on the ground like a pile of discarded clothes, Buffy had kicked at it, just to make sure it was actually dead. And to make doubly sure, they'd burned the remains. Willow and Tara had tossed a little ball of sunshine

at it, immediately incinerating it.

The Saturday night following Xander's promotion, they all met at The Bronze before Buffy went out on patrol. They hadn't gotten together in a few weeks, and it felt good to be out with his friends. They played pool, and danced, and chatted, and everything was normal. Until Spike walked in.

Xander had tried not to think about Spike over the last week, because every time he did he was filled with either hurt or anger or both, and working through all those emotions was an exhausting experience. He kept telling himself that Spike wasn't worth it, but he was having a difficult time convincing himself of that. Despite Spike's issues over the chip, and the fact that he was a vampire who'd just as soon kill them as look at them, there was something different about Spike, and as much as Xander knew that he should forget about him, it was easier said than done. But that didn't mean that Xander was able to forget the things Spike had said to him.

When Spike showed up at their table, he barely looked at the rest of them, just zeroed in on Buffy and asked her if she was ready to patrol. Xander refused to let Spike know how much his words had cut, but he couldn't bring himself to look at him. He told Buffy to have fun on patrol, then asked Anya if she wanted to dance. Anya's acceptance was almost too boisterous, as she attempted to cover for Xander's more quiet demeanor, but it didn't stop her from glaring at Spike. Xander might only be human, but he'd had that look directed at him before, and he figured an eleven hundred year old vengeance demon, though now human, trumped a century old vampire.

Even after he was completely healed, Xander stayed away from the Magic Box unless he was pretty certain that Spike wouldn't be there. He stopped in one afternoon when he got out of work early to chat with Giles and Anya, and spent a Saturday helping Giles put up more shelves, but he tried to make sure he was gone before the sun set, just to be on the safe side. When Willow complained that they never saw him anymore, Xander girded his loins and showed up at their next research session with pizza and wings. Giles complained about getting sauce and grease on his books, but Xander could tell his heart wasn't in it, especially after he caught sight of the veggie pie Xander had ordered especially for him. Spike didn't show up, and Xander wasn't sure if it was relief or disappointment he felt.

But Xander still continued to visit the House. One such visit, there was a new vamp. Xander didn't recognize him, but he recognized Xander.

“Hey, aren't you the slayer's friend?”

You could have heard a pin drop in the ensuing silence. Xander straightened his shoulders, but didn't reach for the stake. “Yeah, so?”

“So maybe you're gonna tell her about this place.”

“Nobody gets killed, you don't have to worry about that.”

The two faced off long enough for Xander to begin to wonder if he'd make it out alive if all the vamps backed this one up. He'd gotten a little complacent in his visits to the House, treating them more like actual visits than patrols, and it looked like he might be going to pay for it now.

Until a vamp Xander did recognize stepped up to the vampire challenging Xander, slapped his shoulder and said, “He's all right, George. Come on, you know what Linda'll do if you cause trouble. Besides, I got us a pair of twins upstairs. First-timers.”

Xander waited while the two vamps made their way upstairs. When they were out of sight, he let out the breath he'd been holding, then turned to begin his patrol of the first floor. Linda was watching him, and he wondered what she'd seen. She gave him a nod before turning her attention back to the door.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander's luck ran out when he got a call from Buffy one day. The night before she'd heard rumors that a large group of vampires were now making the Hellmouth their home, and she wanted to get rid of them before dead bodies started showing up. Xander agreed to meet them at the Magic Box at six, which meant he had just enough time to rush home for a quick shower and a change of clothes. Normally he wouldn't have wasted the time on it, but one of the crews had been blowing insulation, and Xander, though he'd only stopped by the site briefly, had been

itching all afternoon.

By the time Xander got there, everyone had loaded up on stakes. Buffy handed Xander three. He shoved two in his jacket pockets, and kept the other in his hand. He'd tried shoving one in the back of his waistband one time, but it had chafed, and also, poked him in the butt when he'd been tossed on his ass, so Xander didn't do that anymore. Buffy and Spike also carried sharp weapons; Buffy her favorite sword, and Spike an axe, because his always had to be bigger than Buffy's. Xander had learned the hard way that enhanced strength, speed and agility did not mean he was any better at wielding a sword, so he left those to the others.

Before Buffy could team him with Spike, Xander said, "I'll go with Willow and Tara." Everyone looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. Except Spike, of course, because Spike was acting like Xander didn't exist, the same way Xander was acting as if Spike didn't exist.

"Been a while since I've partnered with the witchy duo, don't want to get stale."

Willow punched him in the arm.

"Ow."

"Watch who you're calling a witch, buster."

"That's actually a very good idea, Xander. Although, I'm not sure that a night when you're hunting for a large group of vampires is the right time to get your practice in, but"

"We'll be fine," Xander said. "They won't let anything happen to me. Right, ladies?" Willow was still glaring at him, but Tara was smiling, so Xander figured he was okay. "Shall we?"

Xander ushered Willow and Tara to the door, then looked over his shoulder to say goodbye to Giles and Anya. For the first time in weeks Spike was looking at him. Xander wasn't sure what that meant.

~*~*~*~*~

Trouble at the House, when it finally came, arrived from a quarter that Xander had never considered. He had just finished his patrol and was saying goodbye to Linda when there was a blood-curdling scream from the second floor.

Xander was up the stairs, stake in hand, following the screams down the hallway until he found the door from behind which they issued. He kicked it open, fully ready for the fight, only to find the human he'd expected to have to save sitting safely in the chair, blood staining his wrist, a chilling smile on his face. The vampire was writhing on the floor, screaming.

“What happened?”

Human eyes full of madness turned to Xander. “Holy water,” he said, and grinned. It sent shivers up Xander’s back.

Xander looked between the human and the tortured vamp in horror. He didn’t know if he should stake the vamp, put it out of its misery, or if it might heal. Xander asked one of the vamps that had pushed into the room behind him, but she didn’t know. The question was passed back through the crowd that gathered in the hallway.

After what seemed like hours of listening to the vampire scream in what had to be excruciating pain as the holy water burned it from the inside, but could only have been less than a minute, the vamp finally grew silent, but only after it had turned into a pile of dust.

Xander was the only thing that stood between the killer -- could he even be called a killer if he destroyed something that was already dead? -- and he could feel the crowd at his back, could hear their muttering, could feel the change in atmosphere as they all turned from a group enjoying a forbidden pleasure, into a mob intent on revenge.

Xander was horrified at what had happened, at the horrible way the vampire had been killed, and his first thought was that the man had to be punished. But who would punish him? Not the police, for there was no body. Not Buffy, because he was human, and he’d killed a vampire, a demon. But Xander was having a tough

time reconciling the monster before him with someone he'd been killing vampires to save.

Before Xander had to decide what to do -- let him go? Turn him over to the angry mob? -- the madman charged him. Xander swung his arm and caught the man on the shoulder, sent him sprawling to the floor. Before Xander could reach him to subdue him, he was back up on his feet. Xander let the fact that his opponent was human slow his response, and he got through Xander's defense, clawed fingers reaching for his face.

Xander side-stepped and struck out, and the man went flying into the wall. Xander crouched in a defensive position, but the man didn't rise. When Xander was certain he wouldn't be attacked again, he went over to the man to make sure he was alive. The unnatural position of his head told Xander that he wasn't, even before he checked his pulse.

Xander had just killed a human. It was self-defense, and accidental, but that didn't make him feel any better. Nor did the cheers behind him.

"We need to call the police."

"You're kidding, right?"

Xander didn't recognize the voice. He heard people talking, but he couldn't make out the words, all he could think was that he had just killed someone. "I just killed someone."

"It was self-defense."

"Yeah!" The voices got louder as everyone agreed that they'd seen what happened, even if they'd been standing down the hallway, and that it was self-defense.

Then Linda was there, turning Xander over to the vampire that had stood up for him that one time. Xander still didn't know his name. As the vamp led Xander away, he heard Linda taking charge behind him. Xander knew he should be doing that, he was the one who had experience with things like this, killing things, cleaning it up so no one knew that anything sordid had happened. But wait, he couldn't clean this

one up, it had to be reported to the police.

Suddenly they were in the living room, and when the vamp pushed Xander down onto one of the mattresses, he didn't even complain. Things were happening around him, but Xander couldn't focus. There were voices and footsteps and crying and doors opening and closing. "Oh god, Billy!" someone wailed, and Xander remembered the vampire's name. Billy. He'd been well-liked despite being a blood sucking creature of the night, and quite popular due to his youthful good looks. He'd been turned when he was sixteen, and he still looked fresh-faced fifty years later.

"I killed someone."

"So you said. You don't think any of us are gonna cry over his loss, do you? Not like they're crying over Billy. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say." A moment went by, then the vamp asked, "What's your name?"

"Xander."

"I'm Stephen. So, you really a friend of the slayer?"

"Yeah."

"You kill any vampires before?"

"Yes."

"You ever cry over them?"

"That was different." It had been. Hadn't it? He wasn't sure that the human vs vampire argument was going to be a winner with Stephen. Xander was having trouble believing it himself. "They were trying to kill me."

"So was he."

There was something wrong with that argument, there had to be, but Xander couldn't figure it out right now. It *had* been self-defense, even if Xander had been

horrified at the vampire's, Billy's death, even if he'd considered, however briefly, turning Billy's killer over to the others, even if he couldn't bring himself to feel sorry that the man was dead, though he was sorry that it had been at his hand.

Linda returned and asked Xander who she could call for him. They argued over whether he was in any shape to drive, which snapped Xander out of his funk long enough to appreciate that someone cared. Linda walked him to his car, which Xander thought was ridiculous, because *he* was supposed to be the one walking people to their cars, the one looking out for them. Somehow, right then, Linda didn't look like she couldn't take care of herself. She looked . . . bigger, like she'd taken on a larger presence.

Before he climbed into his car, Xander asked, "Are you human?"

"Are you?"

"I don't think so."

Xander had once seen things in the same black and white he knew Buffy saw them in, but shades of grey had been creeping in ever since he'd admitted to himself that he was in love with Spike. In love with a vampire.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander waited outside the Magic Box for Spike the next night. He was still riding an emotional roller coaster, even though Anya had found him sitting on the couch at three in the morning and made him tell her what had happened. She'd made him hot chocolate, and held his hand, and wiped his tears while he wondered what he'd become, and tucked him into bed when he'd exhausted all his reserves.

And now he was here to warn Spike. Anya said she'd do it, and Xander knew she'd be discreet, or try to be, but he felt like it was something he needed to do. When Spike finally showed up, he didn't look surprised to see Xander, and Xander realized that he'd probably spotted him a ways off. He was lucky that Spike hadn't decided to turn around and leave.

“Surprised to see you here, Harris. I was under the impression you’d quit your little Scooby gang.”

Xander refused to let Spike bait him. “I just wanted to let you know, next time you meet one of your . . . friends in an alley, be careful. There’s been a case of blood tainted with holy water.”

“Heard about that.”

Word sure got around fast in the demon world. The important thing, though was that Spike knew, and that he’d be careful. “Good.” Xander pushed away from the wall that had been holding him up and headed back to his car.

“How’d you find out?”

And because that was a question Xander didn’t want to think about, much less answer, he kept walking.

Sitting in his car, parked a block down from the House, Xander was torn about visiting. He knew that now was when he’d be most needed to maintain order, when something had upset the precarious balance, but he wasn’t sure he could face people who knew what he’d done. And given the way he’d reacted after, would they even find him a threat now? He’d killed someone and fallen to pieces, how intimidating was that?

Xander forced himself out of the car and to the back door of the House. Linda greeted him as if she’d been waiting for him. When he stepped inside he felt as if he’d been transported to Cheers; everyone appeared to know his name. Part of Xander was thrilled, and another part was horrified. What if they only liked him because he’d proven himself a killer? Which was unfair, since at least half of the people there were human, and had probably killed nothing bigger than a cockroach their entire lives. The simple truth was, he’d avenged Billy, however inadvertently, and Billy had been one of theirs. Now, it appeared, so was Xander.

It took Xander longer to finish his walk-through than it normally did, because everyone stopped him to talk to him, to thank him, to pat him on the back. One vamp even offered to bite him for free, which Xander politely declined. When he

got back to the first floor, Spike was leaning against the doorframe, talking to Linda, and Xander nearly had a heart attack.

“Spike. What are you doing here?”

“Could ask the same.”

The words ‘bite me’ were on the tip of Xander’s tongue, but he knew that would be a mistake. Instead he just said goodnight to Linda and pushed past Spike. He wondered if Spike would tell Buffy about this, then wondered why he would, since it would be like cutting off his nose to spite his face. Not that Spike was above that, but

When Xander got to his car, Spike was leaning against the driver side door.

“You know, pet, if you wanted to know what it felt like, you could’ve come to me.”

Which pissed Xander off, just like it was supposed to, most likely. “Really? Because I was under the impression that you wouldn’t drink my blood if I was the last person on earth.”

Spike shrugged. “Might’ve overstated things a bit.”

“Fuck you, Spike. Get out of my way.”

Spike studied his nails, picked off a bit of black polish. “Know what they call you?”

Huh? “Uh, Xander?”

“The Enforcer.”

“Funny, Spike, now move.”

Instead, Spike got more comfortable. “Heard there was a bit of a brouhaha down here last night. Heard one of the vamps got dusted. Heard the Enforcer killed the human responsible. Didn’t think it’d be you, though.”

Even though Xander had been feeling guilty about killing a human, Spike's comment angered him. "Because I don't have the guts for it?"

"Does the slayer know you've let go the apron string?"

"What? Spike, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Following you."

"Why?"

"Wondered what put that look in your eyes."

"What look?"

"Haunted."

For a blood sucking demon, Spike was way too perceptive. "I'm not haunted by anything."

For a long time, Spike just looked at him, then he said, "Come by the Magic Box tomorrow. Chits miss you."

"What about you?" Xander asked, wondering if his presence meant that Spike wasn't going to be there.

As he walked away Spike tossed back over his shoulder, his voice a high falsetto, "Oh, I've missed you, too, Xander."

Xander shook his head and thought, what an ass. Then he smiled, and for the first time in weeks he felt a little bit lighter.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander showed up at the Magic Box the next evening. There was nothing big going down, so they sat around the table chatting until Spike showed up to drag Buffy off

to patrol. He jumped up on the counter and flipped his wrist over, as if he was checking his watch. “The night ain’t getting any younger, slayer.”

Buffy just rolled her eyes, then looked at Xander. “Hey, Xan, wanna come with?”

“Oh, I”

“Can’t get much practice in when you don’t show up for patrol,” Giles said without looking up from his book.

Spike just raised one eyebrow in challenge.

Between the two snooty Brits, Xander was darned if he was going to back down. “Yeah, sure, I’ll go.”

Xander had been visiting the House regularly, and keeping up with patrols around his neighborhood, but this was only the second time in the past several weeks that he’d really been able to let go. And it really felt good to have an outlet for all the frustration and guilt and fear that had been weighing him down.

When they split up for the evening, Buffy heading back to the Magic Box, and Xander off to the House, since he was still feeling a little bit overprotective, Spike followed him.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like?”

“It looks like you’re following me.”

“Guess you’re not as stupid as you look, Harris.”

“Why are you following me?”

“Because you are not going back there alone. What kind of idiot goes into a situation like that without someone to watch their back, anyway?”

Despite the fact that Xander had thought the exact same thing on a couple of occasions, he automatically opened his mouth to argue. Then he closed it. Why was he arguing, exactly? Spike was offering to spend more time with him. Spike was offering to watch his back. Spike had brought him back into the fold, and had finagled him into patrol, which had given him a sense of accomplishment he hadn't felt in awhile.

Spike was, maybe, in his own fashion, trying to apologize to Xander.

“Fine.”

Of course the first vamp they ran into had already had a run-in with Spike.

“What's he doing here?”

“Hey, George. I take it you two know each other.”

“I said, what's he doing here?”

Xander sighed, turned to Spike. “It's great how you make friends wherever you go.”

Spike shrugged. “It's a talent.”

Xander turned back to George. “He's with me.”

“Figures. Slayer's pets, both of you.”

“Ouch. George, that hurt.”

Stephen appeared out of nowhere. “Hey, George, got us a snack in 204.”

Xander winced. “Could you not call it that?”

Stephen just laughed and dragged George away.

“Well.” Xander turned to Spike. “Good thing you came along to watch my back.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

Somehow, even the nights Xander didn’t show up at the Magic Box, Spike was waiting for him outside the House when he got there. It went on like this for several weeks, Xander would show up at the Magic Box when he could, and, after visiting with the girls, he and Spike would patrol. Some nights they would visit the House after patrol, some nights they stopped by The Bronze for a drink, and some nights Xander asked Spike if he wanted to come over and watch TV.

It was one such night that Spike came face to face with a naked Harold.

“You’re not supposed to be home yet!” Anya yelled from the bedroom.

“You’re changing the sheets!” Xander yelled back.

Xander introduced Harold to Spike, who looked a little gobsmacked. Xander wasn’t sure if it was the fact that they’d interrupted Anya and Harold, or the fact of . . . Harold, all of him, right there in his face. Xander got a couple of beers out of the fridge, handed one to Spike.

“Want a beer?” he asked Harold.

“Thank you.” Harold took it and held it in front of himself.

Xander grinned. “You can go get dressed now, if you want.”

“Thank you!” Harold turned and scurried away, and Xander remarked to Spike, “Heh, farmer’s tan.”

Spike was just staring at him.

“Anya and I broke up. But we’re still friends, obviously. I mean, she’s still living here. Well, you know, not that kind of friends, ‘cause, the three of us, we’ve never . . .”

“Dibs on the remote.”

Xander watched Spike bounce on the couch. “You don’t seem surprised.”

“M not.” Spike could probably win first prize if there was a speed-channel-changing contest.

“Why not?”

“You stopped smelling like her.”

“What do you mean, I Okay, you know what, don’t answer that.”

Knowing that Spike could smell Well, that called for chips. And another beer.

Then Spike called one Saturday. Xander pulled the receiver away from his ear and looked at it, then put it back to his ear. “Spike?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“When did you get phone service?”

“Didn’t. Stole someone’s cell.”

“Spike!”

“Kidding. So, The Bronze at sunset? A little pool, one of those flowering onion things, maybe some wings. What do you say?”

“The Bronze?”

“Yeah, little club on the bad side of town, you’ve heard of it. What, not too tired, are you?”

Xander sighed. He was never going to live that down. “No. And you’re so lying about the cell phone. You better give that back.”

“Sure thing, pet, soon as we hang up. Sundown.”

“Fine.”

“And then we’ll visit your little pals at Bitetown.”

“Why do you call it that? And I usually go on Sunday.”

“I know. They know. Everyone knows. You’re getting predictable, Xander. How do you expect to keep an eye out for unusual occurrences when they know you’re coming, hmm?” Spike hung up, leaving Xander with a dial tone.

Xander hung up the phone. He wasn’t sure, but he thought Spike might have just asked him out on a date.

A date which ended badly, if you count your date being propositioned by a bite whore and then calling you jealous, a bad thing. Which Xander did.

“Jealous?”

“No!”

“I could bite you if you want to know how it feels.”

“I don’t! Not like that. That’s so . . . impersonal.” Xander wasn’t about to tell Spike that he wanted much more than a bite that Spike was being paid to . . . perform. Not that he wanted the bite at all, because he didn’t. Even if he might have wondered what it would feel like, one time. Twice max. All those people enjoyed it, came back for it, there had to be something to it, right?

Spike’s eyebrow went up. “I could make it personal.”

Not like I want, Xander thought. That night he dreamt about Spike biting him.

~*~*~*~*~

The next couple of days were more of the same. Spike acted as if nothing had

happened. And maybe for him, nothing had. Then Thursday rolled around and Buffy called out the troops. A band of Lothrap demons, which meant six, per the books. Easy to kill, if you could get past their tentacles. Luckily, like vampires, they didn't care for the sun, so Willow and Tara prepared themselves to create a couple of their wonderful balls of sunshine. It wouldn't kill the demons, but it would incapacitate them long enough for one of them to shove a piece of steel through their hearts.

Turns out that they were traveling in a double band, which required one for luck, so there were thirteen demons to kill. Lucky thirteen. Things were actually going quite well, since they had the advantage of the sunshine. One ball of sunshine could incapacitate all of them for a short period; the ones closer to the spell for a longer period, so the three of them would slice and dice and thrust each time Willow and Tara created a ball.

Unfortunately, the demons weren't stupid, and after the second ball of sunshine they realized that Willow and Tara were the immediate threat. Without them, the playing field evened out a little bit. Everything happened very fast after that. Xander saw two of the demons sneaking up on Willow and Tara and called out to warn them.

Willow and Tara both turned, and the ball of sunshine shot out of their hands, bobbing uncontrolled in the general direction of the demons the three of them had surrounded. While Xander was distracted, one of the demons snuck up behind him. Spike dove at the demon just as the ball of sunshine weaved in that direction. Xander knocked Spike out of the path of the ball of sunshine, which slammed into the demon and set its clothes on fire.

Xander was still lying on top of Spike when he yelled, "Balls of sunshine, Spike. Balls of fucking *sunshine!*"

Spike shoved Xander off of him. "Hey, this time I was the one saving *your* ass!"

They both got to their feet and faced off. Xander gave Spike a shove. "You? If it wasn't for me, you'd be dust right now!"

"And if it wasn't for me, you'd be demon chow!"

“Hey, guys!” Buffy called. “Can this wait until the rest of the demons are history?”

Xander ignored her and gave Spike another shove, and because it felt good, another, until Spike’s back was against the fence. “Yes, all right? Yes, I was jealous. Happy?”

“Bloody thrilled!”

“Good!”

“Fine.”

Xander’s blood was running hot, but it wasn’t from anger. This could not possibly have happened at a worse moment. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

“No, you’re not. I’m kissing you!”

“Fine!”

“Good.”

Looking back, Xander was never really sure which one of them had kissed the other first, but Spike always insisted that it had been him. To be contrary, Xander always insisted the opposite, which inevitably led to more kissing. But it didn’t matter, not really, because Spike’s hands were tight on his back, and Spike’s body was hard against his, and they were finally *kissing*.

“Oh dear goddess, Anya is going to kill him!”

“Willow! Watch the sunshine! I think you singed my hair.”

“Sorry, Buffy.”

Xander figured that now would be a good time to come clean to his friends about his breakup with Anya. But since there were still a couple of demons left, and they

seemed to have their hands full, he determined it could wait a few more minutes, and kissed Spike again.

The End