Fandom: BtVS

At: tamingthemuse
Rating: Pg
Summary: My backwards extrapolation from season 1. Xander, Willow and Jesse in the summer before season one. Set approximately six months before Buffy would be due to arrive in Sunnydale

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Some dialogue borrowed courtesy of http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/
Note: With thanks to peasant's History of the Aurelian Vampires for saving me from having to look up all the individual scripts to check my historical time line.

Beta'd by laazikaat

Ice-Cream

by
Maz
Part One

Prompt: 62-Solitary Confinement

Ice-cream had to be the best invention ever. Of course to a growing boy, and that's what he still was, just, lots of things were the best invention ever. But on a hot afternoon, with school over for the year and the summer stretching ahead full of promise and laziness, ice-cream was definitely the best invention ever.

Xander let the swing rock idly as he glanced around and took another lick of his cone. Across the grass three older boys were sitting under a tree with guitars, chatting and laughing and passing a cigarette around between themselves. One of them had a really quiet smile and he sat so still, like he was in control of everything and nothing could phase him. Where his larger companions gestured with their hands and threw back their heads to laugh, the smaller guy just smiled and nodded. And he had green hair.

Briefly, Xander considered that idea, but realistically he knew he'd look stupid with green hair. Or any other colour. Plus, his Dad would object. Which meant that the green-haired-boy had really cool parents. Xander closed his eyes and imagined the boy and his family sitting
around the dinner table, eating home-cooked food and talking about music and important stuff, like Xander had seen on TV. Maybe the boy's Mom and Dad had dyed hair too? Xander tried to picture his own Mom with a pink or purple dye job. He tried to imagine his Dad wanting to talk to him, like Jesse's Dad sometimes did. Snorting to himself he shook his head; no chance of that ever happening. His Dad hardly noticed he was there most of the time, let alone asked about what he did. He watched the boy with green hair strum his guitar and wished he had that kind of cool.

Xander dreamed of being cool, and of being envied for his cool. He rehearsed cool lines to say. The problem was, it never seemed to work out like it did in his head. The feed line was never quite right and the few times he tried to adapt his beautiful, cool line, all that came out of his mouth were broken phrases and mangled words. Somehow he always ended up tripping over his own feet. Sometimes literally. Like last week when he was showing Willow his new prowess on his skate board. He'd got up a good speed and was ready to sail majestically between the passing students, weaving with consummate skill, but just as his foot touched the ground to give that one, last shove, his toe had caught on an empty chip bag and he'd ended up flat on his face under a tangle of long legs and
angry pink sandals which turned out to belong to Cordelia Chase of all people. So, in addition to a bloody nose, he'd got a thick ear, been subjected to her shrill castigation and the last week of school had been spent cringing from her sneer and the not so subtle sniggers of her gang of followers.

Maybe, Xander thought, he was going about this all wrong. Watching the guy with the guitar he began to wonder if 'deep' was a difficult look to cultivate, because it sure looked good on him. He allowed his mind to wander that path - silent and mysterious; the tall, dark stranger who everyone wants to know, because he never says anything about himself. He just moves through their lives and no matter how hard they try, they can never discover his tragic secret.

A cool, sticky sensation around his fingers caused Xander to look down and he realised that his ice-cream had melted all over his hand and dripped onto his pants. Even if he got it off, it would stain and he was doomed to spend the rest of the day looking like he'd wet himself. Glancing furtively around he licked his hand clean and wiped it on the underside of the swing, before trying to lift the big glob off his crotch without making the stain worse. He was only marginally successful and now his
hand was both sticky and covered in dirt. Giving up, he turned to look across at Willow and Jesse and realised that he had about as much chance of passing himself off as a mysterious stranger as he did of flying to the moon. For a moment he felt a spark of hope; 'now there's a thought, astronauts are cool.' A moment later the spark was extinguished; it was unlikely NASA would have many openings for straight D students - unless it was for sweeping floors or cleaning the locker rooms. 'Could you get cool,' he wondered, 'just by being in the same locker room as cool people? No,' he decided, 'that couldn't be right'; he'd done gym class with the whole of his grade all his life and just about every one of them remained more cool than him. 'Are the janitors at NASA cooler than other janitors? Is it even possible to be cool while scrubbing toilets?' Xander doubted it.

Watching the guitar players, Xander dreamed of having the courage to just walk over and sit with them. He tried to think what a cool person would say as they did that. He imagined the musicians' heads turning towards him as he waved casually - right before they asked him who the fuck he thought he was and told him to get out of their light. 'Yeah' he snorted to himself. 'That would be right'. Maybe he should learn to play the guitar first? It couldn't be that hard, could it? Maybe that could be his summer
project. Once he found the money to buy the guitar.

Willow's voice dragged him out of his dreaming and he crunched down on at the last bit of his cone, sending a shot of ice-cream out of the end to land on his thigh. And that was the last straw. His common-sense clicked back into place and he began to laugh at his own craziness as he turned his attention back to his friends.

"This isn't too childish, is it?" Willow asked, glancing between him and Jesse. "Sitting on swings I mean. We're sophomores in September, are we too old for swings? Should we not be doing swings now?"

Jesse raised an eyebrow, but it was Xander who replied. "We're the big kids. We can do what we like. If we want to sit on swings, the little kids can't stop us. Because we're bigger."

"Oh, I don't know, Man," Jesse drawled. "Some of those sixth graders are pretty mean looking." His voice trailed away to silence.

Xander followed his gaze and saw that the object of Jesse's recent desires was walking into view, glossy shopping bags swinging, small band of drones trailing
along behind. "Oh, man," Jesse said. "That Cordelia is so fine. Do you think?"

"No!" said Xander. "Not even in your dreams, boy."

Jesse looked at him, offended for a moment, before he sighed and turned away. "She's going to Paris," he said mournful. "I heard her telling Harmony." He brightened. "But not for a few weeks. Don't you think?"

"No," said Willow, with equally brutal honesty. "And certainly never, if you don't pluck up the courage to speak to her."

"And probably not then, either," Xander added discouragingly.

Jesse was once again cast into gloom and Xander tried to think friendship thoughts, but it was difficult to sympathise with Jesse lately. He and Xander had been a pair, since forever. Growing up a few doors from each other, they'd played together for as long as either could remember. As children they'd squabbled and fought, until faced with an external threat, at which point they'd turned, united, to bring it down. Even the introduction of Willow in kindergarten hadn't broken the bond; it had
just stretched to encompass her too. Xander had really believed that nothing could tear them apart. And until now, nothing had. But in the last month or so Jesse seemed to have become a completely different person. He said he couldn't be bothered to hang out in the tree house they'd built in his backyard. Xander suspected he'd actually given his brothers permission to use it. He didn't want to loiter in the comic store, browsing for hours and reading the comics on the sly. He didn't even want to watch TV any more, and because Xander's parents had sole use of the TV at home that meant Xander was missing all his favourite shows. All because Jesse decided, one day, that Cordelia Chase was all he wanted. More than he wanted Xander. Cordelia for goodness sake! Jesse had been a founding member of the 'I Hate Cordelia Club'. Now, every time she came in sight, he turned into a big puddle of mush. And when she wasn't in sight he was daydreaming about her. Xander would never have believed he'd think it, but there were times when he got really bored with Jesse lately. He wanted to shake some sense into him. Or walk away. He just didn't understand what was so special about a girl. Of course, Willow was a girl. But that was different. Willow was a friend, so she didn't count. There was no way in hell that Cordelia would ever be a friend. Xander felt a pang of loneliness.
On the whole Willow was more sympathetic to Jesse's state. She seemed quite willing to sit and listen to him ramble on and on about his feelings. It made Xander wonder if she was changing too. He'd caught her looking at him oddly sometimes, as if she was trying to figure him out. It made him nervous and that was just wrong. Willow may bully him occasionally, about homework and stuff, but she never made him uncomfortable. It almost felt like she was trying to find a way to change their friendship, or end it. And when she wasn't doing that she was distracted, seeming to be always thinking about something else, something that wasn't wherever they were. Would the same thing happen to him one day? Would he wake up some morning wanting nothing more than to be close to Harmony Kendal? The very idea left him slightly dizzy and a little nauseous. He didn't want a girl. He just wanted to have his friends back. It was confusing, the way he couldn't seem to do anything right.

"Come on you two," Willow said. "Let's get out of here. Go somewhere else. I recommend more ice-cream in front of the TV." Jesse continued to look doubtful as he gazed after Cordelia, so Willow upped the stakes. "Mom and Dad are away again and I bought gallons of chocolate ice-cream with the food allowance they left me." Jesse
showed slight interest, tilting his head in her direction. "Haagen-Dazs," she enticed, "with chocolate chips."

Jesse caved with a grin and a shrug. "Okay," he said. "Just this once. But I'm telling you, I will speak to her before she goes away. Maybe if she goes to the beach..."

"Yeah, yeah, sure you will," said Xander, shaking off his broodiness and slipping out of the swing. He bent down and wiped his hand clean on the grass, picked up his skateboard, linked one arm through Willow's, and with Jesse on her other side they walked out of the park to Willow's house, where they ate so much chocolate-chip ice cream that Xander began to doubt that it really was the best invention ever and Jesse was almost himself as he explained the crucial plot points of the Star Trek episode to a tolerant Willow.

It was late when Xander and Jesse eventually left to go home, but the sky was clear and the streets were calm and they were teenage boys who mocked the superstitions and beliefs of their childhood - Father Christmas, the tooth fairy, monsters under the bed and monsters on the streets. In spite of which, when they said goodnight to Willow, they kept their voices low without thinking about why. If asked, Xander would
probably have managed to come up with a reason - not wanting the trouble if they disturbed bad-tempered old Mr Williams next door, for example, but the truth was more instinctive. You just didn't shout in the streets of Sunnydale after dark. It was something kids grew up knowing, in the same way that they knew not to step on the cracks in the sidewalk, and it was talked about in the same way - 'watch out for the monsters if you go out at night'. And just like the cracks in the sidewalk, there came a time when it was no longer spoken of out loud, except to ridicule, but being cautious had become natural.

They headed off down the leafy suburban sidewalk past the large, prosperous houses, many dark and shuttered as the owners took every opportunity to travel for their work. A study would have found that Sunnydale's professional population was amongst the most accommodating in the country - always willing to undertake inconvenient travel whenever asked. It was amazing the number of Sunnydale residents who went into careers in travelling sales.

As they got nearer to their own street the houses got smaller and the yards were less well kept, although more people appeared to be home. Jesse's house was certainly
not dark. There were lights on everywhere as the large family crowded into the inadequate space.

Jesse grinned at Xander. "Think I'm in for a lecture, being this late."

Xander grinned back, envying his friend the carefree way he anticipated being in trouble with his parents. He knew that Jesse shared a bedroom with four younger brothers who all drove him crazy in the small space, while Xander had a room of his own where he could hide out, choosing the confinement of solitude over the option of 'family time'. But he also knew that the lecture Jesse got would be motivated by his parents' concern for him. Xander wanted that fiercely. Wanted it, longed for it, prayed for it and despaired of ever getting it.

Jesse turned at the bottom of the steps up to the porch. "See you tomorrow?"

"Sure. I'll call you." Xander raised his hand as he stepped back onto the sidewalk and headed slowly home.

He crept into the house through the kitchen and down the hall to his room, grateful that the TV was loud enough to cover the sound of the door's protest as he
forced it shut. Xander didn't believe it was worry for his safety that would cause his parents to notice and object to his lateness. It was more a matter of principle - he'd been told to be home by ten, if he was late he got into trouble.

Tonight, however, he made it without detection and climbed into bed, pretending to be asleep when the TV was shut off and he heard footsteps in the hallway. His door rubbed against the carpet as it was opened a crack and his father's voice whispered, "No. He's in. Looks fine. Must've been back a while," followed by the same soft noise as it was closed. He breathed a belated and unnecessary sigh of relief. It had been okay. It was one of the nights when they were in a good mood and decided to behave like parents. He probably wouldn't have got into trouble in any case. Bunching his pillow under his cheek, he tried to relax and ignore the faint clatter of his father in the bathroom and later his mother's muffled giggles and the creak of their bed springs.

Xander's early childhood had been confusing. It was not that his parents were unkind. It was just that their preoccupation with their own lives was stronger than their interest in his. Depending upon their moods he could be slapped, ignored or even rewarded for doing
exactly the same thing. He was well on the way to being a troubled and troublesome child when Jesse, and later Willow, had taken him in hand. Jesse introduced him to the stable environment of his own family, where one more toddler under adult feet was not a problem, and Willow recycled her understanding of civilised behaviour, gleaned from her mother's occasional lectures. In the meantime Xander became skilled in reading moods and body language, so he could profit from the good times and avoid the bad. He was so expert now that he was usually in his room or halfway to Jesse's house before either of his parents had finished taking in the first breath to shout or scream at the other.

Jesse's house had been more of a home to him than his own, for most of his life. He spent as much time there as possible. It was the place he got to eat proper food, even if it was from a plate on his lap because the family didn't have the space for a table big enough to sit them all. It was the place he was given comfort for a scratched knee or a stern warning about road safety when he ran across the street after a ball. It was where he was taught to share his toys and divide up a bag of candy. It was where he learnt about fairness and trust. When he was there he almost felt loved. One of his childhood dreams was that they adopted him, made him theirs, because then they
would love him like they loved their own. As he grew older he realised that was crazy, they would never love him like they loved their own children. But he still dreamed.

Xander sighed and turned onto his back, staring blindly up at the ceiling. He could vaguely make out the shapes of the model aeroplanes and spaceships hanging above him. He remembered how he and Jesse had spent a whole day constructing the Babylon 5 and had almost broken both it and their necks trying to hang it. Those thoughts led Xander back to his worries of earlier - that Jesse was leaving him behind. And Willow too - except she had always been way ahead. Nowadays Willow spent more time on her computer than with them, talking to interesting people in the chat rooms, and Jesse kept disappearing to follow Cordelia Chase. Xander didn't understand Jesse's sudden obsession with Cordelia, or any girl. He'd watched Jesse's older brother go through this sort of change and Jesse and he had joked about it between themselves. Now Jesse was the same and Xander still didn't understand. He just felt the loss like an ache in his chest.
2 Informing all that we become

*Prompt: 63 - Enamoured*

Angel allowed himself to feel some satisfaction for what he had achieved in the weeks since his arrival in Sunnydale. Although his body was still weak, it was slowly repairing itself and while his senses were still dulled to almost human level, he was no longer half blind as he'd been in New York.

The drive from New York to California had been long and he'd spent the journey in an apathetic daze, ignoring most of Whistler's attempts at conversation. The demon wouldn't tell him why he was dragging him right across the country and Angel couldn't summon up the energy to force the reasons from him. Eventually Whistler gave up and withdrew into himself, and since silence didn't seem to suit him, he kept it at bay with a rotating sequence of the few cassette tapes stuffed into the glove box of his car. By the end of the journey Angel was ready to swear he knew the lyrics to every song in Barry Manilow's far too extensive repertoire. Whistler also provided a
minimal but regular diet of fresh calves' and lambs' blood, telling Angel that he needed to wean himself back onto a regular feeding schedule. For Angel himself, starvation had become such habit that he hardly noticed that it was never quite enough, until fasting became unnecessary.

When Whistler eventually dropped him off in Sunnydale, right outside the abattoir, he was so overwhelmed by the sounds of squealing animals and the sharp, tangy scent of adrenaline and fear that he scarcely registered the demon's departure. The atmosphere around the sprawling sheds was redolent of blood and guts. It was heady. And wasn't that pathetic, that he became excited by the fear of animals, when once he had been the source of nightmares to princes and generals?

Getting hold of some of the blood was surprisingly easy, he hadn't even needed his quickly concocted line about wanting to make black pudding. In exchange for some of the cash Whistler left him, the night foreman sold him four pints of pig, with no questions asked - and it had still been warm. That was the moment Angel finally recognised exactly how starved he'd allowed himself to become and he drank the lot in greedy, desperate gulps in the lee of one of the holding sheds, unable to wait long
enough to find a more discrete hiding place. The comparative richness of the pigs' blood actually gave him a rush and although the growth hormones and antibiotics it was laced with added an odd chemical flavour, it was full of the memory of life and vitality and the energy flooded his system bringing elation in its wake. For a moment he felt like laughing. Instead he walked back into the street, gazed up at the stars and promised himself that he would change. The Slayer was coming and he would be here, waiting.

That night he walked the streets, still buzzing from the fresh feed, and he began to notice some interesting facts about the town Whistler said would be the site of his destiny; it appeared to be home to an unusually large population of vampires, which, he supposed, explained why The Watchers' Council was intending to send the Slayer here. He also recognised that he was still far too weak to take any of them on. He hadn't survived for a quarter of a millennium without understanding relative power and when to avoid a fight. So he kept to the shadows as he explored.

The first day was spent in a boarded-up shop. Surprisingly large inside, with both a back room and a basement, he spent part of the first hour after sunrise
seriously considering means of acquiring it. The semicircular window onto the street looked sufficiently un-business-like for a conversion to residential status to be a simple task. But in the early afternoon he was woken by a loud crash and was forced to hide under the cellar stairs from a couple of humans delivering timber and tools, who appeared to be preparing to renovate.

The next evening, after another warm meal, he set about finding a more suitable base and planning how to finance his future. The theft of some almost clean clothes went a long way to improving his appearance, so the next few days were spent in a cheap motel, while he carried forward his plans for his own rehabilitation. He would certainly need more than an alley and the rats that shared it, if he was going to help the Slayer rid the town of its undead population.

In the meantime there was the sheer relief of physical comfort. Just sleeping with pillows and sheets felt decadent, that first day in the motel, and that evening, when he awoke, he stretched luxuriously and decided that maybe one set in heavy silk would be a deserved reward and incentive to continue on his new path. The luxury of a shower was intoxicating too. He stood under the jets for as long as the hot water lasted, scrubbing
away the last memory of the streets. Now that he had a mission and a purpose he couldn't imagine how he'd allowed himself to sink so low, and he was desperate to rid himself of any remaining traces. In his weakened state he didn't trust his own sense of smell and no one could be allowed to connect him with a shivering, cowering wreck in an alley in New York.

Three days later he moved into a semi-basement apartment, the least attractive in the building from a commercial point of view, but perfectly suited to his needs, and the day after that he set in motion the processes to access his ill-gotten gains from a century before, in the name of the greater good, to buy it, which would guarantee him his privacy and ensure there could be no mid-day evictions. Once that was done, he could start living like a human again. It seemed an age since he had last bothered to pass himself off, but it was a skill honed during the first decades of his existence - the art of humanity, the skill of the deceiver. It wouldn't be hard. Humans only ever saw what they wanted to see. As a derelict in the alleys of New York he'd been invisible to them, while occupying the same space. They'd walked past him constantly and never known he was there. Even on that morning, when he was so weak he hardly made it into the shade as the sun topped the roof of the theatre
across the square, even then they hadn't seen him. Humans, he thought cynically, always ready to turn their eyes away, even from a man on fire, because he obviously had no home. And their willingness to not see would make it that much easier for him to blend into the respectable background, respectability now being a necessity to the future he had planned.

So after a scant three weeks there was real satisfaction in the knowledge that his muscles were already beginning to bulk up, although it would take months to rebuild his body to its stable weight. The apartment was small, but comfortable, and he'd spent a couple of evenings at the mall furnishing it - a bed, a fridge, the basic furnishings. He would keep it simple, he thought, austere, a monastic cell. This new life was going to be a challenge, so he would set it up in a fashion that reflected his resolve. He was going to change. No more hiding. If he was to help the Slayer, he would, inevitably, have to contact her, eventually, and to do that he would have to look like a regular person. He would use his old skills, but he would use them for good, instead of to kill. Resolve gave him a buzz too. Virtue warmed his frozen soul, chasing away the helpless hopelessness of recent decades. Whistler's faith in him made him believe in himself, and the memory of a bubbly schoolgirl turned into a sad young
woman by her parents' raised voices, fuelled his determination.

Rolling out of his new bed, he made his way to the kitchen area. The blood was not so potent after a day in the fridge but it still tasted good and he felt the first stirrings in his groin as he drank it. Not an erection, the impotence of his long starvation diet had not worn off yet, but it was a sign that his body was beginning to heal.

It was when he went shopping for those silk sheets, and maybe just a few more clothes, that he saw the statue in the antique store. He really didn't mean to go in, but just as he was passing another customer opened the door to leave. Although her body obscured most of his view, he saw enough and without his intending it, he found his feet taking him inside.

There it was. It was amazing. Two feet high and carved of sandalwood, it stood on an ebony stand in a glass case. There was no way it should be anywhere but a museum, or a temple. Angel stood in awe and shock, his mind harking back to Paris and the salon of the Comtesse. It was not just a similar piece. This was the very same Bodhisattva. It had stood to the right of the fireplace in her withdrawing room. God only knew how it had ended
up in a small Sunnydale antique shop, where it was obvious that its true value was not recognised. For a moment he lost himself in the memories of her, her blood, her willing body, her decadent laugh, her bed.

She had been a leader of Paris human society and secretly the lover and property of its vampire elite. Angelus had shared her bed, as a gift from the Master of Paris. Angel smiled at the memory of Darla's petulance at her exclusion from that feast, although she had swiftly found alternative attractions.

A small voice in his head told him to walk away, now, but he quashed it. No, he would buy this. He would set it up in his new home to remind himself of what he was working to avoid, to remind himself of the past. Through gazing at its perfections he would remember what he had come from and why what he was doing now was so important. It wasn't possible to move on while denying the past. He'd spent years trying to forget, but if he was to succeed in this new life, he would only do so by recognising and acknowledging what he'd been. And besides, the subject was the Bodhisattva of Compassion, it would help him to meditate and to come to terms with himself, so that he could really do good. When the Slayer arrived.
So he bought it. It required yet another transfer of funds from the Swiss account, but three days later it was delivered and he set it opposite the door so it would be the first thing he saw whenever he entered the apartment.

That night he dreamt of Paris, of entering the double doors to the salon and stepping into the pulsing mass of human flesh. Armand had brought the Comtesse over to be introduced immediately and he had released his hold of Darla's hand as they approached. The Comtesse's sky-blue silk gown had rustled as she curtsied. Her low-pitched voice with its broken English had welcomed him to her home. Her wrist, as he bent over it to place a kiss, had throbbed enticingly and she had shivered delightfully as he gave a teasing nip, sliding smoothly back into his human face as he raised his head to inspect the rest of her. Darla had snorted with annoyance, and some amusement, beside him and Armand had turned to her, offering his own arm and making some comment about a pair of twin boys. She had laughed her tinkling laugh and swung off into the room with their host, calling out to him to have fun and not break anything.

The Comtesse had gazed up at him from beneath her
lashes and smiled. "Please, Monseigneur, my Master says and I obey. Anything you wish from me tonight is yours to ask for."

He'd gazed down at the smooth, pale globes half exposed by the cut of her bodice and toyed with the idea of telling her to strip for him there and then, just to test the promise. But Darla had been firm that the charade must not be broken in front of the humans present - not polite to frighten the Master of Paris's herd, so he had merely suggested a glass of wine. She had led him across the room and served him herself and later led him to her boudoir where, after he threw Darla out, she had stripped happily and indeed fulfilled her promise that anything he wanted was his.

He came five times that day, using all three of her entrances. She was well-schooled and eager to please, enamoured of the mystery of his kind, and when he left he had the added satisfaction of knowing that Armand would have to feed her well and rest her for at least a week before she would be useful to him again.

Angel woke with a gasp of dismay, sitting bolt upright and staring around the room in confusion, the dream so vivid that for a moment he didn't recognise where he
was. Then he remembered and slumped forward, running his hands over the silk of the sheets, anchoring himself back into the present. Clambering out of bed he staggered to the fridge and grabbed a carton of blood, drinking it cold to minimise the buzz it gave him. Then he did his best to wash the memories away in a scalding shower. But he left the statue opposite the door where it was still the first thing he saw when he came home.

So he had a home and he had a life. Over the past three weeks he'd thoroughly explored the town and now he was getting to know it. He didn't disturb his neighbours upstairs and they ignored him. As the only apartment on the lowest floor, with sewer access from the adjacent garage, it was the ideal situation for someone wanting to avoid notice. He never used the front door onto the street, with its plate-glass doors and granite floor tiles, preferring the back entrance which allowed his movements to go unmarked. And if he occasionally woke up gasping from vivid dreams of blood and excitement, that didn't mean anything except that he was getting stronger. He was ready. He just had to wait. Whistler had said she would come soon, but that it could be a few months; something about her mother needing to deal with the practicalities. Whoever heard of a Slayer who had a mother? He'd seen the family in LA, seen that it
was falling apart. He'd been surprised that The Council had left their slayer in that situation, that they left her with her family at all. Maybe their power was not so great in this New World, maybe they didn't have the authority to take her away.

Meanwhile, he patrolled the streets, familiarising himself with Sunnydale at night: the locations of the demon hangouts and the buildings most likely to be taken over as a nest, den or business, by the less amenable members of the various species he'd spotted around town. He also noted the locations of animal and human blood supplies: the butchers' shops, the hospital and the vampire blood houses. He watched the humans and noted their behaviour. He watched the demons and learned their business dealings.

Sunnydale was a strange place. He'd never seen such a concentration of demons in such a small space before, especially not one also occupied by humans. And there was something strange about the humans; they didn't seem to notice and yet they were aware, if only subconsciously. There was no particular sense of magic in the air, no suggestion of, well, 'suggestion', although he had to admit to himself that he might not be capable of picking up that subtle scent just yet. As a home ripe for
vampires, Sunnydale could not have been better if it had been designed specifically for them.

Angel walked the streets each night, watching, noting and learning. He watched the older, working folk hurrying home as dusk fell. He watched the teens necking near the park. They had an air of rebellious bravado, as if they knew they were breaking some unwritten rule. Whether they knew just how dangerous their actions were, Angel couldn't judge. And on top of that, the whole town stank of Aurelius. Even with his dulled senses Angel was swamped by it; overwhelmed by the familiar and much missed scents of family. Two months ago he would have turned and run, left town to go anywhere but here. But now he couldn't. He had a mission and he would not fail. When the Slayer arrived she would find that he was already here and able to provide the information she needed.

His days were restless. He tossed and turned in his sleep as dreams of the past crowded in on him. Dreams of Darla, who he thought he could sometimes feel so close, dreams of the Master, who he knew was here, dreams of Penn and Dru and Spike - dreams of family and of belonging and of the hunt and of the feast. Vivid dreams of long days spent not wanting to sleep and long nights
prowling the streets together, slinking through the shadows, stalking the rooftops, herding the prey to the exact place chosen for the kill. Every evening he woke in a sweat of excitement, fear and slowly returning arousal, fear of the arousal and fear of the pleasure his dreams brought him. He felt the blood crying out to him in his dreams and at night in the streets he began to sense it humming beneath the skin of the humans he passed. He began to wonder about the hospital, about whether the easy co-operation of the staff at the abattoir might not extend to the night shift in Accident & Emergency. He was still too weak to consider the blood houses; he would be helpless facing more than a single minion at the moment. He needed to build his strength first. He couldn't afford to let himself be seen by any vampire who could possibly sense his soul.

So he took his revenge, as he had always done, through violence. Starting cautiously, by tracking the newly risen who had no Sire waiting for them to rise and catching them before they ate. He lay in ambush, setting himself in their view in quiet places where their ignorance and ravenous need saw him only as an easy meal, then staking them before they knew the truth. Even then it was not always easy and he acquired bruises that took too long to fade. On one occasion he was too slow and
the fledgling found someone else first. That time he decided that discretion was the better part and turned away, looking for easier pickings. He would be no use to the Slayer if he didn't survive until she arrived. With each minion staked he felt the sweet, blessed release of his pent-up fear. With each blast of dust he reaffirmed his resolve. He would do what was right. He would prepare. He would be ready and he would help her when she came.

Sticking close to the shadows he patrolled the night-time streets of Sunnydale.

3 Memories

Prompt: 64 - Promise

It was about 10.30 when he saw the boy for the first time. Angel was walking, without particular direction, just keeping his eyes open, learning the town, watching with relief as the human pedestrians gradually thinned out, taking with them their enticing scent of life, while
the number of demons increased. By 10pm there were very few humans still on the streets; people tended to retire to their homes early in Sunnydale. The high pitched hum of televisions assailed him from every side and blue flickering light flashed from the cracks in draped windows. His hearing was improving so he caught the murmur of a low pitched conversation; two male voices briefly making plans for tomorrow before wishing each other goodnight.

One figure broke away and headed up the steps to the porch of a house, the other carried on along the street. Human, no question, and young. Not thinking about why he did it, Angel turned to follow. If the boy got into trouble it was doubtful he would be able to do much to help, but there was something about him, something about the way he had turned from his friend to walk away, that had caught Angel's eye. From a position out of sight across the street he watched the boy walk a few doors further along the road. He noted the attractive mop of dark hair, the way the boy's body moved like a puppy not yet grown into the size of its feet, and he noted the hesitation as he reached one particular house, the way he paused, as if scenting the air, before relaxing and creeping off around to the back. Angel followed cautiously and watched as the boy cracked open a door,
obviously trying for silence in his movements, slipped inside and closed it carefully behind him. Not a burglar, he knew how to soften the creak of the hinges as he pushed the door open, and even if he was, that wasn't Angel's business. Angel shook his head at his own foolishness and continued his patrol.

Occasionally, throughout that night, he found his thoughts returning to that brief view of the young lad. Something was tickling the back of his mind, some elusive memory which he couldn't pin down. He was no nearer solving it as morning approached.

At three o'clock he went to the hospital. After a week of cautious sniffing around he'd finally found a lead into the blood bank. Although money was no object, an unsafe contact was, but Willy had finally come through. He didn't trust Willy, but he did trust the power of money over humans like him. The expression of panic, as Willy's back hit the alley wall and he faced the extra incentive of a flash of game face, added to Angel's conviction that the name he had been given was good. The price was extortionate, but he went home that morning with two pints of fresh human blood to supplement the pigs' blood he picked up on the way.
Standing in his kitchen, watching the bags warm in a pan of hot water as he drank the pig cold, he was almost vibrating with anticipation and when he tore the corner off the first one, the scent of warm human blood almost made him hard. He drank it slowly, savouring the flavour, making it last. It gave him more strength than six pints of pig could. Void of any fear or excitement it had a flatter taste than his memories, but it was still human and as such, was glorious. He felt the rush of it spread through him sending tingles of sensation down his arms and legs, to his fingers and toes, and a warm glow settled in his core. It had been so long. Climbing into bed he knew he would sleep well, in spite of the still nagging feeling that he was missing something.

The night was clear, with only tendrils of cloud to obscure the stars and trail their lace across the face of the half moon, although the breeze carried a hint of cold mist off the sea behind him. Loitering in the graveyard where the young people gathered of an evening, to court and walk and boast to each other of what they would do, one day, Angelus watched from the shadows by the old church and listened to their conversations. Eventually he focussed on the young man who seemed to have no sweetheart and who talked most loudly of travel and impatience. And when the young man eventually left his fellows to walk
back towards the steps, Angelus followed.

No one heard the muffled shout as Angelus pounced, slapping a hand firmly over his victim's mouth and pulling him back against his own body, using his other arm to encircle the young fisherman's chest, pinning him as he dragged him between the towering and weathered tombstones, towards the cliff edge.

His blood was as clean and smooth as rich, red wine and the cliffs provided a useful dumping ground. By the time the body was found it would be assumed he'd fallen and the blanched skin would be put down to exposure to the sea. Angelus drained it dry, glutting on his meal, so that he could go back to their lodgings and feed the children. William had slightly more control, these last few years, but was still inclined to getting carried away by his enthusiasms, if not kept on a close rein. So Dru was keeping him busy while Angelus and Darla went out to hunt.

Avoiding the remaining humans, Angelus wandered back towards the hundred and ninety nine steps, pausing there, like any tourist taking an evening constitutional, before descending and heading back towards Church Street, past the jet workshops that had sprung up like
mushrooms since 'Dear Albert's' death. At Market Square he turned into Sandgate, towards the bridge and crossed into the newer part of the old town, where the buildings were larger and better kept and the businesses more prosperous. Then around by the harbour, away from respectable, commercial Baxtergate, towards the sea again. The water of the harbour sparkled in the faint light of the Moon and the boats bumped gently against the wall, pushed by the incoming tide. Down here at sea level the breeze was definitely carrying the first traces of the fret that would encompass the town, come morning.

A clatter to his right drew his eye to the lip of the quay as a hand appeared over the rim just yards from his feet. A bundle of rope and wood was heaved up to sit on the edge, followed by a head and a young man clambered into view and crawled under the railing. He picked up the broken lobster pot, stood up and took a step away from the edge, almost colliding with Angelus before he saw him.

For a moment he looked straight into Angelus' eyes and smiled, before ducking his head politely and stepping aside with a murmured, "Your pardon, Sir." Then he settled the pot more firmly in his arms and continued down the street towards the bridge. Angelus took a long
scent of him, as he turned to watch him go.

Angel found himself sitting bolt upright in his bed. "Oh God! Jeb," he groaned, rigid with shock and memory, as part of his mind registered that he was awake and safely at home in Sunnydale. Collapsing back onto his pillows he hugged himself, shivering and gasping as he remembered: 1890. Whitby. They were in lodgings up on the West Cliff, awaiting passage on a trader to the Baltic. He had been a merchant heading for Russia with his wife, nephew and sick niece in tow. An accident on the docks had delayed their embarkation, so they took lodgings in one of the luxurious new apartments on the West Cliff, among the sea bathers, poets, artists and writers who spent their summers at that small, seaside spa.

Jebediah Browning, such a big name for such a slight young man. Fourteen years old, looking for work as a deckhand and in the meantime scavenging what he could, working as and when a hand was needed on any of the boats. He'd been apprenticed from the workhouse but his master had died the week before leaving him with nothing. Jebediah Browning, who was not nearly as innocent as his still childish face suggested. The promise of the man he could have grown to be was just beginning to show in his face and frame. Except he never made it to
fifteen, let alone to full adulthood.

Angelus had not been hungry that first night and he'd been keen to get back, to make sure William was behaving himself, but even as he held his family close and allowed them to feed, he'd been thinking about the flash of those eyes and the pretty deference with which the boy had apologised for his clumsiness. Lying in bed that long day, he'd made his plans and as soon as dusk fell he was out, tracking his prey and wooing him with food and beer in the hotel near the railway station. Then he'd taken him back and kept him for the entire week, while they waited for their passage.

Jeb, with his dark hair and blue eyes and merry laugh, who understood the rules of power and compliance from his childhood in the workhouse, where his pretty face had attracted attention before. Jeb, who'd laughed as he ate the largest meal he had ever seen in his life and confessed that he knew how to please. Who'd proved with his mouth, in the narrow yard off Baxtergate, that he had indeed been well taught. Jeb, who'd told Angelus of his dreams of independence and who obviously hoped that a week with this respectable merchant would help speed him towards them. He'd been sweet and hot around Angelus' rod and although shocked, he'd been
amenable enough to William joining them, once they got back to the lodgings, no doubt hoping for an even better reward.

Angel shivered at the memory, with both remembered desire and heart wrenching remorse. Poor Jeb. It had been when Darla and Dru had joined the game that he'd panicked. Not only had he never been with a woman, but their appearance in the bed had seemed to destroy some fondly held ideal of womanhood, and Dru had never been very restrained. Angelus had beaten her, for taking that first bite which should have been his, and tied her up across the room where all she could do was watch. Then he and Darla, between them, had played - over the next three days they stripped Jeb of first his dreams, then his beliefs and finally of his future.

Angel wept for the memories and hopelessly wondered why Jeb was haunting him now.

That evening found him patrolling the same area of town as on the night before. There was no particular reason for doing so, just an elusive scent that tugged at him and a feeling that something might be going down. If he happened to be in the shadows by a particular house when a particular young boy left to go home, well that
was coincidence, wasn't it? And if he then found that his patrol took him in the same direction? Well, he could make sure the boy got home safely at the same time. He was protecting an innocent and that was what Whistler had sent him here to do. After years and decades of despair, Whistler had shown him that he could do good, instead of hiding from the world. The promise of connection was there. He could live again. And while he was waiting for his promised salvation to arrive, he could make a start; make sure that the Master's minions didn't always find the buffet open and unattended. Sunnydale didn't have to be an all-you-can-eat.

So he watched, seeing the boy's wide, open smile as his friend made a parting joke and seeing also the way his posture slumped, once the door was closed behind him. He noticed the way the streetlights caught the auburn tints in the boy's hair, as it hung over his face, and how he never raised his eyes from the ground in front of his feet. He saw the awkward, hand-me-down clothes, the scuffed sneakers and the worn patches around the collar of his shirt. But why he saw these things, he didn't know.
Xander slipped into the house at ten minutes to ten and, knowing he was safe from recrimination, announced his presence by popping his head around the living room door. "Hi, I'm home."

His mother turned from the TV for a moment. "Hi, dear. Did you eat?"

"Yes, Mom. Jesse's Mom gave me something. Thanks."

She smiled. "Good. That's good. Have you done your homework?"

Xander smiled back. "It's the holidays, Mom. No homework to do. No school."

"Of course, dear. I forgot." she turned back to the TV.

Xander stood in the doorway for a moment watching them, then he sighed and turned away. In the kitchen he checked the fridge and found some Chinese takeaway, obviously left over from his parents' own supper. Grabbing a fork he hurried to his room.

He'd had a good day, really, just hanging with Jesse.
They'd even reclaimed the tree house for the afternoon and armed with apples and cheese and comic books had lounged around for hours, reading and joking and talking. Jesse had almost been back to normal and it had been great. The fact that Cordelia Chase had gone to LA for the day had only come up in conversation four or five times, but since that meant Jesse was free to spend time with Xander, Xander had been willing to humour his friend. They'd even ended up in a wrestling match at one point; rolling across the floor, each trying to get possession of the last apple. As soon as Xander realised that Jesse was getting bored and was about to give up, he'd allowed himself to be pinned down and Jesse laughed in mock triumph as he held the apple out of Xander's reach, his weight heavy on Xander's hips. But he'd also taken out his pen knife and cut the apple in two, giving Xander half. Xander hadn't wanted to move. Lying on his back with a mouth full of apple, he'd been happy. Then Jesse's face had changed, the smile had faded and he'd scrambled off Xander and started talking about something else, but that was okay, Xander had the memory and could treasure it and relive it, over and over, before he went to sleep.

Putting the empty takeaway cartons aside and climbing into bed, Xander was thrown back into gloom by the
memory that Jesse would not be free to spend tomorrow with him. He knew where Cordelia was going to be and had made it clear that Xander being with him, would not be welcome. 'Well he can go and stalk Miss Cordelia Chase for all I care', Xander thought angrily. 'I have things I can do and I don't need him. Maybe Willow'd like to go to the movies.' Staring up at the ceiling, he tried to remember what was showing. Not wanting to get up and find the paper - he didn't really want to see his parents again tonight, he resolved to check tomorrow and give Willow a call.

Pulling the covers over his head, he pushed one hand down inside his boxers and concentrated on remembering every move of the mock fight with Jesse.

4 Blood and love and duty

*Prompt: 65 - Gingery*

*Saturday, Sunday, Monday*
The welcome to Sunnydale sign crumpled to the ground without too much protest. Certainly, the big, black car didn't seem to notice the resistance, since it didn't slow down as it tore through the previously quiet streets, before screeching to a halt near the small garden in front of the town hall. The driver's door opened and a foot in a heavy boot stepped out and planted itself on the ground with a solid thump, followed by its partner and then the rest of a thin, young man's body, dressed in a long, black, leather coat. He glanced around the square with a proprietorial air, blowing out a cloud of acrid tobacco smoke and taking a deep breath full of the scents of the town in its stead. Nodding to himself, satisfied he was in the right place, he decided it was time to find a place to hole up for the day. He would begin his hunt at sundown.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike just knew it couldn't be easy. It should have been easy. He should be able to just walk up to Angelus and tell him the score. Explain what he needed, what Dru needed, and Angelus should help.

It had only taken Spike an hour to locate his Sire, even through the myriad of confusingly familiar scents, and for
a moment he'd been delighted to think that he wouldn't have to hang around in Sunnydale for long, after all. But he'd just watched Angelus take out one of his own; only a newly raised minion, but still a minion of Aurelius. That was just weird. It went against instinct. You could always recognise family and, on the whole, you didn't kill them. Certainly not for the simple crime of walking down the street. Individuals who schemed behind your back, who proved incompetent or got in the way, sure, it was common sense to get rid of them, but what Spike had just seen was so arbitrary.

It was obvious from the minion's reaction to Angelus' appearance, that he hadn't know him, but his fledgling demon had recognised Aurelius. His hesitation, his automatic move to bow or kneel, that had been his downfall. Angelus had staked him, just like that, when the poor bastard was about to offer obeisance. It was the soul, of course, but there had to be more to it than that. Last time Spike had seen Angelus, on a submarine in the middle of the Atlantic, Angelus had been protecting humans, but he hadn't killed Lawson at the end, let alone Spike, himself. Sure, he'd thrown them out of the submarine, miles offshore, but he'd known they would survive. So the soul wasn't the whole story.
There was hardly a vampire in this town who didn't belong to Aurelius. Spike could smell the Master everywhere. Which kind of explained the deceptive peace, if not the human inhabitants' blindness. The Master had never been one for above-ground living. He stayed below and built his court there, allowing his people to bring food to him, so Spike was not surprised that he'd not had sight of him, but it was odd for only minions to be about.

Minions were too stupid to keep their game faces out of sight, for the most part. So stupid they'd not even scented him, a true childe of the line. Minions who survived, tended to get better, but some never learnt to control their faces. Spike had seen Luke in the streets earlier. Luke had been with the Master for centuries and now he was here. Luke, with his unquestioning loyalty to his maker, doing what he was told and only exactly what he was told, still in permanent game face.

More worrying was the occasional hint of Darla. What he had scented so far was too tenuous for Spike to be sure if she was in town herself, or merely that she had made some of the vampires who were. He'd have to pin down one of her get and ask them where she was these days. Because if Darla was in Sunnydale, Spike would have to
revise his plans, just do a snatch and grab and get Angelus out fast. Angelus was his only hope. There was no chance that old Heinrich would agree to help his mad great grandchilde. The only person less likely to help was Darla, herself. The Master had never approved of Dru, although he'd called upon her gift occasionally. Spike he could not abide and the feeling was mutual. Even Angelus had only had his grudging respect, for most of his existence, and then only after he'd taken Darla and made a reputation for himself in Europe.

Spike allowed himself to muse on the nature of Darla. She was an ice-cold bitch and devoted to her Sire, but she'd defied him when Angelus was still a fledge and left his court to live the life Angelus wanted, at Angelus' side. Spike remembered back to the first twenty years of his own death. Much of the time Darla had behaved like a giggling school girl and, although she occasionally asserted her authority over Angelus, it was sometimes difficult to recognise that they were Sire and Childe. She allowed Angelus to rule her in ways that were not natural to the relationship. Spike had never seen him raise his hand to her, but he had seen the cold commands which she obeyed. Of course, he'd also seen her strike Angelus and force him to submit to her will, on occasion. The number of times she'd thrown him out of her room... She
was quite capable of ignoring him for days on end if she really wanted her way. Spike had never seen Angelus last more than a week of that treatment, before he went crawling back to her feet, full of apologies and promises of amends, willing to do whatever she wanted. He really didn't want to cross paths with Darla. Nor did he want her to confront and reject Angelus again, driving him out of town. God knows how long it would take Spike to find him if he did that.

Spike hadn't thought about Angelus and Darla together for close on a hundred years. Never really thought about it back then either, except in the ways it impacted upon him and Dru. Then, Angelus' relationship with Darla had been important to him because it often enough made the difference to whether they ate or not. Certainly it decided how much of Angelus' attention was likely to be directed Spike's way.

He paused in his thoughts, re-evaluating his memories with the objectivity of distance, separation and more experience of the world, and he suddenly realised that the true power had always been Darla's. The twisted game of 'Angelus In Command' had been just that - role-play for their mutual enjoyment. In truth Angelus had always been at Darla's feet. She'd just let him pretend
otherwise, most of the time, so she could lie back and enjoy not being responsible.

Hard on the heels of that insight came another, about the nature of his relationship with his own Sire. The personalities were different, but the motivations? Maybe it was being the female sire of a male childe. Vampires lived for centuries, but they were always the products of their human lives. What Angelus, Darla, Dru and he all had in common was a human life where the men ruled. The very fact that Darla had been an independent woman of her time could be what made letting Angelus 'rule' their family so attractive. No one truly escaped their past. Spike was willing to bet that even Heinrich's behaviour was still coloured by his human life, whatever and whenever that had been. After all, he lived in sewers and they were very like caves. Spike snickered to himself. And Dru? Dru had been the dutiful daughter of a middle-class merchant. She came from the stifling respectability of Trade. Barely twenty years his senior, she was hardly more than a fledge herself when she made him. Dru appeared to depend on Spike to a far greater extent than Darla had depended on Angelus, but in truth, was it very different? Dru had visions which, when they attacked, made her sound crazy and she had developed fey, dreamy mannerisms which lulled the unwary into
believing her harmless, but that was a mask. Under it, she was intelligent and calculating and quite capable of ruling a household. More than capable of ruling him. When she was well. And that brought him back to where he started. Dru needed her Sire, if she was ever to be well again.

The fact that Dru also wanted her Sire was a truth Spike had come up hard against many times in his un-life. It was a fact of his existence, like the grass being green; he no longer questioned it. He didn't even resent it. He was Dru's until she dusted, or she sent him away, and Dru belonged to Angelus. Angelus had released Spike from the sire bond with a simple phrase which Spike had been too euphoric to even recognise at the time. It was not until the next day, with Angelus gone again, that Spike had realised that the feeling of release was not a lingering result of Slayer blood, but actually a change in his status. In half his status, since Dru had never released him, as Angelus had never released Dru. And Dru was his true sire; his Sire of Blood. Angelus had had power over him, as the sire who had taken him on and trained him. Angelus had fed him blood and made him strong, but it was Dru's blood that made him and blood spoke to blood.
Shaking his head at his own uncharacteristic musings on what was well past, Spike brought himself back to 1996 and his current problems. So the Master was in Sunnydale, but apparently keeping himself scarce. That was interesting. Darla may or may not be in town, too. He would have to ask. And Angelus still had a soul. Angelus was his quarry. He needed Angelus, willing or not, to help Dru. So he needed a plan to get his help. Or if that failed, to kidnap him. Angelus was still Angelus, and always would be. That meeting on the submarine had shown Spike what 'Angel' was; still a user, still a cold-hearted bastard, even with the soul. Unlikely to kill his childe, but equally unlikely to go out of his way to help her. Spike would need to find a lever, something to encourage Angelus' help. It pained him to admit it, but only Angelus could do what needed to be done for Dru.

Spike drew back and continued to watch Angelus from a distance, careful not to come too close. Careful, so Angelus wouldn't sense him too clearly and realise that one scent that was Spike, amid all the other scents of Aurelius that filled the town like a familiar, family fug. He watched and waited and followed Angelus to his nest, before he retired himself to the motel that was currently enjoying his patronage.
The next night found him again trailing Angelus, trying to work out what the old bastard was up to. He watched as Angelus prowled the graveyard and killed a minion as it rose. And that was odd too - no one was waiting for the minion to rise. In a town owned by one family, there should have been someone there to collect. The lack of discipline was intriguing. It looked like too many minions were making minions and no one was taking responsibility. If he hadn't seen Luke he'd have imagined there were no true family members here at all, other than Angelus and himself... Maybe there weren't? But Luke never left the Master's side... had never done so at any time since he was made. Luke may be old enough to have acquired some authority, but he would always be a minion. He didn't have the power to fight his way to master status. He doubted Luke would choose to live if the Master died himself, or threw him off.

Spike shook his head as he tried to figure it out. Unless Luke was following orders, holding the fort until the Master arrived? That was possible and a minion in charge of the town fitted with the total sense of disorganisation. It also supported the notion that Darla wasn't around either, and that was good. Was that what Angelus was
doing? Actually stepping into a vacant space and taking responsibility for the family by killing off the weak?

He continued to watch throughout that night and the next, becoming more and more puzzled. It was clear that Angelus was weak, a kitten could have bested him, which would explain why he hesitated before engaging with any of the vampires already around town. It could also explain, in part, why he killed the newly risen. Maybe he was keeping in practice, while he regained his strength, but Spike hadn't seen him feed. In fact he'd seen him buy blood, for God's sake. As if pig's blood would do him much good.

After three nights of watching, Spike decided he really needed more information before he could act. It proved predictably easy to corner and catch one of Darla's make. Not that the creature knew much, but she was happy to talk when faced with a railroad spike, a stake and Spike's obvious status in the order. Spike got enough to be certain that Darla was out of the country, hunting up some book or other. Luke was holed up in a sunken church for some reason. The Master wasn't around, but was expected to return, according to what the creature had heard Luke say. She had no idea the significance of a particular new moon, but Spike heard the truth in her
voice so he disposed of her quickly.

Something was nagging at the back of his mind. He had a brief flash of Angelus standing over him. 'History's important, Boy. How can ye avoid making the same old mistakes, if y' don't study yer history?' Spike shrugged to himself - well he never had. It hadn't interested him. Languages yes, but history? It reminded him too much of Mr Snape, at school. For a moment he allowed his mind to wander back in time, through his personal history with Angelus. Angelus was his surrogate Sire, his mentor and teacher, his companion and General, his Alexander to Spike's Lysander, his Mercutio to Spike's Romeo, his Arthur to Spike's... Lancelot? Galahad? Spike shook his head in disgust. Now he was being ridiculous, but it did make him think. Maybe he'd been doing this all wrong? Maybe he shouldn't assume Angelus wouldn't help? Maybe he should just ask him? Maybe he should think about doing that tomorrow night. Or maybe he should just march over right now. Spike nodded to himself. He drew himself up, pulled his shoulders back and straightened the collar of his duster. Glancing around he tried to spot where Angelus had gone. 'Bugger!' He took a deep scent of the air and began to track.

Spike caught up with Angelus next to a recent grave.
Angelus was squatting down obviously waiting for the fledge to rise. Spike coughed to attract his attention. "One of yours, then?" he asked.

Angelus started and stood quickly, spinning on his heel to face Spike. For a moment Spike thought he saw a flash of welcome in Angelus' eyes, but then his expression tightened to one of hard disapproval. "What are you doing here, William?" he asked coldly.

'Oh yes. This was a brilliant plan,' thought Spike, but he had to try, now that he was committed. "Er... looking for you actually."

Behind Angelus the soil on the grave began to move.

Again, the fleeting expression that could have been pleasure, before Angelus' features hardened again. "Go away Spike," he said. "You have nothing to say to me, that I want to hear."

A hand appeared out of the ground, clutching at the air, then settling onto the soil to help the fledge pull itself free of its grave.

Spike took a half step forwards. "No mate, listen, it's..."
"Go away," Angelus interrupted. "In fact, get out of town. There's nothing for you here."

"It's Dru."

Angelus paused for a moment. "What about Dru?"

"She got hurt. She's fading. She needs you."

Angelus laughed. "Oh boy. That must have hurt. You, asking me for help?"

Spike felt the wash of useless failure threaten to swamp him, but he drew on his desperate need. "Not for myself. For Dru. She needs her Sire. You can make her well. She needs your blood. I can't lose her. Please?" He took a few steps towards his grandsire, lowering his head in supplication. "Whatever you want. Please come with me? A few months and you can make her well again. Strong. Then you can leave, if you have to. Or you could stay. Please, Sire?" By the time he'd finished he was ready to go down on one knee, if Angelus had looked like he wanted it.

He risked a glance at Angelus' face. His expression was
remote and cold. "Months, William? No, I don't have months to spare. I need to be here. The Slayer's coming."

For a moment Spike didn't understand, then it burst in on him with an explosion of incredulous joy. "Sire? You're back?" he cried. "This is fucking fantastic! I thought the soul had neutered you. But if you're planning on killing a Slayer..." Angelus looked about to speak, but Spike overrode him eagerly. "Please. She'll still be here when you get back. Or if she isn't, the next one will. There's always another Slayer. But come to Dru, first. Then we can kill the Slayer together. Did you know I was in New York in..."

"Shut up!" Angelus roared, shocking Spike to silence. "I'm not going to kill her." he explained. "I'm going to help her."

Spike's world rocked again. "Help her?" he gasped. "But...? Dru...?"

Angelus pulled himself up stiffly. Behind him the fledge was now free to its the waist and was hauling itself out of the ground, hands torn and bloody from its coffin, unnaturally bright, gingery hair tangled and full of soil, face and long black dress smeared with grime. It
scrambled to its feet.

"I have to be in Sunnydale when the Slayer arrives. She'll be here soon, in the next few months. I can't leave. I'm sorry, but I can't help you."

He turned away, just in time to be bowled over by the fledge and they fell together, in a tangle of limbs and torn lace. Spike watched as Angelus, lying on his back, attempted to keep her fangs away from his neck, unable, it seemed, to get sufficient purchase to throw her off.

Spike walked over and grabbed the fledge by the hair, hauling her away and forcing her to her knees at Angelus' side. He bent down, his mouth close to the fledge's ear. "Apologise," he growled. "Apologise to the Lord Angelus, for your disrespect."

As Angelus levered himself into a seated position, the fledge shot a glance at both of them and obviously decided to err on the side of caution. "I'm sorry, My Lords," she babbled, placing her hands flat on the ground and bowing her head. "I didn't mean any disrespect. I didn't know. I'll never do it again. I promise."

Spike sighed and looked down at Angelus in the dirt as he
lifted his other hand, to cup her chin. "Can't make good help these days," he observed as he twisted her head off. He slapped his hands together, to rid them of residual dust, but made no other move.

Angelus clambered to his feet, a confused expression on his face. "Why did you...?"

"My Sire," Spike sneered. "You might have forgotten about lore and duty, but I haven't. You may be a sorry, soul-having arse, but you're still family and that thing showed disrespect. It was trying to eat family. Can't have that, it's like incest. 'Sides, Dru needs you."

Taking a couple of steps back, Angelus settled himself into a solid stance, as if ready to resist another charge. "I'm not coming, Spike." Spike looked him up and down, causing him to glance down himself and notice the dirt and smeared grass stains on his shirt and trousers. He began to wipe at them, ineffectually, in an attempt to clean himself up.

"Right," Spike said. "So this is home sweet home, is it?" He turned his back. "I'll see you soon, then," he added, throwing the words over his shoulder as he walked away.
'Well, that was interesting,' Spike thought, as he left the graveyard. It looked like this might take a while. Briefly he considered leaving, going and fetching Dru and seeing if she could persuade her sire, where he had apparently failed. But if he left, Angelus might up sticks. Spike didn't believe that cock and bull story about waiting for the slayer so he could help her, not for a moment. Even souled up, Angelus couldn't have fallen that far. Spike needed a new plan. And in the meantime, he'd find a better base to work from than the motel, where the manager or room service felt free to walk into his room at anytime during the day. If all else failed, there was always Plan B. Or maybe that should be Plan C. As he sauntered through the human streets in search of a meal, he tried to work out how he could kidnap Angelus, now that Angelus knew he was in town.

5 A shot in the dark

*Prompt: 66 - Hue and cry*

**Tuesday**

Xander and Willow walked back to her house slowly. It had been nice spending time together. They'd gone for coffee before the movie and Willow had talked about her
new computer and what she was learning about 'The Net' and how she had met some people online who were real computer whizzes and were willing to teach her some really cool stuff, and had he ever heard of a thing called a computer virus? He admitted that he hadn't, but by the time they left to walk across the street to The Sun, he could no longer make that claim. He got the impression that there might be something a bit off about all this stuff, but Willow had assured him that she wouldn't do anything bad or dangerous. She said she was more interested in learning about hacking, which was really just curiosity, so he'd allowed himself to be re-assured, especially when she promised not to break into the Pentagon and set their computer off playing tick tack toe.

The movie had been okay, enough car chases to keep Xander happy and some smoochy bits for Willow. It wasn't very memorable, but since it was always just an excuse for an evening out, that didn't matter at all. As they left the cinema he noticed that the new Star Trek was about to open and Willow promised to call Jesse, so they could all go together. With that promise safe, he was able to listen with good humour as she spent most of the walk telling him even more about computer codes, and about how people always picked their birthdays, or
family names, as passwords and wasn't that stupid because you could find out about that sort of stuff so easily on The Net? A brief reawakening of his earlier concern caused Xander to question where she was thinking of hacking into and she muttered something about the high school having computerised student records and a plan for Cordelia's files, which made him laugh. Then she complained about how the banks' security was so much tighter than the school's, so he realised she was joking and got into the spirit. They spent the rest of the walk speculating about what they would do if she could hack into the Federal Reserve and steal millions of dollars without being caught. Xander had opted for a never ending supply of Ben and Jerry's and a big TV with surround sound. Willow had wanted a mainframe computer and maybe a yacht, until Xander reminded her that she got seasick on the roller-coaster, so she decided to buy them a house in the mountains instead. It had been fun.

After dropping Willow off at her house and extracting a promise that she would go to bed and sleep, instead of spending the night online, Xander set off in the direction of his own home, feeling more cheerful than he had in days.
He'd just turned off Oak onto Serenity Drive and was walking past Restfield Cemetery when something made him pause and look around. He could have sworn he'd heard a noise behind him, like a sharp footfall. The houses across the street were dark and the tree branches cast deep shadows, obscuring the street lights, but even so, he could see that the street was empty. Shaking his head at the craziness of his brain, he walked on. What kind of mugger would pick on a guy like him anyway? It was obvious he had nothing worth stealing.

When an arm caught him around the neck, he gave a strangled shriek - okay, maybe a mugger who was really desperate. He tried to struggle, but a hand came over his mouth and nose, joining the arm in cutting off his air supply. Beginning to panic, he tugged at the hand with all his strength, but got nowhere. Then, as suddenly as he'd been grabbed, he was free. He thought he heard a strange whooshing sound, but he was too busy falling to be certain. His knees hit the pavement with a painful crack and he only managed to save his face from a similar fate at the cost of scraping the skin off the heels of his hands.

Lying face down on the ground, he dragged in a few gulping breaths, then strong hands were turning him
over and helping him sit and a man's voice asked, "Are you okay? He didn't hurt..." The voice broke off as he looked up into the shadowed face above him. "Oh my God! Jeb!"

Still gasping, Xander struggled to his feet, pushing his rescuer away in his eagerness to not be lying helpless on the ground and raised his right hand to his mouth to ease the sting and clean off the blood. The man stood too and took a step back from Xander, shuffling awkwardly, his shoulders hunched, as if he was trying to shrink into himself. He was big and dark and... Xander looked around... the only other person in sight. Xander took a few more steps backwards, "What? What the fuck did you do that for? What d'you want?"

At that, the man looked up and raised his arms, palms towards Xander in a pacifying gesture of surrender. "Nothing" he stammered. "I didn't... There was a guy..."

"Yeah, sure there was," snapped Xander. "So where is he now, huh? It was you. Keep away from me!" Common sense returning in a rush, he spun on his heel and ran.

~*~*~*~*~
Angel stood on the sidewalk watching the fleeing figure. 'So that's it,' he thought. That was why he was dreaming of Jeb. The eyes were brown instead of blue, but otherwise... He groaned. Even here, even now, his past came back to haunt him. With a sigh of defeat, he turned and trudged home, disinclined to continue his patrol, tonight.

~*~*~*~*~

Across the street Spike watched his Sire walk away. Then he crossed the road, crouched down and sifted his fingers through the vamp dust on the ground. Standing up again he breathed deeply, taking in and memorising the last, fading scent of the boy, before following in the direction he'd fled.

Spike had heard every word of the exchange between Angelus and the boy, heard his Sire's shocked exclamation. He smiled, remembering that week over a hundred years ago. Oh yes, Jeb. Such a tasty morsel he'd been. So young and eager, at the start. Spike and Angelus had both found the unusual combination of dark hair and blue eyes intriguing. He remembered that mouth, so
warm and welcoming. He remembered how Jeb laughed, that first day. He remembered how, when Angelus fell asleep, he and Jeb had talked; two subs together, forming a brief bond over the old man's prick. Spike snorted, 'or the prick of an old man'. Jeb had told Spike of his dream of owning a cobble of his own and being his own man, with his own string of pots and maybe a net or two. There was an old gadgie in town with no family, he said, and Jeb thought he could buy himself into partnership, if he had some money up front. Spike had listened and encouraged him and shared some of his own dreams, suitably edited.

But then Darla and Dru came in and Dru angered Angelus, so Spike took her away to their own room. He'd not seen Jeb again, although he rather thought he'd gone on board ship with them, in the big trunk. Certainly it was heavy when they left the lodgings and was empty soon after they left port. That would be Darla, thinking ahead to possible returns and the need to avoid leaving evidence.

The scent led Spike to a small house fronted by a bare lawn with a couple of big palm trees close up to the bay window, which provided some minimal cover. There were a few dying plants in pots on the porch and the
paintwork was beginning to peel. He peered in through a gap in the curtains and saw two adults, probably the parents, in front of the TV. They had an air of passive permanence - obviously this was their usual evening 'activity'. Scanning the rest of the frontage and finding nothing, he followed the oil stained driveway, around the side of the house to a small back garden, also bare grass. A few shrubs around the edges were illuminated by the light from one window so he stalked over. The ground was lower here and the sill was above his head. Glancing around, he spotted a bicycle leaning against the fence. By propping that up against the wall he was able to use it as a step and peer into the room.

The boy was sitting on his bed, talking on the phone to some friend, describing his lucky escape from the big guy who attacked him and then pretended to help. "Yes, probably," he said. "But anyone with half a brain could see I don't have reward money..... No, he didn't even get a 'thank you'.... Huh? No! Of course not...... No, I just ran...... I don't know. Maybe, if I saw him again...... No, I don't really want to get involved with the police, even as the victim......... No. Okay... Yes, I will. Thanks Will. See you tomorrow?...... Great!...... The park then. Okay, there are...... The Six o'clock showing? Great! Yes........ No, you'll enjoy it........ You will........ Okay. Thanks.... Yes. Same to
you...... Night."

Spike watched as the boy put the phone down, ate half a cold pizza and got ready for bed. Then he jumped down, satisfied there would be no hue and cry to scare Angelus off, and went to see what was showing at the pictures tomorrow.

6 Movie Night

Prompt: 67 - Bangkok

Wednesday

Xander stood resentfully on the sidewalk, staring across the street at the cinema and holding onto his anger, hugging it to himself with self righteous determination. Although, inside, he knew that tomorrow it would all be forgotten and most likely they'd hang out again, right now he didn't care about that. He wanted to see the movie today! They'd have enjoyed the show and talked
about it all the way home, adding jokes and pointing out the best bits to each other, until they'd dissected the whole thing and lived it all over again. 'What's wrong with Jesse?' he thought. Normally, he'd be as eager as Xander, but instead he'd put him off. Again.

The argument had blown up out of nowhere, as such arguments do. Three people with too much time on their hands, hanging out in the park, slightly bored in the heat of a summer's afternoon. Jesse had wanted to go to the beach. Xander had held out for the movies. And Willow? Willow had been too busy trying to accommodate both of them to express a preference of her own. Eventually Jesse stood up and yelled at them about how they never did what he wanted to do. So then Xander had to stand up too and get in his face, yelling back, then storming off, tears prickling the corners of his eyes, face scrunched up at the injustice of Jesse's accusation, when they'd been doing what Jesse wanted every day for the last week. Just because Cordelia was leaving for France in two weeks, was no reason to not go to the movies today. Just because Cordelia was going to the beach, didn't mean they had to. It wasn't as if she even noticed Jesse. Or that Jesse would do anything, except sit and sigh and watch her from fifty yards away. If Xander believed Jesse would actually do something, like ask Cordelia out, and have a
snowball's chance in hell that she'd say 'yes', then sure, he'd have gone to the beach. Then maybe they could've gone to the movies together tomorrow.

But Jesse was never going to say anything to Cordelia and he'd still be following her around tomorrow, like some sad puppy. So instead of a fun evening out, Xander was here by himself. It wasn't fair! Well, he was going to enjoy it anyway! And when Jesse came to his senses and wanted to come? Xander would smile, maybe sneer, and say that he had other things to do. See how Jesse liked having to see a movie like this by himself. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, digging into the corners and gathering up the crumpled dollar bills and small change. Clenching his hand around them, hot and sweaty with his anger and indignation, he marched across the street.

Xander settled into his seat in the middle of the middle row and dipped his hand into the big tub of popcorn, his eyes already glued to the screen even though, at the moment, all it was showing were ads for hot dogs and car dealerships. He felt, rather than saw someone sit down in the seat to his right.

"This is gonna be good," said a voice next to him.
Xander spared half a glance and a grunt of agreement.

His neighbour didn't seem to notice Xander's lack of enthusiasm for conversation because he continued, "I hear this is the best one yet. Plus, it's got that bald guy as the captain," as he settled himself into a comfortable slouch, knees resting against the back of the seat in front.

Feeling obliged to reply, Xander gave a tentative smile and a snorted laugh of agreement. "Yeah, Patrick Stewart's cool," he said, turning his head to look. He saw a young man with slicked back hair that glowed white in the subdued lighting.

The guy smiled back. "Brilliant special-effects too. I read that somewhere."

His neighbour seemed chatty and Xander discovered that he really didn't mind. It was actually nice. Friendly. "And the Borg." he agreed. The guy didn't have any snacks, so he tilted his tub, offering. The guy smiled and reached over, taking a small handful with a nod of thanks. Then Xander's eyes were drawn back to the screen as the trailers started and he was sucked into the images, oblivious to the small fidgets of the other cinema goers.
and to the automatic movement of his own hand between the popcorn tub and his mouth.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike was actually enjoying himself. Sitting in an open air cafe, across a table from a barely pubescent man-boy, talking about science fiction movies and TV, he was actually enjoying himself.

They'd exchanged views on the whole Vulcan mysticism rubbish, on the temporal inconsistencies of the Terminator and the stupid impracticality of chain-mail bikinis for women warriors, no matter how nice they looked. One way or another they'd agreed on all counts. He'd made sure of that. Just as he'd used his skills to subtly direct the conversation the way he wanted it to go. Talking about the original Star Trek, they'd agreed that Spock was cool but dorky, that William Shatner was sometimes just plain embarrassing, although Xander held out that that was at least as much the fault of the scripts as of the actor, and that no one could announce a crisis like Scottie.

It was when they got to discussing the character of Bones
that Spike suggested, "You know, I reckon he was gay. I always thought there was something going on between him and Spock."

Xander spluttered over his Coke and laughed. "You think so?" he asked.

Spike smiled "Well yeah! It's bleeding obvious, if you look at it sideways."

Xander seemed slightly embarrassed, but his bravado apparently required that he not wimp out on the conversation. "What do you mean, 'sideways'?" he asked.

Spike settled in, leaning forwards, resting his forearms on the table. "Sideways is sideways," he explained. "Just look at the World and step sideways - leave all your preconceived ideas and prejudices where they are, step away from them and look at all it again."

Xander looked like he hadn't really followed that, so before he could speak Spike continued, "I mean, there's nothing wrong with gay sex is there?" Xander shook his head in agreement, like the dutiful twentieth century teenager he was. "It's just that people, like the Church
and teachers and authority, they don't approve of it. But just 'cos they say it's wrong, does that mean it is?"

Xander nodded, thoughtful now. "No, I guess not. I guess I never really thought about it, is all."

"Really?" Spike allowed just the right degree of incredulity to seep into his voice. "You never thought about it? How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen? You never thought about what it'd be like t'kiss another guy? See if it was different from kissing a girl?"

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was too embarrassed to admit to only being sixteen and never actually having kissed a girl, let alone another boy. "Er, well maybe?" he said, uncertainly. Looking at Spike, he couldn't decide how old he was, although he was obviously older than Xander. He had an air of experience, but his enthusiasm and certainty reminded Xander of Jesse - the way he took hold of his argument and the energy he expended on it. Xander decided he was probably about twenty. He acted too young to be a proper adult, but twenty? Twenty wasn't old, but it was leaving home and being independent, old.
Twenty was experienced, but not boring and middle-aged.

"Doesn't matter," Spike said with a casual wave of his hand. "It wasn't a test." From anyone else, that would have been a put down, but the laughter in Spike's eyes robbed the dismissal of any malice and Xander found himself relaxing and smiling back. Then, without him really knowing how it happened, Xander found that the conversation had shifted and, within moments, they were deep into a friendly dispute about the authenticity of the story in Jean-Claude Van Damme's movie, The Quest, which Xander and Jesse had seen, before Jesse went crazy. That led to Spike telling some amazing stories about places he'd been in the Far East and Europe and Xander was too busy enjoying himself to worry about whether Spike had guessed that he was still in school.

It was almost midnight before Xander thought to check his watch and realised how late he was. The cafe had closed around them, without him even noticing. He scrambled to his feet apologetically and again Spike made it easy, standing up without Xander needing to make up a story to explain why he apparently had a curfew.
They left the table and headed out towards the street, but as they reached the gap in the half wall that was the entrance to the cafe, Spike hesitated, looking almost shy. "You know? I really enjoyed this," he said.

Xander felt like his smile should probably split his face in half. "Yeah, me too."

With the same hesitation, as if he was afraid Xander would refuse, Spike asked, "You want to meet up again, some time?"

And wasn't that amazing? But for once, Xander didn't feel awkward at all. "Yeah Sure! That would be so cool. Do you live round here? You're not just visiting, are you?"

"Think I might be around for a while, yeah. Got to find myself a place. Somewhere with cable. Hey!" he said, as if it had just occurred to him. "Then we can watch all the re-runs on the Sci-Fi Channel, eh? You ever seen Dr Who?"

"Sure, yeah. That would be neat." Summoning up his courage, Xander asked, "Are you doing anything tomorrow? During the day?"
Spike's expression was regretful. "Sorry. Kind of busy during the day tomorrow," but before Xander could stammer out a reassurance that it didn't matter, he continued, "But I'm free late afternoon, if you are? You want to come over and watch a video or something? Motel's nothing special, but it's okay and I've got a TV and video player in the room." At Xander's dumb but enthusiastic nod, he added, "Right! So you've really never seen 'Trainspotting'?" They sorted out the details and Xander had stepped out onto the sidewalk when Spike spoke again. "Hey. I left something. Listen, I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?" He raised his hand in a casual wave as he stepped back into the shadows, towards the table they'd occupied. "Don't forget, okay?"

Xander laughed and waved back. "No way! I'll see you at five o'clock." He turned and headed home.

He felt light and happy. He had a new friend. Someone just as good as Jesse, for the talking and stuff, but older too. And that was all kinds of amazing; that an older guy would like him. Usually the older kids knocked him out of their way and looked down at him as he sprawled on the ground at their feet. That is, if they noticed him at all. But Spike... Spike wasn't a kid and had not only noticed him, he'd talked to him. And he was cool and really
knowledgeable and worldly wise. And foreign too. That made the fact that he liked Xander somehow even more amazing. He must have met so many, much more interesting people, before coming to Sunnydale. From what he'd said of his past, he seemed to have travelled a lot, although Xander wasn't sure he believed all Spike's stories. The red lights in the windows in Amsterdam, maybe, after all the term 'Red Light District' must have come from somewhere, but the idea that boys could dress up as girls and really fool people, like he said they did in Bangkok? Xander couldn't believe that one was true. But he didn't care. He'd had the best evening he could remember with Spike. And he was going to see him again tomorrow. Xander was going to visit a guy who was staying in a motel. By himself. Like a grown-up would.

At that thought, he forced his mind to a halt. 'No, come on Harris.' he thought. 'You can't think like that. That is so not cool. He's not a grown-up, like you were some little kid. He's just a guy. Who happens to be a few years older than you. Grown-ups aren't friends. But he is.' Xander hugged himself again and wandered on, replaying as much of the conversation as he could remember, in his head, so he could enjoy it all over again. He really hadn't ever thought of Bones and Spock like that before. But now that he did...
Xander crept quietly into the house, hearing the TV droning in the living room, but no other sounds. He breathed a quiet sigh of relief and slipped down the hall to his own room and into bed.

And dreamed of blue eyes that really saw him.

Once again, he had failed to notice the dark shadow that guarded his walk home.

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Spike waited until Xander was out of sight, before leaving the cafe. He saw his Sire turn the corner of the street and start to follow the boy. 'Old man's really slipping,' he thought. 'That was too close. He must be well off his game not to sense me.' Although, it had been chance that Spike had caught the feeling at the edge of his brain that signalled that his Sire was near, but not in sight. Even so, the old man was slipping. Spike knew he should think some more about what that meant. But first, he had a more immediate game to play and plans to make. The boy had taken the first hook, but he was nowhere near landed yet.
Thursday

For some reason, he wasn't sure why, because he wasn't still angry, Xander didn't tell Jesse and Willow about his new friend. Part of it, he thought, was just wanting to have a secret. But the biggest part was probably because they didn't ask. He asked Jesse about the beach and he asked Willow more about her new computer, but they didn't ask him what he'd done with his evening. 'No,' he thought, he wasn't angry, although it was possible he was a bit hurt. So, when Jesse suggested they go and see the new Star Trek movie, Xander just said that he'd already seen it and didn't mention Spike, or his plans for that afternoon with Spike. And when Jesse went off, stalking Cordelia again, he told Willow that he had to do some chores for his Mom. She looked surprised, but it didn't take her long to get enthusiastic about the idea of Xander spending a summer's afternoon sorting out the
junk in the Harris' basement and she went off quite happily to play with her computer, leaving Xander unsure whether he was relieved by her gullibility, or offended by it. He was certainly slightly offended to realise that she could rush off so readily to spend time with people she'd never even met, face-to-face, rather than be with him, but he did his best to shrug that off, reminding himself forcefully that he wanted her to not be hanging around him. The fact that it was only two o'clock and he still had three hours to kill before he could reasonably go to Spike's motel, just meant he could go and buy some snacks to take with him, so he'd be bringing something to the party.

He took a quick detour home, where he found his mom in the kitchen washing last night's dishes and his dad in the living room, supposedly reading the help wanted ads in the Sunnydale Echo, but obviously already eyeing the bottle of whisky on the shelf. It was no sort of challenge to his secret ops skills, to slip a hand into the pocket of his dad's coat and extract $10. His dad wouldn't remember it had even been there in the first place. Telling his mom he was going to Jesse's house, he made his escape and headed to the supermarket, spending a contented hour choosing chips and chocolate and candy. Then he went to ground in the Park and waited for the
afternoon to pass.

By the time he set off for Spike's place, walking as slowly as he could since he was still early, the supplies he'd bought were somewhat diminished, but there was enough left for him to feel he would be making a contribution. He approached the motel with caution, terrified that he'd knock on the wrong door, or that it was the wrong motel, even though he'd written the address down. Pausing on the sidewalk, he studied the low, sprawling building. It was just like the motels he'd seen on TV shows. He pulled the carefully guarded and much handled scrap of paper out of his pocket and studied it, looking up at the sign above the entrance, just to be sure. Yep, The Downtowner Motel. That's what it said. Taking a deep breath and hoping that he wasn't about to make a fool of himself, he walked through the entrance and along the rows of parked cars, searching for room 15. It might be a plain and boring motel to most people, but it was still exotic to his eyes.

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Spike waited impatiently for the boy to arrive, but he counted to five before climbing off the bed and going to
answer the knock on the door. Didn't want to appear too eager, that was the kid's role. And he didn't disappoint - the tentative smile he was sporting as the door opened, transformed into a huge grin of relief at Spike's warm welcome.

"Xander! Glad you could make it. Come in, mate. What you got there?" he asked, standing back from the reflected light of the summer's afternoon and pulling the door wide for his visitor to enter.

Xander held out the bag he carried. "Just some snacks. I figured if we're going to watch a movie, we have to have snacks, so... well..." He looked a little shamefaced. "I got more, but I ate some of them," he added as he walked over to the foot of the bed and put the bag down. "But there's still enough for both of us." Pausing, he looked around, taking in the room, the bed, the chest of drawers with the TV on top and the door into the bathroom. There was very little space for anything else. He turned to face Spike and glanced down, and Spike saw him notice his bare feet.

"That's great!" Spike said. "Thanks mate. I should've thought of that." He gestured at the bed. "Grab a seat. Sorry about the accommodation. It's a bit cramped, but
I've got a lead on a flat, so it's only temporary."

Xander shook his head. "No, it's fine. It's great, even. You still want to watch a movie?"

"Sure. Got it right here," Spike said, picking up the video cassette and brandishing it. "Trainspotting." Turning to the video player, he laughed. "Let's see how good you are at foreign languages. I bet you a dollar, you need a translator."

Xander toed off his sneakers and sat down on the bed, leaning against the headboard, while Spike pushed the cassette into the VCR, before walking back to the other side of the bed and settling next to Xander. Leaning forwards, he grabbed the bag and dragged it over. "What you brought, eh?"

As the tape started and the inevitable ads for future releases began to play, Xander proudly emptied the bag onto the bedspread, between them. 'Yeah,' thought Spike. 'You're as ripe for the plucking as the child you resemble. Just a little more encouragement, a bit of a sympathetic ear and you'll sit there nice and quiet, while I work out what to do with you.' He smiled at Xander and grabbed a bag of hot and spicy corn chips, watching
Xander's face light up again at his apparent success in choosing the right snacks. 'Oh yeah,' he thought. 'You're desperate for something and I'm the man to nurture that need and fulfil it. You're mine, boy, and with you, somehow, I'll get Angelus. The only question is, do I need you alive to do it?'

8. Shifting Sands

*Prompt: 69 - Confrontational*

**Thursday afternoon, Friday, Saturday morning**

Xander didn't have as much trouble as Spike apparently expected with Trainspotting, although there were some words that just didn't make any sense at all, and the suppository recovery scene was totally gross. Spike laughed at him and accused Americans in general of being obsessed with living disinfected lives, although when challenged, he agreed it was a bit extreme, even if it was, he said, a metaphor for the desperation of the
addict. Which made Xander grin at him, teasing him for his sudden attack of education.

That settled, Xander sat back to watch the rest and Spike leaned over the side of the bed, fumbling around a bit. Righting himself, he casually passed Xander a bottle of beer. "Might not be legal here, mate, but in the good old UK you can go out to pubs once you turn 18, even if you want to stick to the letter of the law."

Xander hesitated, but honestly? There was no way he was going to say no, when it was obviously something Spike expected. So he took it, watched Spike crack the lid of his own and copied him. Then he sipped slowly, making it last, as they cheered Renton on, through his adventures to his final bid for freedom. It wasn't the kind of movie Xander would normally have watched, but it was interesting and once he got past the language barrier, and the gross out, he found that he really enjoyed it.

He didn't stay long after it was over, not wanting to outstay his welcome, so it was great that Spike obviously still liked him, because he suggested that Xander might want to come over again and watch Bruce Willis the next afternoon. Xander agreed immediately and walked home
through the late afternoon sunlight, happy that there was someone who enjoyed his company and wanted to spend time with him.

Neither Jesse nor Willow phoned him that evening and since he felt neither confrontational enough to chase Jesse, nor up to dealing with Willow's guilt when she realised she'd abandoned him, he didn't call them either. Instead, he spent the night in his room, sorting through his comics and trying to judge whether or not Spike would enjoy them too.

The next day was much the same as the day before, but without the need for occasional translation. They watched Die Hard: With a Vengeance, cheering McClane and Zeus through the hoops the bad guy set for them and afterward they sat and talked it all over, sharing the best bits, while Xander nursed a single beer and watched Spike drink his way through the rest of the six pack. He didn't seem to get even a little bit drunk, which amazed Xander and secretly impressed him. He wished his parents had that kind of tolerance.

Again the time slipped by as they talked about all sorts of things. Spike had never really got into comics, but when Xander described some of his favourites, he seemed
really interested, so Xander promised to bring some over, next time. Spike described some concerts he'd been to, talking casually about seeing the Rolling Stones at a small club in London, which was amazing to Xander, who couldn't imagine a huge band like the Stones playing anywhere but big arenas. Spike shrugged that off with his opinion the there was no atmosphere in venues like that. Xander nodded dumbly in agreement as he tried to imagine Mick Jagger at the Bronze.

Eventually Xander got up to leave and Spike walked out with him, saying he had to head into town to see 'a bloke' about some business. Xander wanted to ask what business had brought Spike to Sunnydale, but somehow he never found the opportunity, as the conversation did its usual thing and swerved across every topic under the sun. At the town centre their paths diverged and he stood for a while watching Spike walk away, past The Sun, before he sighed contentedly and turned towards home.

The next day was Saturday and Xander was up early, for him. He decided to surprise Spike with a late breakfast and some comics, so he crept into the kitchen, taking care not to make a noise that might wake his parents, and raided the fridge for bread, butter and jelly and even
found a forgotten and unopened packet of Christmas cookies hiding behind an aging box of corn flakes in the back of one of the cupboards. Stuffing them all into his backpack, with the best of his collection, he set off for the motel, anticipating a day of lazing around, talking and reading and sharing one of his favourite hobbies with someone he knew would get a kick out of them, once he'd had the chance. But when he arrived, Spike wasn't there. The door to Spike's room was open and the maid's trolley was parked outside. He stood in the empty doorway, staring in shock.

He couldn't believe it. Spike had been going to see someone, a 'bloke', but he hadn't said anything about leaving. Not so soon. Not at all. Xander kicked himself for not asking about Spike's business. Maybe it had been successful, so Spike didn't need to stay in Sunnydale anymore? Maybe he'd left town? Maybe he'd gone home to England? But he wouldn't do that, would he? Not without saying 'goodbye'! Standing dumbstruck on the porch, Xander tried to gather his thoughts as he peered past the trolley, into the room.

Just as he was about to turn away, the maid came out of the bathroom. He cleared his throat to attract her attention. "Excuse me?" he asked, nervously. "The guy
who was in this room, do you know where he went?"

She shook her head and shrugged indifferently, not looking at him. "I was just told he was gone this morning and go to clean up after him." She glanced around. "He wasn't so bad. Not like some, leaving their take away cartons all over the floor." She looked up and caught his eye. "Friend of yours?" she asked. Xander nodded and her demeanour changed as she smiled sympathetically. "Well, he'll probably call then." Xander brightened at that thought. "Tell you what," she suggested, "why don't you go ask at the desk? He might have left a message, or a forwarding address?"

Feeling the relief flood through him, Xander smiled at her. "Yeah," he said, "I never thought of that. Thank you. Thank you, so much." He caught her amused smile as he left, but for once he didn't care as he raced for the office, praying that Spike had just changed motels, rather than left town entirely.

Sure enough, when he asked at the desk, the clerk dug out an envelope and passed it to him. Xander was a little surprised that he wasn't asked for his own name, as proof, but there it was, in fancy flowing handwriting, across the front: 'Xander Harris' with 'for collection' in
smaller letters in the top right corner. With a huge smile, he took it and carried it outside to read in private.

*Hey, Mate,* it read.
*I hope you get this, but I guess if you're reading it, you must have.*
*Remember I said I had my eyes on a flat (sorry - apartment, I should say)? Well, I got something. I moved in last night. So why don't you come over?*
*3 Torres Heights*
*Just off Crawford Street.*
*It's better than a flat. You can't miss it. It's a small cottage, in the grounds of a big mansion place. Follow the road around the back of Crawford Street and it's the third gate on the left. It's got a big white '3' on the mail box. I'll be in all day.*

Xander smiled at the last sentence,

*And if you don't get this, why am I bothering to write it? I'll give you a call, as soon as they fix the phone.*
*See you soon, mate,*
*Spike*

Xander hurried out of the motel and back through town, past the end of his own street, to the bottom of
Crawford and followed it up the hill, until he sighted the strange mansion ahead of him. That must be the place Spike meant, and sure enough, Torres Heights was a narrow road branching off, heading further up, on the right. He followed it as it curved steeply round, amazed at the sudden quiet. So close to town, but he could be in the middle of nowhere. He couldn't even hear any traffic.

And there it was, the red mail box with a big, faded, white '3' painted on it. The gate was open and Xander followed the short path to the door of the low, dark house. It was just one storey, with tiny windows and a deep porch. He climbed the steps and knocked on the door.

9. A bird in the hand

Prompt: 70 - Arcane

Saturday

Spike was woken by the knocking on his new front door. For a moment he was disoriented, which he later decided was forgivable, since the last time he'd had a front door that anybody actually knocked on was over a hundred years ago. He dragged himself out of the bed he'd only fallen into a scant, he looked at the godawful clock on
the wall as he shuffled down the hall and raised an eyebrow as he did the calculation, five hours ago. Okay, not so bad, but 11.30 was still no time to be up and about. At this time of year, it was still nine hours until sunset.

Peering through the spy hole he groaned at the sight of that damned boy on his porch, bouncing nervously up and down as he waited. Spike rested his forehead against the solid wood and considered opening the door, dragging the kid in by the scruff of his neck and having himself an early breakfast, before falling back into bed for another three hours, at least. The image was so appealing that he almost gave in to it but, just as he reached for the door knob, he remembered Dru and the reason he was in Sunnydale without her and the fact that Xander was the only chink he had yet seen in Angelus' front.

It had taken months of tracking down scrolls and books full of often unintelligible, and usually irrelevant, arcane rubbish to find the possible cure for Dru's condition. Then it had taken another couple of months to locate her sire. Now he was almost there. He just needed to work out how to get the final ingredient he needed for the spell.
Twenty years of intimate experience of his grandsire, during the first years of his death, had taught Spike to read Angelus' moods. Angelus, in the days when they had been a family, was occasionally reckless, usually fun, often authoritarian and sometimes, when he really set his mind to something, exceedingly stubborn. Those were the times when Spike and Dru shut up and knuckled down to do whatever Angelus had decided. Even Darla tended to go along with Angelus' plans when he got that look - the same one he was wearing when he told Spike he wouldn't leave Sunnydale to help Dru. Well, if Angelus wouldn't help voluntarily, he'd have to be persuaded. With a sigh, Spike plastered a smile on his face and opened the door.

"Xander! Hi! You found me. Come in, come in." Stepping back, he allowed the child entry and closed the door behind him. "Hope you weren't knocking long. Come in to the kitchen and I'll make some coffee."

An expression of almost comical embarrassment spread across Xander's face. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you? Listen, I can go. We can do this another time..." He trailed off, reluctantly.
With a casually dismissive wave of his hand, Spike replied, "Nah! Don't worry about it. 'S just that I got the lease sorted late yesterday and then I couldn't wait to move in, so I was late to bed. Really, I should thank you. I don't like sleeping the whole day away." He did a quick mental check, reminding himself that the place was indeed presentable for a human to visit without being alarmed by any left-overs, and headed to the kitchen. "Think I need to get an alarm clock," He said, over his shoulder, scratching his nails through his hair and giving a theatrical yawn. "You usually up at the crack of dawn?"

Still slightly nervous, Xander followed Spike to the back of the house. "No, this is early for me," he said. "But I got your note when I went to the motel and you said you'd be in all day, so..." He stopped uncertainly in the doorway and watched as Spike poured water into the coffee machine, then he brightened. "Hey, I brought breakfast."

Turning, Spike gave him an encouraging smile. Really, it was a bit pathetic, the expression of hopeful eagerness, but Spike wasn't about to start looking this gift horse in the mouth, so he gestured towards the table. "That's good of you. Here, take a seat. I haven't had a chance to shop properly yet. Not even got milk. You okay with
black?"

"Sure, yes, thanks. Umm, I mean, black's fine."

Reaching up into a cupboard for a couple of mugs, Spike closed his eyes and suppressed another sigh. 'You need this one,' he reminded himself. 'Not sure how, yet, but he's important. It's only ten hours. You learnt from the best and you've played a mark for longer than that, before. Just pull yourself together and concentrate.'

Coffee set to brew, he dragged out a chair and sat down. Meanwhile, Xander had emptied the contents of his backpack onto the table and Spike's eyes fixed on the pile of brightly coloured comics. Okay, so they were going to bond over picture books. If that's what it took, he could do that. He rubbed one hand across his eyes to force them clear and sat up, ready to be interested in whatever Xander was about to say.

Over a breakfast of bread and jam, Spike encouraged Xander to explain his love of comics and by the time he was on his third coffee the task of keeping his guest happily occupied was no challenge. It wasn't even a chore. The boy was naturally enthusiastic and that enthusiasm was infectious. He'd brought about twenty
different comics with him and he spent the meal passing them to Spike, one at a time, pointing out the different artists and explaining which were best, and why.

By eating slowly Spike managed to stretch the meal out so it lasted more than an hour as he watched the boy relax and wax eloquent. Eventually however, he decided that they had exhausted the teaching part of the session and Xander was more than happy to acquiesce to his suggestion that they leave the tidying up and relocate to the living room, to read a few of the collection, taking more coffee and the box of biscuits with them.

The house was furnished in the typically haphazard manner of rented accommodation, with no style but with an eye to comfort, so the sofa was a huge four seater, dominating the small sitting room and swallowing them whole when they sat. The only addition Spike had insisted on was the large screen telly which occupied much of the remaining space. Xander's eyes went wide. "Wow!" he said as he gazed at it in awe. "Can we watch some TV? Do you get cable?"

Spike laughed. "'Course I do. Wouldn't have taken the place if it didn't have cable. But that's for later. I want to read some of these comics of yours first, see what all the
fuss is about, eh?"

With a nod, Xander spread the comics out on the coffee table. "Here, try this," he said, passing one over. "I just got it last week and I've already read it, like, six times." Selecting another for himself, he toed his shoes off and mirrored Spike's position, leaning into the corner of the sofa, with his feet stretched out along the seat.

Spike suppressed a smile of satisfaction at the boy's obvious acceptance that this was a house where he could relax and do what he wanted, but he couldn't resist reinforcing the message. "Comfortable?" he asked.

With a suddenly nervous expression, Xander started to put his feet back on the floor, but Spike stopped him. "Hey, don't. 'S okay. Wasn't trying to tell you what to do. There's no rules in this house against putting your feet up."

With a smile of gratitude Xander relaxed again. "Umm, sorry. It's just, I suddenly remembered that Jesse's Mom doesn't let us do this. And Willow's Mom would have a fit if I even took my shoes off, so..."

Spike grinned at him. "Well, I ain't your mom, or theirs,
so that's not a problem. You do what you want, mate." He pulled his knees up, rested the comic Xander had given him against his thighs and opened it, glancing up and catching Xander's eye as he did so, to emphasise the point.

The boy opened his mouth to say something, hesitated for a second, but true to form he couldn't keep his thoughts inside and there was a distinct note of envy in his voice when he said, "It must be so cool, having an apartment of your own, where no one tells you what to do, or to shut the noise down."

Spike laughed. "Live with your parents still, do you?" He gave a mock shiver. "You need to get out, mate. Live your own life." He cast his gaze around the room. "Can move in here, if you like. There's plenty of room for two. Would be nice to have a flatmate." He stopped as if embarrassed. "Umm, well, only if you wanted to, of course. I mean... the rent's covered, so it wouldn't cost you much." He paused as the boy's face flushed with the expected embarrassment and he began to squirm with indecision.

After a few moments, Xander seemed to pull himself together. He stilled, raised his head and looked straight
across at Spike, holding his gaze, although his face flushed even more. "Wow! That's... Umm... Thank you. I mean... wow... even Willow never... but... but I can't...."

Deciding it was time to let the kid down gently, before he spontaneously combusted, Spike interrupted, "No, of course you can't. You don't even know me." He grinned. "I could be a serial killer, for all you know, who'll stab you in your sleep. Forget I said anything. It doesn't matter."

Xander's laugh turned slightly hysterical. "No, it's not that. It's just..." He took a deep breath. "You see... I'm actually only sixteen and I'm still in school, so I can't move out. And I know you thought I was older and I'm sorry that I didn't tell you before, but it never came up and I didn't want you to think I was just a stupid kid, and I would love it if I could move in here, but I don't think my parents would let me, and even if they didn't notice at first, they'd be sure to notice eventually, and then... and then..."

His voice hitched as he appeared to run out of breath, so Spike pre-empted his attempt to gather more air into his lungs and continue, "Oh," he said. "Well, you're right, I did think you were older. But... that doesn't mean I'd think you were a kid, just because I found out." Injecting
a note of sincerity into his voice, he went on. "I like you, Xander. You're my friend." He shrugged. "I'm over here, in a strange country, where I don't know anybody, and you..." He paused, as if thinking. "Well, you're my friend, alright? I don't care how old you are, or how young. And if you ever need a place to crash, well..." He left that hanging and changed tack. "Anyway, isn't there a rule, or something, that when you turn sixteen, you're not a boy anymore, but a young man? In the middle-ages, boys became men at fourteen and could inherit and go to war and get married, and stuff." He paused to assess the impact of his little speech. Xander was gazing at him with rapt attention, so he laid it on a bit thicker. "It's not years, it's whether you feel like you're old enough to be a man. Just because the government says you can't leave school, or whatever, doesn't mean you're not a man now." He stopped there, knowing that he'd buttered the boy up enough to make his point. Xander would remember this statement of Spike's faith in him and it would germinate and bloom in his subconscious, even if they never said anything on the subject again. He rather thought he wouldn't have to. He could already see the subtle changes in Xander's posture as he absorbed the concepts Spike had thrown so casually at him. There was no way the kid was going to do anything to lower himself in Spike's eyes after this.
With a private smirk, Spike returned to his comic book, while Xander sat frozen, gazing blindly into space.

10 Of sleep and dreams

*Prompt: 71 - Aroused*

**Saturday night, Sunday**

Spike really didn't like having so little to go on, but after nights of watching Angelus he'd still only seen one possibility for optimism - Angelus' reaction when he killed the fledge that attacked Xander and his subsequent stalking of the boy. He could feel the beginnings of a plan forming in the back of his brain and he knew that as long as he didn't try to force it, it would eventually work it's way to the front. When it got there, he'd know what he needed to do. In the meantime, he'd enjoy the game.

Standing next to the sofa and looking down on the slumped body, he considered Xander's reaction when he
woke up. Bending down, he straightened the boy's limbs and spread a blanket over him. Then he picked up the almost empty glass of coke and emptied it down the kitchen sink, refilled it and placed it carefully within reach, on the coffee table. He'd have a hell of a thirst when he woke up and Spike wanted to continue to play the part of a good host, at least for a little while longer. But for tonight, he was safe to go out - Xander wouldn't wake from his drugged sleep until long past dawn.

As he shrugged on his coat, he found himself looking over towards the sofa again. Lying out, like a body waiting for burial, Xander's mouth was lax, his face expressionless, showing none of its usual animation and Spike was surprised to discover that he missed that. Once again he'd found himself having fun in the boy's company. They'd read comics, talked about everything and nothing and watched a couple of films, while eating the take-away Spike phoned to order from the Chinese in town.

Xander had immersed himself in the movies, laughing at the crazy campness of The Rocky Horror Picture Show and then, with Spike's second, very different choice, obviously identifying with both Jody, the solider, and Fergus, during The Crying Game. When Dil's true nature
was revealed, Spike thought he'd caught a hint of aroused excitement from the boy. He'd certainly heard a soft sigh at the final scene, with it's promise of an unconventional, but somehow hopeful, future.

That had allowed Spike to explore the hint of scent he'd picked up. An innocent comment about how everyone was different, but some people weren't tolerant of those differences, led to a discussion, where Xander revealed more than he knew about his feelings towards his friend Jesse and Spike had hinted, without actually saying, that he understood those feelings. An almost, but not quite, turn of the conversation allowed Spike to offer to show Xander his own collection of 'comics' and Spike smiled to himself at the memory of Xander's expression of surprise that Spike had any, and his initial shock at the nature of them. The front covers looked innocuous enough, glossy pictures of half naked men, but when Xander saw what was inside the first one, he'd turned bright red and dropped it like the proverbial hot potato. Spike had allowed a hint of disappointment to appear in his face, as if he'd expected more of Xander and sure enough, the boy backtracked, desperate to appease. He then spent a fascinated hour leafing through the pile and by sundown had overcome his embarrassment sufficiently to start asking questions, as he avidly turned the pages, even
going so far as to read some of the articles and letters. In his distracted state, it was easy to slip a simple concoction into his glass and get him to drink.

This time Spike's smile was twisted, as he considered Xander. Awake, the kid had an infectious laugh and an open, vulnerable manner that was attractive on many levels. They were qualities which made Spike look at him, and see him, a fact Spike found himself resenting slightly. But there was no doubting his attractiveness, regardless of his strong resemblance to Jeb.

When he was away from Spike, it was easy to consider Xander as nothing more than a tool to be used and discarded, but in his company, Spike was constantly surprised by how much he enjoyed himself. He shouldn't be enjoying himself. That was not the point here. He was in Sunnydale to get Angelus and only to get Angelus. Dru was waiting for him and he would not fail.

Turning to the door, with a final glance over his shoulder, Spike left to find someone to eat and, hopefully, to see if he could get another word with Angelus. Maybe he could come up with a new argument, find new words, more fluent and convincing, to persuade Angelus to help.
In the end, he spent most of the night watching the big misfit watch Xander's house, prowling around the back yard, peering into windows and stalking back and forth the length of the street. It was too amusing to interrupt and confirmed his diagnosis that his grandsire was once again obsessing over an item of prey. Angelus didn't give up his vigil until 3am, obviously realising that a boy of Xander's age wouldn't be rolling home at that hour, regardless of his parents' inattention. Spike followed his hunched figure back to his lair, just to make sure, before heading home himself.

~*~*~*~*~

When Xander woke, he took a moment to realise where he was. He had no memory of falling asleep and his dreams had been both disturbingly vivid and amazing. He clambered off the sofa, folded the blanket neatly over the back and tip-toed down the hall to stick his head around Spike's door. Spike was a late sleeper, he'd admitted as much, and the lump in the middle of the large bed didn't look like it was moving any time soon, so Xander dug a pencil and a scrap of paper out of his backpack, scrawled a short note, saying he'd see Spike tomorrow and left, closing the door carefully behind him.
As he walked back down to Crawford Street, Xander replayed the afternoon and evening in his head. Spike was such an amazing guy, really not much older than Xander but still, someone who had lived and experienced stuff. Xander felt like he could tell him anything. He'd even told him a little bit about his parents, what they were like, how they drank too much, how his father didn't have a job at the moment and how they yelled at each other all the time and never noticed him. Spike had looked sombre. But then, amazingly, he reiterated his invitation for Xander to move in with him. Of course, Xander said no, but it was so fantastic to know Spike cared enough to offer.

In the warmth of the mid-morning sunshine, he found himself blushing again as his thoughts led him on to remember the magazines Spike had shown him. By the time he got to the bottom of the hill, he was walking in a bit of a daze, as flashes of his dreams started to re-emerge in disconcerting detail. He really needed some time alone. He didn't feel like trying to find Jesse anyway. He'd probably be in the mall, or at the park, or at the beach, mooning over Cordelia Chase. He wanted some peace and quiet, and time to think about last night without the risk of being knocked down by a passing
truck. There was also a half formed idea in his head, something Spike had said...

Luckily, his parents were late sleepers too. When he entered the house his mom raised a bleary head, where she sat at the kitchen table and looked surprised that he was coming in from outside. He told her he had been up for hours and had been for a walk, glad that her obvious hang-over prevented her from asking any questions.

Going through to the living room, he opened the glasses cabinet and extracted one of the candles his mom kept for special occasions. After looking at it dubiously for a moment, he dug a pair of scissors out of her disused sewing box and snipped off the unlit wick. In the bathroom, he retrieved the jar of Vaseline from the medicine cabinet and retreated to his room, both locking the door and wedging his chair under the handle. Guiltily, he pulled out the magazine he'd borrowed from Spike's collection and getting undressed he climbed into bed. 'So,' he thought, looking at the candle again, 'what exactly did Spike mean?'
11 Preventative measures

Prompt: 72 - Crawl

Sunday night

Spike kept to the shadows as he neared Xander's house, in case his grandsire had got there ahead of him. It was only 9pm and barely dark, but Spike's meal had taken longer to corner than he'd expected, so he approached with caution, scanning the street thoroughly before heading up the drive and around the back. Peering in through the window, he confirmed that Xander was safely tucked away in his room, lying on his stomach on his bed, reading, his knees bent and feet swinging back and forth, occasionally hitting his own bum with his heels. Spike would have preferred to have the boy stashed at his own place, where he knew no one could get at him. But in the absence of that, he'd just have to keep Angelus away.

Although reassured that his grandsire was nowhere close, Spike didn't fool himself; Angelus, once he formed an obsession, was remarkably difficult to shift, at least
until he'd satisfied his curiosity. He'd appear to skulk in the shadows before the night was out, unless Spike did something to distract him.

There was no clear approach to the house from the rear, so Spike withdrew back to the street and found a deep patch of shadow behind a large bush in the next door's front yard, from where to keep watch. And less than an hour later his vigil and forethought were rewarded as the distinctive, flat-footed silhouette of Angelus turned the corner and started down the pavement towards him.

Dropping his cigarette, Spike ground it out under his boot and stepped out onto the path as Angelus drew level. "Hey, mate. Fancy meeting you here," he announced, in what he hoped was a mildly surprised tone of voice.

Angelus took a step back and he sounded both irritated and resigned when he asked bluntly, "What do you want?"

"Don't want anything." Spike hooked his thumbs in his belt loops and twisted his upper body right and left, sweeping his gaze over the vicinity, the embodiment of innocence. "Was just out for a stroll," he explained. "Evening constitutional, don't you know?"
Angelus was plainly disbelieving and his voice was cold. "No you weren't. What are you doing here and what do you want?" he asked.

Taking his own step back, Spike held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, you got me fair and square," he admitted. "I came to see what you were doing."

"I'm not doing anything." Angelus lied, and even if Spike hadn't known better, the air of soul-filled guilt would have been a give away. "Nothing of interest to you, anyway." But then he returned to his original question, his voice once again uncompromising. "Why are you still here?"

With a shrug, Spike dropped the pose. "Because you are. Because of Dru."

"Well, that's honest, at least." Angelus acknowledged. "But I'm not going with you. My advice?" His voice was soft, almost like he cared, and for a second Spike felt such a strong sense of nostalgia, that he almost cried, but this wasn't really Angelus and Spike knew it. When Angel spoke again, Spike knew it for certain. "If you care so much for Dru, go back to her. She may need you."
"If I care?" With an effort Spike pushed down the fierce burst of indignation Angel's indifference and scorn elicited, it couldn't serve him now, but it didn't go far. He took a deep breath and channelled it into sarcasm, leavened with a slice of truth. "You just had to get that in, didn't you?" he asked, with a disdainful laugh. "But I'm man enough to admit it." He sobered and didn't even care that he was pleading. "She needs you. She needs your blood. She needs your prayer to Eligor. She needs her sire."

"What can I say? It was irresistible," Angel smirked, completely ignoring the latter part of Spike's speech. Then, unexpectedly, his face softened and that hint of Angelus reappeared. "I'm sorry, Will, but I have to stay here."

Spike sighed. "Yeah, I know you think you do. Once you decide on something, doesn't matter how mad brained..." He paused, doing a quick recalculation and discarding this attempt to persuade. He looked up into Angelus' eyes. "I know why, too. Not that crazy story about helping the slayer. I've been watching you. I've seen you killing off the weak ones. Seems to me as how you're clearing the decks. You're going to make a
challenge against the Master." His eyes narrowed in thought. "Or maybe for him. Get back in his good books? I hear he's arriving soon."

Angelus shook his head in disgust. "You're a fool, William," he said.

"Am not! You've not changed that much. You can't have. You've heard the rumours."

Angelus' eyes narrowed in speculation. "Which rumours are you talking about? There's always rumours in a place like this. It's a hellmouth. You do know that, don't you?"

"Of course I know it's a bloody hellmouth. I also know it's closed. Got bunged up with something, 'bout fifty years ago and hasn't opened since. What's that got to say to anything?"

"Spike, Spike, Spike." Angelus shook his head with exaggerated disappointment. "You never would learn your history. The thing that 'bunged up' the hellmouth, was the Master. He's trapped down there, until Luke finds a way to get him out."

"Oh!" Well that was new, but it made sense, explained a
lot of the confused talk he'd picked up at Willy's. "So that's what the gathering over behind the school's all about then?" Angelus went still, his eyebrow raised in question. Spike ignored him, thinking aloud as he pieced the bits together. "A Hekaton magus and his acolytes. The talk last night was about some spell, or summoning, at the high school. If that hasn't got the Master written all over it, I don't know what has."

Angelus lips pressed together in an annoyed grimace. "Damn! Chaos worshippers! Luke must have got tired of waiting for Darla to get back." He visibly hesitated, desire clearly in conflict with his ingrained caution.

"Want to go and kill them, then?" Spike offered.

"Why would you want to do a thing like that?"

"Don't like Hekatons. Really don't like old bat-face, and anyway, can see you thinking." He waved his hand in front of his face, as if swiping away the smoke that effort had caused. "Can see you want to take them out and I have a vested interest in keeping you alive."

Angelus sighed, thought, then nodded. "Okay, come on then." He turned away from Xander's house and set off
back towards town.

Spike stood still for a moment, surprised by Angelus' easy capitulation, then he pulled himself together and called out to his grandsire's retreating back, "Ta. Ta, ever so, mate," before he ran to catch up, so he was walking at Angelus' side. He dug his cigarettes out of his pocket, tapped one out of the pack and lit it with a flourish. Glancing around as he exhaled the first plume of smoke into the still air, he grinned at Angelus. "Nice night for a bit of mayhem, eh? We'll send this lot scuttling back to the hell they crawled out of and have us a fun time doing it. Be just like old times."

Angelus spared him a sidelong look. "Why do I put up with you?" he asked. "Every time I see you. Why don't I learn?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Spike answered anyway, "Because you need me? Because you know you haven't the strength, yet, to take them alone?"
12 Invocation interruptus

Prompt: 73 - Rope

Sunday night

As they neared the school, Spike allowed Angelus to take the lead. Didn't do any harm to let the old man think he was in charge. Didn't do any harm to let him be the one to run into any danger first, too, as long as Spike was there to pull him out again.

They skirted the entire perimeter without encountering anything suspicious at all, no guards, no signs of disturbance and certainly no magus engaged in dark rituals.

After their second circuit, this time close to the buildings, Spike was beginning to wonder if his diversion was nothing more than that - an empty diversion - when Angelus stopped and held up his hand. "They're inside," he said.

"How d'you figure that?"
"Because the Hellmouth is right under the school. Right under the library, in fact. And the library is in that wing there." He pointed at a low building with a flat roof.

Spike narrowed his eyes and studied his grandsire. "Alright," he said. "Lead on, then."

Together they sprinted across the stretch of grass separating them from the library block. The service door was locked, so Spike took a step away and raised his leg to smash it, but Angelus grabbed him and hissed, "You'll wake the dead, if you do that."

Spike glared at him. "Very funny," he growled. "So what, we just walk away and let them raise the old bastard?"

"I didn't say that. It doesn't look like the library has any windows. Follow me. We'll get in over here." And before Spike could answer, he was off, round the corner and out of sight. With a curse Spike followed.

He caught up with Angelus outside a classroom window, trying to force the lock with a penknife. "Get out of the way, you big idiot," he instructed, tugging Angelus aside.
Turning his back to the wall, he raised his arm and elbowed the glass, shattering it. Reaching inside, he flipped the latch and pulled the window open. With a smug glance at Angelus he leant over the sill and swept the broken glass away, then hoisted himself up and slithered head first onto the bench top inside, sending a brass microscope and a human skull crashing to the floor, but when he attempted to wriggle further he found that his belt had got caught on the metal pin that the catch locked into and he was stuck. He braced his arms and gave an almighty heave, at which point the pin snapped and he shot forward. His hands missed the edge of the bench and the next thing he knew he was over the edge and his head was on a collision course with the floor. By sheer luck, he just managed to get his arms out so his hands made first contact and he was able to transform his mishap into a quick head-over-heels, which left him sprawled on his back, feeling slightly ridiculous, but did avoid the potential concussion. Thankfully Angelus was busy hauling himself through the gap and wasn't watching. As Spike scrambled back to his feet Angelus rolled sideways, swinging his legs in after him and hopping off the bench, but since he followed that by stumbling forward, tripping over a chair and almost crashing to the floor himself, Spike was ten feet away by the time Angelus looked around, bouncing on the balls of
his feet, like he'd always been there. They avoided each other's eyes as they left the science lab and entered the corridor.

A strong whiff of sulphur assailed them as they rounded the first corner, leading them unerringly to a basement access door near the library. Cracking the door open, Angelus paused to listen while Spike crowded close to his shoulder peering into the dark stairwell.

Angelus tilted his head and looked at Spike. "I think we've found them," he observed. He pulled the door wider and lowered his voice. "We go down and hang back. Scout the area and assess their strength." It wasn't quite a question, but Spike nodded his agreement, which seemed to reassure Angelus because he started to edge his way carefully and silently down the steps.

At the bottom was an open space, a store room of sorts, and in the centre were three figures, their backs to the stairs. They were dressed in dark robes, with hoods over their heads, and were gathered in front of a makeshift altar flanked by candlesticks as tall as a man's shoulder. The magus was obviously the one in the centre. He appeared to be preparing to begin an incantation because he was holding a parchment up at arms length in
a very pretentious manner. His two acolytes were standing demurely on his either side, one pace behind him, hands tucked into their sleeves, heads bowed.

Leaning in to Angelus' ear, Spike whispered, "Best to get him while he's busy. He sees us, he could throw a nasty at us and we'd be dust." He pulled back, gave Angelus a gleeful grin and bounded into the room, backhandeded the nearest acolyte into the wall as he grabbed for the magus. Dimly he heard Angelus curse, then he was too busy to care.

The magus turned out to be tougher and faster than he looked, he managed to tear himself free from Spike's first grab, leaving Spike clutching the hood of the empty cloak. Thankfully, he was also too concerned with protecting his scroll to do much more than scuttle backwards out of Spike's reach. He managed to get the altar between them and for a moment Spike was close to bursting into laughter, imagining the ridiculous sight they would make playing musical altars as they circled it.

From the corner of his eye Spike saw Angelus making heavy weather of trading punches and kicks with the second acolyte and he knew that was a fight that was likely to last a while. He concentrated on the sorcerer,
who didn't look nearly so threatening, now his jeans and plain shirt were uncovered, as long as you didn't look into his eyes. His eyes were wild, like whirlpools or tornadoes, or swirling pits of molten lava, promising every fantasy and every nightmare to the person who lost themselves in their depths. Spike resisted the urge to do so and focused on the gold pendant of the Black Winged Night around the magician's neck as he assessed the quickest way to bring him down.

By that point, the magus had the scroll rolled up tightly again and was tucking it down the front of his shirt. Spike didn't have much time, as soon as it was safe he suspected the man planned to unleash some spell. Bending his knees, he was preparing to leap over the altar when a faint movement of air gave him warning and he twisted around, in time to kick his first victim back with a foot to the stomach. The man went crashing into the wall, his head connecting with a satisfying crunch, leaving him slumped and loose at its base. Using the momentum of the swing, Spike spun on his toe and rolled across the top of the altar, in a more successful version of the move Angelus had tried earlier, getting in through the window. He landed in a crouch and straightened his knees, springing forward again, one hand grabbing the magus' arm. He pulled, causing them
both to spin, as if they were dancing a reel, then with a tug, he broke the rhythm and the magus\' back slammed into Spike's chest and Spike wrapped his arms around him, imprisoning him. Before the sorcerer could make the first move in an attempt to escape, before he could even lift his foot to rake his heel down Spike's shin or utter one word, Spike's fangs tore a ragged hole through the side of his neck.

With the practice of years, Spike sealed his lips around the hole, even as he tore his fangs back out, shredding muscle and cutting through veins and arteries, allowing the blood to flood his mouth, not yet needing to use the powerful muscles in his throat to draw it out. It wasn't a pretty kill, but it was fast and Spike drank deeply. The blood flowed smoothly down his throat, tingling with magic and dark power, taking him back to China and memories of the last time he'd felt this kind of buzz, until he was glutted and the heart under his arm was beginning to fail for lack of anything to pump. One final, long draw and the vessel was almost dry. He could have dragged out a little more, and part of him regretted the fact that such a meal would not keep, but this one was too dangerous to store for seconds, so he took his fill. With a sigh of satisfaction he tilted his head back, staring sightlessly up at the exposed pipes in the ceiling, and
allowed the body to fall.

Even through the rush of stolen power, he was aware that the fight on the other side of the room was still going on, in some form, as the shuffling and cursing continued. Angelus couldn't really be so weak that a single human was such a struggle, could he? Not when he had over two hundred years of experience to draw upon. Spike spun on the heel of one boot, his arms swinging out, chemical euphoria making him light and fluid, and saw that Angelus had his victim in a bear hug, trying to restrain the squirming, kicking creature in his grip.

Angelus caught Spike's gaze, over the acolyte's shoulder. "A bit of rope would be useful right now," he gasped.

Spike allowed his spin to turn into a shrug. "What the fuck for? Just bite, man! That'll save your shins and solve your problems in no time."

"He's human," Angelus growled.

"Yeah, I can see that. Sort of the point, don't you think? He's a meal. It's what he was designed for, so stop messing around and get it done! And God, I'm beginning..."
to sound like you! Come on! Get it together, mate. Eat the guy and let's get out of here."

"No! He's human! I can't!"

Surprise caused Spike to blink. Then he walked up to the pair, entwined in their parody of an embrace. The acolyte's back was towards him, his face held tight to Angelus' shoulder, but it was still an easy strike. Spike brought his fist down on the man's temple and he sagged and, as Angelus let go, sank to the floor with a whisper of coarse robes.

They stood over the fallen figure, face-to-face, separated by no more than a foot, and Spike had an insane urge to kiss the dumbfound gape off Angelus mouth. Instead he took a step back. "What's wrong with you? I know you've been out of the game for a while, but we do still eat people. Sort of our raison d'etre, you might say."

Angelus stepped forward over the body and something in his expression caused Spike to take another step back, keeping the distance between them. The way he felt, with the power of his feed, he knew that if Angelus raised his hand in anger, he wouldn't be able to stop himself and for all Angelus' strange ways, patricide was
not a crime Spike wished to commit. Especially not this year.

Fists clenched tightly by his sides, Angelus' whole body was stiff with anger. "I don't do that any more," he grated. "I don't kill humans."

To quote the boy, 'that did not compute'. "But that's what they're there for," Spike objected. "You taught me that - cattle to the slaughter, who exist for us to feed from."

"I have a soul."

"I bloody well know that! So what?"

"So, I don't kill humans."

It was like a light bulb going off in Spike's head and for a moment he was stunned. "So, last time we met, on the submarine, all that stuff about needing the crew to get us back to the good old US of... that wasn't just you being annoyingly practical?" he asked. "That really was you protecting humans for their own sake?" He tilted his head to study his grandsire. "You've gone vegan on me? Is that it? No wonder you're malnourished."
"I'm fine. I just made a choice." Angelus' shoulder's slumped. "I should never have brought you here." He looked around the room. "Look what you've done."

Spike turned to study the bodies on the floor. "Well, you never said I couldn't eat," he said, feeling aggrieved. "I thought this was a date. You know, dinner and a fight? Are you telling me it meant nothing?" He turned back to Angelus and allowed his bottom lip to tremble. "After all this time apart... was this just a fling to you?" he asked, tragically.

Spike thought Angelus would hit him, he looked so mad. He even took another step forward, his body rigid with suppressed exasperation and Spike took an equal step back. Then Angelus sighed and his whole body went loose. He shook his head. "Why do I even bother?" he asked the empty air above his head.

Spike opened his mouth to come out with some smart retort, but was distracted by a sound. He looked beyond Angelus to the unconscious acolyte on the floor. Who wasn't there. Spinning around, he was just in time to see the door at the top of the stairs swing back open from where it had not been properly closed behind the man
who had apparently just managed to make a run for it. He flung at his hands. "Perfect!" he said. "There goes my breakfast. I had that one pegged as take-away, for tomorrow."

"You did what?"

"Last night's take-away... makes a great breakfast." And then, because he couldn't resist, he asked, "What's got you so grumpy? Your boy not putting out for you, huh?" He smiled as Angelus' face went totally blank. "Oh, I'm sorry, does he even know you exist?"

Angelus stood, apparently dumbstruck, for a full count of five, then he turned away, climbed the stairs and disappeared into the school. He was walking with a slight limp.

'And I get left with the clean-up,' Spike thought. 'Just like the old days.' He went and checked the two bodies, figuring that the one he'd knocked against the wall might be worth taking home. But he was dead too and very soon the blood would be gathering unpleasantly in his buttocks and not worth the trouble to suck out. Not when there were so many fresh meals still walking around town. Crossing to the magus, he plucked the
scroll from inside his shirt, unrolled it and held it to the flame of one of the candles, allowing it to flutter to the floor once it was well ablaze. Giving the body a desultory kick, he followed Angelus out into the night.

As he left the school gates, Spike saw Angelus in the distance, heading for his lair. He also saw one of Luke's minions following behind him. Angelus gave no sign that he knew he was being followed. Spike sighed with exasperation and set off to follow the follower. Maybe the second-hand blood would be an acceptable breakfast. Plus, it would keep his oblivious grandsire safe.

With a feeling closely resembling what he imagined was virtue, he hurried to catch up.

13 Confrontations

**Prompt: 74 - Nowhere**

**Monday**
Angel stood balanced on the ladder mounted on the wall, using an old pillowcase to protect his hair from the rusty underside of the manhole cover that he was holding open with his head, just enough to allow him a view of the house. After two hours of waiting, it was a huge relief when the boy finally appeared in the driveway, cut across
the grass and turned towards town. He looked like he was counting some bills, so he was probably heading for the shops. Angel retreated back down into the sewer and ran ahead, so he could see which way the boy went at the end of the street.

~*~*~*~*~

It was another bright Saturday morning in Sunnydale and after his early night, make that, whole day doing nothing and early night, Xander had woken up at the ungodly hour of 10.30. He scavenged the makings of a sandwich from the fridge, slapping it all together in a haphazard tower, which he crammed into his mouth. Then he went out.

He'd spent the whole of yesterday afternoon locked in his room, first experimenting, then, when it began to get uncomfortable, thinking about what he'd done and trying to work out what it meant. Leafing through the magazine he'd borrowed from Spike, he had been both repelled and excited by the pictures and the places they took him in his imagination. It had, he thought, been the most amazing day of his life. It was like he was seeing himself, and everyone around him, with new eyes. Especially, he
realised, Jesse. Somehow, that wasn't as much of a shock as he thought it should be.

When he eventually gave up trying to sort it all out and fell asleep his dreams were not of the well muscled hunks of the magazine, but of a slimmer young body, wiry and firm, that wore both Jesse's and Spike's faces at different times.

He woke up with the same preoccupations in the forefront of his mind, although less confused, as if the dreams had helped settle some things so he could see more than just the immediate. Once again he raided his mother's purse, knowing that he was exceeding his self imposed limit for his 'weekly allowance', but justifying it with a promise to himself that he'd take less next week. He was going to the supermarket to get in some supplies, then he planned to go around to Spike's place. They'd spend the day talking and laughing and watching TV and maybe Spike would help him sort it all out, a bit more.

As he walked he thought back over the previous week. He felt as if he was walking funny and tried to disguise the fact, but every step he took reminded him. What a strange week it had been, culminating in him, he squirmed even more at the memory, discovering
something purely physical, but really amazing. The candle was washed, wrapped in tissues and plastic and hidden safely away in a shoe box under the loose floorboard in his closet, but his thoughts kept returning to it.

Not that he'd say anything. Unless Spike did, first. 'If he asks... what'll I do?' Xander thought. 'Come clean and admit it? Laugh? Pretend I don't understand?' Xander thought about Spike. About Spike, the devil may care, experienced traveller. 'He's got the magazines, he's the one who talked about candles, he must know about it.' He glanced around the street, afraid for a moment that he'd said that out loud, but thankfully there was no one in sight. 'Well, he does know about it, obviously, but has he tried it?' A sudden, and unwelcome thought caused him to stop in his tracks. 'Or is this all a big joke - see if Xander falls for it?' He paused there and considered Spike. 'No. It couldn't be. Sure, Spike told the story as something he'd heard about, but...' Xander's brain shut down at that point. It veered away from thinking further along those lines, not willing to consider the possibility that Spike was just yanking his chain but at the same time, equally unwilling to venture into the territory of 'maybe I shouldn't have done it'. It all felt very weird. But good too. In a very weird way. He gave himself a mental
shake and started walking again. Actually doing it hadn't felt bad. Naughty, maybe. Wrong, possibly. But not bad. And it was Spike who told him about it, after all. So that had to mean that Spike had done it too. Didn't it?

Once again his brain stalled under the weight of too many questions that didn't have answers and again he stopped walking. He looked around at the midday sun shining down on concrete, tarmac and sparse, dried up grass. The corner of Wilkins and Ednamay was probably not the best place for thinking such thinky thoughts. Turning right into Wilkins Drive he hurried his steps to the supermarket, where he concentrated on picking out more of the snacks that Spike had liked so much on Tuesday afternoon, some soda for himself and, as an afterthought, a carton of milk.

Xander had just come through the checkout and picked up the bag of his purchases when a hand gripped his shoulder from behind. Imagining it was Jesse he turned around, a smile already beginning to form, and came face-to-face with a total stranger. No, not a stranger. It was the guy from last week. The guy who'd attacked him and pretended he hadn't.

Xander glanced around wildly, seeing no one he knew,
and started to back away. "Hey! Get off me! What you want? Who are you? And get away from me!"

In the well lit shop he didn't look as big or as menacing as he had in the dark street at night, but he was still big - as tall as Xander and broader in the shoulders, and the black on black look he had going with his clothes didn't make for feelings of warm fuzziness. But once he got a few feet of clear space between them, Xander felt able to relax slightly. After all, what could the guy do in the middle of a supermarket, even if it wasn't crowded?

It didn't actually look as if he wanted to do anything because he held his hands up in a placating gesture and didn't come any closer. "I came to warn you," he said. "You're in danger."

Well, that was unexpected. "Yeah, but only from you."

"No, not from me. I only want to help. But you need to listen, it's Spike, he's dangerous."

A shiver of shock passed through Xander and he knew that he'd given himself away, so he went on the offensive. "I don't need to do anything, especially not what you want. No way, no where, no how!"
He paused for breath and regrouped his thoughts. "And what do you know about Spike, anyway?" he continued indignantly. "How do you know I even know him?" Getting no immediate answer to that question he realised that there were actually more immediate concerns than Spike. "And why the hell are you accosting me for a second time with a story like that?" He felt the indignation surge as he spoke and took a deep breath, trying for a more reasonable tone. "You attacked me. And now you want to help? Believe me when I say that 'I really don't care'.." He knew he was failing at the reasonable thing, but he continued anyway. "Where do you get off? Spike's never attacked me. So get the fuck away from me! And stay away!" Aware that his voice was rising, he took another look around and saw that they were beginning to attract interested glances from the other shoppers, so he turned on his heel and marched out of the shop, leaving his stalker standing rooted to the spot inside.

Blinking in the bright summer sunshine, clutching his full grocery bag, Xander breathed a sigh of relief that the guy wasn't, apparently, going to try and follow him. He gave one more glance over his shoulder at the shadowed figure behind him, turned back to the street and almost
collided with someone coming the other way.

"Hey Xander!" Willow cried. She bounced in front of him, arms swinging, a huge cheerful smile on her face; all of which meant she was feeling guilty about something. Something to do with him. "Watcha doing?" she asked, taking in the grocery bag, "Has your mum got you doing the shopping?" Her voice was slightly incredulous, with reason, Xander reflected.

Shaking off thoughts of the strange guy with the even stranger idea of chat up lines, Xander concentrated on his friend. "Hey, Willow. Good t'see you. How are you? I'm... um... I mean... Sorta. Yeah, it's grocery shopping, as in, lots of grocery goodies." He clamped his mouth shut, before it could betray him. And since the technique had just worked on weird stalker guy, went on the attack before she could dig deeper into why his Mom would suddenly decide to buy actual ingredients. "So, how've you been. Haven't seen you for a while." Bingo! A hit! Her face scrunched and he felt a momentary pang of guilt.

"Er. Yeah. Well. You see. Umm."

Xander took pity "You've been playing on your computer,
haven't you?" He looked more closely. "Have you even left the house for the last week? Have you slept?" he asked, taking in the dark lines under her eyes.

Which were totally belied by the sudden, excited grin that flooded her face. "Yes! No! And a bit, yes! It's fantastic Xander! You have to see it..."

Xander laughed at her exuberance. "You've been up all night fuelled on caffeine, haven't you?"

"Yeah. Er. Sort of. I came to buy more soda. I mean, Mom and Dad left me with a full freezer, but I'm out of soda." Her eyes widened. "Hey! Do you want to come back with me?" She even reached out and grabbed his arm, as if she was about to drag him back to her house by main force. "It's really cool stuff, Xander," she explained. "It's got 512 megabytes of Ram and a 500 megabyte hard drive. It's a souped-up PowerMac 7200. 120 megahertz. It goes like you wouldn't believe. Oh, come and see. I'll show you."

"Will. Will. Will! I know, you told me." Even as he gently detached her grip, Xander felt some of her joy in her toy transfer to him and for a moment he almost gave in, but... "I'd love to. Honestly, I would. But, I've got
shopping. I really need to get back, you know?"

Willow's face crumpled slightly. "Oh yeah. Sorry. I guess it's not really your thing is it?"

Xander gave her a one armed hug. "No, but it's your thing. And you love it and you're happy. That's good, yeah?"

Willow still looked doubtful. "Where's Jesse?" she asked. "I've been a bad friend. I've been so caught up with my stuff and I haven't been hanging with you both. I'm sorry. I should do better."

"Willow, slow down. It's okay. Really. I don't know. I haven't seen Jesse much either. He's still busy following Cordelia around." He laughed indulgently. "I don't think he'll ever pick up the nerve to actually talk to her. But he's fine. Trust me."

"Oh my god! Does that mean you have been all alone? I am a bad friend! You've been deserted by both of us..." She cocked her head, obviously trying to work out how much time had passed. "Hasn't Cordelia gone to Paris yet?"
"She's going in two weeks. Jesse will be back to normal then. And don't worry about me. I haven't been alone. I'm having fun. It's the vacation. Of course I'm having fun. I met someone and I've been hanging out with him."

Willow's brief frown, at his admission that he had met someone, cleared. "Oh, I thought for a minute that you had met someone, female someone." She suddenly turned stern "D'you have a girlfriend, Xander Harris? Have you been holding out on me?"

Xander couldn't help it; he laughed out loud. "No. I haven't got a girlfriend. Who could replace my Willow?" He tightened his arm around her shoulders, which threatened to send the bag in his other arm flying. "I met a guy at the movies and he likes the stuff I like and we've been hanging out, is all."

"Oh! Okay! Well, that's good. Do I know him? Is he from school? What's his name?" She pulled away so she could look up into his face.

"No, you don't know him and no, he's not from school. He's English and just visiting town for a while. But he's got cable and we've been watching British sci-fi and comedy shows on TV and it's been fun. Yeah?"
"Okay, so are we okay?"

Suddenly Xander wanted nothing more than to spend time with the familiar Willow-shaped things in life, but he could tell she was on the verge of crashing and he didn't want to be responsible for keeping her awake any longer. If she didn't get some sleep soon, she'd turn cranky and cranky Willow was not someone you wanted to be in the same room with, as he knew from experience. So instead of giving in to the impulse, he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "We're fine! We're great! And you really need to go to bed, instead of drinking more soda." He wrapped his arm around her neck and steered her away from the supermarket. "Come on. Let's get you home. I'll come round and hang out with you tomorrow. But right now, it's at least two days past your bed time. And I have to get this shopping back." He gave her a gentle squeeze to emphasise his point. "A good day's sleep, then you can wake up, fresh as a... a daisy and the power thingy will still be there. It's going nowhere, but you will be, if you don't sleep. Probably to bizzaroland, with the crazy people."

By the time they reached her house she had surrendered to his persuasions and was actually stumbling, his arm
around her holding her up, as much as it directed her steps. He saw her through the front door on the promise that she would be good, drink some milk and go upstairs to lie down, then he turned away and headed to Spike's cottage, thanking goodness he hadn't actually bought the ice-cream, as he'd originally intended.

14 Landfall

Prompt: 75 - Hush

Monday evening

Rupert Giles dropped his cases and his rucksack inside the door and slumped back against it. He reached behind himself to slip the lock closed and took a moment to just luxuriate in the sudden cessation of movement and the hush. A few deep breaths and he opened his eyes again, looking around his new flat. Even from the vantage point of the front door, it was apparent that it was very small compared to his home in England, but not as bad as the digs he'd been living in, in London while undertaking his
thesis at the British Museum. Sunnydale property prices were surprisingly low, or maybe not, considering where the town was situated, what it was situated above. With two salaries, that of a high school librarian and his Council field pay, he could have afforded to buy a sizeable family house, if he had not had a congenital dislike of attracting the sort of question that being an apparently wealthy school librarian would have raised among his soon to be co-workers. In any case, there were his other expenses to take into account.

He had raided the Council library for all the books and scrolls he could get permission for, plus a few other choice selections that old Mr Fellows probably wouldn't notice were missing, hopefully for a considerable time. However, there were more volumes he knew he would be needing, or maybe, if he was honest with himself, he just wanted.

His crates had already arrived and the realtor had helpfully placed them in the centre of what was obviously the living room, come dining room, come study. They stood there and glowered at him, a neat stack in the otherwise empty room.

He was too tired to consider them right now, however.
Wearily he hoisted his rucksack back onto his shoulder and staggered towards the stairs. He'd just survived the flight from hell: delays at both Heathrow and New York, which resulted in him missing his final connection to Sunnydale, and all of that on top of getting up to catch the dawn train to London, yesterday? Saturday? His internal clock was all to pot. He should have left the day before and spent the night at his club, but he'd been reluctant, wanting to spend as much time as possible in the familiar surroundings of his childhood home with its low pitched roofs, small mullioned windows and comfortable shabby furniture.

His body was telling him that the early evening sunlight outside was a lie, that it was really 3am and he should have been in bed hours ago. With dragging steps he hauled himself up the stairs, hanging on to the banister, and thanked goodness that at least the bedroom had a carpet. He dug out and unrolled his sleeping bag, pulled off his clothes and crawled inside. His last thought before he crashed into darkness was that he would have to buy some bookshelves, before he could even begin to unpack the mountain of books in the packing cases downstairs, but that was also tomorrow's concern, as was his more immediate task of acquiring a bed and familiarising himself with this hellmouth town.
15 Stepping Out

*Warning: Major character death*

*Prompt: 76 - Mount Everest*

**Monday night**

It's not that Xander had never seen adult movies before. On a couple of occasions, when his mother was out for the evening, he'd sat on the floor by the door of the living room where his Dad couldn't see him. But that had been secret. His dad hadn't known he was there in the dark, behind him. This wasn't. This was shared. And even if they did spend much of their time making rude comments about the lack of storyline and mocking the cheesy music, it was still, somehow, exciting. And as the movie progressed, Xander didn't notice that his jokes gradually trailed off, until they stopped altogether.

Some time, shortly after the third or fourth blow job
given by the busty blond in the lace negligee, Xander was vaguely conscious of Spike getting up to fetch another beer, but he was suddenly hyper-aware, when Spike sat down again, that he seemed to be sitting closer than before. Casually Xander allowed his leg to flop to the side, so it was touching Spike's, and Spike didn't pull away.

When the end credits eventually rolled, Spike looked across at him. "Want another?" he asked, lifting his beer bottle and indicating the half empty one Xander had been clutching tightly in his hands, but had otherwise forgotten, paralysed by the sensation of his knee against Spike's thigh.

Xander looked up, startled. "No. Thanks," he blurted, taking a quick swig to hide his confusion. 'When had Spike undone the top buttons of his shirt?' he wondered. For a moment he was mesmerised by the vee of exposed skin, framed by the blood red of Spike's collar. So pale. Maybe it was because he was English? The sharp edges of his collar bone created a shadowed hollow and Xander's eyes were inexorably drawn up, to follow the line of Spike's neck to his ear and the tightly gelled feathers of hair clinging to his skull, across to his face and his amused blue eyes, and the dark, scarred eyebrow,
which was cocked questioningly. With a guilty start, Xander pulled his gaze away, taking another big gulp of his beer. It was warm and fizzy and he choked slightly. Spike laughed softly and, hauling himself upright, wandered into the kitchen, giving Xander time to compose himself again.

When he came back Spike flicked the remote to switch the TV off and sat into the corner of the sofa, twisting around so that he was facing Xander. "You a churchgoer, Xander?"

Surprised by the question and wondering if Spike was feeling bad about sharing the movie with him, when he now knew that Xander was still only sixteen, Xander hesitated in answering "Er... No... Not really. My mom goes, most Sundays. I guess she'd say we were Episcopalian, but she doesn't drag me along any more, and my dad...

"Hmm." Spike frowned. "Did you go to Sunday school?"

"Yeah," Xander replied, still dubious about why Spike was asking, but happy enough to play along. "When I was little." Of all the subjects he'd thought Spike might want to discuss, this was not one of them. "Why?" he asked.
Spike grinned disarmingly. "Oh, just something I was thinking about earlier, before you arrived," he explained. "I don't really remember much church stuff. But when I was out last night, this guy said something. Got me thinking about souls and wondering what they are, and if they do anything."

"Do anything?" That was a strange question, on top of a series of other strange questions.

"Yeah, you know, make us good, or something."

Xander squinted thoughtfully at Spike. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think so. I mean... Hitler had a soul, didn't he?"

"Yeah. I guess he did." For some reason Spike looked pleased, but Xander was already too confused to try figuring that one out. "So," Spike continued, "if they don't make us good, what are they for? If having a soul doesn't stop someone being evil..." Spike trailed off.

Deciding that whatever this was, it appeared to be important to Spike, Xander concentrated. "We all have souls," he said, slowly. "But I don't think most people are
good," Spike looked up, but Xander hadn't finished, "or evil," he added. "I think most people are in the middle. I had one teacher, and she said that our souls were the bit of us that lives after we're dead."

Spike gave a bark of laughter which stopped as suddenly as it began. "What else?" he asked.

"Er, that it's the bit that makes us think." Spike raised an eyebrow. "Makes us know when something's right or wrong, so we can choose to do right. Um... I guess it's what makes us, us."

Spike looked thoughtful then. "But it doesn't force us to do right?"

With a grin Xander played his trump again. "Hitler!"

"Yeah..." Spike lapsed into silence, obviously thinking hard, while Xander sat waiting to see if there would be an explanation for why they were having this very strange conversation. Eventually Spike spoke again. "So a soul can be corrupted. It's just a matter of whether the person always chooses to be good."

"My teacher said it was a battle. That doing evil was
always easier than doing the right thing."

"And if that happens... if the person doesn't fight, if they don't choose to do good?"

"Then I guess a soul doesn't make any difference. Why are we talking about this? What's with all the soulfulness?"

Xander laughed, hoping Spike would understand the joke and he did smile, but he also looked intently at Xander. "Sorry, pet." he eventually offered, hoisting his bottle again. "Guess I've drunk more than I thought, getting all maudlin and stuff. Forget about it. It was an aberration. Let's talk about something else. What d'you want to do, more than anything?" Xander froze. "With your life," Spike clarified.

"With my life?" Xander felt an incredulous giggle escape him. "Not exactly a less serious question there, Spike." But Spike's gaze didn't waver and eventually the power of his regard drove Xander to add, "Err, I don't know?"

"No job in mind? No lifelong ambition?"

"To survive high school?"
Spike cocked his head and studied Xander's face. "Apart from that? Travel? See the world?"

"Well, maybe... I suppose..."

Spike frowned. "Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in Sunnydale?"

Feeling the disapproval inherent in the question, Xander hurried to provide an acceptable answer. "Oh! No! I want to get out! I really don't want to spend the rest of my life here, I just don't know what I want to do, apart from that."

He was rewarded with a slight smile. "Would you like to travel with me?"

Blinking in surprise and beginning to think Spike really was drunker than he appeared, Xander decided to play along. "Er... are you asking? I mean, offering?"

The smile widened, almost imperceptibly, but suddenly Xander felt like Spike was serious in his question. "Could be, pet, could be. Interested?"
Smiling shyly back, Xander nodded. "Well, yeah, of course I would. But I have to finish high school."

Spike shifted closer and ran a hand up Xander's arm and around the back of his neck. "I can show you the world," he whispered, as he pulled Xander towards him and into a kiss.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander's lips were loose and wet and warm, and Spike relaxed into the sensation, taking control of the kiss and enjoying the way the boy's initial hesitation was replaced by fervent enthusiasm. Leaning forwards, Spike pushed Xander back so he lay into his corner of the couch and Spike was sprawled on top of him. He radiated heat, like the sand on the white beach, that summer William's mother was persuaded by her doctor to go to Torquay and try the sea cure. Six year old William had played, bare foot in the shallows, and the sand had squished between his toes as his feet left indentations, which immediately filled with water. Spike remembered how William had run back to where his mother sat on a spread blanket, the sparkling grains sticking to his wet skin and he'd buried his feet in the dry sand, feeling the
heat stored in the top few inches leach out the chill of the sea, leaving the tops of them tingling.

Such strong sensory recall from William's life was rare and for a moment Spike lost himself in Xander's warmth and the glow of one of William's most treasured memories. A hand on the back of his neck forced him back to the present and he pulled away from Xander.

His voice husky with stolen nostalgia, he asked, "Want what I can offer you, pet?"

Xander looked dazed. "Oh yeah," he breathed, tilting his head and offering his lips again. He didn't see the way Spike's smile turned feral, as he lowered his mouth to Xander's exposed neck.

~*~*~*~*~

Wednesday evening

Spike sat in his habitual corner of the sofa, watching over Xander's body stretched out on the floor at his feet and waited to see if his gamble had paid off. He'd never made a childe before and if it didn't work, if the demon failed
to assimilate both the memories and the personality of the dead boy, then he'd have cocked up his best weapon in his campaign to force Angelus' help for Dru.

You couldn't force a child. Spike didn't know why, but he did know that something in the magic required some sort of consent, no matter how uninformed. He'd done his best to build a relationship with the human and with luck that would carry over into the new vampire. If it all went to plan, his new childe would rise, and in the process of awakening would access the patterns in his brain laid down by it's host's past, and what would emerge would truly be Xander, with all his charm and naive love of life, unspoilt.

That had been one of the boy's most attractive features. Xander had no side - none of the self-centred arrogance that too often irritated Spike into murderous action. He responded so immediately and so positively to a single word of praise, and Spike had taken care to nurture that hunger, so the demon should respond to Spike in the same way the human had.

The body gave a twitch and Spike leant forward, watching intently. He had a stake ready by his side, but he found himself hoping that he wouldn't be forced to
use it.

He'd witnessed this process before, endlessly fascinated by the moment the demon reached consciousness, but never after feeding so much blood to the dying human. He'd been starving by the time Xander's heart had finally stuttered to a stop, the process of creation taking so much out of him that he'd been glad of the two day's respite that allowed him time to hunt and feed and regain his strength and more.

The body's eyelids twitched and its nostrils flared, then, with the crunch of shifting bones, the vampire arched and gasped as the eyes sprang open. With a jerk, it sat up, back rigid, and stared around the room. Spotting Spike, it froze, the eyebrows drawing together over glowing yellow eyes, as if it was trying to remember something. It growled.

Stake in hand, Spike slid down off the sofa to crouch in front of it. "Who are you?" he demanded. The new vampire growled again, it's lips moving, as if it was attempting to shape speech. Spike growled back. "Tell me who you are!" he ordered.

This time the change was a mere whisper, the sound of
stiff paper being crumpled in a careful hand and the yellow eyes faded to brown. "I'm... I think..." he stuttered. "I think I'm Xander." The voice was rusty but recognisable and full of awe. "I'm Xander. And you're Spike. I remember. I remember Xander."

Spike put the stake down on the floor, slid back up onto the sofa and reached out his hands. "Come here," he murmured, "come here. My childe."

Rolling onto his hands and knees, Xander crawled slowly up onto the sofa to Spike's side and, as Dru had done for him when he finally clawed his way out of William's grave, Spike pulled Xander into his arms, humming softly as he rocked him and whispered comfort into his hair.

They sat like that for half an hour or more, as the young vampire's shivers gradually died down and he was doing nothing but cling to Spike. Eventually Spike pulled his head back and looked down at the averted face. He placed a hand under Xander's chin and tilted his head up, so he could catch the boy's eye. "How do you feel, pet?" he asked.

With a sigh, Xander shrugged. "Like I've been run over by a truck and it's scrambled my brain. What did you do to
me?" he asked, already he sounded more like himself.

Spike grinned. "Yep, I think that's you, alright. You're a vampire."

"A vampire?" Xander's voice was incredulous. "There's no such thing as vampires! What did you do? Did you drug me?"

"No, not today."

"Not today?" And now there was a note of expected panic. "What do you mean, 'not today'?"

"Xander! Look at me!" Spike lifted the boy's hand and laid it on his own chest. "No heart beat," he said. He moved it to Xander's chest. "You don't need to breath." As if the words were a trigger, Xander started to pant. "Calm down." Spike relaxed his features and allowed the change. "You don't need to breath and you're a vampire. I'm a vampire and I turned you. Makes me your sire." He pushed Xander back, so he was sitting up straight. "That means you listen to me."

Xander's eyes widened in surprise and shock as he looked at Spike. He pulled his hand free and raised it to
Spike's face, tracing his fingers gently over the ridges of his brow. "Wow!" he whispered. "Wow, wow, wow. Oh wow!"

With a grin, Spike took hold of Xander's chin and gave it a small shake. "Very coherent, pet. Believe me now?"

"No. I can't believe you. I mean, vampires? We're having a conversation with 'vampires' in it. And I'm looking at you and I still can't believe it. Shouldn't I be screaming and running for the door, or something?"

"Why'd you do that? You're a vampire too. And I told you, I'm your sire. I'll keep you safe and show you how it works. Trust me. I'll look after you." He pulled Xander back in to his side, with one arm around the boy's shoulders. "You'll be better once you've fed," he said, unbuttoning the first four buttons on his shirt. Xander looked up at him, his eyes wide with alarm. They stayed wide as Spike drew his knife from his belt and dug the point into the skin below his own collar bone, but as the blood began to trickle sluggishly down his chest, Xander's nostrils flared and when Spike guided his mouth to the flow there was no reluctance in the way he latched on and the muscles in his throat automatically began their powerful suction.
Spike leant back and cradled Xander to him, resuming the wordless humming he'd used earlier to soothe the demon, as it assimilated Xander's identity.

After ten minutes, he forced his hand between them and took a firm grip of Xander's throat, applying pressure to the feeding muscles and paralysing them. He pushed the boy away from the wound, which began immediately to close. "Feel better?" he asked.

Xander gazed up at him, a dazed and peaceful expression on his face. He nodded slightly and Spike released his grip. Xander darted back, briefly, but only to lick up the last of the blood, before it stained the edge of Spike's shirt, then he sat up again. "I'm a vampire," he announced.

Spike grinned. "That you are, pet."

Xander's face scrunched up in thought. "So where's my coffin?"

"Knew you'd be fine." Spike laughed. "Right! Lesson one. I know tradition says you should've had a proper burial and all, but I wanted to make sure you were alright."
Wanted to know for sure." He gave Xander's shoulders a squeeze of reassurance. "Didn't want to be hanging around a graveyard waiting half the night, in case I missed you. And I really didn't want anyone else to find you first." Xander's smile was both grateful and tentative and Spike shrugged. "You didn't miss anything. And if anyone asks you can always lie, right?"

"Er, yeah, sure. Will anyone ask?"

"They might. There's some people get all snooty about where they come from. 'My grave was in the best part of town', sort of stuff. Load of old bollocks."

Xander chuckled. "I don't think my family could afford the best graveyard, so I'm not bothered by waking up on the floor."

'Time for lesson two, then,' Spike decided. He frowned at Xander and hardened his voice "You're not that boy. Don't make that mistake, just because you carry his memories. That boy is gone. You're a vampire. First, last and always."

"But, I remember...?"
"The memories are important. They'll shape you. As my great grand-sire said, in a rare moment of poetry, 'What we once were informs all that we become.' You'll always be Xander. But you're different too. You're powerful now. You can do things you couldn't do before."

"Yeah, like not breathe. Hey! Can I fly?"

Kids today, raised on comic books and trashy novels. "Er, no, not without an aeroplane." In the face of the boy's obvious disappointment at that news, Spike tried to sweeten the pill. "But you can walk under water and you won't drown."

Brightening again, Xander asked, "Can I walk to Europe?"

Spike considered that one. " Might get a bit hungry. It's a long way."

"Can I climb Mount Everest, without oxygen."

"Same answer, pet. Not much to eat up there." He looked down at Xander's excited face. "You need to eat every couple of days, if you eat well. Every day, if you're on limited rations."
"Okay. Regular diet. Got it. But in spite of the super-powers... otherwise... am I still me?"

"You're still Xander, yes. In all the good ways. You have all his strengths, all his memories and all his feelings. But there's some things that'll be different. What do you feel for your parents?"

Xander grinned a feral grin. "Vengeance," he pronounced.

Spike smiled his approval. "And his friends?"

This time the boy hesitated and his answer was more tentative. "Pain. Fondness. Ownership."

"That's good. That's very good. And what do you feel for me?"

His face breaking into a blinding smile, Xander looked so human. "I love you!" he stated with absolute certainty.

"And you'll do as I say? You'll follow my orders and learn from me?"

"Yes, sire. Yes, I will."
"Good! So let's start on those lessons, eh?" He lowered his head and took Xander's mouth in another kiss and this time he didn't lose himself in heat, but revelled in the responsiveness and worship of a cool and oh so willing mouth.

16 A fall of shades

Prompt: 77 - Rocking the boat

Monday

Xander. The boy's name was Xander. His young girl friend had called him that. Then they'd walked away together, Xander's arm around her shoulders, leaving Angel to watch, furious and impotent, from the shadowed safety of the store.

Lying in bed and trying to find a comfortable position for sleep, for the few remaining hours before nightfall, Angel's brain nagged at him for his failure. It insisted on
replaying the conversation over and over, supplying alternative approaches, other ways he could have introduced the subject, better, more reasoned arguments. Even lies that a human would have accepted. He used to be so good at that, at getting humans to believe what he said, do what he wanted. What had gone wrong? Why did he stumble and fail when faced by one human boy? He tossed and turned unable to escape, or forgive, his own maladroitness, until the sheets gradually tangling around his legs creased under him into uncomfortable ridges.

Staring blindly up at the ceiling above him, the image of the boy's indignant face and his harsh words giving him no rest, Angel admitted it was Jeb's fault he'd tried to talk to Xander in the first place. He could remember every single person he'd ever killed, they all hung heavy on his heart and his soul, but Jeb was a particular regret. Even to Angelus.

Eventually realising that he was never going to get to sleep like this, he gave up. In the kitchen he heated and drank the last of his stock of human blood, then he went and remade the bed from scratch, pulling the bottom sheet tight to the mattress and tucking it firmly under, so it would stay secure. That done, he climbed back under
the covers and at last, he was able to sleep.

He dreamt of Jeb. Of his apparent innocence, but his willing, knowing eyes. He dreamt of long limbs and hands that clung to his shoulders, a throat that stretched in erotic exposure as Jeb threw back his head and mewled with need. He dreamt of William, tutoring the boy, passing on his own experience for the satisfaction of his grand sire. He dreamt of a warm mouth and a warm arse and a growing fascination with the contradictions of the boy's ambitions and his obvious, instinctive skills.

Abruptly the dream flashed forward and Angel was jerked awake, a half strangled cry of dismay escaping his lips as the images and remembered sensations shattered around Darla's smug, taunting smile.

Glancing at the clock, Angel saw that it was already gone nine. He'd slept for hours then. Dragging himself up he staggered back to the kitchen, his shoulders slumping when he opened the fridge and remembered that his supply of human was gone. Wearily he extracted the last carton of pig and placing a saucepan of water on the stove, set about warming it up enough to be palatable. Then he collapsed into the nearest chair, rested his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands.
Angelus had planned to tie Jeb to him by blood, leave him alive and come back when he'd grown a couple of years, to claim him and turn him. But Darla had ruined that scheme, just as she ruined so many of his plans to build a bigger family. Jealous of his attention being directed towards anyone else, she'd almost staked Penn any number of times, until eventually Angelus had tricked his childe and sent him away. She'd probably have staked Dru, except that the visions made her useful. Even the Master had acknowledged that. Distracted by that thought, Angel wondered again if it was the Master's word that had kept Dru alive for so long. She was cunning and strong, but there was something about her that made other demons' hackles rise. The unique brokenness of her mind caused others to underestimate her, but also left her vulnerable. With a sigh, Angel acknowledged that he'd done many unconscionable things as Angelus, and Dru was probably the worst, but she was his in ways that no one else had ever been, not even Penn.

The water was beginning to simmer on the stove, the soft hissing of small bubbles breaking against the walls of the pan pulling Angel out of his memories and he got up to retrieve the blood before it cooked and was ruined.
Pouring it into a mug he sat back down, cradling the cup carefully in both hands he absorbed the only source of warmth available to him now. And as the heat soaked through the pottery and into his skin, he looked around the room and wondered if this was the shape of his eternity. Drinking slowly, doing his best to savour the flavour and ignore the fact that it was old, animal and slightly singed, he tried to wake up enough to calculate the shift patterns of his contact at the hospital blood bank. Then he got up, got dressed and went out. He'd patrol the main streets and take a swing past Xander's on his way back, just to check the boy was safe.

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Wednesday morning

The sun eventually drove Angel back to his apartment after a night of hopeless sentinel duty outside Xander's house. The light had not come on in Xander's room, again, and by standing on the bicycle leaning against the wall under the window, Angel had been able to confirm that nothing had been moved in the room. The bed was still unmade, the sheets in the same disarray, and the
same shirt hung over the back of the chair.

The small scrap of conversation he'd overheard through the open kitchen window the previous night had told him that the parents assumed Xander was at one of his friends' houses, but visits to the two other places Angel had seen Xander leave had revealed that he was not at either of those.

Of course, a boy like Xander probably had any number of friends. Just because he was neither with the other boy, nor with his girlfriend, didn't mean something was wrong. In spite of his best efforts at clinging to that thought, a feeling of dread was building in Angel's chest. Tonight he'd find out where Spike was staying. He silently berated himself for not doing so before. He should have kept a closer eye on his grand childe. Wherever Spike went, trouble followed close behind. And he'd been stupid. Instead of driving Spike out of town, he'd gone out hunting with him. What kind of protector of humanity did that make him? He'd walked away, after Spike made it clear he knew who Xander was and his one attempt to warn the boy of the danger he was in had been a total disaster. He should have scared the boy, shown him that the monsters were real, instead of stumbling through a partial explanation, which had
probably driven Xander straight into Spike's arms.

In a sudden burst of frustrated anger, Angel threw his half full mug across the room where it smashed, splattering blood across the wall. The sight sobered him and, in an effort to tear his thoughts away from his worry, he deliberately thought back to when existence was simpler, when he didn't care.

Back in the thirties he'd travelled the railroads, living off stolen sips from cattle in the trucks and rarely seeing another human, except when he hit a town and couldn't find a quick ride out. In the forties, in New York, he'd been passing for human while shunning their company, keeping his head down, not rocking any of their precious boats, and pretending to be disabled whenever he left his apartment, in case anyone wondered why he wasn't involved in the war effort. Getting his blood through occasional work sweeping floors in the meat packing district, on night shift. Yes, life had been simpler. He hadn't cared what anybody thought or wanted then. And he hadn't wanted anything, except to be left alone.

Desperately he followed those memories, avoiding the visit from the military and its consequences, shying away from the hotel in LA, concentrating on other times, like
Las Vegas and the gullibility of humans who allowed themselves to be tricked at cards, Chicago where trickery of a different kind had allowed him to live both well and privately for a while, and Detroit, where, through his own carelessness, he'd almost ended up heading a crime syndicate, before he ran, again. That memory almost raised a smile. It had been good while it lasted.

Over the decades he'd developed his skills in invisibility and, though the style in which he lived had fluctuated wildly, his armour had always been in place and no one had ever touched him. Now he was plagued by fears and doubts and frustrations. And his dreams were more vivid than he could remember. It was perhaps a result of eating well for the first time since the sixties, or it might be from seeing Spike again, after so many years. Perhaps the experience of having Spike fight at his side again, for the first time in over a century, had stirred up old urges? With a shake of his head, Angel discarded that idea. He'd felt nothing but relief when he'd finally got Spike off the submarine and he'd slept better that night, before he made his own escape. Where had Dru been then? he wondered. Off on one of her periodic infidelities? Or had her visions told her to avoid obvious traps laid by Nazis in Madrid? Spike might have been her unfailing knight and protector, but she'd never wanted him like she'd wanted
Angel. His Dru. His face hardened. And now she was sick, fading, Spike said. And Spike was here, to win his help. Well, Spike would have a few questions to answer when Angel found him, and they wouldn't be about Dru.

Resolve in place, Angel considered whether Willy's would be the best place to start, or whether The Fish Tank was more Spike's sort of bar.

17 Dream-track

Prompt: 78 - Emancipation

Wednesday night

Willy's was a bust. Spike hadn't been seen there for almost a week and Willy swore he didn't know where he lived. Although he did, with some persuasion, remember where he had last heard Spike's car was stored. The Fish Tank drew an equal blank. For all it's rough appearance, it turned out to be a predominantly human bar and, by Angel's judgement, the clientele were neither rough enough, nor respectable enough to attract Spike. A visit to the lock-up garage where, as Willy predicted, Spike's car was hidden also provided no clues. There was no guard or attendant on duty for Angel to threaten for more information, not even an office he could break into
and ransack for an address. He spent the whole night keeping watch from a roof top across the street, just in case Spike returned, but to no avail. And a second night was too much time to waste - the chances that Spike would come back for anything were too slim. However, the knowledge that Spike was still in town was both worrying and perversely comforting. It didn't get him any closer to finding Xander though. Reviewing his actions to date Angel realised that he didn't have a single clue, which left only the final option of aimlessly trolling the streets.

That day his sleep was shallow and his dreams confused, Jeb tormented him with words of blame and regret. 'I wanted you,' he said, as he ran a hand down Angel's naked chest. 'I would have been everything you dreamed of.' He curled his fingers, digging his nails into the delicate skin under Angel's arm pit and dragging them across and down to his stomach, leaving thin trails of bright red welling from ragged cuts, which he bent down and licked away. He looked back up and gazed into Angel's eyes. 'I still can be,' he whispered. The words held both promise and threat and Angel realised that he couldn't move, his wrists tied tightly to the bed frame above his head. So tightly that they were going numb, as if he still had a circulation that could be cut off. Darla
peered down at him from behind Jeb's shoulder and smiled, her eyes mocking. Jeb keened and arched back, his head falling to her breast as she ran her hands up his arms, just before she gently cupped his face and with a vicious twist, snapped his neck. Jeb's body fell forward onto Angel's chest. 'No!' he cried, 'it wasn't like that!' He reached out clasping the body to him, as it faded away into insubstantial mist. 'Fucked that one up, didn't you?' Spike observed, his bleached hair glowing in the moonlight and his pale face somehow illuminated from below while the rest of his body, shrouded in his leather coat, merged with the night. Jeb opened his eyes and gazed mournfully up at Spike from the long, dead grass at Angel's feet. 'You love me, don't you?' he whispered, his eyes fixed on Spike's face. 'You'll love me forever.' Spike slung his arm around Jeb's shoulder and they stood together, looking down at Angel with identical expressions of disgusted pity. Then they turned and walked away across the moor, twin patches of darkness sharply outlined against the harvest moon, merging into one and fading away in a shimmer of wavering shadow. Angel looked over at Dru on her motorcycle. 'Can we catch them?' he asked. Her smile was sad and she shook her head. 'Not for a hundred years,' she replied. 'But we can try.' The wind whipped at his face and Dru's laugh echoed in his ears. 'You killed me,' she observed in a
conversational tone, as if she was offering him no more than the time of day. 'You took me, claimed me, owned me and never freed me. I always wondered why you did that.' With a sob, he reached for her, but she danced out of range. 'I'm sorry,' he cried. 'Sorry enough?' she asked. Then she smiled like a tiger and twisted like a snake. 'No, not sorry enough,' she sang. 'Not nearly sorry enough. Not yet. But don't take too long, lover, I haven't got as much time as you.' When Angel woke, the tracks of dried tears were tight on his skin, pulling at the corners of his eyes.

Thursday evening

He called it patrolling, but he knew that he was way off his game. His feet were heavy and his movements felt sluggish from lack of proper sleep. The occasional flurry of movement caught his attention from the corner of his eye, but even those he investigated proved to be nothing by the time he reached the spot. His heart just wasn't in it tonight. The worry about Xander and the problem of Spike occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of any more mundane vampire hunt.

Xander had still not been home; his room was untouched
from when Angel had first checked on Monday, so he walked the streets, hoping for a miracle that would lead him to Spike. He tried the empty factories that he'd noted in his first few weeks, those that weren't already occupied by small bands of sireless minions, and the boarded up shops in back streets, but found no sign of Spike.

After an hour of fruitlessly wracking his brain for any alternative options he found himself in the park, looking down at a dead homeless guy, who seemed to reproach him with his fixed and glassy gaze, and he realised that he needed to do something. A quick touch to the face confirmed that the body was still warm and he'd missed the chance to save another life. With a shrug of regret, Angel hurried away, just in case the police happened to be out patrolling too. 'Once more along Main Street,' he thought, 'to the ATM, then the hospital. I just need something to eat. There's nothing really wrong with me, nothing that a good meal won't solve. After that, Restfield and maybe check out the Funeral Home. Even if Spike's not around, there may be someone who knows where he is.' With that decided, he sped up his pace and headed back into town. If those places turned up nothing, he'd go back to the factories.
For a price, his contact at the hospital provided him with two packets of blood, fresh from the bank. He had them ready, almost as if he'd been expecting Angel to show up. And Angel drank it cold, as soon as he got outside, too eager to wait, or to go home and heat it up. As always, the surge of power was thrilling and for a moment he felt almost dizzy with it, but once the buzz faded a little, he felt able to resume his patrol with clearer eyes and a renewed determination to find someone who could give him a new lead. Part of him kept hoping he was wrong, but it was four nights since Xander had been home.

It was nearing 1am by this time and the town was quiet, but Angel strede on, searching for any movement. With most of the humans off the street there was less chance in finding a minion out and about, but there was always a chance. Most experienced vampires in a suburbia like this ate early, or waited for the nightshift to knock off work nearer dawn and, if necessary, he would wait that long. It wasn't as if he had anything else to do.

As he turned the corner into Main Street he thought he spotted movement near the alley next to The Sun Cinema. It looked like Xander, it looked like Jeb, and he broke into a run.
Skidding to a halt at the alley mouth he peered into the darkness. Slowly he edged forwards, step by step, cautiously hopeful, until he could see the blank wall at the end. The alley was empty, but he could have sworn he'd seen... He shook his head, frowning, wondering if he was hallucinating. There was no way it could have been Xander, not in those clothes. And if it was, where was he now? He turned and made his way back to the street, not noticing the fire escape ladder hidden in a dark corner of the building.

He was walking towards the gates of Greenacre Cemetery when he saw him next, on the other side of the railings, stepping into an open patch of moonlight. Angel caught his breath and Jeb stood still, looking back at him. Then he seemed to shrug and turned away, disappearing into the bushes next to the path. Angel ran to the entrance, grabbing the edge of the open gate to swing himself around without slowing down. But when he reached the spot there was no sign that anybody had been there, no footprints, no broken twigs in the bushes, just the rich, musty smell of damp earth and the scurry of small creatures in the undergrowth. He searched the whole cemetery without finding anything, not even a recently disturbed grave.
By 2.30, he was back in the factory district, and this time he thought he caught a glimpse of Jeb entering a shadowed doorway. Again he ran, but when he reached it he found the door firmly locked. Raising his foot, he put all his force behind the blow and kicked. It shuddered. A second kick and the jam began to splinter around the catch. A third and the door crashed inwards. Inside was a narrow staircase and Angel scrambled up, into a wide space full of heavy duty shelving stacked with crates on pallets. A portable pallet lifter was parked near the top of the stairs and the place was silent and empty. He searched it anyway, but found nothing. That fact didn't surprise him.

For the rest of the night he continued to doubt his sanity as he kept catching glimpses of that familiar figure, dressed in loose and shapeless trousers and a heavy coat tied at the waist with rope. It really was Jeb, but that was impossible, and each time he ran after his hallucination, he found nothing.

As dawn threatened, he finally caught a break. He was back on Main Street when a slim young looking vampire walked out, right in front of him. He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to him, bringing his stake up to press against her chest, above the heart. "Talk," he
demanded. "Where's Spike?"

She grabbed at his wrist, trying to force the stake away and he had to exert all his strength to hold it still. "Who?" she gasped. "I don't know any Spike."


"Oh, him, yes, I've seen him," she cried. "If I tell you, you'll let me go?"

"Maybe. Tell me anyway."

"I just saw him. He was heading up Crawford Street. I don't know where he was going. Please let me go?"

Angel considered her words. She was frightened enough to be telling the truth. She could probably sense his age and didn't know how weak he was. "Relax," he said. Obediently she dropped her hands away from his arm. Angel smiled into her shoulder and plunged the stake through her ribcage. "I only said 'maybe'," he observed as he stepped back from the dust. Slipping the stake back into his pocket, he wiped a few traces of ash off his coat and trousers. 'Crawford Street, eh?' he thought. 'Okay, a bit more classy than I would have expected of Spike, but
there aren't many houses up there. It shouldn't be too
difficult to track down which one he's taken over.
Looking up at the sky he confirmed that there was no
time now to follow up the lead, but come nightfall he'd
find the bastard and he'd get a few answers to his
questions. Weak he may be, but Spike was his grand
childe and that gave him an advantage that he intended
to make full use of.

18 Gazumped

Prompt: 79 - Marigold

Friday

Angel dodged around the last corner, just as the sun
broke the horizon, and made his way through the
underground garage to his apartment. He was exhausted
for some reason, although he hadn't done very much
during the night. The vampire he'd slain hadn't put up a
fight, although that didn't diminish the rush he'd got
from the kill.
Simply relieved to be able to at last get off his feet, he didn't bother with another meal, just stripped off his clothes as he walked across the room. Sleep came easily. No sooner had he crawled into his bed, than he felt himself sink into the deep heaviness of relaxation and his last conscious thought was a smug sense of satisfaction that at least he'd be able to tackle Spike after a good day's rest.

Angel dreamed. *He was back in that rundown bar in Mexico in the 20s, facing Boone. The woman Boone was sweet on stood cowering against the wall as they fought, and Boone just wouldn't shut up. 'You want to be human so much?' he taunted. 'That must really piss you off.' Angel shook his head to clear it after a blow that nearly laid him flat. 'It's sad, the things a soul will do to a demon who's not supposed to have one.' Boone said as he glanced around at the crowds of peasants with candles and flowers, celebrating the Day of the Dead. 'Look, they're commemorating your passing,' he observed. 'I'll be sure to spread marigolds over your ashes.*

*The scene kaleidoscoped and he was standing watching the sunrise and feeling the warmth suffuse his body. He walked across a meadow to a small brook and dipped his*
hands in the water to drink. His heart beat strongly in his chest and he knew such joy, for such a brief moment as his soul expanded, taking possession of every inch of him. It didn't last, as he knew it couldn't. Even as he gloried in the knowledge that he was alive, his hand began to crumble into ash and Dru's face appeared, floating like Ophelia in the water below him. 'Why do you think I have to lose you, my dear?' she asked. 'Don't you know yet what you are?' She laughed as her body began to crumble. 'You think it's so important, that soul? You think it makes you almost human? Oh, my poor, poor fool. You don't know what you are.'

Jeb's voice was soft. "Master Angelus?" he whispered. Angel turned his head on his pillow and opened his eyes. "Master Angelus? I didn't want t' leave ye." His lips were not moving, but the words were clear in the small room, echoing as if they came at him from all sides. Jeb approached the bed tentatively, eyes cast down and hidden behind thick lashes. Somewhere off to the side was a source of dim light, which caught the movement of his hands as he undid the rope holding closed his heavy, oiled wool coat. With a shift of his shoulders it fell to the floor, exposing his naked chest. His pale hands shifted to the belt holding up his loose canvas trousers and they fell too, leaving him to step out of them and towards Angel's
bed. "Please, sir," he said "will ye not let us gi' ye some peace?"

Some part of Angel knew then that he was dreaming and he lifted his left arm, but whether to ward off the apparition, or pull it to him, he wasn't certain. It made no difference, anyway, because Jeb crawled up onto the bed and crouched over Angel's feet, on his hands and knees. He lowered his head, rested his cheek against the blankets covering Angel's shins and pressing forward, stroked his face up Angel's leg, coming to a halt at his groin, where he nuzzled, like a small creature in search of mother's milk. Angel made some small noise of protest, even as his hand came down to the back of Jeb's head, combing and gripping strands of the thick hair. He'd washed that hair himself, before he took Jeb to his bed, laughing at Jeb's protests when the soap came too close to his eyes. "Nay, be still," Jeb whispered, burrowing his face into Angel's groin through the bedding. "Dint y'reckon y'deserve it? Doin' reet as y'are." He ran one hand up Angel's side and Angel watched it approach, spellbound in the dim light. Jeb's fingers gripped the edge of the sheet, where it lay across Angel's chest, and drew it down towards him, until he was able to apply his lips directly to the crease at the top of Angel's leg, rubbing his chin against Angel's cock, which twitched slightly in an
effort to respond. The touch was soft and cool and although his mouth was busy, his voice was still clear. "I's not some sackless boy who mun be protected." Jeb's right hand smoothed down the outside of Angel's thigh, pushing the sheets further and he began to mouth the sensitive skin on the inside. Angel groaned as the memories of a stolen week and a stolen life overcame him and his hips jerked. And finally, Jeb's mouth closed over his shaft and he began to suck. "Tis too lat fer that," he whispered, and in this dream state, it didn't seem strange to Angel that Jeb could both service him and talk, at the same time. "Remember how t'stars skimmered so bright t'night 'fore ye flit'ed? Night 'fore I lost ye? It were like heaven, Angelus." Angel shivered and again his hips jerked with desire, causing Jeb's head to bob up, almost dislodging him from his task. "I know y'dint mean me t'dee," he said, even as he swallowed Angel's cock again and Angel grabbed at a handful of hair. "I know I wasn' bait t'ye." Jeb tilted his head and looked up at Angel from beneath his lashes. His eyes were dark and...

"No!" Angel cried, dragging Jeb's mouth away from his cock. "Stop!" He pulled the boy towards him until his arm had enough leverage, then flung him away, so he tumbled off the bed and crashed onto his back on the floor.
Sitting up, Angel scrubbed his hands over his face and through this hair. He looked down at the figure sprawled on the mat. "Xander?" he asked, hoping against hope that he was still dreaming.

Xander growled, his mouth contorting with frustrated rage and his eyes glowing yellow, even as his features shifted, with a crunching sound, and a vampire was glaring back into Angel's horrified face.

A movement near the foot of the bed caused Angel to drag his eyes away from his greatest failure and Spike stepped into view from the kitchen. "Hmm, shame that," he observed. "Was looking reet promising there, it were." He walked over to Xander and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder, glancing down at his childe. "Better get ye kegs back on, love," he advised. "Looks like this one's played out." Turning to Angel and nodding towards Angel's half hard state, he added, "Though if I was you, I'd be a mite insulted by that."

Angel grabbed the blanket and pulled it back up, clutching it to his chest until Spike's growing smirk made him realise how that must look and he let it fall to his lap. "How did you get in here?" he demanded.
Spike turned Angel's reading chair around so it faced the bed and sat down. "Sewer access, mate." He shrugged with a smirk, "Plus, I know where you live..." He paused. "Exist, anyway." His voice became thoughtful and he cocked his head. "I'm not sure 'live' is the right word. What do you think?"

Sulkily, Xander rolled over and reached for his trousers and coat, standing up to pull them on, leaving the coat unbelted. He moved to stand behind Spike, but Spike snagged him around the waist, pulling him down to sit on the arm of the chair, leaning against Spike's shoulder.

Wrapping the sheet around his waist, Angel swung his legs out of bed, so he was sitting with his feet on the floor, and rested his forearms on his thighs. They stared at each other across four feet of furry rug. Eventually Spike broke the silence. "Wasn't meant to wear off that fast," he observed.

"What wasn't?"

"The drug. Was supposed to keep you under while Xander here had his wicked way with you." He gave Xander an affectionate squeeze and leered up at him.
"And he can be very wicked, can't you, pet?" Xander smirked back.

"What drug?" Angel asked, feeling, as he so often did these days, that his life was escaping his control.

"The drug in the blood you bought." Spike explained, speaking slowly and clearly, as if Angel were being particularly dense. "At the hospital? Nigel Mears? Your 'contact'? Ringing any bells?"

"You paid him," Angel stated, flatly.

"Well, yeah!" Spike's smile was feral. "Not much point in doing anything else. Couldn't sell you the blood if he was dead, now could he?" Angel ran his hands over his face, trying to clear his head. "That would be the last of it, beginning to wear off," Spike added. "Did some killing tonight, did you? Got the endorphins pumping?" Angel looked up sharply. "Yeah," Spike continued. "That'd do it. Counteracts the effects. Should've thought of that. But, watching you for the last few weeks, didn't think you were likely to take on anyone who could actually fight back." He grinned cheerfully. "You'll be a bit groggy for a few more hours, but it'll be worn off by evening."
Angel looked at his grandchilde and his great-grandchilde, sitting together and felt himself slump in defeat. "What did you expect to gain from this charade, Spike?" he asked.

Spike looked offended, if Angel chose to believe his expression. "Just wanted to give you a present," he said, his tone aggrieved. "Remind you of the good times. Remind you where you belong. Drug's supposed to free you, give you some home truths from the old subconscious and release your deepest desires. You always had a soft spot for Jeb, thought you'd enjoy meeting the new version."

"That's not Jeb," Angel snapped, just as Xander said, "Hey!"

Spike gave Xander another squeeze, tipping him over to sprawl across Spike's lap. Smiling down at the indignant face, he tapped Xander lightly on the nose. "No you're not Jeb," he agreed. "But you look like him. The spitting image." He considered his childe. "Well, except for the eyes," he added, ruffling Xander's hair, playfully.

Xander crossly swiped his hair out of his face, but he didn't move off Spike's knee. Instead, he reached up one
hand and stroked it down Spike's cheek and neck, a gesture so tender and full of trust, on both their parts, that Angel felt a sharp pang of jealousy. "You killed Xander," he said, stating the obvious in an attempt to dispel the mood and regain his indignation.

"Yeah," Spike agreed, obviously not picking up on Angel's intentions. "Isn't he beautiful?" Xander purred and nuzzled his face into Spike's neck, which sent a vivid sense memory of his attempted seduction through Angel's chest and into his groin. Spike's arms closed around his childe. Looking up, Spike grinned at Angel. "So it didn't work," he said. "But I'm not complaining. I got me a lovely childe from the deal. Would never have thought of turning him, if I hadn't seen you panting after him. Remind me to thank you for that, one day." He pushed at Xander to make him stand up and heaved himself out of the chair. "We'll leave you with that thought," he said, sauntering towards the door. "Come on, pet. Time we were off home." He looked over his shoulder at Angel. "We're at 3, Torres Heights, if you want to find us," he added, as he opened the door. "See you soon." And with that, they were gone.

Angel dropped his head in his hands and tried to will
away the memory of a lean young body and the adoring look in a young vampire's eyes as he gazed up at his sire.

Translations of dialect words:
us - often used to mean the singular 'me' or 'I'
sackless - simple-minded
mun- must
lat - late
ye flit'ed - you left
skimmer - to shine brightly, to sparkle
dee - die
bait - food
I think the rest are obvious from the context, but let me know if there are any that aren't.

The title is a British word that refers to a situation where a verbal agreement of sale is withdrawn by the seller, because they have received a better offer.

19 The made man

Prompt: 80 - Rule Number Seven
“Rule one?” Spike asked.

“Keep an eye on Angelus.”

“Two?”

“Lay low. Don't attract attention.”

“Right! Number three?”

“Don't go leading anyone back to the house.”

“Four?”

“Keep the house clean.”

“Yeah, I don't want to be bringing Dru back to bodies all over the place.” He glared at Xander. “Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Sheesh.”

Spike's mouth twisted into a reluctant smile, but his voice stayed firm. “Five?” he asked.
"Make sure to be in at least an hour before dawn. I can't believe I've got a curfew."

"Oi, less cheek, or I'll ground you too." Xander looked up, but relaxed again when he saw that Spike was still smiling. "Six?" Spike continued.

Nodding his head from side to side, like a toy dog in the back window of a car, Xander adopted a sing song voice. "If Angelus comes round, be polite and accommodating." Spike's sharp clip round the ear made him continue more sulkily. "Not that he will. He's hardly left his den for the last three nights."

"He might. And if he does, it'll be because he can't resist you, so play along and give him anything he wants, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Be nice to Angelus. Check!"

Spike put an arm around Xander and gave him a hug. "Good boy. Seven?"

Xander bowed his head into Spike's shoulder wracking his brains, fruitlessly, until it clicked. He looked up sharply. "Hey! There isn't a seven," he said indignantly.
Spike laughed and dropped a kiss on Xander's forehead. "You're right, there isn't." He turned to pick up his duster, swinging it around as he expertly inserted his left arm into its sleeve.

He was arrested as his other arm groped for the opening to the right sleeve by Xander's next words: "But you are coming back, right?"

Turning around, he regarded his childe. "Don't be such a needy blighter," he ordered as he shoved his arm in and pulled the coat over his shoulders. As he twitched the collar straight he obviously saw that that wasn't enough to reassure Xander, because he sighed again. "Yes, I'm coming back. Angelus is here. Dru needs him. I'm coming back. Satisfied?"

Happy again, Xander launched himself at his sire, jumping into his arms, wrapping his legs around Spike's hips and his arms around Spike's neck. Spike staggered under the impact, but he was laughing too. "Alright, calm down. I'll not leave you. I'm not like some fly-by-nights, who'll desert their kin on a whim." He kissed Xander again, on the mouth this time. Xander tried to continue the kiss, but Spike pulled away, slackening the grip of his
arms, so Xander slipped back down to stand in front of him. "I'll be two nights. Three, max. Then I'll introduce you to your grandsire. You just behave yourself, while I'm gone. Okay?"

"Okay." Xander fingered the lapel of Spike's duster. "This is a really cool coat. Can I have one?"

Taking a step back, Spike glanced down at himself. "Yeah, leather does give a bloke a bit of an edge." He raised his left hand, stroking it down Xander's cheek. "Tell you what: when we get back, we'll go out, just you and me. And we'll find you one and get it for you." His voice became sterner. "But only if you're good. I'm trusting you here, okay?"


He tried to ignore the sinking sensation he felt, as he stood at the window watching Spike pull the gate closed behind him.

Thursday evening
Pacing the length of the living room, back and forth, casting regular glances at the window, Xander wasn't sure if he was worried, or fuming with anger. 'Two nights, he said! Three at most! But even if Sunday doesn't count, he should've been back yesterday!' Just to be certain, he ticked the nights off on his fingers. 'Sunday night to get there. Monday to sort out whatever he needed to sort out. That's one. Tuesday to get back. Or Wednesday, if whatever his business was took longer than one night. He should be back! So where is he?' Another glare at the window; it looked darker. He checked the alarm clock he'd brought out from the bedroom. Yes! 'Finally!' Rushing over to the door, he pulled it open and looked out. Suddenly cautious, he edged out onto the porch. He'd never left the house quite this early before, but he'd not slept well and had woken long before the alarm had told him he must. Plus, he was starving, having finished off the woman Spike left for him, the night before, so certain that Spike would be back when he got home from keeping watch over Angelus' movements.

It had been a boring week. He'd done as he was told - set the alarm for seven o'clock each evening, to give himself plenty of time to wash and eat before making his way, as soon as it was dark, to the rooftop across the street from
Angelus' apartment building. Each evening it had been a relief when Angelus got his lazy ass in gear and came out, because lying on a roof top for hours on end, watching the entrance to the garage and the manhole that was Angelus' access to the sewers, just inside it, was not Xander's idea of fun. Not that trailing around town after the guy was much better. Angelus wasn't doing anything, just wandering around, not even killing things and certainly not hunting. On Tuesday night there had been that slight excitement, when he chased a few kids away from the park, but it didn't amount to anything. He didn't get into any fights. Which, when Xander thought about it afresh was probably a relief, because he was pretty sure Spike would expect him to go to the rescue and he wasn't too sure how good he'd be at that whole deal, since he didn't know how well he could fight yet. He felt stronger than he remembered Xander being and it was true he could jump higher and run for longer, but facing other vampires, who also had those abilities and had had time to practice with them? No, maybe it was as well Angelus was doing no more than skulking around the graveyards and peering into crypts.

But right now he was starving, because last night he'd allowed himself a bigger meal than usual. He'd even remembered rule four and taken the body out and
dumped it, before heading over to Angelus' place. Craning his neck he checked the sky beyond the porch. 'Yep, safe enough. Time to find something to eat, before another night of one sided tag. And if Spike wasn't coming back... Xander shook himself, he'd be back! He'd promised! But it was a bit of a thrill, to be actually going out on a hunt by himself.

Walking down towards Crawford Street, Xander pondered hunting grounds. The Bronze seemed like the best bet. He'd blend in there and be more likely to see someone who thought they knew him. Not that Xander had ever had any luck with the girls. He considered that memory. Not that he'd ever tried. Bronze it was then. And Angelus' apartment was nearby, so it wouldn't even be a detour, not really.

He didn't have any money on him to pay the cover charge, so he took up position near a dark loading bay and a pile of empty pallets, about a hundred yards from the club and nearer to the entrance to the alley. Leaning up against the wall, as if he was waiting for someone, he watched the evening's party goers straggle passed. A group of girls walked by, giggling, and didn't even spare him a glance, but he needed someone on their own if he was to do this right. Spike hadn't had much time to teach
him how to hunt, but he knew enough to know that a human scream was nearly as effective a weapon as a stake. He shifted slightly as the sound of a single pair of footsteps reached him and turned his head towards the mouth of the alley. Male, slim, young. Xander strained his eyes as he slowly stood upright. 'Ah, yes. Now what was his name? Wayne? Warren? Scott? Yes, that was it, Scott Hope.' Stepping away from the wall and into the middle of the path, Xander hunched his shoulders. "Hey, man," he called, swinging his hand in a half formed wave. "Umm, you're Scott, right?"

His target slowed down, but continued to walk towards the club, and Xander. "Yeah?" he replied, cautiously. "Do I know you?"

"Xander. We had English together last year."

"Oh, oh yeah, sure, Xander." Scott's shoulders relaxed and Xander grinned inwardly at the advantage his host's looser status gave him. Being underestimated could be useful. Scott had stopped a few feet from him and was looking at him questioningly.

"Oh umm, listen, I was just wondering..." Xander edged a little closer, causing Scott to take an unthinking step back
towards the loading bay. "I was wondering..."

Scott continued to back away. He seemed to have picked up some sense of threat because he looked up and down the alley, searching. "There's no one there," Xander said. "Just us."

"What are you talking about?" Scott asked, his voice sounding slightly strangled, so it came out higher than before. "Are you coming on to me?" he asked, trying to smile, to pass it off as a joke if that proved necessary.

Xander shook his head. "Nah, you are so not my type." He gave a small sniff and felt a smile begin to stretch his lips. "But it seems like I might be yours. What do you say?" he asked, edging them both back further towards the shadows.

"What are you doing?" Scott's voice was now beginning to rise in volume too, as alarm coloured it.

Xander lifted his arms and rammed his hands into Scott's chest, causing him to fly back and crash into the pallets, from where he bounced off to collapse to the ground on his back. "Huh!" Xander said, staring down at his hands, then up at the body lying awkwardly sprawled on the
floor. "Cool." He pounced on his meal, before Scott could even think about getting back on his feet. Pinning him down with the weight of his body, Xander grabbed a handful of hair and pulled Scott's head back, exposing his neck, and bit. Scott gave one strangled scream and his legs thrashed, but Xander shifted his weight back and clamped his feet down over Scott's ankles. From there it was easy. Scott's right hand grasped at Xander's hair, while the other groped blindly around on the ground next to him, as Xander sealed his lips around the wound and began to suck.

It didn't take long, first the struggling grew weaker, then, gradually, the heart began to falter, until it too stopped. Shortly after that even Xander's powerful throat muscles couldn't drag any more goodness from the body and he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. He was glutted on the power of his first full meal. Life coursed through him and he felt like his body should be glowing with the strength of it.

He looked down at his chest, just to make sure. No glow, but there was a pretty big bloodstain on his t-shirt. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and that came away stained too. Thinking quickly, he rolled the body over and stripped it of the leather jacket it was wearing.
Not as good as Spike's coat, but good enough for now. Using the hem of Scott's shirt, Xander wiped most of the blood from his mouth, then he got to his feet, pulled the jacket on, zipped it up and bent to drag the body further into the darkness of the loading bay. Finally satisfied that it wouldn't be found immediately, he wandered out into the alley again. 'Better get over to Angelus',' he thought, 'for another exciting night of follow the ancestor.'

He had just turned into Main Street when a voice called out to him, "Hey! Xander!" He looked around and saw Jesse waving at him as he sprinted across the road. He came to a halt, right in front of Xander, bouncing slightly with suppressed excitement. "Watcha' doing?" he asked. "Ya heading to the Bronze?"

"Er, no, I just left." What an amazing coincidence, bumping into Jesse, right now. A plan began to form in Xander's brain.

Jesse's face twisted, "Man," he asked. "What the fuck happened to you? You get a bloody nose?" He smirked slightly. "Did ya step on Larry's foot, or, uh, spill his drink?" He looked past Xander, towards the alley. "Are they following you?"
Xander tugged at the collar of his jacket and Jesse's eyes widened. "That's blood on your shirt. Oh, dude, are you really hurt? Come on, we've gotta get outta here. I'm gonna take you to the hospital." He reached out to grab Xander as Xander feinted a stagger.

Allowing his left arm to be hauled over Jesse's shoulder, Xander murmured, "Home. Just get me home."

"No, man, Hospital! Just hang in there, okay? I'll get you there. How bad is it? That looks like a lotta blood."

"It's just a small cut. Won't even need stitches. I just need to wash up and put a plaster on it. I'm okay."

"You are not okay, on an epic scale. Come on. This way. Lean on me."


They set off, Xander allowing Jesse to take his weight. "Sure thing. Just hang on in there," Jesse begged. Shifting the grip he had on Xander's left hand, he grunted. "You still with me, man? You're hand's kinda cold and clammy, don't go into shock, okay. 'Cause I really don't know what
I should do." Xander gave a pained grunt and Jesse steered them through the gates of St Matthew's cemetery.

Once they were well inside the gates, out of sight of the road, Xander straightened up, pulling away from Jesse. "I am so glad I bumped into you," he said, taking advantage of Jesse's surprise to grab him and pull him into his arms.

Remembering how well it had worked on his dinner, Xander hooked a foot around Jesse's leg and pushed forward, tripping them both so they fell, with him landing on top, forcing the air out of Jesse's lungs with a pained 'Umph!' He struck, before Jesse could draw another breath to protest, sinking his fangs into Jesse's neck. There was no tearing hunger this time, so he was able to take more care, concentrating on the change in suction needed as Jesse's heart did less of the work for him. Once Jesse stopped trying to fight, he pulled away, tore into his own wrist and forced the bleeding wound against Jesse's mouth. Jesse choked once, swallowed and then his lips closed around the cut and he began to suck. Xander thought about what Spike had told him about his own turning and dipped his head back to Jesse's neck, to complete the process.
It seemed to take longer to kill Jesse than it did to drain Scott dry, but eventually his body went limp and his mouth fell away from Xander's wrist. Xander rolled off him and looked around as he got back to his feet. The next question was, where to take him? Home was the obvious answer, but how to get there? Briefly Xander wondered if he hadn't been a bit impatient. He could probably have lured Jesse back to the house, if he'd been thinking more clearly. Well, there was no point in regrets, he crouched down and hauled Jesse's body over his shoulder, like a sack of potatoes, and set off through the cemetery, away from the hospital and towards the woods which would bring him out at the top of Crawford Street, from where he could probably cut through some of the wide grounds of the big houses, onto Torres. He suddenly realised he was really tired. Thank fuck, he'd managed to find a good meal before trying this. It might not have worked otherwise.

Friday evening

Xander sat on the floor next to Jesse's body, laid out on the same rug he'd woken on, just over a week ago. It was early evening and Xander considered going and getting a meal from the girl he'd got stored in the pantry. Getting her had meant going out again last night, but once he'd
got Jesse back to the house and into his bed, he'd realised that the turning had taken more out of him than he'd realised and he'd had to go back out to hunt again. He'd grabbed the first human he saw, jumping out of the trees and knocking her over the head with a rock, bringing her back and tying her up, before taking enough to keep her unconscious.

For once it had actually been a relief to find that Spike still hadn't come home while he was out. And he still wasn't back, but that wasn't what was stopping Xander leaving now. There was a feeling stirring in his gut and he wondered if Spike had felt this too. Whether Spike had sat vigil over him, for the three days he said it took for Xander to wake. He stroked his hand through Jesse's hair and bent down, taking the slack lips in a gentle kiss. Now they could be together. Now Jesse wouldn't reject him, wouldn't stiffen up and roll away when Xander wanted to kiss him. Now he could have Jesse, like Spike had him. He could love him and hold him and teach him how to feed and Spike could teach them both how to hunt. And if Spike's sire didn't let Spike come back, then Xander would still have Jesse. They could learn together.

He rolled back onto his butt in surprise, as the lips under his moved, staring in awe as Jesse's body jerked,
twitched and sat upright, like a wooden board hinged in the middle. Jesse looked around, his eyes glowing yellow in the dim light of the room. "Xander?" he asked, then more hesitantly, "Sire?"

"Wow," Xander exclaimed. "You're awake. Already. I thought it was supposed to take days."

Jesse's expression became smug. "You did, did you?" he asked. "I was always faster than you, man."

"I don't care," Xander interrupted, before Jesse could say anything in his confusion, that Xander would have to pick him up on. "I'm just glad to see it worked." He leant forward to kiss Jesse again, but Jesse turned his head, looking around the room and Xander's lips collided with his cheek.

"Faster, smarter and stronger," Jesse mused. "Where are we anyway?"

Nonplussed Xander replied, while he tried to get a handle on the conversation, "Torres Heights."

"Off Crawford?"
"Yeah."

"Great! That's where Cordelia lives." Jesse jumped to his feet and crossed to the door, turning with his hand on the knob. "Thanks, buddy," he said as he pulled the door open and stepped out. "I feel great!" And he walked out into the night, leaving Xander still sitting on the floor, too shocked to move.

20 When the cat's away

Prompt: 81 - Grovel

Friday night

An hour later, Xander had progressed from shocked, through depressed and was building towards angry. He'd moved from the floor to the couch, but he hadn't managed to figure out what to do next. He ought to go out and find Jesse. He ought to go and watch Angelus'
place and follow him when he left. He ought to figure out what he was going to tell Spike, if Spike ever came back. Instead, he was sitting, numb and confused with his brain refusing to co-operate with any of the things he ought to be doing. And underneath it all, was a feeling of intense frustration and annoyance, a deep seated resentment at Jesse's attitude.

A faint noise outside caused him to look up, but the initial hope that it was Spike returning was dashed when the door opened to usher Jesse back into the living room. Xander jumped to his feet and was across the room in seconds. He grabbed the lapels of Jesse's jacket as he drove him back into the wall. "Where have you been?"

Jesse didn't seem to notice Xander's tone, didn't seem to notice that Xander was furious with him. Or maybe he didn't care. His mouth was turned down in a frown that looked remarkably like a pout. "Cordy's left, already," he said. "She's gone to Paris."

Stepping back, Xander let his hands fall away but Jesse stayed where he was, slumped against the wall. "How do you know they've gone?" Xander asked.

With a shrug, Jesse raised his face to Xander, his
expression woebegone. "You think I haven't been keeping count? But I just lost a whole day! Why'd you have to wait so long? If I'd woken up one night earlier, I'd have been able to get her and turn her. She'd have been mine!"

Xander reached out again, his hand hovering above Jesse's shoulder, before he pulled it back. "And what if I didn't want her?" he asked. "Did you even think of that?"

Jesse shook his head. "No. I wanted her, so I thought you'd be okay with it."

In the face of such longing, Xander wasn't sure what to say. The anger was still there, but so was the desire to make Jesse happy, to have what he'd wanted when he saw Jesse in the street and decided to make him. He thought about the boy Jesse'd been and the way he'd stalked Cordelia for the last few weeks. She wasn't so bad, for a girl. It was just her air of superiority that had put Xander off, he thought. She hadn't interested him, but she'd been important to Jesse. "Yeah, well, maybe," he offered. "We'll not know now, will we? Anyway, she'll be back in a month." With an internal shrug, he dismissed Cordelia Chase from his mind and returned to the source of his own concerns. "But it didn't take you
this long to check her house. Where've you been?"

Brightening at the reminder that maybe all he had to do was wait, Jesse answered, "I went to The Bronze. I thought she might be there, since she wasn't at home." A slow smile spread across his face and he straightened up. "I ran into that Harmony bitch." The smile turned into a grin. "Man, you should have seen her. She wouldn't spare a glance for the old Jesse, but me? I walked in and she was panting. I so rule!"

Stepping away from the wall, Jesse began to pace and his voice shifted again. "I got her outside, but a whole gang of vampires turned up and I had to run." He looked over. "They were huge and there were at least ten of them. They took Harmony off me and I hadn't even finished with her." There was the beginning of a whine now and it seemed that the injustice of the theft had completely overwhelmed his previous heartbreak. "They said I had no right here. What did they mean by that?"

It was Xander's turn to shake his head. "I don't know. Spike, my sire, hasn't had a chance to tell me much yet." He thought about it. "Maybe there's different hunting grounds for different gangs," he suggested. "Maybe you strayed into another gang's territory?"
"But how would I know?" The whine transformed into frustrated anger. "I only just woke up. You're supposed to know this stuff. How long have you been around? A month? A week? What?"

"Er, just over a week. But I've been busy. Spike wanted me to do something and he was concentrating on that." In an effort to provide Jesse some hope that things would get better, he offered, "Spike will know if there's gangs. He'll explain it. When he gets back."

"Spike, Spike, Spike. I don't want to hear about Spike! I don't care about Spike!" Xander rocked back in shock at such sentiments, feeling an involuntary growl forming in his throat, but Jesse didn't seem to notice because he continued, "And even if there are gangs, we still need to eat." He resumed his pacing, staring at the carpet under his feet and ignoring Xander. "So we need to go somewhere they don't own." He looked up. "How about your parent's place? Or mine? We could get enough to last a week from mine."

It was as if Jesse's words released a desire that Xander hadn't known he'd been nurturing and suddenly he was excited too. "No, we'll save yours. We'll do mine!"
Grabbing his leather jacket and pulling it on, he caught Jesse by the shoulders, turned him around and started bundling him towards the door, when a sudden thought made him stop short. "Wait!" he said, letting his arms drop to his sides. "Problemo amigo. Big fucking problemo. Spike said something about this - we can't get into a house unless we're invited." He watched Jesse gaze around the room. "A house where humans live," he explained. "There's some sort of barrier. They have to invite us in. Demons are different, no barrier on a demon's house."

"Invite us? That sounds crazy. Have you tested it?"

Xander shook his head. "I know we can get into a demon's house, but we never tried to get into a human one."

"So you don't actually know it's true?"

"Er, no, but Spike said it was. And if it is, it'll totally screw us if we're stuck outside and can't get in."

"Yeah," Jesse agreed, thoughtfully. "So what d'we do?" He turned away from Xander and went back to pacing the floor. "I know," he announced, "I knock on the door
and get invited in to wait for you."

"And I'm stuck outside, while you have all the fun?"
Xander retorted. "I don't think so."

"Got a better plan?"

Grabbing Jesse's arm, Xander pulled him outside. "I'll think of one, on the way."

~*~*~*~*~

Crouching by the trunk of his dad's car, Xander watched as Jesse climbed the porch steps and knocked on the door. It was not yet eleven, so Xander doubted they were in bed, but it seemed to take forever before his mom answered. It was quiet on the street so Xander could hear the conversation clearly. "Hi, Mrs Harris." Jesse said, sounding perfectly cheerful and normal. "Is Xander in?"

Xander couldn't see anything from where he was hiding, but he heard the shocked surprise in her voice when she answered, "He's not with you?"

"No, I haven't seen him for a few days. That's why I got a
bit worried. Are you sure he's not in? Can I come in and see?"

Her reply wasn't very encouraging for Jesse's lame idea. "Wait there," she ordered. She must have turned away, because her voice echoed differently, but it was loud enough so Xander could still hear what she shouted. "Tony! Jesse McNally's here. He's looking for Xander."

There was silence for a moment, then Jesse tried again. "Maybe he came home and you didn't notice? Maybe he's in his room, right now? Could I go and have a look?"

His mom didn't answer and when Xander peered cautiously around the end of the car he realised that she'd left Jesse on the porch, while she went to talk to his dad. Jesse had his hands up and seemed to be pressing against something in the empty doorway, but he suddenly dropped them back to his sides and stood up straight and respectful. Xander pulled his head back behind the car as his dad appeared. "Jesse?" His dad asked. "Are you saying that Xander's not staying at your place?"

"No, Mr Harris. I came to see if he was alright. I haven't seen him for a coupla days. I was just saying to Mrs
Harris, that maybe he's in his room..."

"He's not in his room," his dad interrupted. His words were slightly slurred, but he appeared to be sobering fast. "When did you last see him, exactly?"

This plan sucked, there was no way it was going to work. Xander began to crawl backwards, as Jesse started to splutter out some story about last seeing Xander in the park on Wednesday, until he reached the sidewalk and the cover provided by next door's shrubbery, then he stood up. Taking an unnecessary but steadying deep breath, Xander walked into their view and started towards them "Hey, Jesse," he called.

His dad pulled the door wider and peered over Jesse's shoulder. "Xander," he yelled. "Where've you been?"

Before Xander could answer, his dad was pulled aside and his mom reappeared, echoing her husband as she exclaimed, "Xander! There you are! Where've you been? I've been worried sick. Come here, this minute!"

Hopefully that was enough of an invitation, because although Jesse had turned around and was watching Xander approach, he wasn't saying anything more to
persuade them to let him in. "What's up, mom?" he asked.

"Xander Harris, come inside this minute!" As Xander reached the doorway, Jesse moved aside and that apparently caught her attention, because she added more quietly, "Jesse's here, looking for you. Now come inside both of you, I don't want to stand here holding the door all night and we don't need to have this conversation in front of the neighbours." She turned back to Jesse. "In fact, if you don't mind, dear, I think it would be best if you went home now. Xander and I need to talk." To Xander she added, "You could have phoned, if you were staying with one of your friends."

Taking the last step, across the threshold, Xander cast a glance at Jesse over his shoulder and grinned, but his face was under control when he turned back. "Sorry, mom," he said, trying to sound contrite.

"Yes, well, come on in." Now that her momentary alarm for his safety was past, she appeared to forget about it. "You've missed supper," she said, "but there might be some pizza left, in the kitchen."

With a jerk of his head to Jesse, Xander smiled at his
mom and followed his dad into the living room. "I'm sure we'll find something," he agreed.

~*~*~*~*~

Saturday evening

Xander shoved Jesse's head off his shoulder as the faint tickling sensation he had come to recognise in the back of his mind signalled that the sun was setting. He looked around the room as he got to his feet and fastened his jeans. Jesse was curled up on the couch, where they'd fallen asleep watching TV. His mom's body was lying like a broken action figure, propped up in the corner and there was a small pool of smeared blood at her side. Looked like Jesse hadn't managed to finish that meal. Eyes bigger than his stomach, as she used to say. And his dad... he glanced around and smiled, yes, his dad was lying on the floor in the doorway, where Xander had finally brought him down by jumping on his back.

Turning back to the couch, Xander dragged Jesse to his feet and held him upright. "Rise and shine," he said, giving him a shake.
Jesse's eyes cracked open. "Oh, man, I'm still full. My belly's bloated." He allowed his body to slump as he relaxed his stomach muscles and ran a hand over the resultant bulge. "See?"

With a laugh, Xander let him go, giving him a shove so he fell back onto the couch and bounced gently a couple of times. "We need to head home," he said.

Jesse opened one eye and peered up at him. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Sunset. Come on. I'm going to see if there's anything I want from my old room. Get yourself together. We are so out of here."

He walked away, stepping over his dad's body and down the hall to his old bedroom. Jesse's voice followed him. "Why would you want anything?" he called. Xander ignored him.

But looking around the room, he had to admit there wasn't really anything here he wanted. The memories were too strong and they weren't the sort he wanted to treasure and keep. He wandered around anyway, turning over the comics scattered across the bed, picking up the
shirt tossed over the back of the chair and dropping it again. He stopped for a moment and regarded the photos of Willow and Jesse and himself on the desk and thought about turning Willow. Except Jesse was not quite how he expected and, he realised with a shock, not quite what he wanted. They'd shared a few fumbled kisses and Jesse had cuddled up to him willingly enough. He'd even fallen asleep with his hand still around Xander's dick, but there'd been a passivity about him that had left Xander feeling vaguely frustrated, in spite of the fact that Jesse had brought him off. And he hadn't seemed to care that Xander didn't return the compliment. It was like he'd done it because it was expected of him. He didn't gasp and moan, like he had in Xander's imaginings. He didn't actually feel like Jesse. It was odd.

Dragging himself out of his thoughts, Xander shelved that problem for later and took a last look around the room. From the closet he picked out his other pair of jeans and a fresh t-shirt, then he turned his back on the trappings of his human memories and made his way to the bathroom for a shower.

It was disconcerting not to see himself in the mirror, but he managed to comb his hair by feel and it was good to wash off the grime and splatters of blood from the night
before and have clean clothes. They smelt fresh; looked like his mom had done the laundry recently. Then he returned to the living room.

Pausing in the doorway, he contemplated the mess, wondering if he should tidy the bodies away, bury them, maybe. Jesse was up, but he hadn't made any attempt to tidy himself. Xander walked over to his mom and considered her, his head on one side. She didn't look peaceful, just broken. She didn't really look like his mom. Behind him, he heard Jesse wandering around. "We gonna go over to mine next, then?" he asked.

Xander didn't bother to turn around. "No, we're going home. What we do after that, well, it depends. But first we're going home."

"Aww, no, man. Come on. I wanna go see the 'rents"

Looking over his shoulder, Xander glared. "No! I want to go home and check."

"See if your precious Spike's turned up yet? You do that, man, I'm going to see how many of the family missed me."
Ignoring the jeering comment about his sire, Xander crossed the room and grabbed Jesse by the arm. "You'll do what I say, or I'll stake you."

Jesse wrenched his arm free and stumbled back a few paces towards the hallway. "Ha! Not if I get you first."

The crash of the door flying open interrupted the incipient argument and Xander watched, mouth agape, as Spike stormed into the room. Without slowing his step, Spike's left arm lashed out and he back-handed Jesse, sending him flying into the wall. Xander barely had time to take in the sight of him sliding to the floor, where he settled in an ungainly heap, very similar to that of Xander's mom, before Spike was on him. He dithered, not sure if he wanted to throw himself into Spike's arms or run like hell and as a result only managed a few dancing steps to the side, but Spike was too fast anyway. He caught a fist full Xander's hair with his right hand and dragged him forwards, forcing his head down at the same time, until Xander's legs buckled and he collapsed to his knees, sending jarring shocks of pain through his knee caps. Spike planted his right foot on the back of Xander's calf to hold him there and jerked his head back. He loomed over Xander, who gazed up at him through watering eyes. "Where's Angelus?" Spike growled.
"You came back," Xander gasped, too relieved to realise he wasn't answering Spike's question.

"'Course I came back. Where's Angelus?" He gave Xander's hair another tug, pulling his head further back, and Xander screamed, fearing his neck would break.

Apparently realising that Xander couldn't answer if he couldn't get any air into his lungs, Spike relaxed his hold slightly. "Don't make me ask again, pet," he warned.

Drawing a ragged breath, Xander managed to gasp, "He was at home, when I last checked."

Giving Xander a shove, as he let go of Xander's hair, Spike lifted his foot from Xander's leg and planted it squarely in Xander's side, pushing him over and holding him there. "And how long ago was that?" he asked in an overly reasonable voice.

He really should have studied his math better at school, Xander thought, since even the ability to count appeared to have deserted him. "Um, er, yesterday?" he suggested.
"You don't sound too sure of yourself there," Spike observed. "Which night was it you ran into this fool and decided, on a whim, to forget your task and turn him?"

Desperately trying to piece together his last few days, Xander gasped. "That was the next night. I finished what you left in the larder, so I had to go hunting." Spike continued to look at him and Xander's panic increased. "Today's Friday, and that was yesterday. So I saw him yesterday, I mean... it might have been the day before."

Spike stood up and regarded Xander, the expression in his eyes making Xander want to curl up into a ball and hide. "Today's Saturday," Spike corrected. "You came here yesterday. So you haven't seen him since Thursday? Or is it Wednesday? And now he's missing. Well done, pet." He reached down and hauled Xander to his feet, holding on to his upper arm to prevent him pulling away, not that Xander was thinking of doing any such thing, and turned them both to face Jesse.

Jesse cowered back against the wall. 'Grovelled' a voice noted in Xander's head, 'That's the word.' It was a girl's voice, instructing him, but he couldn't place it. Then he did: Cordelia Chase, looming over him, much as Spike had just done, after Mitch Fargo knocked him down in
the school hallway.

Spike looked Jesse up and down and gave a 'humph' of disgust. "What part of laying low do you call this?" he asked Xander. "You're too young to turn anyone. But since you did, what the fuck are you doing arguing with it? You don't ever let a minion defy you. Not ever."

Turning in Spike's hold and grasping his upper arm with both hands, Xander clung to him. "He's not a minion, Spike. I made him. He's my childe. And I was just telling him he couldn't go and kill his parents, until we'd been and checked if you were back." A new thought occurred to him. "And you are. And I'm so glad, because I was getting really worried that your sire wouldn't let you come back and I was going to come home, as soon as I got him to tidy himself up. Because I really, really wanted to know you were safe. And how did you find us, anyway?"

Spike turned his head to regard Xander and his gaze softened slightly. "You're my childe, that's how I found you. He's a minion. How long did it take him to wake?"

"Er, he woke up last night." Spike raised an eyebrow. "Um, after one night. But he said he was always faster
than me, and he was, because with the long legs, he could always run faster, so I figured..." he trailed off in the face of Spike's continued look.

"Pet," Spike shook his head, almost regretfully, "that's why he isn't a childe. You spent three nights absorbing who and what Xander was. When you woke up, you were confused because you had so much to process." He toed Jesse's leg disdainfully. "This one is just a low level creation. Has the memories, but none of the feeling. You're a childe. My childe. He's cannon fodder." Finally he released Xander's arm and Xander slumped with relief.

Spike in the meantime turned on the spot, taking in the mess. "Still, since he exists, might as well make use of him." He jerked his head at Jesse. "Get up. We're going hunting." And turning back to Xander: "Angelus is gone. He's not home and he's not been there for at least two days, so get your arse into gear, we need to find him, before he gets into any more trouble."

Behind Spike, Jesse scrambled to his feet, but his obvious fear didn't seem to be enough for him to keep his mouth shut. Perhaps it was because Spike was no longer looking at him. "I wanna go see the family," he whined.
Spike turned back and glared. "I don't care if you want to go out and slaughter all the bloody tribes of Israel, first you're coming with me!" He reached out an arm and gave Jesse what appeared to be a gentle tap across the cheek, except that Jesse's head whipped round in reaction to the blow. "And if you do well," he added. "I might just let you live."

21 Threat or promise

Prompt: 82 - Utopia

Friday

The cage was created from an alcove cut into the rock, approximately four paces deep and five wide, with thick steel bars across the opening, so even if he had been able to reach them, it was unlikely Angel could have broken out. Opposite him, a single torch in a bracket on the wall shed enough light to illuminate most of the rest of the cave and Angel knew that his cage was one of a number, probably intended as a pantry. In the time he'd been here, that torch had been replaced six times but the others had not been lit, so he hadn't been able to see into the furthest reaches of the space. From the direction of one of the deepest shadows the smell of rotting flesh permeated the air, making Angel thankful that he didn't
need to breathe. Altogether, as a view, it had quickly palled.

The sound of heavy footsteps in the passageway leading from the main cavern reached him where he sat and he raised his head from his knees. The chains around his wrists connected to those around his ankles preventing him from standing and he refused to kneel in front of a creature who once bowed before him, but to deliberately close his eyes when his captor was so close was stupid. And Angel wasn't stupid. Certainly not in the ways of torture and persuasion that Luke was so expert in.

As Darla's newly turned protégé, Angelus had sneered at Luke's devotion and the way he obeyed The Master's orders without question, but he had been impressed by Luke's skills in extracting a confession of treachery from one of The Master's court, particularly since it had been Angelus himself who had dusted the envoy, for the crime of bumping into his shoulder and not apologising. It had taken four days before Vincenzo had admitted to the murder and Luke had allowed him to die. Angelus had spent hours watching Luke at work, memorising his technique for his own future use, and Luke had enjoyed having the audience. Which was why Angel knew that Luke's attentions to him had not been as harsh as they
could have been. He'd been beaten and burnt, but his intestines were still safely inside his body. His fingers, wrists and lower arms were broken, but that was more a result of his own attempts to fight back, than Luke getting serious. Luke hadn't even declared his intentions yet, contenting himself with subduing Angel's initial attempt to escape, then leaving him alone. However, it looked like that was about to change.

When he came to a halt in front of the cage, Luke's heavy frame blocked out the light, leaving him a black silhouette, and Angel concentrated on projecting an air of relaxed amusement as he blinked up at the shadowed face. His feet squarely planted Luke clasped his hands behind his back, like a priest about to begin his sermon, but his tone was almost conversational when he commented, "You intrigue me, Angelus. From your behaviour, I could almost suspect you of attempting to thwart our plans."

They both knew that Luke wouldn't kill him, not without the express permission of The Master. Luke may be old, with the greater capabilities of his age, but he was still created a minion and taking it upon himself to kill a direct descendant of the line would force his master to execute him in turn. With that advantage, unspoken but
acknowledged, between them, Angel found himself unwilling to even pretend. He managed a smirk as he replied, "That would be about right."

His nonchalance seemed to succeed in infuriating Luke, who started forward, gripped the bars and growled, his voice thick through his fangs, "You are not worthy of the honour done you. You are an abomination in the face of Aurelius. I will have justice! And it will not be pleasant." His mouth stretched into a smile. "For you," he added.

Angel shrugged. "And yet," he replied with deliberation, "somehow, I can't find it in myself to care." He lifted one chained arm as far as he could, ignoring the pain as the weight of the manacle caused the broken bones to shift against each other, and gestured towards Luke. "You want to bring your master back from whatever hell he's trapped himself in. I want to leave him there. Looks like I'm in the lead."

With a visible effort Luke let go of the bars. "Unfortunately for you, you are no longer in a position to stop me. Our master has a dream. He came to this auspicious place to create a new world. A world where vampires rule. That dream shall come to pass and he will rise up and take dominion of the earth and all shall bow
before him." Then dropping the portentous tone he added, in a more balanced voice, "Killing Aldric has merely delayed matters."

"Killing who?" Angel asked.

He thought Luke would ignore the question, but instead he answered, "The Chaos Mage who was to break through the veil and allow my master to return to us. His acolyte, Ethan, described you to me." He grunted and paused for a moment, thinking. "His willingness to do so was the only reason I allowed him to live." He stepped back and the light from the torch caught his face as he glanced to his right. "That, and the fact that he makes a pretty addition to the zoo."

Turning away Luke went over to the torch, pulled it free of its bracket and walked around, lighting the others from its flame, before returning it to its place. Angel took the opportunity to make a better inspection of the cave. A male arm sticking out from under what appeared to be a random heap of rags explained the awful stench. Minions! Never good house keepers, if they weren't watched. They obviously made a habit of throwing the bodies down here, rather than taking the trouble to get rid of them, away from the den. Angel wondered, for the
umpteenth time in his life, at the capacity of minions to put up with filth.

Luke's return drew his eyes back to the apparent leader of this otherwise leaderless band. "Darla," Luke said, causing Angel's attention to snap back into focus, "has journeyed to Europe, searching for a book she says holds the key to his release." Strangely, he sounded dismissive, as if Darla was of little account, which wasn't right. Unless Luke had some power play in mind. His next words seemed to confirm it. "I will raise him first," he announced. "The sleeper will wake," he said, his voice heavy with borrowed gravitas. "The Master will walk among us once more! He will be restored and the world will bleed! It will be a day celebrated throughout eternity." He blinked, coming back to the present. "And to do that, I need something. Every member of the family has a place and yours is to bring me the seer."

A trickle of dread made it's way down Angel's spine. "I don't know what you mean," he said. "I haven't seen Dru for over a century."

Luke regarded him calmly. "When you killed Aldric," he explained, "you had Spike with you. Where Spike is, Dru is never far away. Since it appears you have reconciled
with your children..." He allowed that sentence to peter out, in a manner that was not usual for him and a wide smile gradually formed. "They will come for you," he finished, smugly, "and I shall be ready."

Lifting his left hand in a fist, Luke casually banged the edge against one of the bars as he turned and walked away, leaving Angel staring at his retreating back. His comfort, Angel thought, was that Spike probably would come for him. The problem was that it wouldn't be for the reasons Luke imagined. And Spike's motives were crucial to whether he sprang Angel from this imprisonment, or cooperated with Luke to bring him down. As comfort went, it was not as adequate as he would wish.

\[22\] A court without a king

*Prompt: 83 - The Underground*

**Friday evening**
The awareness of Sunset prickled at the corners of Angel's mind. After Luke left, he was undisturbed and it was difficult to judge time in solitary, but the instinctive awareness of the sun's movements told him it was now 8pm. Not that it made any difference, except that he knew the rest of the residents in the warren would be waking up and if he didn't want to attract attention, he'd have to be quieter.

He'd spent most of the hours since Luke's visit smashing the manacles around his ankles against the rock wall. It had been a painful and frustrating task, since the chains were so short and every impact sent sharp bursts of pain through his wrists and arms as the bones ground against each other, but eventually he'd managed to break them open and kick them aside. His broken arms were black with bruises and wouldn't permit the same attempt for the manacles on his wrists, but he took satisfaction in his minor victory. At least he could now stand up and move around a little, for all the good that did him.

Resuming his seat on the floor, Angel leaned against the wall with his legs outstretched, resting his forearms on his thighs to relieve the pressure. He allowed his head to fall back and closed his eyes. He hadn't eaten for over twenty four hours and then it had only been pigs' blood.
Normally that wouldn't be a problem, but his injuries were crying out to heal and the resultant hunger was causing his throat to ache with need.

A voice raised in indignation stirred him from his half-trance state, just as two men entered the cave from the tunnel leading up to the main cavern. One was a large, lumbering minion, the other was human, fighting his captor as he was shoved and dragged along by a powerful grip on his arm. "Leave me the fuck alone, man," the human cried. "What are you doing? Let me go, you bastard!"

The minion took no notice, ignoring the wild swings of the human's free fist, not even blinking when the occasional one connected. He merely gave his prisoner a violent shake, causing him to stumble, so he would have fallen if his captor hadn't kept him upright. The minion paused near the torch and unhooked a set of keys dangling from the bracket that held it.

Angel watched, expecting the human to be shoved into one of the other cells. He was surprised therefore when it was his own cage door the minion opened, letting go of the human with a last shove. The human took a few stumbling steps, before he fell to his hands and knees,
his head hanging below his shoulders. He stayed there for as long as it took to draw in one deep breath, then lurched back up onto his feet, spun around and threw himself at the door. Too late, the minion pushed it shut against his inadequate resistance and turned the key in the lock. Not even pausing to look at Angel, he then walked away, replaced the keys and left the cave, apparently in a hurry.

Angel stayed where he was; moving would only cause his arms pain. The human turned and slumped against the door, allowing himself to slide down it, until he too was sitting on the floor. Then he raised his head and registered Angel's presence for the first time. "Who are you?" he asked. "Why am I here? What do they want?"

Angel shrugged, his mind playing out various scenarios to explain both why Luke had apparently decided to feed him and what exactly he could say to his proposed meal. After a moment it occurred to him that he should try to reassure the man, so he offered a tentative smile. That seemed to help a little, because the man rolled over and began to crawl towards him, studying him carefully as he approached.

When he was about level with Angel's feet, he suddenly
stopped and sat back on his heels, eyes fixed on Angel's arms. "My God, your hands!" he exclaimed, his eyes flying up to meet Angel's.

"I'm Angel," Angel said. "They're broken." He shrugged again, attempting to belittle the seriousness of the obvious damage. "There's not much we can do about it though."

The man nodded. "Liam," he replied, automatically, missing Angel's start of surprise as he looked around the bare cell. Turning back he added, "You need to bind those." Leaning forward, he took a closer look, still not touching, then he began to drag at the hem of the tee shirt he wore under his unbuttoned shirt. "I saw this on the movies. We haven't got a splint, so this will have to do."

Angel realised he was going to use his tee shirt to fabricate bandages. The prospect of Liam's exposed skin, the pulse beating beneath it, jolted him into action. "No!" he said, shuffling forwards and turning slightly, so Liam could see his back. He turned his head to look at Liam, over his shoulder. "Use mine. It's already torn."

Doubtful, Liam demurred, "You're hurt, man. You need to
"It doesn't matter. It's torn already. The silk will make better bindings, believe me, and it's sticking to me anyway."

Liam threw him a sceptical look, but apparently accepted Angel's earnest expression as proof of superior knowledge, because he shrugged and capitulated. "Okay," he agreed and crawled closer. Manoeuvring behind Angel, he began to ease the cloth away from Angel's wounds and tear strips off the hem, sucking in a shocked breath as he exposed the burns on Angel's back.

Eventually he seemed to have enough and he returned to Angel's side. Lifting Angel's left arm, he rested the manacle on his own knee. "I need to straighten them, don't I?" he said, looking down at Angel's broken fingers.

"Yeah."

Taking a deep breath, Liam darted a glance at Angel's face. "I think this is going to hurt," he said.

Angel nodded his agreement and clenched his teeth.
It did hurt, exceedingly, and Angel only just managed to avoid shifting into gameface. Luckily Liam was concentrating on his task and didn't notice the momentary flash of yellow in Angel's eyes.

Once the fingers were straight Liam began to wrap the torn strips of cloth around them, talking as he did so. "Who are these people?" he asked. "What do they want?"

Angel was still thinking through what he should say about Luke and the court without a king, so he ignored the second question. "They're trouble." he replied. "How did they get you?"

Tying off the loose ends of the first bandage, Liam shook his head. "I don't know." He ran his hand gently along Angel's forearm. "Here too?" he asked.

"Yeah, both arms, my wrist and a couple of fingers on the other hand."

Liam winced, but he didn't flinch, simply moved around, placed one foot up in Angel's armpit, took a firm grip of his arm, above the wrist, and pulled. Angel closed his eyes and screamed, forcing his face to stay human by
redirecting the pain into his voice.

Eventually the bone setting was over and he lent back against the wall, taking deep breaths. It still hurt like hell, but it was a different pain and he knew that a few days of good feeding would now see him heal straight. Not that he was thinking about that.

He opened his eyes. Liam was gazing at him. "Man," he said. "You are some tough dude!" Angel shook his head and Liam reached over for the rest of the strips of silk, laying them across his knee as he knelt at Angel's side.

"It wasn't as bad as it looked," Angel said. "But thank you for doing that. It took some guts." Deciding that distraction was at least as important as getting information, he asked, "What's the last thing you remember?"

Liam shot him a quick glance, before returning to his task. "I was in a bar." He picked up another length of the torn shirt and his mouth twisted with bitter amusement. "I thought I was in luck, she was real pretty, but outside, there were these guys. I thought it was a jealous lover, but they didn't beat me up, just hit me over the head and I came to in the back of a truck. Are they planning to
ransom us? What about the others?"

"What others?"

"There were two other people in the truck, a boy and a girl. What do they want with us?"

Deciding that lies and make-believe really wouldn't help, Angel offered up the truth. "With you? Food. With me? Revenge. Delayed revenge. When their master comes back. Until then, I suppose they decided to keep me healthy."

Liam snorted. "If you can call this healthy." He tied off the last strip and looked up at Angel. "I'm a student. Sure, my folks have money, enough so I can take a road trip this summer, instead of finding a job, but they're not rich. Not ransom paying rich."

"It's not about money."

Liam shuffled back so he was leaning against the wall, next to Angel. "Of course it is. What else would it be about?"

"Food."
"What do you mean, food?" Liam stared at him quizzically, his expression hovering between amused and incredulous. "You mean you think they're going to actually eat us? Are you crazy? That only happens in Hollywood thrillers. There aren't really any cannibals in America. I'm guessing they're going to come asking for contact details soon, so they can call for ransom. But my family can't pay much. What kind of idiots kidnap people without checking if they've got the money to pay? Do I look like I come from money?"

Angel turned his head and looked at Liam along his shoulder. "It really isn't about money," he said again, very seriously. "They're going to kill you. They're going to drink your blood and kill you."

"No, no, no, you said that, man. And see? I don't believe you. You're crazy. That's crazy." He began to edge away along the wall. "You're letting your imagination get away from you. How long have you been here, anyway? You don't know what you're saying. It must have been a while, if you've started to believe in urban myths. Come on, man. I mean, think about it. What's the most rational explanation? Huh? This is suburbia, not some..."
"Quiet!" Angel hissed, interrupting the stream of denial when he saw movement at the entrance to their cave. "There's someone coming."

"Oh, thank god! Maybe they'll believe me when I tell them my folks..." Liam looked up and fell silent with shock, taking in the sight of two minions exiting the tunnel. They were walking one behind the other, half carrying, half dragging two bodies between them, as if they were a pair of ladders. One had an arm around the bodies' chests, the other had her arms wrapped around their ankles. The body on the side facing the cage was a young woman, her short fair hair dangling down, half obscuring her face, her left arm dragging along the ground. As they walked past, Angel could just make out a pair of men's shoes on the feet of the other body. The minions made their way over to the dark corner of the cave and dropped then both. One of them then hauled them up, one at a time, and threw them onto the top of the heap. Then they turned and left, without even glancing in Angel's direction.

A shuffling sound, followed by retching, drew his attention back to Liam, who had at least had the common sense to throw up through the bars, as far from where they'd been sitting as possible. Eventually he
subsided, huddled in on himself. He rolled away from the bars and raised his face to look at Angel. "That was the woman from the truck," he whispered.

~*~*~*~*~

Saturday evening

Spike strode into Willy's, Xander and Jesse trailing behind him. He walked up to the bar and Willy himself came over to ask for his order. "Spike, my old friend," he said eagerly, a faint quiver in his voice. "What can I get you?" The question ended in more of a squeak, as Spike grabbed him by the collar and dragged him across the counter top, until his feet left the floor and the hard edge of the bar dug into his stomach.

"Where's Angel?" Spike growled.

Willy's arms flailed, knocking over a jug of water, scattering glasses and the occasional paper umbrella everywhere and sending a heavy ash tray crashing to the floor. "I don't know any Angel," he gasped.

Xander bent down and picked up the ashtray, then stood
there, feeling foolish clutching it. Jesse shot him an amused look as he took up position at Xander's side, watching Spike's treatment of the human with the sort of attention he never paid in school. Xander turned to watch too.

When Spike released him Willy slumped, sliding back over the polished surface, like so much human slime, but before he could sink completely out of sight, Spike grabbed his collar again, holding him in place. Spike cocked an eyebrow. "Angel - tall brooding guy, caveman brow, vampire. Where is he?" he asked again.

Xander sneered at the whine in Willy's voice as he replied, "Oh, yeah, Angel, never met him, but there's been talk. Let me go and I'll tell you everything I know."

Spike shook his head. "First you tell me, then I consider letting you go," he corrected.

"Okay, okay, Um... Well... I might have heard a few things, you know, from the underground."

Spike looked sceptical. "The underground?"

"Yeah, you know. From things that live under the
ground."

"You mean the court?"

The quiver had spread from Willy's voice to his entire body, which was shaking. "He'll gut me, if I say anything."

Spike smiled. "I'll gut you, if you don't"

"But he'll preach at me while he does it. You? You're more civilised, don't inflict your religion on people while you kill them."

With a laugh, Spike let him go. "What have you heard?"

Willy obviously didn't make the mistake of assuming that the laugh meant that he could relax. If anything he looked even more worried. "Not much, Honest! I don't know where Angel is! I swear on my mother's grave! Should something fatal happen to her, God forbid." As he was speaking, his eyes flicked behind Spike's shoulder and he gave a small jerk of his head.

Spike spun around, his coat tails flaring, and a vampire who had been edging sideways past the group, towards the door, froze. Two others were trying to make a break
for the back door. Using the speed of his turn to add force, Spike kicked out, catching the first one in the middle, causing him to double over and sending him staggering back towards Xander, who raised the ashtray and brought it down on the back of the vampire's head. The vampire went down like he'd been poleaxed and Xander promptly sat on his stomach, grabbing Jesse and pulling him down to sit on their captive's legs.

By the time Xander looked up, Spike was across the room and the nearest of the fleeing pair was sinking to the floor, his head having apparently made sharp contact with the corner of the pool table. Spike was still in motion, his legs almost at shoulder level as he used the same pool table as a spring board, pivoting on one arm as he leapt over it. He landed like a cat on the other side and allowed his momentum to carry him forward into a dive, his shoulder connecting with the small of the vampire's back. They both crashed into the wall, but only Spike rolled free. He jack-knifed his legs in towards his waist, at the same time as he pushed his hands against the floor, and before Xander had really registered the move, he was back on his feet. Bending down, he took hold of the vampire's head and gave it a sharp twist. There was a muffled cracking sound and Spike slapped his hands together, ridding them of dust.
Meanwhile the other vampire was beginning to pull himself back up, using the pool table as a ladder. "Sire," Xander yelled, pointing.

Spike's head whipped around and his body tensed, but when he saw the object of Xander's concern, he grinned and relaxed. Straightening his coat, he sauntered around the pool table and took hold of a fistful of the vampire's hair. Pulling back, he forced the vampire to look up into his face. "Want to talk to me?" he asked. "Tell me what's going on in the underground?"

The vampire obviously had more loyalty than sense, because he shook his head, in so far as he could, with Spike's hold on him. Spike sighed. "Okay, then." He pulled the vampire's head back further and lifted it a few inches, until he was almost dangling from Spike's hand and trying desperately to get his legs under him. Then, with a crash, Spike slammed him back into the edge of the pool table, once, twice, three times.

The vampire's face was covered in blood when Spike lifted him again. Reaching out with his other hand, Spike picked up a pool cue, letting it slide through his grip, until the end hit the floor. He flung the vampire away from
him, at the same time as he brought the cue up in a vicious stabbing motion. For a second the vampire stood there, gazing down at the pool cue in disbelief. His hands came up to clutch at his chest, as if he would pull it out and Xander feared for a moment that Spike had missed the heart. Tightening his grip on the cue, Spike pulled it free and there was a soft popping sound in the otherwise silent room. He watched dispassionately as another cloud of dust settled to the floor.

Beneath Xander, the final survivor began to buck and wriggle, attempting to dislodge him and Jesse, but he didn't have a chance and Spike's approving smile made Xander feel like he'd won the best prize in the lottery.

Spike wandered towards them, twirling the cue in his left hand. Stopping in front of Xander, he leant on the cue, bent at the waist and tilted his head, so he was addressing the vampire face to face from a distance of only a couple of feet. "What do you know about Angel?" he asked.

"He's at the lair, sir. Master Luke brought him in, because he killed a chaos mage. He's locked up in the store room," the vampire babbled.
"And is he safe?" Spike's voice was friendly, genial, and the vampire obviously thought he had a chance, if he co-operated.

"Yes, sir. Master Luke even gave him something to eat. He wants him alive, when The Master comes back."

"And how do I get in to this store room?"

"Er, the entrance is through the Williamson crypt, in St David's. There's a tunnel that leads down to the lair." He looked up at Spike, pleadingly. "Please sir, if they know I told you, they'll kill me. Please, can I join your gang, sir. Please?"

Straightening up, Spike turned to Xander and Jesse. "Off you get," he instructed, with a wave of his hand.

They stood and stepped away. The vampire took a deep heaving breath of relief and made to scramble to his feet. He didn't even see the pool cue slam down through his chest, even as he was bracing his hands on the floor to help him stand.

Spike ignored the dust and turned around on the spot. Any other patrons who had been present were long
gone, as was Willy. He sauntered over to the bar, reached across it and grabbed a bottle of whisky from under the counter. Turning back to Xander, he lifted it, like a prize. "Since the poof is safe for now, I think we should go and see if my Dru can think of a good way to get him out of there." He jerked his head towards the door. "Come on, time to meet the ancestor."

23 Down the rabbit hole

Prompt: 84 - Suspension of disbelief

Saturday evening

When they got back to the house, Spike took off his coat and hung it on a hook in the hall before entering the living room and pausing just inside the door. Peering over his shoulder Xander could see a woman sitting in the chair next to the sofa. She was slim and elegant and quite, quite beautiful. Her face was smooth and peaceful and her long dark hair flowed like silk around her shoulders. She sat tall, with a straight back, and her
hands rested on the arms of the chair as if she was holding court over the mundane, suburban room. He felt Jesse crowding up behind him, also anxious to get a first look at Spike's sire.

Spike bowed his head in a nod and crossed to her, dropping to one knee. "My Queen," he said reverently.

Now that Spike no longer blocked his way, Xander responded to Jesse's shove and took a single step forward, but in that moment he hesitated to approach her himself, she looked so remote and regal. Jesse followed closely and came to a stop just behind his shoulder. The woman glanced down at Spike's bowed head and a small smile curved her lips. Then she looked up, eyes sliding over Jesse to fix on Xander as he hovered indecisively and he felt a shiver of awe pass through him. Eyes still fixed on Xander, she lifted one hand and Spike took it in both of his and raised it to his lips. He knelt back allowing her to use his grip for leverage as she unfolded herself from the chair. For a moment she stood still, swaying slightly, then she pulled herself free of Spike's grasp. Her hand trailed over Spike's shoulder and fell away as she stepped past him.

She walked like she was dancing, like she was floating,
and her eyes never left Xander's face. "Oh Spike," she whispered, her voice both smug and dreamy, "you have been previous." Her accent was strange and Xander had a flash of chimney sweeps dancing on a roof top, to the music of a fun fair carousel, even as he realised that he couldn't break from her hypnotic gaze. "Not supposed to be this way," she said. "You've changed the order of the world." A smile began to spread across her face and at last she looked away, to Spike, and Xander felt his whole body relax with relief. "I like it!" she announced, turning back and pinning Xander again.

Vaguely, out of the corner of his eye, Xander was aware of Spike getting to his feet and watching her take the last few steps to halt in front of Xander, who stood frozen as she lifted the hand that had so casually caressed her childe and trailed the back of her finger nails down his cheek. "Your face is a poem," she breathed. "I can read it. And what wonderful dreams it brings." She laughed delightedly. "Everything in my head is singing! We'll be a family again. We'll feed," she sang, with a playful growl towards Spike. "And we'll dance." Abruptly she stepped back and began to spin on the spot, her hair flying as she clapped her hands.

As suddenly as she had begun, she jerked to a stop
voicing a distressed whimper. Her hand to her brow, she swayed again and before Xander could blink, Spike was at her side, arms around her shoulders, steadying her. "Drusilla," he crooned, as he turned her away from Xander. "You shouldn't be dancing. You're weak."

Drusilla allowed herself to be eased back down into the chair, but she looked up through the hair that now obscured her eyes. "What a lovely mess you've made," she observed. "But not with me." Her voice took on a shrill note and she suddenly appeared to be distressed or angry. "No. No. Not with me," she wailed.

Xander took a shocked step backwards, colliding with Jesse who reached out his hands and grabbed at Xander's waist, but whether it was to steady him, or hide behind him, Xander wasn't sure.

Falling back to his knees in front of the chair, Spike pulled the woman into his arms and patted her back, soothing her like a hurt child. "Hush, love. Hush. It's okay. He's yours, just as I am. I'd never leave you." Drawing back he gently eased her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ears. "C'mon Pet. Take a look? For me?" There was a note of hopeful desperation in his voice as he cajoled her. "Remember? Remember Whitby?"
Angelus wanted that one. Now we have this one instead." Looking back over his shoulder at Xander he snarled, "Come here! And either kneel or stand to attention, one or the other."

Xander pulled himself free of Jesse's grasp, stumbled across the room and dropped to one knee, next to Spike, bowing his head. He felt the feather light touch of her hand on his hair. "Oh," She murmured. "My knight, my poor knight." Keeping his head bowed, Xander watched from under his brows as she turned to Spike. "He's perfect, my darling," she breathed.

Spike let out a huff of a sigh and stood up, grasping Xander's upper arm and pulling him to his feet too. Xander felt like he'd just passed a test he hadn't known he was taking. Stepping back, he glanced over at Jesse, who was still standing just inside the door, a lost expression on his face. Following Xander's gaze, Spike grunted. "Oh yeah," he said, addressing the woman. "You'll have to suspend your disbelief and imagine that this one might be useful. He's a tagalong, bit of a mistake, but we all make 'em." He spared Xander another glare. "Seems I was away too long." Xander cautiously backed up until he was stopped by the wall, across the room from his sire.
Sitting up straight, Drusilla rested her head against the back of the chair, once again the image of regal majesty. Her smile was soft. "Don't worry, dear heart," she said. "He'll play his part." With another of her abrupt changes of tone she asked flatly, "You found my Angel?"


Shifting slightly in her chair, Drusilla reached down beside her and pulled out an antique doll in a frilly flowered dress which she propped up on her lap. "The King of Cups is refusing to play with his food. They laid on a picnic for him, but he won't eat. It's not his birthday."

Spike snorted. "Stupid bugger. But he'll never last, love. He was never one for self denial." He began to pace. "We just need a plan to get him out. He's no use to us locked up. Now that we know exactly how to do the spell, we don't even need his cooperation." He shoved his hand into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a packet
of cigarettes and a silver lighter, but did nothing with them, simply passed them from hand to hand as he thought. "We just need him."

Drusilla's fingers had been busy fussing at the neck of her doll and she now pulled its lace cap off. Underneath the hair was missing from the crown of its head and she licked the tip of her finger and began to rub at the bald patch, like a mother cleaning dirt off her child's face. "I want to go out," she announced sulkily. "I miss Prague."

Spike spun on his toe and returned to her side, sitting himself down on the arm of the chair and leaning over to kiss the top of her head. "You nearly died in Prague," he said, momentary rage apparent in his voice, in contradiction to his actions. "But this place..." he added. "This place will see you well. Angelus and the Hellmouth between them will restore you, put colour in your cheeks, metaphorically speaking. And..."

Tilting her head back Drusilla smiled and interrupted, "The stars will align and the time will be right."

With an indulgent laugh, Spike agreed, "Yes, pet. But in the mean time, you need to take care and keep strong. I'll go out and get you something to eat in a moment, as
soon as I've sorted out a plan to get Angelus back."

Despairing of understanding the nonsensical conversation, Xander looked across at Jesse who gave him the sort of grin that the boy Jesse used to give, when a teacher said something particularly stupid. A growl interrupted their silent exchange, causing them both to turn to Spike, who looked like he was about to stand up, a fierce scowl on his face. Jesse immediately shrank back, as if trying to make himself invisible, while Xander snapped to attention, bobbed his head to his sire and did his best to look like he knew what the hell was going on. Spike spared Xander a second glare, before relaxing again and turning back to Drusilla, his mouth already opening to continue what he had been saying.

Drusilla's sudden scream cut him off. "No!" she cried. "I want a treat! I need a treat! The wasps will leave the nest when they hear the bird is flying."

Sitting up straight, Spike looked down at her in shock. "Dru? No, please? You're weak. You have to be careful. Please, let me look after you?"

"But I'm fast," she said with finality.
Spike sighed. "Why would they?" he asked.

"The bear wants the lion tamer to come back with his whip and teach him how to dance."

"And he thinks you can help with that?"

Drusilla just smiled and licked her lips. She picked up her doll and raised it in front of her face, staring into its eyes. "He wants the stars to tell him how to find the door."

Sliding off the arm of the chair, Spike knelt at her feet again. He reached out and gently removed the doll from her grasp, laying it down on the floor next to him. "Please Dru, let me think of something else, eh? Just give me tonight to come up with another plan?"

Dru looked down at him "Do you love my insides?" she asked. "The parts you can't see?"

"Eyeballs to entrails, my sweet." Spike replied fervently. "That's why I don't want you risking yourself." He raised her hands and kissed each one of her fingers, sucking the last one into his mouth. Watching, Xander felt a shiver travel the length of his spine. Not that he wanted to have his fingers sucked, but the expression on Spike's face, oh
yes, he wanted that.

Dru shook her head. "I... I need to change Miss Edith."

Closing his eyes, Spike now looked like a man resigned to being hanged. He let her finger fall free of his lips. "I'm sorry, kitten," he said. "Forgive me! You know I can't stand to see you like this. I just don't like you goin' out alone, that's all." He stood up and threw his hands in the air. "But we're runnin' out of sodding time!"

Standing also, Drusilla lifted her hand and patted gently at his face. "Shh. Shh," she crooned. "You'll make it right. I know you will. But we need him and the fool wants me and that's the dance we'll play."

Spike let his head fall back and stared at the ceiling. He stood like that for a long moment, then he looked back at Drusilla again. "I'm sorry baby. I'm a bad, rude man, who doesn't listen to his sire." His mouth twisted. "Are you certain this is the best thing to do? That this will work?" he asked.

Apparently content, now that she had her way, Drusilla sat down again and leant forwards to pick up her doll. "The king, the knight and his squire will lead the way."
"And what about you. You shouldn't go out alone."

"The bear is all growl, big lumbering thing. Can't catch a butterfly, let alone a bee." She brought her hands up in front of her and fluttered her fingers. "Buzz. Buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz."

Swinging round, Spike pointed at Xander. "You!" he said. He pointed at Jesse. "And you! Come with me. It's time to turn into the sodding cavalry and rescue the damsel in distress." He walked over to Xander. "And remember," he added. "That," another stabbing finger towards Jesse, "is not your friend! You are not that boy!" He cupped a hand behind Xander's neck and pulled him forward. "He's a minion and not a very good one at that." he explained, his mouth inches from Xander's ear. "There is no long history of friendship between you. It was the humans had that." He pulled back and stared into Xander's eyes. "You remember the human memories. He doesn't, at least not to feel them." His hand stroked Xander's nape, then his fingers tightened and he drew Xander close and kissed him. Xander sighed into the kiss, relaxing for the first time since they walked though the door. He tilted his head and kissed Spike back, feeling the need and want and power in Spike's reaction and sinking into it, giving
himself to it and letting the peace and security of it overtake all his senses. Eventually Spike broke away, pausing to place one last peck on Xander's lips. "You are my childe," he whispered. "Approved by my sire. This is your place now. I've got you safe."

Xander blinked in agreement and knew that no matter what, he'd follow Spike, his sire, into hell, if that was what he asked.

24 Desperate measures

Prompt: 85 - Topaz

Friday night to Saturday

Angel rolled his head to the side, against the rock wall, so he could study Liam. He was slight, but tall and it looked like, although he'd reached his full height, he hadn't yet finished bulking out. There was some muscle there, showing the potential, but he had a wiry strength. And he was so very young, probably twenty-one, or maybe a
year either side of that. Angel found it difficult to judge human ages. It was the times they lived in. In Angel's human youth a boy became a man, to all intents and purposes, at fourteen when he was sworn to his master as apprentice. Assuming he came from a family that could afford to set him to a trade in the first place. Nowadays humans remained children for so much longer, but they also lived longer. He thought about the even more extended childhood of a young vampire. Looked at in terms of the eventual lifespan he supposed it made sense.

Liam had remained remarkably calm too, his first instincts had been to help Angel, by binding up his broken hands and arms. He'd flinched from the task, but hadn't really hesitated and he'd managed to withstand any urge to panic. At least, he had until he'd been hit by the shock of seeing his fellow captives carried in and thrown away like so much garbage.

Once he'd finished throwing up, he'd turned to Angel. "What was that?" he'd asked. "What's wrong with their faces?"

Angel didn't know how break it gently. "They're vampires," he said flatly. "Didn't the others look like
that?"

Liam shook his head but Angel suspected it wasn't in answer to his question. "Oh no! No, no, no, man. That's not possible," he said, huddling back into the wall, as far from Angel as he could get.

"You saw them! What do you think they are?" Angel snapped back.

Liam just buried his face in his raised knees and hugged his legs.

He'd stayed like that for a long while. But he was tough and he was practical. Once his initial panic was over, he'd busied himself tearing a strip from the hem of his tee shirt and tying it around his face like a surgical mask to protect him from the worst of the stench. Then, still not looking at Angel, he'd spent more than half an hour inspecting the lock of the cell door, fruitlessly searching for some flaw in the castings or the welds. Failing in that plan, he'd turned his attention to the main cave, avoiding the charnel heap in the corner. Lying on his side, he'd managed to snag a loose rock and had spent a further hour hammering at the hinges, until it was the rock that crumbled, while the hinges held firm. Angel had just
been relieved that no one came to investigate the noise.

After that Liam had returned to where Angel was still sitting and it seemed that in his exhaustion he'd lost some of his incredulity. Sitting cross-legged, his pale blue eyes gleaming like topaz above the slash of white across the lower half of his face, as they caught the occasional flare from the torch, like those of a Siamese cat, he began to ask questions.

Angel had been as honest as he could be, explaining that the faces of the minions were neither masks nor some form of inbred hillbilly deformity, that there really were vampires and that Angel and Liam were being held by creatures who were certainly not interested in monetary gain. Under Liam's continued probing he went on to tell what he knew of the habits of gangs such as this, what he knew of Sunnydale in particular and to recount what he'd overheard of Luke's plans to raise the Master from wherever he was trapped. He told Liam about his night time patrols, his efforts to dispose of new born vampires as they rose and his belief that if he could just hold out, someone would come to help the town rid itself of the scourge they represented. He explained about the Council of Watchers and the Slayer and the eternal fight against the powers of darkness. He even told Liam about
Xander and his regret and self-blame that he hadn't been able to save him, going so far as to admit the shameful attraction he'd felt for the boy. Liam had argued then, saying that although he didn't personally tend that way, he could understand how, if it had been a girl he liked who he knew was too young for him, he'd have hesitated too. He probed until he had the whole story of Angel's attempts to guard Xander as he walked home each night, congratulating Angel on killing the vampire that attacked Xander and sympathising with him on the interpretation Xander had placed on that rescue. And while he agreed that Xander probably couldn't be blamed, having not seen his attacker, he also asserted that Angel had done all he could; he'd told Xander the truth and if Xander didn't believe him, well, it wasn't surprising, but it was hardly Angel's fault. Slowly Angel had allowed himself to be persuaded.

The hours passed and for all their talk they were no closer to finding an escape. As dawn approached, Liam grew quieter, until eventually he fell silent, the horror of all he had heard and seen taking its toll and he'd fallen into a light sleep, propped up against the wall at Angel's side.

Angel stayed awake longer, resolutely ignoring the
hunger that constricted his throat with its raw need and claws like hot pokers to his chest, ignoring the lure of the pulse he was almost certain he could hear in the stillness of their cell. He kept his vigil, determined that this human, who had shown such trust in him, would not die in the dark like the poor unfortunates whose husks were now piled rotting in the corner.

Beside him, Liam gave a soft, snuffling sigh and shifted, so he was leaning against Angel. His body gave out a welcome warmth and Angel moved subtly, encouraging him to slump closer until his head rested on Angel's shoulder. With a sigh of his own and a growing certainty that Liam was right about Xander, Angel relaxed into the human heat, allowing his own cheek to rest against Liam's dirty fair hair which curled at his forehead and neck, like that of Michelangelo's David. The pain in his arms wouldn't allow him to sleep, but he could relish the momentary peace that this child gave him.

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Angel started awake from a dream of Xander and blood, some sound alerting him, moments before he sank his fangs into Xander's neck while Spike stood beside him
saying, 'You know you always wanted him.' Momentarily disorientated he took a deep breath and immediately choked as his senses were swamped by the stench of putrefaction. He looked down and just as he realised that Liam was still asleep, he also realised that it was totally dark but he could still see. He shook his head to shift himself back to his human face as Liam began to stir, lifting one hand to rest on Angel's chest and beginning to push himself upright.

From the entrance to the cavern a light approached, getting brighter when a female entered, carrying a new torch. She removed the dead one from its bracket and tossed it aside, slotting the new one into its place. Then she unhooked the keys and walked past their cell and out of sight.

Beside him Liam gave a weak laugh. "Hey man, sorry for falling asleep on you. Don't take it the wrong way, yeah?"

Angel ignored him, concentrating on the sound of a key turning in a heavy lock. That was followed by a whimper and some scrabbling, then a crunch and silence. The sound of a cage door clanging shut was followed by the reappearance of the minion, with a body-shaped bundle over her shoulder. She replaced the keys and Angel
thought she was just going to leave, but instead she approached their cage.

Stopping a foot from the bars, she snarled. "Not hungry?" she asked. "Shall I take it away?"

Angel sat up straight. "No!" he said. "I'll eat. Leave him." He didn't dare even glance at Liam, concentrating on the threat before them. "Luke knows the protocol. He wants me healthy. He's old enough to have learnt some sense." He looked at the creature up and down with a sneer. "I doubt you'll last long enough to do the same."

Ignoring his taunt, the vampire turned her attention to Liam. "It's comfortable in the corner," she said, her words mangled by her fangs but still clearly understandable. "You'll be there soon enough. You're not destined for the zoo." And with that she turned on her heel, the head of the man dangling over her shoulder swinging slightly with the movement, and marched back out of the cave.

"What does she mean, zoo?" Liam asked, a slight quaver in his voice.

Angel shrugged. "You saw the bodies. You're supposed to
be one of them." He turned his head and caught Liam's eye, trying to communicate reassurance. "I'll try and help shield you. But..."

"How?" Liam interrupted. "What can you do? You're in here with me."

Crunch time, Angel realised with resignation. "No," he said. "Actually, you're in here with me." He hesitated, but he knew he couldn't put it off any longer. "When I get hungry enough, you're supposed to be my supper."

Eyes widening with shock, Liam began to scramble backwards. "You're one of those?" he asked, aghast.

"Not one of those," Angel said. "But I am a vampire." He held Liam's gaze. "But I won't hurt you," he promised.

"Are, are... Um... and are you hungry yet?" Angel shook his head, but Liam wasn't satisfied. "When will you be?" he asked.

Closing his eyes, Angel considered his possible answers. Eventually he decided that only the truth would do the job, if it could be done. "I'm starving," he admitted. "I need to eat, to heal. But I won't feed from you. I'm not
He could hear the pride in his own voice as he announced that last phrase, but Liam apparently couldn't because he was shaking his head. "But, but, no! You can't be," he asserted.

Realising the fact that Liam was doing his best to deny, Angel allowed his face to relax and shifted.

Liam gave a gasp, which turned into a strangled scream and crab crawled further back until he hit the wall and could retreat no further.

"I won't kill you," Angel repeated calmly, sliding back into his human face. "I'm not a monster. I'm old, I can survive for days without feeding."

"Days?" Liam asked weakly. "And... And what happens after that?"

"I'll get hungrier," Angel replied. "But I can control my needs. Just because I get hungry, doesn't mean I have to eat. It's a choice. I told you, I have a soul."

"And those other ones don't?"
"No. When a vampire's created, the human dies. A demon comes and takes over the body and the demon has no soul."

"So how come you have one?"

"I was cursed by gypsies. They conjured a soul out of the ether and gave it to me. Since then I've lived off pigs' blood, cows, rats, anything, except humans."

"So, you're not going to kill me?"

"No."

"But," and Angel could see his brain ticking over and coming to the only logical conclusion, "if you don't, they'll take me away and they'll kill me. I can't find a way out of here." He looked around the cell, as if some new weakness in the security of their prison would suddenly manifest. "You've watched me, I've tried." He turned back to Angel and his shoulders slumped. "I'm going to die either way, aren't I?"

Angel allowed his head to roll back against the wall behind him and sighed. He looked back over at Liam.
"There is one way," he suggested cautiously. "I feed, but don't take enough to kill you." He spoke slowly, determined to convince Liam that this was the only possible plan. "They won't be surprised. They'll just think I'm rationing. You'll have the marks, so they'll know I've fed, but you won't be dead and it'll buy us some time."


"Time for my godforsaken childe to come and rescue me," Angel replied.

25 Cause and effect

Prompt: 86 - Juggling

Saturday evening

Biting carefully into Liam's neck was like coming home. The blood flowed freely and Angel had to resist the urge to drag it out faster. It slid over his tongue and down his throat, hot and vital, intoxicating in its promise of life, tinged with Liam's fear and the adrenalin that released. Instinctively, his arms clamped around Liam, trapping him and still the blood flowed. Angel closed his eyes blissfully. He felt the saliva with its natural anticoagulants burst free from the glands at the base of his fangs with
an explosion akin to orgasm. His brain buzzed with it, like the white noise of a radio station after it has gone off the air or a soaring orchestral crescendo, blotting out everything else. The power flowed into him, sending surges of joy and loss and a gloating smugness throughout his whole body - through his torso and down his legs, causing sharp prickles of pleasure to alight his nerves, and into his arms where the flood of energy forced its way passed the broken bones and bruised tissue, sweeping away the blockages like a river in full flood, bringing healing in its wake.

Angel surrendered himself to sensation, glorying in a strength and richness he'd not felt in fifty years, not since his reluctant but essential turning of Lawson on a submarine in the Atlantic. With the arrival of that memory a feeling of unease began to tickle at the back of Angel's mind, intruding on the pleasure, creating discord in the music and he became dimly aware of movement, of hands batting weakly at his ribs. With a mental gasp he pulled himself back to full consciousness and dragged his fangs free of Liam's flesh, the back of his head hitting the wall behind him. Liam lay limp in his arms and frantically he searched for a pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when he found one, strong and steady on the other side of Liam's neck. The wound was still bleeding, so he
bit through his own tongue, a new urgency replacing the abandon of moments before. The blood filled his mouth and he sealed his lips around the wound again, so the antidote to his saliva, the thing in the blood that gave vampires their ability to heal, sealed up the wound.

Drawing his head back, Angel inspected Liam's neck. Liam would always bear a scar, but it would not be ugly. He tried to calculate how much he'd taken. He'd meant it to be no more than a pint, as much as Liam might donate voluntarily to the Red Cross. But he'd lost himself in the experience and from the way the broken bones in his arms felt, it had to have been two pints, maybe more. That wouldn't normally be too serious, since Liam was a healthy, well fed American male in his prime, but he'd had nothing to eat since his imprisonment and had vomited up what he'd had in his stomach, so he was probably already dehydrated.

Angel berated himself for his carelessness as he gently laid Liam down on the floor. The boy had trusted him, had befriended him, even after he knew what Angel was. He'd had more conversation with Liam, more interaction, than the sum total of the last hundred years. He'd shared things with Liam that he'd never told a soul about before. And Liam had listened and sympathised and understood.
Finally, in circumstances of adversity, Angel had met someone he felt he could really connect with, and he'd almost killed him.

Bending over Liam's prone body, looking down into vaguely fluttering eyes, Angel smoothed a curl of hair back from Liam's face. "Stay still, don't move," he said. "I'll try and get you some food, or at least some water. You'll be okay if you take it easy."

Liam nodded his understanding and whispered, "Sure, man. I'll be okay," adding ruefully, "Just don't expect me to do any housework around here for a while, yeah?" He smiled reassuringly up at Angel as he allowed himself to relax onto the hard ground.

Angel smiled back and once more smoothed one of those stubborn curls back on Liam's forehead. Then he got up, walked as near to the cage bars as his shackles would allow and started to yell for room service.

~*~*~*~*~

Locating a trio from Luke's gang proved to be child's play. They were walking down the street, free and easy, as if
they owned it. Anticipating their planned hunting ground and ambushing them in the alley leading up to the club Xander called The Bronze, was simple. Jumping in and having a good old scrap, was just plain fun. It also gave Spike an opportunity to see his childe and his sidekick in combat. That was not such fun.

Spike took on the leader of the hunting party himself, pouncing onto her back from their hiding place behind a stack of pallets and twisting her head until her neck broke, even as they both crashed to the floor. As they went down he brought up his left leg, so when they landed his knee came down hard on the small of her back. Grabbing a fistful of hair in his right hand, he yanked it back exposing her throat. He brought the stake in his left hand down hard, puncturing the ribs in her back and watched with satisfaction as her dust settled. After that he got to his feet, leant up against the pallets to study the continuing fracas.

Dru stepped out of the shadows to join him, her head tilted thoughtfully. "Pretty, kitty kitten," she observed. "He'll grow up to be a dragon."

Spike smiled at her, pride in both his sire and his child swelling his heart, before turning back to watch the
'kittens' at play. As he'd expected, Xander was timid, overly cautious, not yet at ease with his body and his new capabilities. His technique more resembled the kitten Dru had named him, playing with a ball on a string, than any serious combat. He was holding his own defensively with a set of instinctive swerves and ducks that suggested he had the potential to be light on his feet, but it was obvious to Spike that he would need to apply some serious effort to his training. It was a shame, because the vampire he was so singularly failing to engage was himself hampered by his refusal to let go of what appeared to be a bag of groceries. It was actually comical, there was Xander making ineffective swipes with his balled fists, while his opponent juggled the paper bag back and forth between his right arm and his left, as it threatened to spill its contents all over the floor, at the same time as he tried to kick and punch at Xander. Spike felt his grin threatening to turn into full laughter and frowned to suppress it, scratching his ear as he concentrated on watching his childe and sparing the occasional glance for Jesse.

Jesse was the opposite of Xander. He was overconfident and began his attack of a solidly built male with a clearly telegraphed head-down charge which his opponent deflected by simply taking one step to the side and
shoving him off at a tangent. Jesse staggering onwards, carried by his own inertia, right towards Spike, who took his own evasive step, allowing Jesse to crash face first into the pallets. His opponent followed up immediately, grabbing Jesse by the shoulders and dragging him away, pausing for a moment to nod a polite greeting at Spike and Dru. Spike inclined his own head in reply as he returned to his former position of comfortable observation. Jesse's arms reached out to Spike as he was hauled back and he appeared to be trying to say something. He didn't get an opportunity to voice his plea as he was lifted bodily into the air and dropped, flat on his back in the dirt. His opponent pounced, pinning him down and clamped one hand around Jesse's throat, the other reaching into his jacket pocket. Spike pursed his lips in thought as he weighed the advantages and disadvantages of keeping Jesse. With a nod to himself, he came to his decision, took the two necessary steps and brought his own stake down into the minion's unprotected back. Jesse might be pretty worthless, but there was no point in wasting him. He'd provide a distraction, if nothing else, when they eventually headed underground.

Before the dust had even cleared or Jesse had managed to scramble back onto his feet, Dru stepped forward into
the alley. She clapped her hands, the sharp sound echoing between the tall buildings on either side. "Now then, dearies," she called loudly, her voice cutting through the grunting and shuffling of feet on concrete. "That's enough play. It's time."

Xander's opponent jumped clear of Xander's last attempt at a punch, glancing wildly around, as if searching for his mates. His eyes fixed on a smear of ash on the oil stained ground, then he raised his head, took one look at Dru and Spike together, turned on his heels and ran. He was out of the alley and away before Spike could say 'jackrabbit'.

Note: The idea that vampire saliva contains an anticoagulant, to encourage the blood to flow, while vampire blood contains something to encourage healing, is not mine. I came across it in Twilight Time by Shadow, which can be found here: http://www.shadows-and-dust.co.uk/SDFA/Round9/twilighttime1.htm

When I read that, back in 2002? 2003? I thought it was a beautifully logical idea. Much more logical than the common fanon theory that vampire saliva heals wounds, because, lets face it, that's sort of contradictory. I was always surprised that more people didn't pick up on it
and use it. I do and always have, but I have to give the credit where it's due.

26 Being the Cavalry

Prompt: 87 - Dreams

Spike wasn't happy about leaving Dru alone in the centre of a town she didn't know, and where he knew no one he could call on to protect her, but her plan required he do just that. She had faith in her own ability to evade any number of untutored minions. And in truth, he acknowledged, Xander or Jesse would be more of a hindrance than a help to her in that task. He also knew that, like him, she didn't make the mistake of underestimating Luke. His followers may be weak minion made minions, but Luke himself had centuries of experience and had stood at the Master's shoulder through them all. Spike's comfort was that Dru knew Luke even better than he did, since she'd spent time at the Master's court before Spike was made. She knew that Luke was big, but slow, experienced, but stupid. She
would be okay, he assured himself as he led Xander and Jesse in the wake of the fleeing survivor of their little ambush, towards St David's cemetery.

Finding the crypt was easy, once you knew about it. They approached warily, making sure they were not spotted, making sure there were no guards or lookouts.

Crouched behind a large family gravestone, downwind of the crypt, they watched the entrance. "Are we going to kill them, sire?" Xander whispered, his words tickling at Spike's ear.

Spike swivelled round on the balls of his feet, one arm raised to the lip of the tombstone for balance. "What? No! Are you mad?" He saw Xander open his mouth and moved to forestall him. "Don't answer that," he said, frowning first at Xander, then at Jesse for good measure. "No, we're not going in there all guns blazing to commit bloody suicide! There could be twenty of them. First rule of survival, pet - pick your fights!" With a final glare at Jesse, he turned his attention back to their target.

Half an hour later and Xander and Jesse were fidgeting and nudging at each other like the pair of school boys they so resembled, while Spike was worrying that Dru
had been wrong in believing that a sighting of her would have the desired result. He was beginning to consider returning to her, his concern for her health warring with his instinctive need to follow her instructions, when the heavy wooden door behind the fancy wrought iron gates was pulled open. Moments later the gates themselves swung wide and Luke strode out into the graveyard, into the meagre light of the crescent moon. He paused on the threshold, taking a deep breath, scenting the air and Spike allowed himself to relax into gameface, keeping his eyes slitted until they had adapted to the darkness. Reaching out, he placed a restraining hand on Xander's and Jesse's shoulders as he waited to see if their presence was suspected. Apparently not, because Luke turned ponderously and jerked his head in a clear order to those behind him in the dark that they were to follow him. Spike counted them out, logging their faces as they exited the crypt.

One by one, he watched the dark shapes slip through the doors and hurry to catch up with Luke's retreating back, the last pushing the gates closed behind him. They gathered behind Luke in a phalanx as he disappeared between the trees towards the town centre. Twelve in all. Assuming there was more than one hunting party already out, and there would need to be with a gang that
big to feed, it was likely that the den had been left with a minimal guard. Given the amazing freedom vampires had in this town, there was even a chance that the place had been left empty. Everything Spike had seen since his arrival in Sunnydale suggested that these vampires had grown overconfident and sloppy, secure in their invulnerability. It was quite possible they wouldn't consider a home guard necessary, but that was not a guess he could afford to rely on. He waited a further full minute after the last one disappeared from sight, before he stood up.

Settling his coat comfortably back onto his shoulders, he turned to look Xander and Jesse in the eyes. Addressing Jesse first he frowned to reinforce the message. "You, stay behind me and keep your mouth shut!" he instructed. Then to Xander, "You too, pet. Stay back. You don't have the experience, or the age, to face off against an enemy alone. Even if they do still have dirt under their fingernails."

"I can fight!" Xander asserted indignantly.

Spike snorted. "Yeah, in your dreams, pet."

Beside him, Jesse nudged Xander. "Yeah, like you could
always fight Rodney Munson?" he jeered.

Xander turned on him. "Rodney Munson is a.. a..."

Jesse laughed. "Oh, come on, man, you're a vampire and you still can't manage to insult the guy who beat you up every day for five years."

His laughter was interrupted by a growl from Spike. 'Bleedin' upstart good for nothing,' Spike thought, taking in Xander's crushed expression. He stepped between them, turning his back on Jesse. "Listen, love," he said softly, "once this is over, I'll teach you to fight. By the time I've shown you a few tricks, you'll be able to knock the clogs off anyone. But right now, you haven't had time to get used to your body." Xander looked up at him hopefully. "My Dru, she says you'll be a bloody dragon one day. But that day isn't now." He raised an eyebrow interrogatively and Xander nodded in doubtful agreement. "And then you can come back and show this Rodney Munson character exactly what fighting is." He smiled when he saw an expression of gleeful anticipation light up Xander's face. Turning around, he glared at Jesse until he lowered his eyes with due respect, then he strode off across the grass to the crypt.
Sure enough, the gates were unlocked and the door still ajar. Spike took a quick look back, reassured when he saw Xander give Jesse a playful shove. Frowning when Jesse returned it. 'Deal with that later,' he thought. In the meantime they had a job to do. Opening one of the pair of gates and pushing the door slightly wider, he edged into the musty space with care. A couple of dark alcoves, a couple of large sarcophagi, a stone urn and another set of ornate, wrought iron gates opposite the entrance, but thankfully no guards on duty. 'Minions!' He snorted to himself. 'They never bloody learn.' He shook his head in wonder, as he walked over and inspected the other set of gates. As pretentious front doors went, this was certainly one. It was just the Master's style. It was also unlocked.

Giving an iron curlicue an amused stroke he turned, intending to call Xander and Jesse in, and found them already standing to attention behind him, Xander's grin making clear his pride that they'd been able to creep up on Spike without him noticing. Spike contented himself with a sceptical eyebrow, although he knew his lips had twisted in acknowledgement.

Pulling the gate open a crack, he slipped through into the darkness beyond. Inside was a set of concrete stairs and at the bottom of those, what was obviously a service
tunnel of some sort - a couple of ancient acetylene bottles indicated that, at least at one time, maintenance workers penetrated this far to check the conduits and pipe work lining its walls. Utilities, he surmised, laying a hand against one of the pipes and feeling the cold chill that suggested a mains water supply inside. Taking a breath, he scented the air, nodded at Xander and set off, heading east.

The maintenance tunnel went on for about half a mile and although Spike strode forward as if he owned the place, his concentration was focussed on the shifting patterns of air and the messages they carried. The scent of Luke's departure was dimming now and there were no indications of more recent traffic. At each side tunnel he paused to check, but so far their current route was leading them steadily onward, towards the school and the hellmouth.

After ten minutes of steady marching, the tunnel took an abrupt left turn, while many of the conduits continued straight ahead through the solid concrete wall. Mentally calculating distances and geography, Spike decided it was probably a detour around the basement of the Town Hall. He turned to follow the tunnel, ignoring the nervous sniping and whispering Xander and Jesse were indulging
in behind him. After a further hundred yards or so, a rough hole on his right exposed what looked like a disused sewer, its curved floor now dry, but stained from old use. 'That would be right,' he thought with an internal grin as the scent of family led him to step over the broken bricks and breeze blocks at the entrance. He heard Xander pause before scrambling after him, his steps uncertain on the loose rubble and he turned to offer him a hand. Xander took it gratefully, although he was already over the small obstacle and Spike pulled him forward so he stumbled into Spike's chest, his startled laugh clearing the concerned frown from his forehead. Looping his free arm around Xander's waist, Spike hugged him. "Close now, pet," he whispered. "Try to keep the noise down, yeah?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. We'll be quiet as mice. Quieter. Won't we Jesse?" Xander whispered, with a quick glance at his companion for corroboration. "You won't hear a squeak or a sniffle." His brow creased in thought. "Do mice sniffle, or do they just scratch? 'Cause the ones in my parent's basement..."Looking up he registered Spike's expression. "Umm... Yeah. Uh. Quiet as mice. Shutting up now," he added. Releasing Spike's hand to thread both his arms around Spike, inside his coat, he nuzzled his face into the crook of Spike's neck.
Spike gave Xander's back a long stroke as he watched Jesse, shoulders hunched and eyes down, shuffling uncertainly from foot to foot. "When we're done here, love. Okay?" he said, pushing his childe back to stand clear of him. Turning his attention to Jesse he added sternly. "Just be quiet. Prove yourself tonight, and I might look more favourably on you in future."

Jesse's body tensed to attention and he nodded. "Yes, sir," he replied, cowed by Spike's tone.

They continued along the sewer for a further twenty yards, Spike gradually becoming aware of light up ahead, around another bend. Walking carefully to the corner, he peered around it. A few yards in front of them the sewer came to an abrupt end and the space beyond was alight with the warm glow of hundreds of candles and torches. There was still no one in sight. Stepping out into the middle of the tunnel Spike strode forward, noting all the new details that came to his view as the cavern widened out below him. There were candles everywhere, tall ones in brass candlesticks, squat ones perched in niches in the broken rocks that littered the space and formed a rude staircase down to a patch of cleared floor, even a number of tall candelabra holding five or six candles.
each. There were also torches, their naked flames flaring malevolently in the sluggish breeze that caused the candles to flicker and almost gut on a regular basis. He shifted back to his human face, to reduce the visual distraction.

Pausing on the threshold, Spike surveyed the totality - the air was stiflingly hot with the smell of scorched wax and burnt pitch, many of the rocks were carved and he spotted a gutter gargoyle sticking up out of one of the piles of rubble. A broken pulpit lay on its side against the far wall and a plush chair sat like a throne, next to a pool which appeared to be full of dark water, or blood. Being careful where he placed his feet, Spike picked his way down the rock slope. Behind him he heard Xander and Jesse doing the same.

He was half way down when a heavily built male vampire entered the cavern from a rough hewn tunnel in the far left corner. 'Ah,' he thought. 'The guard, at last.' Pausing on a ledge about three feet above the floor, he called out, "Hey, you there, your Master at home?"

The greeting seemed to confuse the vampire, who stepped forward, apparently unsure whether to greet him or challenge him. Eventually he compromised. "Who
wants to know?" he asked.

Spike drew himself up straight. "I do," he replied at his most arrogant. "Who the hell are you?"

Being challenged in return appeared to confuse the poor sod even more, because he began to look around, as if hoping for assistance from one of his absent colleagues, but he stupidly didn't stop his advance. Eventually he reached the bottom of the rocky slope and looked up at Spike. "I'm Sam and this is the Master's hall. You shouldn't be here without an invitation," he said.

"Don't need an invite, now do I, Sam?" Spike responded. "I'm family." He glanced around as if seeking out more efficient assistance. "Where is he then?" he asked. "Anybody else here, who might actually know the full court and it's members"?

"Er, no, sir," Sam replied, obviously getting more flustered by the moment. "Um, family?" he asked dubiously, but tingeing his voice with a note of cautious respect. "May I ask, which member of the family you might be, sir?"

Spike closed one eye and squinted down at him
thoughtfully. "William," he announced, shifting back into gameface. "Descended in direct line from the Master who begat Darla, who begat Angelus who begat Dru," he paused a moment for effect. "Who begat me," he finished with a flourish. He watched Sam's face shift from dubious to impressed during the first part of his list, which at least confirmed that Darla was still officially in favour, to concerned and finally to downright worried, by the time he reached the end. "Oh, bloody hell," he exploded. "Don't tell me you've been listening to gossip?" It wasn't really a question he intended Sam to answer, because even as he spoke he launched himself off his perch, feet first, smashing into Sam's chest and knocking him flat. Converting his stagger into a full roll, head over heels, Spike bounced up onto his feet again, swung around, raced back and stamped down hard on Sam's face. Sam let out a howl as his nose broke and another when Spike jumped up into the air and brought both his heavy boots down to do the same job on his right knee-cap. Then Spike stood back and surveyed his handiwork.

In spite of his injuries, Sam still attempted to roll over and drag himself up. Spike watched his efforts. "Having some problems there, mate?" he asked as he reached into his coat pocket for his stake.
Sam was braced on his hands and one good leg, his other leg splayed out behind him and was attempting to get his uninjured foot into a position to allow him to stand, when Spike put him out of his misery. Which was the exact moment that Xander apparently lost his footing. Alerted by the scraping sound and the clatter of dislodged pebbles, Spike looked up, just in time to see Xander make a grab for Jesse's arm, miss and get a fistful of his shirt instead, pulling Jesse off balance and sending them both tumbling down the slope to crash into Spike. They all landed in a mass of arms, legs and damned uncomfortable elbows in Sam's dust.

Spike shook his head to clear it, shoved the tangle of limbs off himself and clambered to his feet. 'Thank fuck I didn't try and persuade Dru to take one of them with her,' he thought, leaving the boys to sort themselves out while he did a quick scout around the cavern. There wasn't much to inspect that he hadn't already seen from above. The pool was confirmed to be brackish water, heavily laced with old blood, but the only item of interest was the tunnel Sam had emerged from. The air from there was heavy with rot and death, but inside that almost overwhelming smell was something else, something familiar, something imprinted on Spike's
memory from his earliest days. 'Angelus,' he sighed. 'That's where he is, among the dead. Who knew Luke could appreciate irony?'

Striding towards the opening he brought a halt to Xander's and Jesse's hissed recriminations by calling back over his shoulder, "Stop messing about there, you two. We're here to do a job and the sooner we get it done the sooner we can leave." Without looking back, he grabbed a torch from a bracket by the tunnel mouth and set off, following the trace of Angelus and doing his best not to breathe in the other stench.

He'd made about five paces when he heard two pairs of footsteps running after him.

Three steps more and he'd reached another cave. This was smaller than the main cavern, one side lined with cells cut out of the rock wall. A quick glance around confirmed that Sam had not lied when he said no other members of the court were at home. The occupants of this space were of a different class entirely. And there, in the central cage was Angelus, standing bare-chested, with bruises and half healed burns painting his visible skin, leaning back against the wall, his chained arms crossed and a scowl on his face.
Spike grinned through his fangs. "We're here to rescue you," he announced.

Note: Breeze Block is the British name for what in the US is called Cinder Block - what the tunnels Buffy and Xander walk down on their expedition to rescue Jesse in episode 1.02: The Harvest, are made from.

27 Uncaged

*Prompt: 88 - Haste makes speed*

Angelus took a few steps forward, as many as the chains attached to his wrists would allow, and watched them warily. His eyes flicked from Spike, to Xander, to Jesse and back to Xander, where they fixed. Spike stood and joined his grandsire in admiring the view, while Xander prowled around the cave, stopping to peer into the dark corner that was the source of the stench. Jesse stayed where he was, hovering between Spike and the entrance, like the good little minion he needed to learn to be, if he
wanted to survive to enjoy his death. Behind Angelus, a young man with a mass of curly blond hair rolled onto his knees, from where he had been sitting cross legged against the wall, and heaved himself to his feet. He edged carefully forward to stand behind Angelus and peered over his shoulder, instinctively seeking shelter, but also curious to see what was going on. Spike almost thought he'd have taken hold of Angelus' arm, if his hands hadn't been fully occupied by a bottle of juice and some sort of fancy bread bun thing, which was threatening to spill sliced tomato and lettuce all over the floor.

"Hey," Xander announced to the room in general, "I don't have to breath, so I don't have to smell the garbage. This is way cool."

"Is that your 'godforsaken child'?' the young man whispered, addressing Angelus. "I can see the resemblance." Spike smirked as Angelus turned, his mouth opening to answer, until he saw where the kid was staring. "Who's the punk?" the kid asked.

Angelus closed his eyes, briefly. "The punk is my godforsaken childe," he explained, eliciting a surprised 'oh' from his companion. Shifting back into his human
face, which caused the young man to gasp, Spike gifted Angelus with one of his most irritating smiles.

Meanwhile, Xander's explorations had brought him back to where Spike was standing. Ignoring Angelus, he studied the young man. "Hi," he said cheerfully. "I'm Xander. I'm not sure if we're going to rescue you." The kid's eyes widened and his mouth opened and closed a couple of times, as if he was trying to find the right words to reply, but Xander was already wandering away, attention caught by other things.

Spike ignored him, concentrating on Angelus. "Seems like you pissed young Xander off somehow. God knows how you did that, warm, open bloke like you are, but you did."

Ignoring that comment as the provocation it was, Angelus reassured his fellow prisoner: "I wouldn't leave you here, Liam. Don't worry. We're all getting out."

"Liam?" Spike laughed, incredulously. "Is that his name? Ha! Poor blighter."

Angelus simply crossed his arms over his chest and glared through the bars. For a moment their gaze held as each
tried to stare the other down, until, finally, Angelus relaxed and a smirk twisted his lips. "What took you so long?" he asked.

Unwilling to concede anything to his twice blasted grandsire, Spike smirked back. "Wanted to give you a chance to do it on your own, mate. Only came 'cause I realised you weren't up to it." Snapping his fingers, he pointed at Jesse, then at the torch in it's bracket on the wall. "Keys!" he instructed. Jesse hurried over and retrieved them, returning to hand them to Spike. Stepping up to the bars, Spike grinned at his grandsire. "Promise not to bite?" he asked, facetiously. Angelus simply glared. With a soft snigger, Spike picked through the keys, trying each in turn until he found the one that opened the gate. "C'mon then," he instructed, stepping back. "Don't hang about."

Angelus lifted his arms to indicate the shackles and, smiling, Spike went over and unlocked them too, before preceding his sire from the cell.

Angelus stepped out after, Liam following behind, while Spike turned around looking for Xander. He was halted by Angelus, "Wait. What about the others? We need to free them too."
Xander was crouched down in front of the cage on the left, his face pressed close to the bars. With a look of scorn for Angelus, Spike took an exaggeratedly theatrical side step to the left and tilted his head, gazing past Xander to study the contents of the cell: a group of four humans, huddled as far back as they could get, clinging to each other. With a shrug, he took two steps to his right, so he could see into the cage on the other side of Angelus' cell. It contained a single man who sat like Liam had done, against the wall. Returning to stand in front of Angelus, Spike lifted his chin and stared him in the eye. "Why?" he asked. He gestured towards the first cell. "Take a look at them. They're broken! Nothing's going to make them right again." He strolled over to the other cage. "This one's interesting though." The man raised his head and looked at him. "How come you're not gagging at the smell and horror?" Spike asked. Looking more carefully, he felt his face shift, before he'd properly registered the impulse. "I know you!" he accused. "You're my escaped breakfast. 'S probably your fault I got put to all this inconvenience, in't it?"

The man held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I... I'd just like to point out that that wasn't my idea," he said, with a nervous smile. "But if you'll help me get out of
here, I'll make it worth your while."

Just for the sheer fun of it, Spike smiled in a way that he knew exposed his fangs to their full effect as he sorted through the keys again. By sheer chance, he got the right one first go and twisted it in the lock. Removing the key and pulling the gate open, he advanced on the cowering figure, who started to panic. "No, no, no! Don't kill me, please," he cried. "My name's Ethan Rayne, I have some skill in conjuring, I can be useful to you. I can fix anything. I can help you."

"And just how, exactly, do you think you can help me?"

He felt hands settle on his shoulders and a hard young body press up against his back. "Pretty," Xander whispered, his soft breath tickling Spike's ear, too soft for the human to hear.

'Dru might like to play with this one,' Spike thought. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Angelus had drifted closer and was watching them with a scowl on his face.

But Ethan was speaking, "Just tell me what you want and I'll arrange it. I would imagine, for instance, that you're
not flavour of the month with this little court, am I right? I understand about family and coming to rescue your sire, but..."

Spike interrupted with a growl. "Grandsire!" he corrected.

"Yes, yes, of course, grandsire. How could I have been so foolish? So you rescue him. But then Luke and his crowd are hunting you and following you and it all gets very tedious. I can mask your location."

Snarling, Spike snapped, "I'm not afraid of them!"

"No, no, of course not. But they could be an inconvenience, an irritant?"

Spike stood and considered the human at his feet for a full thirty seconds, then, without replying, he lifted Xander's hand from his shoulder, turned and walked back out of the cell, pulling Xander with him. Behind him, he heard Ethan scramble to his feet and follow.

Back in the central space, Angelus waited. "The others?" he asked. He seemed particularly sullen all of a sudden.
"They'd just slow us down," Spike objected.

Xander lifted Spike's hand to his lips and kissed it, before he let it go and slid back behind Spike, his arms circling Spike's waist, his chin propped on Spike's shoulder. Spike's hands came naturally to rest over Xander's. "Quick in, quick out, you said," Xander observed. "Shouldn't we be making haste out of here?"

Angelus' scowl turned into a sneer. "Haste makes waste, little man," he snapped.

Spike could hear the taunting smile in Xander's voice. "No, it doesn't! It makes for speed," he said, with infuriating literalness. "Come on, get with it, man. We came for you. Be happy. Let's eat and run, huh?"

Lifting one arm up behind his neck, Spike tangled his fingers in Xander's hair and gave his head a playful shake. "Angelus doesn't do that any more, do you?" he observed. "Angelus is all for saving puppies and kiddies and bunny rabbits, these days." Releasing his grip, he allowed his hand to stroke down over Xander's hair to the nape of his neck as Xander turned his head and laid a kiss under Spike's ear. Spike watched Angelus face harden further, his brows gather and lower over eyes
that flashed momentarily yellow. If they weren't careful, they'd push him too far and he'd turn stubborn. Spike remembered that look. If they made him angry, Angelus was quite capable of refusing to leave.

Shaking his head, Spike gave in. "Oh, all right," he agreed, stepping out of Xander's arms. "I'll open the doors, but then they're on their own," he said, suiting his actions to the words. The gate swung open, but apart from a collective shudder none of the occupants moved. It was obvious they weren't going to, either. This clinging they were doing wasn't a natural reaction for humans. It was herbivore behaviour. Humans were usually too individual to cooperate in allowing the loss of one or two to protect the herd as a whole. Usually, they could imagine themselves in the place of the sacrifice and that didn't sit well. Usually. This lot weren't huddling as a protective device. This was evidence of how broken these specimens were. Spike stepped back from the cage and pursed his lips in disgust.

"Spike," Angelus said and it wasn't clear whether he was pleading or despairing. "We have to take them with us. We can leave them at the hospital."

"Bloody hell, okay, okay. Just shut up about it." Spike
strode back into the cage, grabbed a couple of arms and hauled them away. Not even a whimper, let alone a screech. Yep, this lot were nothing now, their minds gone. He dragged them out and handed them over to Xander. "Hold on to this," he said. "And no snacking." Then he went back for the other two. A jerk of the head brought Jesse over to take them. Spike looked over at Angelus. "Satisfied now?" he asked. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted movement and reached out to grab Ethan's collar as he tried to slip past. "Oi! You take one of them," he said, indicating the load Xander was supporting. "You help us, we help you." As Ethan hurried to obey, Spike addressed his grandsire, "Told you, you should have eaten him when you had the chance," he observed. "Bet he was the one ratted you out." He swivelled on the spot, taking in the motley collection. "Don't suppose you'll reconsider now, eh?" He nodded past Angelus' shoulder. "Or that one. Looks like he'd make a fine healing meal." His eyes narrowed as he noticed something under Liam's raised collar. "Oh, but lookee here, you've already partaken." He felt the righteous indignation rising in his throat. "You're a damned hypocrite, you know that? 'Oh no, don't touch the humans' until you get hurt and need a boost to heal."

"It wasn't like that!"
But Spike was too angry to care about making Angelus stubborn and mad now. "Don't try to fool yourself," he yelled. "And, really, don't try to fool me! You may have a soul, but you're still the same underneath. It was exactly like that!" He turned to Xander and Jesse. "One each," he said. "Pass one over here. And we'll take the fourth one home for Dru." He caught the mutely whimpering meal Jesse shoved towards him and, as he sank his fangs into its neck, he watched Angelus turn away to stand between them and Liam, blocking the boy's view. He watched Angelus place his hands on Liam's shoulders and begin to whisper urgently to him. Spike couldn't hear what Angelus was trying to say, but he didn't miss Liam's instinctive flinch.

28 Escape

Prompt: 89 - Hot seat

Staring into Liam's eyes, holding his attention by main force, Angel knew he was pleading. "Don't watch," he
instructed. "Please. You'll be safe. I'll make sure you are. I know it's a shock. I know it's wrong. But I can't stop him." Liam took a half step back, pulling himself free but didn't interrupt, just stared at Angel, as if challenging him somehow, his unfinished supper still clutched in both hands. Unsure what the look meant, or if Liam was even hearing him, Angel continued his attempt to reassure, "I know I said he was family. And he is, sort of. But he's not like me. I don't do that. I told you. I need blood to live. But I don't kill humans." Looking into Liam's eyes, he felt the pressure to explain the unexplainable, excuse the inexcusable. "What I told you before..." He hesitated to step closer, although the need to do so was almost overwhelming. "It was true. Everything. About my soul, about Xander, about finding other ways to survive." Liam was still staring straight at him and Angel felt uncomfortably like he was on trial. He'd never had to defend himself before. Never faced this hot seat situation, where everything he said could be taken the wrong way, if he wasn't careful in his choice of words. Silently willing Liam to understand, to wait, not to judge him, he injected all his sincerity into his voice. "Just wait until we get out of here," he pleaded. "I'll get you away. You won't die. I promise. I'll keep you safe." The sound of a body crumpling to the floor seemed to echo around the cave. "But I can't stop him," he admitted again. "He was
my childe, but he's his own vampire now." A shiver passed through Liam's frame and he seemed to reach a decision. He raised the forgotten baguette and stuffed the last bite into his mouth, following it with a swig of the orange juice the big vampire had brought down to him an hour or so ago. Angel chose to interpret that as Liam doing his best to cope, to understand. "I'm sorry for them," Angel said, waving his hand vaguely behind him, while still making sure that he was the only thing in Liam's line of sight. "They didn't deserve this. No one deserves this. Please. Let's just get out of here. Once we're out, I'll help you get away. I won't let them hurt you. I promised, didn't I?" Desperate for any response, the feeling of relief when Liam's mouth twisted into a faint smile was enough to make him offer up a prayer of thanks. He reached out and pulled Liam against his shoulder, enfolding him in a hug. "It's okay," he murmured. "It's okay. It'll be okay."

Liam remained stiff for a moment, then with a suddenness that took Angel by surprise, his body relaxed. His arms rose to hug Angel back and he took a shuddering breath that ended on a hiccup, before he pulled himself free again. His eyes were solemn, but he nodded his understanding and Angel felt the tension leave his own body as he offered another smile of
reassurance and admiration for Liam's bravery. "We will get out of here," he repeated, just to be certain Liam understood.

"Yeah, sure, man," Liam whispered. He broke eye contact then and glanced quickly around. "So, hadn't we better be going?"

No question, that was a necessity. Turning around Angel addressed Spike, "How did you get in here, anyway?" he asked.

Stepping over the bodies at his feet, Spike scanned the cave. "Dru had a plan," he replied. "She's led them all a merry dance by now. No worries. She won't let them get back too soon." His face took on that fondly indulgent expression that Angel had only ever seen when Spike was thinking of Dru. "They all left, except for the one guard and he was no trouble. But I don't want to go back that way. Don't want to leave any scents they can follow." He began to prowl around the walls, sniffing deliberately. "Torches stay alive," he noted, plucking one from its bracket and lighting it from the one by the entrance. "So there's air coming in from somewhere. Reckon the way out's past the charnel heap there. Come on," he said with a jerk of his head. To the minion he added, "You take
Dru's supper off the sorcerer there. Clock 'er one and carry her. Can't expect her to walk, not the condition she's in." He began to turn towards the dark corner but apparently registered the minion's lack of comprehension, because with a sigh of exasperation, he strode back to Ethan's side, handing the torch to Xander as he passed. He jerked the last apathetic human out of Ethan's arms, punched her in the temple and tossed her across to the young vampire who caught her limp body and hoisted it over his shoulder like a sack.

Spike reclaimed the torch. "Right!" he announced glancing around the diminished group. "We ready now?"

The minion nodded enthusiastically, Xander snapped to attention and gave what he probably thought was a military salute and Angel reached over and placed an arm around Liam's shoulder, pulling him in to his side. Spike laughed at Xander and indicated Ethan. "Keep a close eye on that one, love, okay?"

Grinning back, Xander nodded and grabbed Ethan by the upper arm. "Sir, Yes sir," he replied crisply.

"This way, then," Spike said, spinning on his heel in a mockery of a parade turn and leading them over to the
corner. Picking his way between out flung arms and legs, he skirted the pile of bodies and entered the darkness beyond.

Angel debated who he would rather have at his back, knowing that the minion would come last. Deciding that on the whole, he'd rather have the sorcerer where he could see him, he allowed Xander to hustle Ethan forwards next and then guided Liam after, keeping himself between the boy and the pile of bodies. "Don't look," he murmured. "Just a few steps and we'll be past. Can you feel the fresh air? Feel the breeze? It means there's a way out up here. Just watch the light and keep walking, okay?"

Liam nodded jerkily, keeping his eyes fixed on the torch as it dipped and flared, casting heavy shadows across the tunnel wall and sparking the occasional flash of reflected light from small crystals of quartz embedded in the rock. The walls were as rough hewn as the cave they had left, but the floor was fairly even and it didn't take long to get past the last of the bodies and into a clear stretch beyond. Rats chittered and squeaked around their feet, indicating that this exit was not regularly used by the occupants of the court, and gnawed and broken bones lay as testament to their reason for being there. Angel
just hoped that the exit, once they reached it, would be big enough for them to get through. The idea of having to retrace their steps, and possibly having to fight their way out through the front door, was not an attractive one. However, the tunnel showed no signs of narrowing and it had obviously been created deliberately, so he concentrated on the intermittent wafts of clean, outside air and guided Liam as best he could in the semidarkness.

The light ahead disappeared as Spike turned a corner and Angel paused to look back. The faint glow behind them was almost obscured as the minion approached, his outline obscenely distorted by his burden. Angel felt Liam shiver beside him and tightened his arm in a reassuring hug, before resuming their walk. Rounding the corner, Spike's torch was in sight again and Liam relaxed a little, so Angel hurried them slightly, to get them closer.

Once they were nearer to the group in front, Angel was able to make out the words of the conversation he had been aware of between Xander and Ethan. "No, see, that's where you're wrong," Xander was saying. "There has to be a better reason than that. I mean, this town? How come no one ever mentions vampires? How come Xander went his whole life and never even knew they existed?"
"Very interesting, young man, the way you separate yourself from your human host." Ethan obviously caught a look from Xander because in spite of the tight grip Xander still had on his arm, he raised his hands and added, "I talk too much, I know." Apparently satisfied that Xander had accepted that peaceable gesture, he continued, "But I keep my ear to the ground. This place is famous, in certain circles. At first glance it could be considered mysterious, how it's survived so long, but there are power players here, keeping a low profile, waiting. More than just this vampire king his followers want to raise" He shrugged. "And lots of eyes watching from a distance, ready to swoop in when the storm breaks." There was a suggestion of a rueful smile in his voice. "I really should learn to wait too. But to be in on the first wave..." He sighed. "As the great man said: 'I can resist anything, but temptation'. On the other hand..."

A step or two ahead of them, Spike stopped. "Quiet!" he hissed.

Crowding closer, Angel could make out a branch in the tunnel ahead. Spike took a few paces into the one on the right, paused, returned and entered the other. Turning back to his companions, he jerked the torch towards the
first tunnel. "This way," he said.

The tunnel sloped gently downwards and they continued along it in silence. The walls around them were no longer so rough and after a while the bare rock was replaced by brick. It looked old, by the standards of the area, but it was in good repair. They passed a number of other junctions, but Spike seemed more confident now and he didn't hesitate. After a further five minutes Angel spotted a ladder fixed to the wall. Pausing there, Spike handed the torch to Xander and climbed up to the iron trapdoor above them. It seemed to take some effort, but with a soft grating sound it shifted and Spike's stance changed as he lifted the lid slightly and peered out, turning in a full circle to scope the entire area above. Once satisfied, he bent down and spoke, "We're by the docks," he said. "Back alley behind The Customs House. Drop the torch, pet, and follow me up." Bracing himself again, he hefted the trapdoor over, so it fell open with a loud 'clang' and clambered out. Xander gave Ethan a shove towards the ladder and climbed up behind him. Angel helped Liam in turn, immeasurably glad when he was finally able to stick his head out into the cool night air, rich with the tang of diesel, salt and weed. The minion came last, still hauling the unconscious body of the girl they had liberated from the court's cells.
Xander left Ethan in Spike's care and pulled her up, allowing the minion to get out more easily. "Jesse, man, are you okay?" he asked.

The minion nodded in reply and Angel pursed his lips thoughtfully at the exchange, but he didn't have time to speculate on the nature of Xander's relationship with an obvious minion, Liam needed him. He was almost hyperventilating as he took deep lungfuls of air. Laying a hand on each of Liam's shoulders, Angel bent close. "I told you I'd get you out," he said. "But it's still not safe. We need to get back up town. So keep it together a bit longer and stay close, okay?"

Liam nodded tightly and wrapped his arms around his chest, rocking slightly.

Xander shoved the trap door back in place and Spike scuffed dirt roughly back into the slot around its edge. Then he handed Ethan back to Xander and set off along the alley, towards the centre of town.

~*~*~*~*~
Eleven days and finally Giles had reached the end of his 'to do' list for settling in: furniture bought and delivered, belongings unpacked, kitchen appliances in place, pantry stocked, books put away on the shelves, car acquired and driving test booked, so he could get his California licence. He'd arranged an interview with the headmaster and a tour of the school and he'd even managed to wangle a key, so he could spend some time checking the catalogue in the library over the summer months.

Mr Flutie was a harmless old bird and had gushed enthusiastically in response to Giles' apparent dedication to duty. He'd promised that Sunnydale High would soon feel like home and that he'd discover in the student body a family to be proud of. Giles had not had the heart to contradict the man, or to admit his own natural aversion to teenagers in general and en mass. He was simply thankful that the Headmaster was going back east for the next month, so he wouldn't be subjected to too much of his overpowering personality.

And now, for the first time, on this Saturday evening, Giles was free to do as he wished. What he decided to do was take a walk around town, to get a feel for the place after dark. It wasn't large, but it packed a tremendous
variety of neighbourhoods into it's small space. In the natural course of settling in, Giles had already learnt the general layout. He knew where the docks were and the mall. He had found the street off the high street, which housed the small, specialist shops and he'd thoroughly inspected the public library. What he didn't yet know was where the trouble spots were. There appeared to be an inordinate number of churches in the town and a rather impressive number of graveyards. Giles decided that he ought to at least know which was which, in case he ever needed to be specific in his instructions to his slayer. Packing a large cross in each of his pockets, he straightened his tie and let himself out of his flat.

29 Home Truths

Prompt: 90-Colourless

They made a strange procession, Angel thought. Jesse trailed along at the rear, carrying the limp body of the woman. Spike and Xander were in the lead, Xander still with a firm grip on Ethan. Angel and Liam were in the middle, walking next to each other, although Liam had pulled away from Angel, so he no longer had his arm around the boy's shoulders. Angel understood that, he remembered that humans, especially young male humans had some strange responses to physicality,
except when they were drunk. Now they were out of the underground, Liam seemed to be regaining his confidence, walking smartly, casting his eyes around the streets, watchful and alert. His change in demeanour reassured Angel that he would be alright.

They headed uphill towards the town centre and Crawford Street, beyond. Angel wondered if Dru was okay, Spike's brief explanation, that she had had a plan to distract Luke, had been reassuring. She couldn't be too sick if she believed she could run around town alone. He hurried his steps and drew level with Spike. "You never told me what was wrong with Dru," he said.

"You never asked."

"I'm asking now."

Spike squinted up at him, apparently assessing the sincerity of his interest. "She got caught by a mob in Prague," he said. "I don't know what it was, exactly, but she's not been right since. Sometimes she's fine. Others..." his voice trailed off and silence reigned for a few moments while Spike gazed blankly into the distance, then he took a deep breath. "Some sort of magic," he explained. "While I was tracking you down,
she found the cure. But it needs the new moon, a church, some magical thingy that she says she's located and the power of the Hellmouth. And the new moon isn't for three more weeks. It needs her sire too."

He looked sidelong at Angel, a challenge in his eyes. "So are you going to help?" he asked. "Since we've come to you? Dru's come to you? It was leaving town that was your problem, wasn't it?"

Angel glanced over his shoulder. Liam was walking close and obviously listening in. Angel gave him a small smile of reassurance before he turned back to Spike. "Yes," he sighed. "I'll help."

Spike nodded tightly and walked on, while Angel dropped back to Liam's side.

Liam glared at him. "Why would you help them?" he asked.

"They're family. Dru... it's complicated, but she's my responsibility."

"She's a vampire too?"

"Yes."
"But you kill vampires. Why would you help this one?"

"I said -"

"Yeah, she's your responsibility. I heard you." He shut up then and looked away from Angel, concentrating on the ground in front of his feet. Angel opened his mouth a couple of times, but on each occasion he hesitated, knowing that the bond of family was beyond his capability to explain. Hopefully, when Liam saw Dru he'd understand.

They were passing one of Sunnydale's newer Cemeteries before they saw another human being. A single man stood in front of the entrance gates staring up at the sign proclaiming the place to be Restfield Cemetery. After studying it for a moment he looked down and appeared to write something in a small notebook.

"Strange sort of tourism," Spike observed. "Could get a bloke killed, behaving like that."

The man glanced up, startled, as the sound of their approach reached him. Cautiously he took a step back, so he had the wall behind him. He shoved his notebook into one pocket and his pen into the other, leaving his hands there as his eyes swept across the group and widened in surprise. Angel's puzzlement over which of them he knew was answered immediately by Ethan, who attempted to pull himself free of Xander's grasp. "Hello, Ripper," he called.

'Ripper' looked unimpressed, but nodded. "Ethan," he replied, his voice guarded.

They had all, somehow, come to a halt, Jesse crowding in behind Angel. Liam took a step to the side to avoid the minion and in the process ended up on the far edge of the group, over by the wall, while Angel was stuck near the curb, next to Spike, with Xander and Ethan beyond him. He wanted to go over to the boy, but if this Ripper was another sorcerer, it could be dangerous to do anything to attract his attention.

Obviously realising that Xander wasn't going to let him go, Ethan gave up the struggle, but his move had made it clear to anyone that he was a prisoner. "What? No hug? Aren't you pleased to see your old partner, Rupert?"
Rupert, Ripper, neither name meant anything to Angel, but he knew he was completely out of date in his paranormal connections. He hadn't even known who Ethan's master, Aldric, was.

"Why am I not surprised to find you in town?" Ripper asked. "I should have realised that a hellmouth would be irresistible to the likes of you."

Ethan shrugged. "Well, you know me, never could keep my curiosity in check. But in this case it's not exactly my choice."

Spike snorted. "Was your choice to take the job."

"Yes, well, that's different," Ethan asserted. He looked back at Ripper. "Vampires," he said. "Not really the people I would choose as companions. Force majeure, dear boy. Don't suppose you'd help out an old mate?"

Pulling his hands out of his pockets, Ripper brandished a cross in each at arm's length. Angel felt the surge of aversion and noticed how both Xander and Jesse stumbled back a step, hissing and sliding into gameface. Spike held his ground. "Now that's just rude," he
asserted. "We aint doing no harm. Just out for an
evening stroll with my friend Ethan, here. No need to get
nasty. We're not even hungry."

Ripper laughed and it was a harsh and unforgiving sound
in the quiet of the night. "That I will believe," he said, still
talking to Ethan.

"Rupert, please? I know you're playing at being the
Watcher now, champion of innocents and all things pure
and good, but can you really walk away and leave an old
mate with creatures like this?"

"I'm not playing at anything. It's who I am. And you've
made your bed, Ethan. You'll have to lie in it."

"Watcher?" Spike growled. "So where's your slayer?"

"Not here. Ethan, leave this place and never come back.
Because if I see you again..."

His speech was interrupted as Liam broke away from the
group and made a rush towards him. He swung one of
the crosses around, obviously expecting it to bring Liam
to a halt. It didn't. Liam ran right up to the cross and
pressed his chest against it. "Please, I'm not a vampire,"
he gasped.

Ripper drew his cross back and pointed it back at Angel and Spike, both of whom had taken a step forwards, although Angel was willing to bet for different reasons. They did stop. Angel watched helplessly as Liam slid close to Ripper and the protection of the holy symbols he held. "They're vampires," Liam said, "all of them. That one," he pointed at Angel, "he was going to kill me."

"No! Liam!" Angel cried. "What are you saying? That's not true. I told you you'd be safe. I-I told you... I-I thought..."

"You bit me."

"No! I mean, yes, I did. But you agreed. I explained and you agreed. I needed to heal. We talked about it and you understood that I had to, to keep you safe." Liam edged behind Ripper, who swung his two crosses from side to side, as if fearing they would attack and snatch the boy back. Angel felt Spike's hand descend on his shoulder, but he was too preoccupied to even shrug it off. He kept talking past Ripper, to Liam. "All that time we were locked up together, we shared stuff, I trusted you. I thought you liked me." Even he could hear the whine in
his voice and Spike's snort of derision made it clear he'd heard it too.

Liam, on the other hand, didn't seem to care. "I could never like you," he spat. "I could never care about you. You took my blood." He laughed incredulously. "What? You thought I trusted you? You thought we shared? You talked a lot, man. But all I did was listen and watch. And I learnt what you are. You're a monster!"

Angel felt a growl forming in his throat as his face shifted under the overwhelming humiliation of being addressed in such a way, in public, by a mere human and he did his best to choke it back. Years ago he'd taught himself to suppress his rage, to cultivate an indifferent attitude to the world around him, but he felt that control slipping now. Spike's hand tightened on his shoulder, offering both support and restraint.

Meanwhile Ripper began to edge backwards, along the sidewalk. "I don't know what the hell's going on here," he said, adding, over his shoulder, "And I don't know who you are. But I would advise you, for both our sakes, not to taunt a demon, under any circumstances. Stay behind me and stay close. They can still move faster than we can and these crosses will only hold them away." He cast a
quick glance over his shoulder, assessing the direction of the sidewalk. "I think it is time we left. Slowly and carefully." He turned back to Ethan. "I mean it, Ethan" he warned. "If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of town, because if I see you anywhere near the hellmouth again..."

Ethan struggled to follow and Xander's grip tightened. "Rupert," he cried, despairingly.

Grinning widely, Spike stepped in front of Xander and Ethan, following Ripper and Liam, step for step. His hands were dug deeply into the pockets of his duster and there was a cocky swagger to his gait. "What if I said he really is an unwilling prisoner?" he asked.

Ripper smiled grimly in reply. "I'd say to you, what I'd say to him: there's not a ounce of good in Ethan Rayne and if he's got himself into trouble? Well, it's no more than he deserves. I'm sure he'll manage to work out a deal with you. That's what he's good at, making deals with demons."

Laughing, Spike turned his back on the watcher and looked at Ethan, who paled. "I'm thinking there's no love lost there, mate," he observed.
Ignoring Spike, Ethan continued to plead with Ripper. "Please, after all we've been through together. We used to be friends. When did all that stop?"

"When you started to worship chaos," Ripper snarled, causing Spike to laugh again.

Angel registered the exchange, but his attention was fixed on the boy behind Ripper. He stepped out onto the road and tried to approach the pair from the side. Ripper's right hand, with the tightly clutched cross, swung around to block him and Liam moved around Ripper's body to keep the cross between him and Angel.

"Liam?" Angel asked.

"Stay away from me, you freak," Liam shouted. Then he glanced at the watcher's face and muttered, "Sorry," before he clamped his mouth shut and kept it that way.

They made their way slowly down the street for about twenty yards in silence, Spike stalking forward for each step the watcher took back, Xander and Ethan behind him and Jesse cowering in the rear. Angel maintained his position slightly off to the side, waiting. The initial shock
at Liam's betrayal was gradually fading, but the rage that
replaced it seemed to grow with each step they all took.
With it came the urge to grab the boy and force him to
understand that he, Angel, was not the monster Liam
had judged him to be. He had a soul, damn it! By
definition that meant he was not the vampire he'd been,
or the vampire Spike still was. He just needed to get to
the boy. If he could explain... He took another step and
found himself blocked by a parked car.

Ripper and Liam stopped on the far side of it, by the
driver's door, and Ripper spoke over his shoulder, "Liam,
is it?"

"Yes."

"Do you drive?"

"Er, yes."

"Good. There's another cross in my back pocket. Take it." Angel couldn't see what was happening, but suddenly
Liam's hand came up, clutching a cross of his own. Giles
shot him a quick glance. "Right jacket pocket," he
instructed. "My keys. Take them and get in. Start the
engine."
Ripper kept his eyes fixed on the vampires as Liam fumbled in his pocket. When he pulled back, keys jangling from his fingers, Ripper took a step towards the front of the car, while Liam managed the lock one handed, holding his cross up in the other. The door swung open and Liam scrambled in, pulling it closed behind him. A moment later the car coughed, then roared into life. Ripper slid around the wing and across the front to the passenger side, his eyes darting constantly back and forth between Spike and Angel, both crosses raised against them. Inside the car, Liam reached over and pushed open the door and Ripper paused there. "Bring me the woman," he called.

Spike stepped up close and cocked his head. "If you want," he agreed genially. He waved over his shoulder to Jesse, who came reluctantly forward.

Getting an unconscious woman into the car with them would require Ripper to drop one of his crosses. It would also require one of the vampires getting close enough to pass her over. Angel watched as Ripper figured the manoeuvre through and saw the moment he realised it was unworkable. Ripper's eyes narrowed and his mouth hardened into a bitter line as he clambered backwards
into safety, slamming the door shut.

Spike was forced to jump out of the way as the car sprang forward. He spun on the spot and watched as it disappeared down the street. Then he started to laugh. "That was fucking priceless," he gasped eventually. "My god! You should have seen your face."

Angel tore his eyes away from the fast fading tail lights ready to roar his sorrow and impotent rage into Spike's impudent face, only to find Spike was looking at Ethan. "You really thought a starched up council watcher would risk his pretty suit over a degenerate chaos worshiper?" Spike asked.

"He wasn't always like that," Ethan said sadly.

"Well, he's like that now," Spike replied. "Tell you what, I haven't had so much fun for months. For that, you might just get to go free, once you've done your concealment spell for us." He turned to Angel and his face sobered. "Sorry mate," he said, coming over and laying a consoling hand on Angel's shoulder. "I know you wanted him. But come back with us now and if you like, once Dru's better we can go find him again for you. You know where he lives, right?
Angel nodded glumly. The rage had faded now and he found himself confused by his previous reaction. He looked into Spike's eyes and saw something there that he didn't really want to address immediately. "Sure," he said, his voice flat and colourless to his own ears. "I've nowhere else to go, have I?"

30 Hollow Men

*Prompt: 91 - Rusting*

Dru was as beautiful as he remembered. Even through his disillusionment and bitter disappointment, Angel noticed that fact. Thinner, maybe, and paler, if that were possible, but just as beautiful. She was sitting in an easy chair when he entered the living room of the small cottage in Spike's wake, and his eyes were immediately drawn to her.

Spike relaxed as soon as he saw she was safe. He'd been worrying at them to hurry up for the last half hour, ever
since they'd lost Liam to the watcher. Now he walked over and bent his knee before her, taking her hand. For a moment she gazed down at him, then she looked up and saw Angel. The slow smile of welcome that spread across her face was like a soothing balm to his soul and although a voice deep inside him told him it shouldn't be, he felt some of his pain fade. "Angel," she sighed.

Feeling ridiculously awkward, he nodded formally. "Drusilla," he acknowledged.

With a shake of her head, Dru's voice turned fretful. "No, no that's not right," she wailed. "Your line is 'Baby, I'm back'."

Angel closed his eyes for a moment and dropped his head, absorbing the distress. When he looked up again he caught and held her gaze, willing her to understand him. "I'm sorry, Dru," he said. "But I'm not back, not the way you'd want me."

Standing up, Spike growled as he quickly moved between them, herding Angel towards the sofa and interrupting their mutual stare. "Enough of this," he said, "you're back with us for now." He stood close to Angel, until Angel gave in and took a seat. "Once we've done Dru's cure,
you can go where you like and do what you like, but until then you'll stay with us." There was no suggestion in his tone that he would accept a compromise on that decision and Angel found he didn't have the energy to argue.

Meanwhile, Spike turned to Jesse. "You," he instructed, "take Dru's supper through to the kitchen and tie her up, then make yourself scarce. Go and make up the bed in the spare room. And bring a few blankets in here too, for my Grandsire." Angel looked up at that, but Spike was already turning to Xander, who had stayed close to the door. He went over and placing a hand behind Xander's neck, pulled him in for a kiss. "You'll have to give up your place to my sire, pet. Okay?" Xander nodded, although he didn't look too happy about it. "It's the way things work, love. My sire owns me, just as I own you. Doesn't mean I'm rejecting you. Just means there's a way these things are done, understand?" Again Xander nodded. Spike kissed him once more and gave him a small shove, taking custody of Ethan. "Go offer your obedience, then," he instructed.

Xander walked across the room to Dru's chair and went down on one knee. She reached out her hand and he took it, bowing his head and placing a reverent kiss on
the backs of her fingers before he straightened up again. Seemed like Spike had trained some manners into him then, a fact Angel had been doubting up to now.

Drusilla smiled graciously down at him and patted the side of her leg. "Sit, my dear," she murmured. When he twisted around and sat at her feet, leaning against her chair, she laid her hand on the side of his head and pushed it down against her knee. He settled then, gradually relaxing as she began to run her fingers through his hair.

"Jesse," Spike yelled.

The minion stuck his head through the kitchen door. "I've tied her up, sir," he said, immediately. "I was just going to make up the bed, like you said."

"Bring some spare rope in here first and tie this one up too. I don't want to be holding on to him all night and I don't trust him to stay put, just because I say so." Jesse disappeared again and re-emerged a moment later with a few yards of thick cord. "Just his wrists, for now," Spike added. Once that was done, Spike gave the ropes an experimental tug, shoved Ethan down to sit next to Angel and jerked his head at Jesse, sending him off to the

Jesse left and Angel looked across at Xander, to see how he was reacting to Spike's treatment of Jesse. There was a story there, if he knew anything of young vampires. Jesse was not the type of minion he thought Spike would turn, too young looking to be of use in many situations. Of course, so was Xander, but Angel already knew the reason for that turning. Once again he felt the tendrils of despair creep up his spine as he thought about the human boy he'd tried to guard, but there was no denying that the demon who had taken his place looked superbly content, sitting against Dru's leg as she petted him. With his eyes closed he looked so much like Jeb that Angel's heart hurt.

Movement across the room caught his attention and he looked over to see Spike remove his coat and toss it over a hard backed chair against the wall. Spike stretched, as if to remove the kinks of tension and Angel was momentarily mesmerised by the thin, hard lines of his grandchild, the muscles that played along his arms, the deadly power of him.

Arms braced behind his neck Spike turned and once
again Angel saw his face soften as he regarded his sire and his childe. "Hungry, pet?" he asked.

Dru slowly shook her head but didn't say anything. Leaning back in her chair, she looked exhausted. Spike sighed and when he turned to speak to Angel the smooth predator of a moment before had totally disappeared and all Angel could see was a young man who looked suddenly vulnerable in his obvious desperation. "She's weak," Spike explained, although Angel hadn't needed to be told. "But she won't eat. She's been all over town for you tonight and you can see she's not fed. I can't make her eat."

Angel looked down at his bruised arms and held them out for Spike to see. "I'd help if I could, Spike," he swore. "But..."

Spike cocked his head thoughtfully and a slight smile formed on his lips. "I'll hold you to that, mate," he said. Going back to Dru's chair, he bent down to whisper something in her ear. She listened for a moment, then looked up, past Spike to Angel, and her eyes were suddenly wide and alight. Angel wasn't sure if it was a feverish symptom or not and he found himself wishing there really was something he could do to help Dru, but
he also knew he couldn't drink from the woman in the kitchen and until he healed, there was no way his body would spare any blood for anyone else.

Angel tore his eyes away and watched Dru's fingers trace patterns in Xander's hair, combing and twisting the strands. He remembered the skill with which, in the distant past, those fingers could soothe his anger on the rare occasions one of his plans went wrong and they lost the object of their hunt. Almost against his will, his eyes followed the line of her arm to her shoulder and on to her face. She was watching him with a pensive expression which blossomed into a mischievous smile when she caught him looking. Her eyes flashed up to Spike, then immediately down to Xander and her smile turned seductive. Angel felt his earlier despair transform into a shiver of jealous need.

Spike's voice interrupted his thoughts before he could even think of trying to understand them. "Alright, food will have to wait. First things first," he announced. Turning to Ethan he continued, "You bargained a spell for us to get you out of the court. It's time f'you to pay up. Do it now, where Dru can watch and make sure you do it right. And believe me, she'll know if you try to pull a fast one."
"My very dear sir," Ethan replied, his voice somehow both mellow and smarmy at the same time. "Believe me, I would never dream of welshing on a deal with such a powerful demon as yourself."

Spike just snorted as he untied the cord from around Ethan's wrists. "Yeah, sure," he said. "I know you wouldn't. And so does Dru," he glanced back at her, "don't you pet?"

"I know this one's mind," she replied. "He's twisted and tied by more than your rope, my love. He wants things he can't have and it hurts him. He is one of the hollow men, the stuffed men. Headpiece filled with straw and veins of rusting blood." She looked directly at Angel. "Makes him do silly, dangerous things," she continued. "Playing with fire and chaos to prove a point to the ones who don't care enough to watch. I'll know if he tries to play you false."

Spike hauled Ethan to his feet, none too gently, and set him in the middle of the room. "Need any props?" he asked. "Candles or whatnot?"

Ethan shook his head. "No, it's just an incantation." He
took a step back, away from Spike. "If you'll allow me?" he asked, casting a glance around the room. Spike backed away and settled on the arm of Dru's chair to watch and Angel found himself straightening in his own seat. He looked across at Dru, quickly, and saw that both she and Xander were watching attentively too.

Ethan folded himself down to the mat, sitting cross-legged in approximately the centre of the room.


Ethan nodded and shifted himself a few feet towards the door into the hall. Straightening his back he laid his hands palms up on his knees, closed his eyes and began to speak. His voice started off low but rose in volume to end in a shout, "Janus, evoco vestram animam. Illis lacuna, Tego! obscurate!"

As simply as that, it appeared, he was finished. Opening his eyes, Ethan relaxed from his rigidly held pose into an exhausted slouch.

"That it?" Spike asked, sceptically. Ethan nodded wearily. Apparently not satisfied, Spike turned with a raised eyebrow, to Dru.
She was still sitting back in her chair, but her hands were now gripped together in her lap. "Yes," she said simply. "It's done."

Nodding, Spike stood up, went over to Ethan and hauled him to his feet. He dragged him back to the sofa and dropped him into it. Before the man could move, assuming he was capable of it, exhausted as he looked, Spike snatched up the rope and tied his hands together again.

Ethan opened one eye. "Don't suppose I could trouble you for a drink?" he asked. "Rather took it out of me, that."


Spike, however, was already back at Dru's chair. Reaching a hand down to Xander, he said, "Come with me." Xander scrambled to his feet and they disappeared together into the kitchen.

Angel looked around the room. Dru was staring blankly
into space, apparently lost in her tangled thoughts, or possibly enjoying the swirls of magic, which Angel was convinced she could actually see. Ethan was slumped where Spike had left him. Jesse had not returned, obviously judging that Spike's admonition that he make himself scarce was an order to be obeyed. Not so stupid after all. By the door to the kitchen was a bureau, with bottles and glasses on top.

Getting up, Angel went over to inspect the selection: Bushmills, he noted with approval, as well as Glenmorangie and seventeen year old Eagle Rare, as well as a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He smiled his appreciation, Spike had obviously learnt a few things about living well, since Angel had last seen him. Pouring out a glass of JD, he returned to Ethan and placed it in his hands. Ethan smiled his thanks and Angel smiled back, before returning to get something slightly better for himself.

He'd just lifted the glass to his lips when Spike and Xander came in from the kitchen. "Hang on, mate," Spike said. "Before you start on that you have to help Dru. Your blood'll give her a boost and she'll take it. Better than trying to force feed her something else." He looked Angel up and down. "But I know you have to heal first."
Shaking his head, Angel interrupted, "I'm not drinking that woman," he said, lifting his glass again.

Spike reached out and snatched it from him. "You don't have to. But young Xander here needs to be welcomed into the family. He's got Dru's approval. How about you give yours?"

Angel narrowed his eyes. "And then?" he asked.

"Then you can feed from him and you can feed from me. That'll heal you up and give you some extra to pass on to Dru. What d'you say?"


By those somewhat haphazard means, it should translate as - Janus, hear my plea. By these words, obscure! Conceal/shield!
Oh, and the title and Dru's misquote are from the poem, The Hollow Men, by T.S. Eliot.

31 Aftermath

Prompt: 92 - Centre

Sunday evening

Opening his eyes, Angel rolled over on to his back. He felt heavy and relaxed and disinclined to move. Instead, he shoved his right arm behind his head on the pillow and studied the ceiling.

The cottage had obviously been built in the forties or fifties, but it's decor harked back to an earlier time. In the centre of the room, above the foot of the bed, the light fitting hung from a fancy, plasterwork ceiling rose and there was more moulded plaster around the cornice. Combined with the stark whiteness of the paintwork, it made the room look like an inverted wedding cake. On
the opposite wall from the bed was a high marble fireplace which looked out of place, too large for the small room. The bed was also big and heavy. Like the moulded plaster and the mantelpiece, it was a relic of a previous age, leaving little space for anything else in the room. The alcoves on either side of the chimney breast were boxed in with panelled doors, marking them as built in wardrobes and to his right, the small windows were covered with heavy drapes which Angel knew hid deep windowsills, wide enough to sit on. Lying there, in the sweet lassitude of waking from a long and much needed sleep, Angel considered whether the original owner had designed the place to meet his particular needs, as well as his tastes.

Running his hand down his naked chest, Angel stretched luxuriantly, feeling the bones of his spine click back into place, one by one. He was free. Well, he paused and considered that idea, he was free from Luke's prison at least. Whether he was actually free beyond that was less clear. Remembering Spike's attitude the previous evening, he didn't think he'd be inclined to allow Angel to leave the house until after the ritual to restore Dru's health was completed.

The prospect of three weeks of further confinement was
not an attractive one, but only in the sense that he was
not accustomed to being restricted. As prisons went, this
was far more luxurious than the stinking cells he'd
endured for the past four days. And it came with
additional perks.

Rolling his head to the left, Angel studied Drusilla's face.
In sleep, she looked peaceful. He knew it was a false
mask, but he accepted the illusion gratefully. There was
solace in the belief that her restless spirit could
occasionally find comfort. There was more to be found in
the fact that it was he who could grant it to her. And that
brought him back again to Spike.

For all that Spike had lectured Xander on the order of the
sire and childe relationship, Angel was certain he'd
glimpsed a flash of annoyance, even hurt, on Spike's face
when Dru had closed the bedroom door on him. Closed it
metaphorically, since she'd actually told him not to
follow, before she and Angel left the living room. Where
Spike had gone, Angel didn't know but he could make a
very good guess. His lips quirked as he contemplated the
odds of Spike remaining where he was and sharing
sleeping quarters with Ethan. They would be somewhat
less than zero, he thought.
Caressing the smooth skin of his belly, he scratched at his groin, fingertips catching in the tangled hairs and pulling them free of each other, shedding flakes of Dru's dried juices in the process. He'd comforted her, alright. More than once. He felt his lips twist into a smirk as he thought about the thickness of the walls and considered the chances that her cries and moans had penetrated through to the spare bedroom. Maybe not, since the house was so solidly built. He'd not heard anything from next door, himself, although that could just mean that Xander wasn't a screamer. Spike, as he remembered, was almost always silent in his love making.

Lying in Dru's bed, remembering his actions of the day, part of him felt guilty for usurping Spike's place. But another, larger and more insistent part, recognised its inevitability, its rightness. Dru was his childe. It was his duty to care for her and in her illness, it was his duty to do what he could to alleviate her suffering.

When Spike made his proposal, Angel's first instinct had been to refuse. "You want me to welcome Xander into the family?" he'd asked, confused and somewhat revolted by the idea; or maybe simply revolted by the instantaneous surge of emotion he'd felt at Spike's words. He shook his head. "I can't do that."
"Sure you can, mate," Spike replied airily. "You don't have to take him to bed. Just acknowledge him as my childe. Feeding's more important than fucking, and you know it."

What Angel did know was that he needed to feed if he was to finish healing. He spent a moment considering the chances of persuading Spike to get him blood from the hospital. He might actually succeed, since Spike wanted him healthy and co-operative for the ritual. At least, so he hoped. But there was no chance of getting hospital blood without notice, at least not by any means that Angel could sanction.

The woman was obviously already dead. Angel could see the faint flush of recent feeding in both Spike's and Xander's faces. They would have to be glutted, since they'd each killed before leaving the court's cells, and he knew they'd feed Dru themselves, if he refused. He reached out and picked up his whisky from where Spike had put it down. Spike opened his mouth, as if to protest, but Angel merely rolled the glass between his hands as he considered his options, and he closed it again. It was true, Angel thought, that he'd agreed to help Dru, but at the time he'd been referring to the ritual. He stared
down into the glass, watching the whisky slosh from side to side and he remembered that he'd also said that he'd help Dru tonight, if he could. Spike didn't look like a man who'd be willing to go out again to negotiate the purchase of blood from the blood bank, assuming Nigel Mears was even on duty. Putting the glass back down, he held up his arms and studied the dark bruising. Long experience of his body and its moods told him that although the breaks had joined, the fractures were still brittle. One way or another, he needed more blood and animal blood would not serve. Glancing around the room, if only to avoid catching Spike's eye, he caught Dru's instead. She smiled at him sympathetically, as if she understood his pain and it was quite possible she did. It was part of her curse that she felt her family more intensely than other vampires. In the midst of his mourning over Liam's treachery and his guilt at his failure to protect Xander, the prospect of betraying Dru in her turn, suddenly seemed impossible. Slowly Angel nodded. "Okay," he agreed. "Where?"

Point made and concession won, Spike grinned. "Right here," he suggested, waving his hand towards the sofa.

Angel looked at Ethan, who immediately shuffled along the seat and scrunched himself into the corner, leaving
the remaining acres of cushion free. Tightening his lips thoughtfully, Angel considered suggesting one of the bedrooms, but before he could voice the idea, Spike strode across the room, grabbed Ethan and bundled him out into the kitchen. With a shrug, Angel strolled over to the sofa and sat down.

As they waited for Spike to return, Angel watched Xander, who still stood, dithering by the bureau. He looked so uncertain of himself and so resembled Jeb, that it touched a nerve in Angel. "Don't worry," he said. "It certainly won't hurt."

Xander nodded convulsively and took a deep breath as if to steady himself, but before he could reply Dru spoke. "Kitten," she said, gesturing Xander to her. "Come here. I have a secret to share with you."

Immediately, Xander went over and knelt at the side of her chair. Angel couldn't hear what she said, but he saw Xander's head jerk once, as if with surprise. He watched them, their two dark heads bowed together as she whispered in his ear; they looked like a pre-Raphaelite painting - the knight at his lady's feet. Then she made a shooing movement with the backs of her hands and he stood up again, going back to his place by the door. Dru
looked over at Angel, her expression saucy, and she winked.

A moment later Spike returned and shepherded Xander to the sofa, guiding him to sit next to Angel. He gave Xander's hair a soft stroke that extended down to the back of his neck and looked at Angel across the top of Xander's head.

"Welcome to the family, Xander," Angel murmured, as he reached his hand up, slipped it beneath Spike's and pulled the boy towards him.

As his fangs pierced Xander's neck the boy's body stiffened. Then the blood began to fill his mouth, with minimal effort on Angel's part. Oh, Xander was full and overfull and the blood flowed over his tongue and into his throat, rich, still slightly warm, still carrying the elusive flavour of life, but with that additional tang, and it sent Angel's senses flying. The energy, the taste of magic and darkness and the sheer familiarity of it flooded him, rolling over and through him like an ocean wave. Vaguely, Angel was aware of Spike's voice whispering softly, shushing and encouraging, but his focus was on Xander and Xander's gift. Without him being aware of it, his arms closed around the boy, pulling him tight to his
chest, one hand rubbing circles between Xander's shoulder blades. He drank and felt the power flow through him, closing cuts, dispersing bruises and binding fast the weak bones of his arms. The supply seemed never ending. Until it was. Far beyond any ability to formulate conscious thought, Angel's body did his job for him and when the resistance would normally require his throat muscles to add extra suction to the task, instinct took over and he stopped. Slowly he drew his fangs free. Pulling his head back, he focussed on Xander's face. The boy's eyes were closed and he wore an expression of blissful abandon. Yet again the image of Jeb rose up in Angel's mind. Cupping Xander's cheeks, he bent his head and placed a kiss on Xander's forehead and another, softly, on the lips. "Thank you, my childe," he said. "That's enough now."

Flopping back, Angel allowed his head to fall against the cushions and watched through half closed lids as Spike pulled Xander to his feet and settled him again on the floor at Dru's feet. With a smile that almost looked like happiness, Dru began to stroke his head, as she had done before.

While Spike returned and settled in Xander's place, Angel raised his arms to inspect the skin. The ugly bruising was
almost completely gone. What remained would disappear over the next few hours. He sighed and relaxed into the chair.

Spike's hand on his chin, turning his face towards him, pulled Angel back to full consciousness. "You remember why we're doing this, mate?" Spike asked, although he didn't sound angry or impatient.

"Yeah, sure, I remember," Angel replied, pushing himself up to sit upright again and turn slightly to face Spike. Spike leaned forward and tilted his head, and something in Angel roared with satisfaction, before his fangs had even touched skin.

If drinking from Liam was seductive and drinking from Xander was exhilarating, holding his grandchild and feeding from him was as far beyond both of those as the sun was beyond the moon. Again Angel's throat muscles hardly needed to ripple as the blood flowed out of Spike's neck and into Angel's mouth as if pushed like the tide. And where Xander's gift had sent him flying, Spike's offering brought him back, back to the room, back to Dru sitting in her chair nearby, back to Xander at her feet, back to memories of Darla and Penn, back even to the taste of Lawson. He felt as if he were just one speck in
the continuum of the family and they were all connected through the blood that flowed across his tongue. For the first time in months, maybe years, he felt himself fully harden. His hands clenched around Spike's upper arms as he pulled him closer and Spike's own hands slid around Angel's ribs, up his back to grip his naked shoulders, before stroking down again and stopping, gripping hard at Angel's sides, just above his waist.

Once again, it was Angel's body that recognised when the feeding was complete.

When Spike drew back Angel hauled himself upright and walked across to Dru, who lifted her hand to him. Pulling her gently to her feet, he placed an arm around her shoulders and together they turned to look at Spike, lying bonelessly in the corner of the sofa, where Angel had left him. "Don't follow, pet," Dru said. "My Angel and I are taking this next door."

That was when he saw the flash of an expression cross Spike's face. Spike had expected her to stay, as they had done, in the open forum of the family room. Still caught in the last tendrils of memory, Angel recognised that look, he recognised the hurt, almost betrayal, before Spike schooled his face to neutrality. "Of course, sire," he
agreed.

Suddenly the memory of Liam crashed over Angel like a tidal wave and he shivered. Drusilla looked up at him. "Oh poor baby," she crooned. "You thought he was family, but he left you stranded, high and dry. You see how confused you are." She laughed gently before continuing in a chiding tone, "You think it's so important, that soul? You think it makes you almost human? Oh, my poor, poor dear. You really don't know." Then she took his hand and led him, all unresisting, into the master bedroom and closed the door behind them.

They'd lain on the bed together and it had been good. It had been amazing. He'd forgotten the powerful sensation of feeding from family. Even more so had he forgotten the impact of the reciprocal. Having Dru once more in his arms, suckling from him, as she had done as a childe, before the madness that took him away from her, from all of them, was like sliding back in time. And if the memories were tinged with regret for how he'd done it, he found that any desire to regret the creation of her, as an act in and of itself, was a feat beyond his powers to fulfil. And when her delicate, teasing hands slipped inside his clothes and began to undo buttons and slide down zippers, he didn't fight. Rather, he joined in, releasing her
laces and hitching her skirt, until with a moan of completion, he slipped inside her as she continued to nurse gently at his neck.

And now it was morning and he had to face the consequences of his action. His grandchild would not reproach him, after all, it had been Spike's idea. But Angel found his own mind was doing a good job, all on its own. There was no way Spike would want him to apologise. He wouldn't even understand why Angel should. But Angel remembered that look, that moment of betrayal and it chilled him, just as Liam's betrayal had. Although why he should feel betrayed, he wasn't sure. Liam was human. They did that, as he should know. They did it between themselves and they did it to others. He had the personal evidence of a submarine crew sacrificed to twisted greed in the forties, a hotel in LA in the fifties, where one scapegoated life had been tossed to the mob with never a thought, and Detroit in the sixties, where it was only by running that he'd avoided a betrayal that would have jeopardised his soul. Even yesterday he'd received the further evidence of unforgiving and sanctimonious humanity, provided by the watcher in his reaction to a man who had obviously once been a close friend.
On that thought Angel rolled silently out of bed, grabbed the pile of his clothes from the floor and tiptoed out of the bedroom. In the hall he tugged his trousers on, but finding that he only had one of his socks, left his feet bare. Regardless of Spike's plans, he'd need someone to go back to his apartment to pick up some clothes for him. Three weeks living shirtless was beyond what he was willing to endure.

Padding down the hall, he entered the kitchen and looked around with interest. Jesse was curled up under the kitchen table, a blanket covered lump on the bare floor, and the body of the woman was gone. He nodded to himself with approval; Spike had obviously learnt to keep a clean lair at some point in the last hundred years. Crossing the room to the other door, leading to the living room, he slipped through. Sure enough Spike was not there. Ethan, however, was.

Ethan was also drinking. His wrists and ankles were both bound, but apparently he'd managed to stand up at some point and hop across the room to the liquor supply. He was now sitting, almost prone on the sofa, feet propped up on the coffee table, drinking from the open neck of a bottle which was held tightly in both hands. The Bushmills, Angel noted with a sigh of regret.
What are you doing?" he asked. "It's barely evening!"

"So it might be, my friend," Ethan slurred. "But I've been alone out here for the whole day." He nodded towards the coal scuttle on the grate. "Couldn't even get to the loo. But waste not, want not, I managed to reach the important things." He looked up at Angel, squinting as if to fix him in one place. Angel knew the feeling. "Anyway," he added, with a hiccup, "Something bad is happening. Bad for both of us. Bad for all of us." Taking in Angel's sceptical look, he giggled. "Just kidding!" Then he suddenly turned serious. "But something bad is going to happen to me." He paused and studied Angel critically. "So you," he said, once more cheerful and pointing his two index fingers vaguely in Angel's direction, "should relax. Enjoy the night." Lifting the bottle in a toast he added, "Here's to me."

Looking down at the man, Angel addressed the one part of that speech that appeared to make sense. "Why do you think something bad is going to happen to you?"

"Can feel it in my bones, dear boy. Can feel it in my bones. Plus, you must remember, I saw your grandchilde kill my master. Can't have that now. Mustn't be any
witnesses to a death like that."

Angel began to wander around the room, studying the pictures on the wall, the huge television that dominated one corner, the few books on the shelf behind it. "Spike said he'd let you go, in exchange for the spell," he observed over his shoulder.

"Yes, he did, didn't he? That was nice of him."

Turning Angel studied him again, wondering if he was really as drunk as he appeared. "But you don't believe him." It was a statement, not a question and Ethan didn't bother to reply. He just took another swig from his bottle. Going back to the bureau by the kitchen door, Angel picked up the Glenmorangie and sat down next to him.

32 Peace Offering

Prompt: 93-Chimera
Sunday evening

By the time Spike got up and wandered into the living room, Angel had put the bottle of Glenmorangie back where it belonged and was nursing a glass in one hand as he pretended to read the only interesting looking book he'd found on the small shelf behind the television. He'd armed himself with the book and the glass, as things to hide behind, knowing that sitting with no occupation would make him uncomfortable during the confrontation to come.

Spike appeared to be still half asleep, scrubbing his hands through his hair before he started buttoning up the red silk shirt he had obviously just pulled on. He glanced across at Angel, nodded, and tilted his head to read the book's title. "The Chimera," he said "Hmm." Angel turned it around to check the cover. "'S okay," Spike observed. "Got some nice torture scenes, but it's not that great. 'Course if you read it in the Italian..." He paused as if in thought. "Nah, still not much cop. Oh, and I forgot. Languages... not your thing, are they?"

Doing his best to suppress his irritation at Spike's taunt, Angel still found himself rising to the bait. "I read French!"
Spike grinned. "Yeah, just about," he agreed. He paused by the easy chair. "Where's Dru?" he asked.

"Still asleep."

"Oh. Right. Okay then." Spike acknowledged. He looked around again. "And where's Merlin?"

"Gone." Off Spike's suspicious look, Angel confirmed, "I let him go."

As he'd expected, that news was not taken so calmly. "Bloody hell!" Spike exploded. "Why the fuck d'you do that? I had plans for him."

There was often satisfaction to be found, Angel reminded himself, in frustrating his grandchilde. It was a small satisfaction, but in his present position he would treasure each and every one. Mirroring Spike's earlier tone, he observed innocently, "You don't like magic."

With a growl, Spike snatched up the Jack Daniel's from the bureau, twisted off the cap and tossed it over his shoulder. "You're about a hundred years too late to tell me what I do or don't like," he snarled, lifting the bottle
and taking a swig.

Suppressing a smirk, Angel maintained his casual front. "You said you'd let him go."

"Didn't mean it, did I? Do you have any idea what a chaos sorcerer tastes like? It's nearly as good as slayer blood! That one under the school..." He trailed off as another thought apparently struck him. "Oh, shit! This means I've gotta go out later, too. Was planning on him being enough for all of us, for t'night."

Shaking his head sorrowfully, Angel finally allowed his amusement to show. "Planning?" he asked, incredulously. "You don't plan, Spike. You react. You always have." He threw his book aside. "I on the other hand," he continued, "now have a chaos mage who owes me a debt of gratitude. Ethan could be a very useful resource and as such, was not to be wasted just to save you some effort. I made sure he'll pay, when the time comes. The watcher was right, he knows how to make a deal." He felt his smirk broaden. "But then, so do I," he added.

Slumping down in Dru's chair, Spike took another gulp of Jack. He spent a moment savouring the flavour before his
Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "This is my bloody house, Angelus. I'd remind you t'keep that in mind. You just fucked up my quiet evening at home, y'bastard! I've a good mind to let you starve, since you robbed us of a ready meal. Don't need you healthy to do the ritual, you know?"

"You might not need me healthy, but it'd make your life easier if I was," Angel shot back. "And you do need me to make sure Dru eats between now and then."

Spike sat up straight in his chair with a snarl. "And that's another thing. No more going off to bed to feed Dru. From now on, you do it right here, where I can make sure you're doing it right."

Narrowing his eyes, Angel considered his grandchilde's angry face. It was time to put forward his proposal, but he needed to do it carefully. "I'll make a deal with you," he suggested. "I'll stay in here while I feed Dru, but in return there will be no repeat of last night. From now on, you get me blood from Mears, at the hospital. You do that and I'll keep Dru in line." Spike had calmed slightly as Angel made his suggestion, although the taunt at the end, as Angel had intended, caused his hackles to rise again. Winding Spike up was so easy that Angel didn't
even try to resist the impulse to continue needling. "Poor Spike," he said with totally false sympathy, twisting the knife in his victim's wound. "Always second best. Never could hold his sire's attention for long." He shook his head mournfully and voiced his judgement. "Totally whipped!"

But it appeared he had over played his hand, because instead of getting more frustrated, Spike seemed to relax. "Like you were any different," he observed with a smirk of his own. "Always crawling after Darla's apron strings." He raised his bottle in a mock toast. "I've learnt a few things in the last hundred years" he explained. "And one of the things I've learnt is to see the world as it is. Darla had you as whipped as Dru has ever had me."

Suddenly the pleasure went out of the game and Angel sighed. "Yeah, I think she did," he agreed. "Until she threw me out of the house in China, cursing both my face and my name."

That elicited a surprised jerk of the head from Spike. "She threw you out?" he asked. "You mean, you didn't just leave?"

"Is that what she told you?"
"Yeah, as she threw us out after you. Said any childe of yours would be as faithless and that she never wanted to see us again."

Angel smiled. "And look at you now," he said, "all grown up and independent. You could say I did you a favour, back then. You'd never have got out from under Darla, if she hadn't wanted you to." He grinned. "She's have dragged you back to the old man's court and you'd have been stuck there, with Dru playing seer to his every whim." He felt a laugh beginning to form as he continued his thought. "And if she'd been there, he might not have got himself stuck like a cork in a bottle, when the hellmouth closed on him."

As the first snigger finally escaped Angel, Spike began to chuckle. In a moment they were both laughing at the image of Heinrich Nest, face even more distorted for being squashed up against glass.

Spike shook his head. "Right," he agreed. "Not sorry I missed that little adventure." He raised the Jack Daniel's and Angel returned the toast with his own glass. "Cheers, mate."

Spike's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Not afraid I'll drug it again?"

"No, you've got what you want. I'm here and I'll help with Dru, so there's nothing for you to gain from doing that."

Spike's mouth twisted into a grin of acknowledgement. He nodded towards the television. "Might find that more interesting than Italian village politics and corruption," he observed. "The characters are no more real, but at least you don't have to work so hard for it. You're sure to find something you like, everything from porn to opera, at your finger tips." Angel looked at him doubtfully and Spike laughed again. "Fuck you," he observed as he got up and walked across the room to the hall door. "Do what y'like. I'm going to get Xander up and we'll go out and get you your blasted blood." He paused with one hand on the doorknob and turned back to Angel, the smile fading from his eyes. "And you keep your paws off Xander too. Got it?"

Nodding wearily, Angel agreed, "Yeah, I've got it. Don't
worry, I won't try and touch him."

'Xander,' Angel thought as he watched Spike leave. 'It's Xander, not Jeb. And even if it was Jeb...' Since the night Spike drugged him and dressed Xander up, Angel had been tormented by 'what if's' around that close call. Jeb hung so heavily on his conscience, not only because of the life lost, but also for the acts of degradation he had indulged in with the boy. He remembered that lesson, learnt early by Liam and learnt well: men rutting together was a sin beyond forgiveness. He didn't usually allow Liam's memories the freedom of his conscious mind, but the image of two boys, beaten to death by their fathers with every member of the village knowing full well the why's and the wherefore's, no one raising a voice in protest when a tinker was blamed and taken to trial, that memory had surfaced regularly in the decades since Rumania.

As Darla had once said, Liam's life had shaped him as much as the two hundred and more years since it had ended. Liam had been fifteen or sixteen at the time and he'd taken great pains over the next ten years to ensure that his own father heard of his adventures with the slatterns in the tavern. Spike had no soul; he didn't know that what he did was wrong. The fact that Angel had not
had a soul when he'd bedded Jeb might act as some excuse, but he had one now. Xander was safe from him. As was Spike.

And Dru... Dru was his childe, he'd made her, but he'd only had her for twenty years. Spike had cared for her for much longer.

Thinking about his childe and his grandchilde, Angel knew that regardless of Spike's own acceptance of a hundred years of devotion being tossed aside, Angel himself could not judge it the same. It was true that he'd never released Dru, but even so, his sense of justice told him that he'd done Spike a wrong by bedding her. Plus, he'd never liked to share. Before, he'd kept Dru from William whenever Darla wasn't demanding his attention. It had been amusing, watching William's face as Dru pulled away from him and clung to Angelus. But now Angel understood the devotion Spike had given Dru and he acknowledged that it had earned Spike his place at her side and in her bed. He would, he resolved, withdraw from the field. Let Spike have the reward he had earned.

33 Dock side

Prompt: 94 - Danger Zone
Tuesday 30th July

Spike untangled himself from his childe and climbed out of bed. Looking down at Xander he reached out and gave one stray curl of hair a gentle tug as he smoothed it back from Xander's brow, before leaving him to wake up when he would. Brand new children needed more sleep than older vampires, as their bodies continued to adapt to the change and Xander seemed to be taking his own sweet time about it. But each night Spike noticed that he moved with more control, more grace, as his spirit integrated with his inherited musculature. There was never a question that when Dru called Spike would drop everything and go to her, but Xander too had a legitimate claim to some of his time. In spite of his constant worry over his sire's health, it had been good to spend one night with Xander.

At the moment, though, he needed to check how Dru was doing. She'd not got up the previous night and had barred him from her bed during the day. Spike could only hope that the undisturbed rest had done her some good.

On the way he stuck his head around the door to the living room, just to check. Angelus was stretched out on the sofa and just beginning to stir into waking. Okay
then. Spike continued along the hall, quietly eased open the door to Dru's bedroom and tip toed inside.

Two hours later, having set Jesse to his tasks of making the beds, doing the laundry and polishing Dru's and Angelus' shoes, and having overseen Angelus' feeding of Dru, Spike was feeling free enough of his responsibilities to indulge his own desires and he and Xander were out on the streets to do just that. They'd have to stop off at the hospital at some point, before Nigel Mears went off duty. Angelus had used up the last of the supply and would need more later. Briefly, Spike played with the idea of killing someone and filling a bag from the tap, just for the private enjoyment to be gained from such a practical joke, but on consideration decided it was too much effort. It was simply easier, and safer, to spend money on Mears, at least for Angelus' needs. There was a lot to be said for the easy life.

Personally, he had no intention of stooping so low and he certainly wasn't going to let his childe subsist on stale and processed food. Xander would eat well and grow strong, or Spike would be asking why. But Angelus, Angelus was different; different from how Spike remembered him when Spike himself was a fledge. Yet, in some ways he was also much the same. He was still a
stubborn son of a bitch and Spike knew he meant it when he said he'd not kill a human, not even to get the blood he needed to keep Dru alive. It was a pain in the bloody neck, but the actual task of buying blood was not difficult. It was just piss poor behaviour for a vampire to indulge in. Spike could only hope that news of his involvement in the degrading practice didn't spread too far.

Two weeks, they had two weeks before the ritual could be staged. Two weeks before they could kick the dirt of this town from their shoes. Two weeks while he still needed Angelus and had to put up with the sad bastard in his home, with his encroaching, insinuating ways. From the corner of his eye, he saw Xander react to the growl he felt forming in his throat. The boy turned to scan the area, pressed his back against Spike's so they faced in opposite directions, ready to take on the danger he thought his sire had spotted.

Spike took a breath and consciously relaxed, feeling Xander respond to that too. "'S okay," he said. "Nothing there." He reached out and pulled Xander to his side, taking comfort for a moment in his childe's solidity, before he drew the mantle of his responsibilities around his shoulders once more.
Gazing up at the full moon hanging serenely in the clear sky, Spike estimated the time as just short of midnight. He nodded to himself with satisfaction - they still had a few hours before Mears finished work, just right for a trip down the docks to catch the pubs at chucking out time. The local rag had announced that there was a Russian freighter in port, and ever since the fall of the iron curtain it was assumed that sailors who went missing on American soil had absconded to a better life in the west, so no one mounted a serious search in the days before their ship sailed. Once the ship was gone, there was no one left to care.

"We'll go down the docks and find us something that'll provide more of a challenge than the domesticated cattle, eh?" he suggested.

Xander's teeth flashed white in the street light and Spike felt his childe's gleeful anticipation transmit to him, lessening his tensions further. They turned as one and, arm in arm, headed down hill, bypassing the town centre and aiming for the warren of warehouses, flop houses and cheap drinking holes that occupied the narrow strip between the harbour and the freeway.
In the end, their meal was both satisfying and educational. After half an hour of lounging around, across from a place called 'The Sailors' Arms', a pair of likely candidates finally staggered out into the quiet street. The smaller of the two was hanging onto his mate, obviously roaring drunk and barely able to walk, as he slurred out some incomprehensible Russian folk song at the top of his voice, his free hand waving around as if he were conducting an invisible orchestra. His hulking friend looked less inebriated. He seemed to be concentrating on keeping them both going in the right direction as they set off across the road on a long and wavering diagonal.

Spike straightened from where he'd been leaning against a warehouse doorway and giving Xander a nudge, pointed at them. "Let's see how much you've learnt," he said. "I'll take the small one, you concentrate on the other, okay?" There was no way he was going to let Xander get drunk, not even second-hand.

Xander grinned back at him and nodded. "Sure," he agreed. "Time to put all your lessons to good use, huh?" He rubbed his hands together. "This'll be fun!" Pausing for a moment, he looked seriously at Spike. "You know?" he asked. "I think I'm getting the hang of this being dead
and eating blood thing. I mean, I remember reading comics about vampires and thinking it was all a bit gross, but now..." His grin broadened further. "Now I just think 'Bring it on, man!'" He caught Spike's expression and tried to appear serious. "Yeah, yeah, I know what you're going to say," he said, replying to Spike's unspoken comment. "That wasn't me." He glanced down at himself, lifting his hands slightly to stare at them, as if they held the secret to his identity. "But it feels like me, it really does. Doesn't that count for something? Anything?" He looked back up at Spike, his mournful tone contradicted by the way his expression was hovering on the edge of laughter while he did his best to appear obediently hopeful. Spike felt his own lips twitch and bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from smiling, but Xander seemed to sense it anyway, because he laughed out loud and executed a little dance step, before sidling up to Spike. Bending down, he rubbed his cheek against Spike's shoulder and chanted, "Made you laugh, made you smile, made you..." He paused and straightened. "Umm, shall I pretend I can't think of an ending to that?"

Stepping back a pace so he could look Xander up and down with slow deliberation, Spike allowed just the corner of his mouth to curl upwards. "I think that might
be a good idea, pet," he said, gravely. Glancing past Xander's shoulder he added, "And since our supper is about to turn the corner up there, don't you think we should maybe head that way too?"

Xander's head snapped around. "Oh, wow, yes, totally! I'm starving!"

With grin, Spike gave him a shove and they set off down the street in fast and silent pursuit of the Russians.

Rounding the corner, staying close to the wall of the warehouse, Spike sprinted ahead of Xander. As he came level with their prey he reached out and grabbed the smaller man's free arm, using his own speed and momentum to drag him free of his companion's grasp and swing him around at arms length. His target staggered, almost falling, but somehow managed to keep his feet, until Spike released him at precisely the right moment to send him crashing into the wall of the warehouse. His song had been cut off mid note and it was now replaced by a howl, more of indignation than pain.

The bigger guy looked dumbfounded for a moment, then he roared. He looked about to charge Spike, but just at
that moment Xander appeared and flung himself on to the big guy's back, arms wrapped around the man's shoulders and legs clamped around his waist. The sudden shock almost caused the sailor to overbalance and for a second he stood frozen. Then he began to turn, staggering backwards at the same time, and crashed into the wall. Spike winced in sympathy as Xander was crushed between the man's body and hard brick, and his arms and legs sprang wide in reaction. The sailor lurched forwards out of reach and spun on the spot, even as Xander slid slowly down, thankfully getting his feet under him so he didn't end up in an ignominious heap.

Spike turned his attention back to his own sailor, gripping the back of the man's neck and smacking his forehead against the wall. His supper thereby subdued, he dragged him back against his chest and sank his fangs into the exposed neck, holding him high enough that he could continue to watch his childe as he fed.

Xander had regained his balance and was closing with his target again. His footwork was good and he was light on his feet, as he danced back and forth, dodging most of the man's punches and pulling back as soon as he had landed one himself. The Russian took half a dozen blows to the torso before he seemed to realise that his
opponent's appearance was deceiving and he really was facing a serious threat.

He drew back a pace, out of the danger zone, before lunging in again and this time Spike saw that there was calculation behind the move. He feigned right, but then swung left, putting all his power into his right fist as it connected with Xander's cheek. Xander went staggering, his arms windmilling madly, but managed to stay upright. There was little or no science on either side, and the encounter quickly degenerated into a classic street brawl, with both combatants telegraphing their swings and taking their hits, but unable to get in the killing shot. Spike finished his meal, the alcohol giving him a mildly pleasant buzz, and allowed the body to slip to the ground. Taking a single pace to the side, so he wouldn't trip over it if he had to intervene, he leaned back against the wall to watch.

Judging dispassionately, he was actually pleased with the amount of progress Xander had made over the last ten nights of training. Although he had gone from overly cautious to overly confident in his fighting style, it was, Spike admitted, a relief to at least see a style there at all.

The scrap itself took longer than he would have wished
and he almost stepped in on two occasions, but eventually Xander's greater strength and stamina won out over the human's more limited endurance and Xander managed to land a blow past the sailor's guard and into his face. The big man stood stock still, rocked a few times, then tipped over backwards, falling heavily onto his back. Spike watched with approval as Xander made sure he was out, by placing a carefully aimed kick to the side of his opponent's head, before dropping on top of him, knees pinning the man's arms to the ground and sinking his fangs into his throat.

After a few minutes Xander sat up, braced his hands on the dead sailor's chest and pushed himself to his feet. The cuts on his knuckles were already closing and he hadn't taken any serious damage. Spike walked up behind him, slipped his arms around his childe's waist and gave him an admonitory hug. "What did you do wrong there?" he asked.

Xander paused, then his shoulder's slumped. "I didn't wait to judge his reach. I should have attacked in a way that allowed me to keep my feet."

Giving his childe another squeeze, this time of reassurance, Spike corrected him, "Not only that. You
also underestimated his speed and how drunk he wasn't." Spike released Xander and swung him round so they were face to face. "The other one was pissed, but if you'd looked more carefully, you'd have seen that yours was holding his mate up and was getting him home. He was pretty well sober." Reaching up, he took a firm grip of a wodge of Xander's hair and gave his head a shake to reinforce the point. "But," he added, "you got the job done in the end and you'll know better next time, eh?"

Xander gave an obedient nod and Spike planted a quick kiss on his forehead, before releasing his hold. "Right then. Let's dump these carcasses where they won't be found. I want to get back. Don't like leaving Dru alone with the old bastard for too long."

Pausing in the middle of bending down to haul his late meal up, Xander looked back at Spike. "I don't think he's doing anything with her," he observed.

"Don't care!" Spike replied. "I don't like the way he's sniffing around." He dragged the smaller sailor up and over his shoulder. "We'll drop these off where the weevilers'll find them. They'll have 'em stripped down to shards of bone in no time." Hefting his shoulder to settle his burden more evenly, he started down the street to the next intersection and an alley where he'd caught the
telltale whiff of a weevilers' den in his initial scouting of the town, weeks earlier, adding, "And we'll nip into the hospital on the way home, get granddad some supplies, so Dru will eat tomorrow."

*Note: I invented weevilers when I wrote Blood on a Sundial. They are small, rodent-like demons with a rancid scent and a limited geographical range. Spike delivered a body to the mouth of a weevilers' den in New York, knowing that 'by morning there'd be nothing left but the odd scrap of bone and those few broken pieces would sink peacefully to the bottom of the Hudson'.*

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**34 Crisis**

*Prompt: 95 - Mime*

**Tuesday**

When Spike and Xander entered the house, Spike sent Xander straight off to change his grubby shirt, while he took the sack of blood bags into the living room.
Watching as Xander walked away from him, down the short hallway, he nodded to himself. Xander was developing slowly, but he was making a thorough job of it. As always, Dru had been right - once he came into his own, Xander would indeed be a dragon. And Spike would make sure he was the best dragon he could be, just as Dru and Angelus, between them, had ensured that he was now one of the most successful vampires around today. He found himself grinning at that thought; since most fledges died within a year, simple survival defined him as successful, but it was Dru's and Angelus' training of the uncertain and eager William that had given him the skills to ensure his longevity.

Thinking of his sire and grandsire led him back to Xander's strange comment earlier about Angelus and Dru not 'doing anything'. Unless... he paused as another thought occurred to him: unless Xander meant that he'd noticed Angelus wasn't fucking Dru and thought it strange? Spike thought it was strange too, it just so happened to be true.

Angelus was an odd bird, his soul had changed him in so many ways, great and small. Some of them Spike could ignore, but some of them took him by surprise, ambushed him. Like when Angelus cornered him alone in
the kitchen, his second night in the house, and apologised for sleeping with Dru, saying that he'd seen Spike's face and knew that Spike had been hurt. Spike had been gobsmacked. His, "Well, yeah! So what?" response to what they'd done had caused Angelus to wince and he'd gone on to promise not to do it again. That just compounded Spike's befuddlement, the idea that Angelus thought that his sleeping with Dru was worthy even of mention momentarily robbing him of words. If they were fucking, it was their right. Spike might not like it, but he had Xander, so it wasn't as if he was being shut out and left alone. He had always been jealous of Dru's attention, but it was her time and her regard he valued, not her non-existent fidelity. He had never, he thought, had a problem with her sire taking her to his bed. It was the fact that she wanted to be with Angelus, all the time when Spike was young, that had pissed him off and made him push against their rules.

Once he got his head around what Angelus' was apologising for, he'd tried to say that it didn't matter, because it didn't. It was the fact they went off alone and left him that he'd objected to. But Angelus apparently didn't see the distinction and, for once, Spike's glib tongue failed him. Before he could pull himself together enough to produce some suitably flippant, and
preferably insulting remark to explain it, Angelus had turned and left the room.

Looking back on it, the only explanation Spike could come up with was that the soul had not only defanged Angelus, it had also turned him into some sort of second rate human, screwed up his priorities so much that he really no longer understood how a proper vampire thought. It was definitely very strange.

Almost as strange as standing daydreaming in the hallway with his arms loaded down with bags of blood. It needed eating, or refrigerating, if it wasn't to spoil. He opened the door, entered the room and froze. Dru was sitting on Angelus' lap on the sofa, her arms around his neck, whispering in his ear.

At that moment, Angelus looked up and caught Spike's eye. With his hands on Dru's waist, he casually lifted her sideways, placing her down to sit next to him, and stood up. "Spike, my boy, you brought supper," he observed, nodding at the sack. "So kind."

Taking himself in hand, Spike strolled into the room and put the blood down on the coffee table in passing. "Had a good night, pet?" he asked Dru, ignoring Angelus.
Sinking down to one knee at her feet, he placed a kiss on Dru's cheek.

She lifted her left hand to his face and turned his head, kissing him firmly on the lips in reply and he allowed his mouth to open under the pressure, sinking into the comfort of her caress. "My sweet William," she murmured. "Angel was telling me stories, but when I asked for more, he wouldn't play."

Pulling back, Spike looked up at his grandsire. "Yeah, well, he's here to look after you, love," he said. Turning back to her, he added, "not to take liberties."

Dru's face twisted into an expression of displeasure. "My liberties to take. And they're not your concern!"

Bowing his head, Spike acknowledged the truth of that. "I'm sorry, pet," he said, lifting her hand to his mouth and kissing the inside of her wrist. "But you know he'll not hang around, once the ritual's done. I don't want to see you hurt."

Glancing up at Angelus, Spike could have sworn he caught a flash of embarrassment on Angelus' face, but then it went blank. "It's good to see some respect in the
young, no matter how delayed," Angelus noted. A smirk began to twist his lips. "You really should see to your childe though. You have responsibilities now and you shouldn't leave him to associate with minions." Spike eyed him cautiously, waiting for whatever rock Angelus was about to throw into his pond. He got up and sat down on the sofa next to Dru, her hand held in his lap.

Angelus' face held an expression of friendly concern, though Spike was ready to bet that it was fake. "You know he took the servant to bed, yesterday?" Angelus asked and Spike felt relief wash through him. He'd feared it was something serious. "He'll never develop properly if you don't raise him right." Angelus added, with a smirk.

"Well, of course he did," Spike replied. "I was with Dru. There's nothing wrong with that." He gave Angelus a long, considering stare. "What's it matter to you if he fucks the minion?" he asked disdainfully.

Taking a step closer, so he loomed over Spike, Angel's voice was exasperated. "It doesn't matter, if that's all he's doing. But he's your childe, and as such, his behaviour reflects on us all. If he was only 'fucking the minion', it wouldn't matter... a fuck." Angelus seemed to think he was being amusing, because he gave a little
chuckle as he delivered his limp joke. "I sleep in here, next to the kitchen, and I sleep lightly. I heard him take Jesse to his room and I heard the creature come back, around noon."

Releasing Dru, Spike stood up. He still had to tilt his head slightly to look Angelus in the eye, but he refused to be intimidated by such an obvious ploy. "So Xander isn't keeping him there all day. What's the problem?"

"He's still sleeping with him."

With a smile, Spike stepped back from Angelus and sat on the arm of the sofa on Dru's other side. "Why should I care about that?" he asked. Narrowing his eyes, he regarded his grandsire. "And when did you become so mamby pamby that you have to use euphemisms?" he added.

There was a momentary flash of something in Angelus eye, before he pulled himself together. "Tut tut," he replied with a solicitous shake of his head. "Careful, Spike, your education's showing. It'd be a shame to let it out now, when you've spent such a long time trying to hide it." He looked away, around the room, and when he turned back his face was blank again. "Are you going to
do something about your childe, before he disgraces us all?"

Spike snorted. "Why should I?" he asked. "You're a bloody interfering busy body. And you have absolutely no ground to stand on, when we're talking about being a 'disgrace to the line'."

He wasn't surprised when Angelus didn't react to his taunt. He obviously still had news to impart, but he took a moment to savour the moment, before delivering his punch line. "He called the creature his childe," he said, his supercilious smile converting into a grimace to reinforce his point.

That did cause Spike to pause.

"Are you going to discipline the boy?" Angelus asked.

There was no way Spike was going to concede that Angelus had landed a hit, but he had to admit that if Xander had indeed said such a thing, it did suggest he was confused at best and perverted at worst. Standing up again, Spike suppressed the growl forming in his throat. "Do I tell you how to live your unlife?" he asked. Glaring at Angelus he realised there was no point in
pretending there was nothing wrong. "I'll deal with it!" he snapped.

He stomped across the room intent on finding Xander and knocking some decorum into him, leaving Angel smirking and Dru looking amused.

His hand was on the doorknob when he was halted by Dru's next words to Angel. "You shouldn't be mean like that, my Angel." He turned to look at her, unable to resist the urge to see how Angelus responded. She was standing close up to Angelus, her hand resting lightly on his chest.

Angelus was gazing down into her eyes, with apparently no awareness of Spike's continued presence. "I know, but I find it so hard to resist."

Her smile was intimate, as was her voice - intimate and teasing. "There are other, better things, you could find hard... and not resist."

Spike's anger surged again as she continued to gaze up at Angelus, her expression hungry and full of adoration. With a shudder, Angelus seemed to force himself to break the eye contact, focussing on the wall beyond her.
He took a deep breath and when he looked back, his face had set into harder lines. "I told you..." he began, before words apparently failed him.

Dru's smile turned bitter. "You'll make him crazy, but you won't offend him?" she asked. "You know it isn't supposed to be like that. You know it isn't even true. Why do you deny yourself the thing you want."

It looked like Angelus was struggling to find the words to explain, and when he did their sense meant nothing to Spike. "Dru, please... Before... I remembered guilt as a pain I didn't need to feel. Then I felt it. And now, it's always there, tearing me up."

Her hand curled against his chest, into a claw, as if she wanted to dig in, through muscle and bone, and rip his heart out. She screamed, "Don't say you're sorry for me!"

Angelus groaned, a defeated sound, and shook his head as he gazed into her eyes. "Ah, I wish I could," he said sadly. She lifted up onto her tip toes and their mouths were almost touching, before Angelus pulled away.

As Spike watched, half fascinated, half repelled, Dru's fingers straightened and she patted the spot on Angelus'
chest, above his heart, her face suddenly gentle and it occurred to Spike that it might have been his soul she was seeking, rather than his dead heart. "You're not Liam," she said. Angelus opened his mouth, but she forestalled him and her words confirmed Spike's guess. "It's not Liam's soul. It's not even human. So why do you cling to your delusions when you could be shiny and bright and real?" She began to rock, her hand on Angelus' breast the only fixed point as the rest of her swayed from side to side and Spike felt a shiver of dread skim up his spine. "Do you hear the drums?" she asked. "Lord of the dance in a dark land? Calling. Calling." Her voice dropped and Spike stood totally still, straining to hear her words. "I'd go," she whispered. "If you asked."

All thoughts of Xander fled, as Spike prepared to intervene, but Angelus spoke before he could move. "Dru," he seemed to choke on the word. "I have a mission. I have to hold on to what I know is right."

Dru pursed her lips and emitted a long whistle which undulated up and down the scale, the mournful sound creating resonances in Spike's bones. Beneath his hand, the doorknob moved, attempted to turn, and he released it. The door opened a crack before it hit his foot and stopped, but Xander slipped through the gap and into
the room. "What..." he began. Spike raised his hand and flapped it at Xander to shut him up, without shifting his gaze from the tableau across the room.

Dru stepped back from Angelus at last and for a second Spike thought the vision was over, but when she spoke it was clear the voice was still in her. "He lied," she announced, lifting her arms and weaving her hands back and forth before her face. "He told you half truths and second hand truths." She sounded like she was in pain and her mouth twisted as she let out a moan. Clutching at her stomach, she hunched over. "He would say anything to recruit you," she gasped.

Angelus was frozen to the spot, but Spike knew that posture from long experience. Breaking from his trance he rushed over and caught her before she collapsed to the floor. Cradling her against him, he got one arm around her back and the other under her knees and picked her up. Curling in to his chest, she whimpered, batting weakly at him with the hand not caught between their bodies. Sparing a glare for Angelus, Spike turned to Xander. "Fetch the fur blanket off her bed," he instructed.

Xander rushed back out of the room and Spike knelt
down, laying Dru out, full length on the sofa. He kept his arm behind her shoulders, holding her up while he grabbed a cushion with his other hand, to place behind her head. Looking back up at Angelus he spat, "What were you thinking? Bloody moron! She could have hurt herself."

Angelus looked stunned. "What... what was that?" he asked.

"That was a bad one. That's what that was. And what were you doing, eh? Standing there like a block, when you know what the visions do." He glared at Angelus again. "At least you did, once upon a time." Turning back to Dru, he gently straightened her skirts down around her ankles. She seemed to have fallen asleep, or into unconsciousness, but she wasn't dust and Spike clung to that comfort. He knew his voice was shaking, but the rage needed an out. "If it wasn't for the ritual, you'd be in the street, on your ear for this. Don't you bloody care about anything except yourself?"

Interrupting his accusations, Xander returned, clutching the fur to his chest with both hands. He tip toed across to Spike, who stood to take it from him. Then he backed away towards the kitchen door, seeming to recognise
that this was an occasion when it would be safest to be neither seen nor heard. Spike gave the blanket a shake and tucked it around Dru's still form, making sure she'd be comfortable when she woke up.

Finally satisfied, he straightened and looked again at Angelus, who hadn't moved from where he was standing when Dru's turn began. The anger and worry now gone, Spike was surprised by the expression of wonder on his grandsire's face. "You always had so much humanity in you," Angelus observed, apropos of nothing, "no matter what I did to train it out of you."

Now that he was reassured that Dru would be okay, Spike relaxed. He laughed bitterly. "Dru was undermining you at every step, mate. She wanted me the way I am." Glancing across at Xander he pointed at the bottle of Eagle Rare then brought his hand to his mouth, miming the act of drinking from a glass. Xander jumped to comply. "You may have had the training of me," he added, "but she made me." Crossing to the bureau he took the glass from Xander and pulled the boy to him, loving the way his childe immediately moulded his body into Spike's side. Taking a deep swig, he nodded towards Dru and explained, "They take it out of her. Every time, she's not as strong after. She might be okay one day, but
then she's bad again for a while. And it's getting worse."
He sighed. "And it's not like most of them make much sense. I don't know what that one was all about. Do you?"

Angelus shook his head, a frown creasing his brow between his eyes and Spike decided he believed him. "You'll have to feed her again," he said. "When she wakes up. She'll be weak as a kitten. I can never get her to take anything after one of her attacks, but you'd bloody better. Got that?"

Nodding his agreement, Angelus walked over to Dru's chair and seemed to collapse into it. Suddenly Spike remembered the blood, still sitting on the coffee table. Releasing Xander, he stalked over, grabbed a couple of bags and tossed them to Angelus. "Here," he said. "So you'll be ready. I'll put the rest away in the fridge." Grabbing Xander's hand as he passed, he pulled him towards the kitchen door. "Just remember: make her eat!"

Looking up from the blood in his hand, Angelus seemed confused. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Got a conversation to have, about decorum,
remember?" Spike growled. "And since it'll be loud, I'm taking it outside. We'll be back before dawn, never fear." Giving Xander a push, he propelled him out of the room. "Go find that Jesse creature, where ever he's cowering, and meet me at the back door," he instructed him. "I have some energy to burn off, and you two just scored."

35 Lessons

Prompt: 96 - Keckle. I haven't used the actual word, because it doesn't fit into any of my characters' vocabularies in a way that wouldn't be forced, but it is there and I know that's alright, because I've done it before (I used the prompt word 15 times, without actually using it, in my first ever Taming story). It also caused Dru to say something she otherwise might not have said, but which really worked out well for me.

Tuesday night

Leading the way out through the small back garden into the woods in the grounds of the big, empty mansion
beyond, Spike slapped the coil of thin rope he carried against his knee and listened to the two pairs of footsteps behind him. There was no other sound from either of them. They had both picked up on his displeasure and sensibly were not pushing their luck. Reaching a small clearing with a single large tree in the centre, he stopped and turned around.

Xander and Jesse immediately halted too, a few feet from him, and waited to see what he wanted. Spike spent some time surveying them, allowing the tension to build. His initial anger had been diffused by his more urgent concern in the face of Dru's collapse and now he felt only cold determination that a lesson needed to be taught and taught thoroughly. If Angelus was telling the truth, and knowing Angelus he was, because making up such a story would be too easily discovered, Xander was in danger of going seriously off the rails. It was Spike's job to nip that danger in the bud.

Gesturing Xander over to him, he took him by the shoulders, positioning him under one of the main branches. Holding both Xander's hands in one of his own, he dropped one of the lengths of rope and looped the other around Xander's wrists. Xander was looking really worried now, but he allowed Spike to do what he was
doing without protest, and without saying anything, which just went to show that he had a good idea of Spike's mood. Tossing the free end of the rope over the branch, Spike hauled it taut so Xander's arms were stretched above his head, and tied it off around another, lower branch. Once Xander was secure, he turned to Jesse, just in time to see a small smirk of satisfaction on the minion's face at Xander's predicament. The creature obviously thought he was there to witness Spike's punishment of Xander for some offence.

That misapprehension lasted as long as it took Spike to string him up exactly the same way. Jesse opened his mouth once or twice, as if he would voice some protest, but in the end, he also, wisely, kept schtum. "Stand there!" Spike said harshly, if unnecessarily. "Don't move!"

Stepping back, he surveyed his handiwork. They were both secure and, while they were able to stand on the flats of their feet, there was little give, so they couldn't get free without assistance. They were also both watching him with identical expressions of trepidation. Fixing his gaze on Xander, Spike asked his first question, "Who am I?"
Xander's eyes widened with surprise. "Er, you're Spike?" he suggested. Seeing that Spike wanted more, he tried again. "You're my sire?"

Spike nodded and turned to Jesse. "Who am I?" he asked.

Jesse flicked a quick glance at Xander, before turning back to Spike, bowing his head respectfully. "You're Master Spike."

Again Spike nodded his approval. Stepping up close to Xander, he reached out and gripped his childe's chin. "Who's he?" he asked, turning Xander's head towards his co-defendant.

"Umm... He's Jesse."

"Yeah, and what else is he?"

Xander looked a little alarmed, as it obviously occurred to him that he didn't know what answer Spike wanted. Spike gave Xander's chin a small shake to encourage him and Xander drew a sharp breath before uttering an unconsidered, but for Spike's purposes, perfect answer, "He's my best friend."
Keeping his voice calm and encouraging, Spike asked, "Your what?"

"My, my best friend," Xander said again. Looking up into Spike's eyes, he expanded on his explanation. "I've, I've known him since forever."

"Have you now? And what have I said about the human Xander and you?"

Finally Xander seemed to realise where this was going, because there was marginally less hesitation in his reply. "That I'm not him?"

Spike smiled and nodded approvingly. "Yes. You're not him. You have his memories. You feel him, you've taken all he was and wrapped yourself around it. But you're not him." Releasing Xander's chin, he stepped back. "That gives you an advantage when hunting," he explained. "You can think like the prey, but you aren't the prey. You're a vampire, a demon." He turned to the Jesse. "What are you?"

There was no hesitation in Jesse's reply. "I'm a vampire."
"And what's your name?"

"Jesse."

"Why?"

That gave Jesse pause, but only for a moment. "Because that's the name of the human whose memories I took when I was born."

Again Spike nodded and Jesse assayed a small smile of satisfaction. "And who's he?" Spike asked, indicating Xander.

"He's Xander, your childe."

Tilting his head thoughtfully, Spike stepped up close, but spoke clearly enough that Xander would be able to hear too. "And what do you feel for him?" Jesse face screwed up in confusion so Spike expanded on the question. "Do you care for him? Love him?"

It didn't seem to help. "I... I don't understand," Jesse stuttered.

"Would you sacrifice your existence for him?"
Here, Jesse seemed to feel he was on surer ground. "If he asked me to. He made me. I know what he wants and I serve his purpose."

Now they were getting to the meat of it. "But he doesn't understand that, does he?" Spike asked gently. Jesse shook his head. "Did he call you his childe?" Spike asked.

Jesse pulled himself up straighter. "Yes."

"And what did you feel when he did that?"

"Proud." Was that a hint of defiance? Spike wondered.

Flicking a glance at Xander, Spike saw relief warring with concern in his face. He turned back to Jesse. "You have ambition?"

"Of course! I'm strong and the strong shall inherit the earth."

"Amen," Spike murmured with a smirk. "You want to be someone important?" he continued. "You want to prove yourself?"
"Yes! Just ask. Anything you want, I'll do it!"

Mentally Spike sighed, Minions, so bloody predictable. "Tell me what you feel," he suggested, keeping his voice calm and friendly. "Cast your mind out and describe what you are."

"I'm... I'm a vampire." Jesse seemed at a loss for words, but he did his best. "I feel good! I feel strong! I'm connected, to everything!" He began to warm to his theme under Spike's encouraging gaze. "I... I can hear the worms in the earth and smell the blood in the humans down in the town. I can feel hell stirring!"

"And what about the human Jesse? What do you feel about him?"

"He's like a shadow of me. Occupying my mind, giving me an advantage, an edge." Jesse turned to Xander. "It's like one of Willow's computers, man. Full of information on how to act, how to talk, how to play the part, to hunt. You feel that too, don't you?" Turning back to Spike, an expression of cunning flickered across his face and he asked, "Is there something wrong with Xander? Can't he feel it?" He looked back at Xander. "You're my sire. You made me. How can you have made me so perfect, if you
are not whole?"

Sharing a smile with Jesse, Spike turned away and took the two paces necessary to bring him to Xander. Allowing the smile to fade, he instructed, "Come childe, answer the question."

Xander snarled. "I am whole. I remember it all. There's nothing wrong with me!"

"But you think like a human," Jesse taunted. "You cling to the memory of friendship. I remember how it was. How it really was. There's no such thing as love. It's a myth that humans invented, so they wouldn't be alone. We don't need it. I don't need it!"

The reality of their situation seemed to crash in on Xander all at once. He tugged at his bound hands, trying to break free. "No, Jesse, man, that's not true. Remember how we promised to always look out for each other? We used your penknife to cut our hands and shook on it, to mix our blood." There was a note of hysteria entering his voice as he desperately tried to remind Jesse of the connection he still felt. "We said we were blood brothers, because we couldn't be real brothers. Don't you remember, in the tree house, you
said you wished I was your real brother, because Harry and Chris were stupid and didn't know how to play? Don't you remember the other night in bed?" With each assertion of memory his voice had been rising and the final plea sounded like it was being torn forcibly from him. "You love me!"

Jesse looked at him, impassively, then he turned to Spike and smiled.

"No!" Xander yelled.

Spike drew his knife from its sheath on the back of his belt. Walking over to the ropes, where they were tied off, he sawed through the one closest to the trunk of the tree. Xander immediately collapsed to his knees on the ground and shook the bindings off his wrists. Grabbing a broken length of branch, about a foot long, from the ground he sprang back up and launched himself at Jesse, makeshift stake raised.

Spike was ready for him to make that move and jumped between them, grabbed Xander's wrist and prevented the killing blow. "No!" he growled. "You don't kill him. He'll live and he'll be a constant reminder to you that the boy Xander is dead!"
Xander fought against Spike's hold on him. "I... I want," he gasped.

Spike forced Xander's arm down, gripping his wrist harder, until the stake dropped. Reaching with his free hand to the waistband of his jeans, he pulled free the riding crop he'd stowed there before leaving the house and placed that in Xander's hand instead, giving the boy a sharp shove to the side at the same time, so he staggered slightly. While Xander was recovering his footing, Spike took hold of Jesse's shirt and tore it up the back, then he stepped away, allowing Xander free access.

It was, he thought, a pleasure to watch such passion, such release of pain and hurt. By the time Xander had finished, the crop was bloody and Xander's hand and sleeve were likewise stained. Jesse's back, arms, and neck were cut to ribbons. In a few places the bone of his ribs and spine showed through the mass of torn muscle. His jeans had slipped down on his narrow hips, but even so, they were sliced through in places around the waistband. But the rope had held, leaving him hanging limply from the branch, the cord cutting deeper for his weight, and blood ran down from the wounds they left.
When Xander's arm eventually dropped and didn't rise again, Spike went to him and removed the crop from his hand, letting it fall. "So I put away childish things," he murmured, clasping his arms around Xander, offering the comfort he knew his childe needed. Xander buried his face in Spike's shoulder hiding his tears as he sobbed.

They stood like that for at least five minutes, before Xander sniffed and pulled back to wipe his hand across his eyes, smearing tears and blood across his cheek. Spike walked over to the tree truck and sawed through the remaining rope, allowing Jesse's body to collapse in an unremarked heap. Returning to Xander, he asked softly, "Who are you?"

Xander gave his face a last angry scrub but his expression was firm when he looked up. "I'm Xander the vampire, your childe."

Cupping Xander's face in both his hands, Spike smiled. "That you are, my fledgling dragon. That you are." He pulled Xander towards him and brought their mouths together, holding Xander firmly still, forcing Xander's lips apart with his kiss, showing him by the most expeditious means that he was proud of his childe and that, no matter what Jesse had said and believed, love was as
true for vampires as it ever was for the human Xander remembered.

When they returned to the house, Spike again sent Xander off to get cleaned up, while he entered the living room alone. Dru wasn't there, but Angelus was sitting in his usual spot, reading 'La Nausea', the poser - just making the point he could read French. He looked up. "Lesson taught?" he asked.

Spike shrugged. "Yeah, if he manages to crawl in before sunrise, he'll be okay."

"And you really think that'll do the job?"

The hint of doubt narked Spike. "Listen, mate! You're still a bloody guest in my home. So keep your busy nose out of my business!" He glared at his grandsire as he collapsed into the opposite end of the sofa. "And that includes encouraging Dru to go all dewy eyed over you too!"

From the door way, Dru's voice interrupted his little tirade. "You two boys... fightin' over me and all." She wandered into the room and stopped where she could watch them both. For once Spike didn't feel the need to
jump up and help her to sit. She was healthy enough to walk, she could seat herself too. Not that she looked like she was going to do that. She had a devilish expression on her face, gleeful and teasing at once. "Makes a girl feel..." She continued, running a hand down her front and stopping on the soft curve of her belly. If her skirt had not been in the way, she might have been touching her sex. Lazily, she allowed her gaze to drift towards Angel and Spike felt his anger stir again.

Angelus apparently sensed something too, because he tried to interrupt her. "Dru, please?"

She scowled at him. "Shhh! Grrrruff! Bad dog," she snapped. Drifting over to Spike, she placed her hand on his cheek, forcing him to look up at her. "You try to keep me wrapped up, to protect me, but all you do is bind me tight. I won't wear away from contact with the world, not once I'm well, my sweet. Once I'm myself again."

Silently, Xander slipped into the room and came over to sit on the arm of the sofa by Spike's side, his arm on the back rest behind Spike's head. Spike placed a hand on the boy's thigh, acknowledging his arrival, but kept his attention fixed on his sire. "Yes, pet. Once you're well, you can do anything. We'll have a coronation down Main
Street, and invite everyone, and drink for seven days and seven nights. But until then, will you at least sit down and stop wearing yourself out over this sorry excuse for a vampire? He's got a soul and he's not going to hang around, once he's done what he's promised."

Immediately Xander stood up and offered Dru his hand, guiding her over to her chair.

Spike watched until Dru was sitting down, then turned back to his grandsire. Angelus was looking at him, an expression of puzzled concern on his face. "I don't know what it is that's upsetting you," he said. "I told you, I'm not sleeping with Dru, not since the first day I was here."

"What has that got to do with anything?" Spike snarled. "That's not the point and you know it! What's wrong with you?"

Xander stood up and turned to face the sofa. "He's thinking like a human," he said. "He thinks sex is intimacy. He thinks as long as he doesn't 'sleep with her'," he held has hands up, palms facing forwards at shoulder height and crooked his index and middle fingers as he said it, "he's not doing anything you could object to."
Spike was incredulous. "Is that true?" he asked, looking back to Angelus. "Is Xander right? The reason you're being so... so inconsistent, saying you respect me but acting like a twat, is because you really have lost your mind?" He'd suspected something like this, but somehow, hearing it said in words made it both clearer and stupider, at the same time. Beside him Xander chuckled as he sat back down as he'd been before.

Dru's brittle laugh dragged Spike's attention back to her. "Chilling, isn't it?" she said. "He's so full of good intentions." She picked up her tarot cards from the arm of her chair and glanced around the room. Xander once again jumped up and dragged the coffee table over to her. She smiled up at him. "But it's delicious too," she added. "Rrrr. He's like a fox in a trap, chewing off his own foot. But that won't make him free."

Spike opened his mouth, but finding that he had nothing to say, closed it again. Shame Angelus didn't have the same control. "I was given a mission," he explained, in a voice that suggested he had little hope of convincing anyone present of his argument. "A cause." He hesitated for a moment, seeming to pick his words with care. "I was... I'd lost hope. Whistler... he gave me that back."
Placing his book carefully, face down beside him, he leant forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. "I saw the slayer, I saw what she did and how young and scared she was... and I wanted to protect her and help her and do right."

Squinting thoughtfully at Angelus, Spike reconsidered the last few weeks. "Don't you think you burnt that boat, when the watcher rescued your little pet?" he asked.

Angelus looked up sharply, an arrested expression on his face. Spike returned it with his best innocent look, until he couldn't hold the grin in any longer and turned away. He caught Dru's eye and she winked at him.

Final note: Spike's line at the end of the lesson, comes from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 11 - When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
36 Playing the fool

Prompt: 97 - delirious

Tuesday 6 August

Angel wandered listlessly around the living room, picked up his book, put it down, sat on the sofa, but stood up again when he realised he couldn't settle. Without conscious thought he found himself in the kitchen with the fridge door open, gazing blankly at the pile of blood bags that were its only contents. He wasn't hungry and after a moment he closed it and returned to the sofa, stretching out full length in the place he used to sleep.

He was tired of thinking, tired of trying to compose arguments strong enough to persuade the watcher of his good intentions. Tired of trying to find a solution to the mess he'd landed himself in. Liam had screwed him. Even if he could think of an explanation for why he had been found in the street with three vampires, three other vampires, and an unconscious woman, the watcher would surely grant more credence to a young man who
had managed to escape from murderous captors. A young man who swore that Angel was evil. There was no precedent for him to recognise the uniqueness of a vampire with a soul.

Angel's thoughts kept going round in circles, getting him nowhere. One week. One more week to the night of the new moon. Then Angel would be free of his obligations, free to leave, free to return to his mission, his cause, his search for redemption. One week left to endure and then he could concentrate on forgetting this interlude had ever happened, banish his children from his life and his memory, as he had done so successfully for the last hundred years. With a sigh he swung his legs back to the floor and sat forward. Resting his elbows on his knees he scrubbed his hands up his face and decided that in spite of his reluctance, he really needed to think.

The past week, since the night Xander and Spike between them had so casually shattered his perceptions of himself and cast doubts on his future, had been uneventful, leaving Angel with far too much time to think. Spike's laughter had stopped abruptly when they'd heard the sound of the back door opening. He'd jumped to his feet and disappeared into the kitchen to investigate, but returned within moments, resuming his seat with a
shrug. Dru had murmured some question and Spike had made some reply, but Angel hadn't been listening, too caught up in the shock of seeing all his plans in ruins under his feet. Why hadn't he seen it before? Why hadn't he realised the cost his temporary reunion with his family would inflict? He'd been doing good. He'd prevented the Master from rising, he'd been keeping the vampire population down, he'd been gathering information to help the slayer. He'd been waiting for her to arrive. It hadn't occurred to him that her watcher would come to Sunnydale before her. He'd imagined that Spike and Dru and even Xander and Jesse would be long gone before he had to declare himself.

Even after the fateful night when Liam betrayed him, he still hadn't made the connection. Why not? Was he so caught up in the immediate concerns over Dru's health and the certainty that Whistler had been informed by prophecy that he'd not allowed himself to see the obvious truth until Spike threw it in his face?

And Xander... Xander's exposure of the false premise behind Angel's good intentions, Spike's scornful reaction... They had rocked Angel's beliefs in a way he hadn't though possible. He'd sat transfixed as his whole existence reshaped itself before his bewildered gaze.
Then he'd got up and walked out of the room, taking possession of Xander's bed, from where he'd not moved until the following night when Spike came in to bully him into feeding, so he could in turn feed Dru.

Angel had done that, doing his best to stamp on his response to the sensual pleasure Dru's fangs in his throat elicited. And he'd continued to do that - hiding in Xander's room, which had now become his, except when he was needed to keep Dru fed and as healthy as she could be, until the ritual was complete.

Assuming the ritual was successful. He shied away from that thought. The idea that his destiny could be put in such jeopardy and the cause of the damage then fail, was just too much to contemplate. Something good had to come out of this mess. He refused to consider the idea that putting a healthy Dru back on the streets was anything other than a good outcome. She was his childe and he loved her.

The sound of the door opening brought his head up out of his hands, even as his mind reeled again at the shocking realisation of his feelings for his childe. And there she was, his childe, who he'd possessed in his soulless state, but who he'd never loved. Not then.
Dimly, through the roaring in his ears, he wondered if this was the ultimate curse of his soul - that he should realise he loved a woman who was not only evil, but also mad?

Standing in the doorway, her head tilted to one side, she regarded him seriously. "I slept so long," she said. "I thought I'd never wake."

Slowly she tottered into the room and Angel jumped up to help her to her chair. Smiling, she relaxed back into her seat with a sigh, her head resting against the chair back as she gazed up at him. "Have they gone?" she asked. "Have they gone to fetch it?"

Angel crouched down in front of her, fearful for reasons he didn't want to examine. "Yes, Spike's taken Xander and the servant. They've gone to fetch the cross."

She nodded, looking so frail that for a moment Angel wondered if she could make it through the next seven days. "Let me get something to eat," he offered. "Once you've fed, you'll feel better. Okay?"

"Of course. Of course, yes, we could ask the wizard," she murmured, her head turning from side to side. She rarely
talked like normal people, but there was a note of delirium in her voice that concerned him. "He knows where the dark god is. He knows."

Angel eased himself up and hurried into the kitchen. Glancing at the stove, he decided there wasn't time to wait for water to heat up to warm the blood. He'd just have to drink it cold. It wasn't a hardship, not like choking down cold pig or cow. Grabbing four bags and a pair of scissors, he filled a large tankard and downed the contents in no more than a couple of long gulps, repeating the process twice more. Then he poured the last bag into the tankard and carried it back with him, placing it on the coffee table.

Returning to Dru, he lifted her, surprised that she didn't weigh less, so fragile she looked. Sitting down in her place he settled her comfortably, sideways across his knees. She raised her right hand to his left shoulder as she twisted around and he guided her mouth towards the other side of his neck. Then he leant back and relaxed, allowing her to sprawl across his chest.

As always, the sheer sexual pleasure, the sensation of family, threatened to engulf him and as always he fought to subdue it, but the recent recognition of tenderness
made it more difficult this time. Without him noticing when he'd started, he found he was stroking her side, up and down her ribs, a soothing motion, but whether to comfort her or himself, he couldn't tell.

They remained like that for a few long minutes, the pull from her fangs sending tendrils of want through his body, his hand gently stroking. When her hand slipped off his shoulder, he hardly registered the fact. It was not until she took his own hand in hers, as the flow of blood began to slow, and guided it lower, to her hip, that his conscious mind began to reengage. When she tried to push it in towards her lap, he finally realised his own danger and pulled away.

Letting out a little mewl of protest, she raised her head and looked at him from beneath half closed lids, her expression so knowing that Angel felt again the rush of need he so often felt when she flirted with him. "No," he groaned. "Dru, please. I can't."

Lifting her as he stood, he set her back in her chair and stepped away, out of physical range, but he knew he couldn't leave. She might have fed, but she was not well and he couldn't walk away from her if she needed him.
"You could," she said. "If you wanted to enough. You could stay with us. We could be a family." She sounded so frail and pitiful that he closed his eyes to find the strength to resist her. He counted to ten before he opened them again and now she was sitting up straight in her chair, her momentary weakness apparently past, for now. "You've not always been alone, even after you deserted us, left us to fend for ourselves, you had companions by your side. How would this be different?"

"I... Not really," Angel protested. "I didn't really." The only time he'd ever settled down for any length of time had been in the sixties in Detroit. The only person to ever share his home had been a weaselly little man who had attached himself to his household there, somehow, when Angel was living the life of a shady recluse. Parson, that was his name. He'd taken on the duties of a manservant and had punctuated his tasks in caring for Angel's clothes with talk of girls and their beavers. Angel had been both repelled and fascinated by his obsession. He'd had books with pictures of half dressed women in them and magazines showing more. Women with their fingers spreading their lower lips for the camera. He'd always sounded like his mouth contained too much saliva when he spoke of them and Angel had come close to killing him, more than once. Thinking back, it would probably
have been a good thing to have done.

His confusion suitably tamed by that memory, Angel frowned at Dru. "I never had anyone I cared for," he admitted. "I made sure of that." Bending down he picked up the tankard and drank some of its contents, to give him something to hide behind. As his rational mind once again took control of his thought processes, he narrowed his eyes and stared at her, suddenly realising that she looked far stronger and far less delirious than her recent feed alone could account for, compared to her state moments before. 'The minx!' he thought.

Dru smiled the serene smile of the Madonna, with more than a hint of mischief. Then she shrugged, acknowledging his victory in this round of what, he suddenly realised, was their game.

37 Chance Meetings

Prompt: 98 - Cubic

Tuesday 6 August

It was still early, the sun having only just set as they left the house, but the streets were quiet, even for a Tuesday evening. Of course, the better quality suburbs were
always quiet. For all their denial of the truth about their town, those residents who had the means did seem to find lots of excuses for spending time elsewhere. An occasional car passed them as they made their way towards the cemetery and the Du Lac mausoleum, but there wasn't even a dog walker out on foot. Not that Spike was bothered by that. They had plenty of time, in spite of all they had to do and he was in no hurry to bring his temporary escape from the tangled emotions rife in the atmosphere at home to an end.

As he ambled along, Spike kept a surreptitious eye on Xander, noting the way he kept always one pace ahead of Jesse. He'd hardly spoken a word to the creature all week, but it wasn't because he was still angry. That emotion had burnt itself out quite thoroughly the night he'd punished Jesse for his own blindness. No, it appeared that Xander had finally accepted that the memories he'd been harbouring were indeed his alone. It was a lesson all children learnt, one way or another - that a minion was not capable of experiencing or understanding emotions, to the extent that they might as well be a separate species. The difference was that most children didn't have a personal stake in the results of the lesson.
For two days after Jesse had crawled back into the house and curled up under the kitchen table Spike had watched, ignoring Jesse but keeping a close eye on Xander's reactions. He'd been prepared for any response, from denial to dispatch. In the event, however, Xander neither attempted to feed the fool nor kill him. He just ignored him. And Jesse stayed where he was, hiding under his blanket, under the table.

The fact that Jesse couldn't heal without feeding hadn't bothered Spike, as long as he kept quiet, but eventually the need for someone to keep the house clean had led him to drag the creature out for something to eat. By the time they got home, Jesse was healed and able to resume his duties.

Since then, Jesse had been much more circumspect around Xander. Spike grinned to himself as he mused on the change in Jesse's demeanour. Maybe it wasn't so much Xander keeping a pace in front, maybe it was Jesse hanging a pace back. He'd see if it lasted with them both out together. It was going to be a busy night; once they had the cross they'd have to take it back to Dru, but then they'd need to go out again to restock the larder.

Up until now Spike had been content to pander to
Angelus' squeamishness and he and the boys had eaten out, but with only a week to go, and with the Du Lac cross in the house, he didn't feel like taking risks. The fridge was stocked with an extra load of blood bags from Nigel Mears. Mears himself was already stashed in the pantry, but it was amazing how many humans you could fit into twenty-five cubic feet and still leave enough space to keep them breathing and fresh. Angel would just have to avoid the kitchen. He seemed to have perfected the art of denial in his dealings with his family, he'd just have to extend it a little further. Smiling to himself, Spike ran his mind over the best locations for a quick snatch and grab that wouldn't attract Luke's attention. They'd been careful to avoid any of the Court's regular hunting grounds and until after the ritual Spike intended to keep it that way. At least Ethan's spell had been a success. On the one occasion Spike had visited Willy's, the little grease ball had admitted that Luke was on the warpath, hunting high and low for them. Maybe another trip down to the docks? Or maybe that computer place out by the highway? They were still running two shifts and the early shift came on at five. Hang around in the parking lot and they'd have plenty of time to pick up three or four stragglers, stuff them in the boot of a spare car and get them home before dawn. Yeah, that sounded good, as long as they weren't too big.
Xander's hand on his shoulder interrupted his thoughts and brought him back to the present.

Ahead of them a small figure was approaching, a girl with a bag of groceries clasped loosely under one arm. Xander's head went up and he took a deep scent of the air before casting a wide grin in Spike's direction. "This'll be fun," he observed.

Slowly the gap between them and their prey closed. She seemed as oblivious of the dangers of her situation as any of the other sheep in town, but from Xander's expression Spike guessed this was not one of the nameless masses.

As they passed under the streetlight, she glanced up and, at last, she saw them. She stopped in her tracks, but it was not with alarm. "Xander!" she called. Hefting the shopping bag and hugging it to her chest she stumbled into a trot. "Jesse!" As she got nearer she was forced to slow down, the bag threatening to spill its contents, but she kept talking. "Thank goodness!" she gasped. "Where've you been?" A few short yards away she came to a halt, her expression suddenly horrified. Spike wondered if she'd somehow sensed what they were, but
she didn't appear to be scared of them. Something else then. "Oh my god!" she gasped. Then, plastering a smile on her face and visibly struggling to calm down, she continued, "I'm so glad to see you. The police! They came to my house yesterday." Glancing from one to the other, she ignored Spike. "Have you been out of town?" she asked, but carried on, not waiting for an answer, "Xander, have you been home? Because... because... Oh Xander, I have some awful news. I was so worried."

Spike looked her up and down. Sort of sweet, he thought. Small, young, and dressed even younger with no style or care for her appearance, but there was a hint of steel under the little girl exterior. He interrupted her disjointed remarks, "And you'd be Willow, right?"

She barely spared him a glance "Yes," she agreed. "I'm their friend." Concentrating all her attention on Xander she kept talking, angry now and beginning to scold. "You should have called. Told me, before you went running off on a road trip. Xander..." Xander opened his mouth, but she ploughed on, over the top of whatever he was going to say, "I've been so scared. I didn't believe them, when they... I don't... I mean.." She juggled the bag, apparently trying to get it into a hold that would allow her to reach out to him. Jesse took a step forward to stand next to
Xander's shoulder and she grasped the distraction gratefully. "Jesse! Your parents have been so worried. I called them today and they said you'd run off, or something. That's where I'm going now." Giving up on getting an easier grip of the bag, she just stood there, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. "But if they know you're back." She paused to take a breath. "Except, you can't have gone there yet. Because there is no way they'd let you out of their sight. They've been so scared." Her shoulders slumped and suddenly she sounded defeated. "Where have you been?" she pleaded. "The police said Xander's parents had been dead for maybe two weeks. And they wanted to talk to both of you." She stopped, one hand flying to her mouth. "Oh God!" She turned to Xander. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I meant... I mean..." She took a deep breath. as if gathering her courage. "But they are, Xander. They're dead. Both of them. Murdered. I'm so, so sorry."

Xander cocked his head thoughtfully. "Don't be," he said. "I know. I was there."

Willow's eyes opened as wide as saucers and she took surprised step backwards, away from them. "What are you saying? That's what the police... No! I don't believe you." But she kept backing up.
Xander's smile was both mischievous and slightly malicious as he advanced towards her with leisurely grace, a big cat, still more interested in playing with his food than impatient for the kill. "Believe it, Wills," he said. "They cried."

The sound of pounding footsteps caused Spike to look around and a voice called out, "You there!" as a man ran towards them. The bloody watcher, cross held out ahead of him, pelted across the street and jumped between the girl and Xander. "Get behind me," he ordered.

Xander growled. "Aw, swell. It's the White Hat," he said, his voice full of disgust. Flinching back from the cross shoved towards them, he and Jesse both slipped into gameface.

Meanwhile Willow was staring at the watcher uncomprehending. "What?" she asked, apparently still too shocked to take in what was happening. Not getting an answer from the watcher, who was concentrating of the trio in front of him, she turned back to Xander. "Oh my god!" she gasped. "What? What's happened? What's wrong with your faces?"
The watcher reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her away from them. "Get behind me and stay there!" he ordered, his voice harsh with fear and determination. Willow did as she was told. "Now back up, slowly."

"What? But..."

"Just do it! I promise, I'll explain when we get away from these, um..." he seemed to flounder for a moment, "bad men," he finished.

Spike almost laughed out loud. Bad men? How mealy-mouthed. But the watcher, mealy-mouthed or not, was digging in his pocket and then he had two crosses out and it was like a repeat of the last time they'd met.

Watching Xander and Jesse pull back another step, Spike considered making an issue of it. But in spite of his earlier dawdling, he still needed to get the Du Lac cross and, he figured, if the watcher was busy dealing with a hysterical teenager there was no danger they'd stumble over him in Restfield. Allowing his own face to slip into its true form, he snarled at the watcher, turned on his heel and strode away. The boys hesitated for only a moment, before he heard them turn too and hurry to catch up with him. At
the corner of the street he looked back. The watcher and the girl were gone.

Note - just to show I did the sums, 25 cubic feet is basically 2 by 2 by 6 - if Spike wraps them up tightly, with lots of gaffer tape, I figured he could get four or five happy meals on legs into a pantry that size. *g*

38 Too much truth

Prompt: 99 - Clamp

Giles didn't slow down until they were back near the town centre and he was reasonably certain that the trio of vampires had not followed them, but eventually he had to stop. Bending over and resting his hands on his knees, he concentrated for a few moments on simply breathing. Really! He'd become soft over the last few years, working in research and support. If he was going to train the slayer, he'd need to get himself fitter than he was now. The old guard may not think that hands-on involvement in the training was necessary, but the
casualty rate for the active watchers had always been high. Dolce et decorum est, or not, unlike poor Merrick Jamison-Smythe, Giles intended to live long enough to retire! Standing up and drawing a last few, deep, panting breaths he shook his head and ruefully acknowledged that rushing into the middle of a vampire attack, before his slayer had even arrived, was hardly setting a good precedent towards achieving that ambition. However, what else could he have done? Living on a hellmouth was obviously going to result in encounters with vampires, and he was sworn to protect, as much as the slayer was chosen to do the same.

Suddenly, he felt the weight of his secret lie heavy on his shoulders and loneliness threatened, but he clamped down ruthlessly on the moment of weakness. He couldn't afford it! At home, surrounded by other watchers in the familiar surroundings of the Council headquarters, it was easy to discuss warding techniques and theorise about decapitation and staking over a glass of port in the members' dining room. But here, alone on the hellmouth, the adrenaline starting to fade from his system, he realised that even a lifetime of study was no preparation for the real thing. Nothing was, not even the worst of his misspent youth. If all active postings were as eventful as this it was no wonder so many died on their
first tour of duty. He'd write to Travers, he determined; young watchers needed exposure to the things they might have to face in the field.

With that decided he cast a careful eye around the immediate area to check where they were and that nothing threatened. In the meantime, he had a child to get safely to her home, if she'd allow him to escort her. They were approximately equidistant from his flat and the school. Thankfully, nowhere in Sunnydale was very far from anywhere else.

Turning around to face her, he studied her properly for the first time. She looked miserable, her hair wild and disordered, hugging her arms around her meagre chest, and so very young. Hopefully she'd accept the recommended cover story, he'd get her home and she'd be more careful in future for this fright. He opened his mouth, but at that moment she looked up and caught his eye. "Why did I run?" she asked. There was a maturity to the question that took Giles by surprise and he hesitated, loosing the opportunity to lie as she continued more firmly, "What was wrong with their faces? Why were they acting so strange?"

Thinking fast, Giles stumbled over his words as his
intended answer was replaced by a need to discover more of her involvement. He'd assumed she was a random target, an unfortunate who was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. "You, you thought you knew them?" he asked.

All at once she appeared angry. "Of course I know them! That was Xander! And Jesse!" She looked back up the street, the way they'd run. "I lost my bag," she observed. Then, returning to the question at hand, "I've known them all my life. I don't know who the other one was. But, but something's wrong." In spite of the fact that her voice had been firm when she started speaking, it became progressively more bewildered. "They... they weren't acting like... like themselves." She turned on Giles, angry again. "And you said you'd explain. So explain! Right now! Because none of this is making..." She stopped abruptly and Giles got the distinct impression that she'd just shocked herself, talking to an adult like that. Instead she just gazed at him beseechingly.

This was not what he wanted. Taking care to avoid involving civilians was one of the first lessons all watchers were taught. It was elementary. So why was he having such trouble concocting a plausible story that
would send her on her way? Perhaps it was the fact that
she'd known the vampires' human hosts, before they
were turned. "When did you last see them?" he asked
instead.
She paused and her mouth drooped. "Um... three weeks
ago? Er, maybe four?" She looked guilty and Giles'
curiosity was piqued. Although certainly human, and
apparently ignorant of what had happened to her
friends, was she still somehow involved? Her next words
dispelled that suspicion. "I was busy," she explained, her
voice both defensive and defiant, and she looked him
straight in the eye for a moment. "I got a new computer
and I was learning how to work it and I didn't..." As her
voice petered out again, she dropped her gaze to her
feet. "When I called Xander, no one answered, but I just
thought he was out," she mumbled. "But then,
yesterday, the police came around and told me... they
told me..." Miserably, she looked back up at him. "They
told me Xander's parents had been found dead.
Murdered. And I called Jesse and his mom said he'd run
away and they didn't know where he was. And I was
going round there, just now, and I couldn't believe it
when I saw them both and I thought... I thought..." She
took a deep, gulping breath. "But their faces... "


Again she stopped and Giles sighed. He couldn't leave her in ignorance. Looking around he spotted a bench about a hundred yards away, in front of the memorial gardens. "Let's go and sit down?" he suggested. "We'll be safe enough on a busy road like this." His hand hesitated above her shoulder, but he didn't know her well enough to offer sympathy. Not to mention the fact that he was more than old enough to be her father.

Together they walked to the bench and sat. Giles twisted slightly to face her as she huddled in her corner, her hands gripped between her knees. For one more moment Giles hesitated, but she looked up at him from beneath her hair, her eyes wide with confusion and he couldn't do it. He couldn't lie. If she refused to believe him, if she ran screaming, or laughing, from his company, he'd simply have to shrug and carry on. "They were vampires," he said.

Her eyes got even wider and for a moment he thought she'd stopped breathing. "Vampires?" she whispered.

At least she hadn't run, but she didn't look convinced either. "Er, yes, vampires." Still uncertain, for some reason her reaction engendered in him an overwhelming need to convince. "This whole area is a centre of mystical
energy," he explained. "The Spanish who first settled here called it 'Boca del Infierno'. Roughly translated: Hellmouth. It's a sort of, um, a portal between this reality and the next. And things gravitate towards it that, that you might not find elsewhere."

"Things like vampires?"

"Yes."

She looked away and gazed off into space, her face blank and Giles sat watching her, waiting for her judgement. When she did eventually speak, it was nothing that he expected. "That's why I ran," she said, her voice wondering. "I knew there was something wrong. I've always known." Turning back to him she asked, "Can we save them?"

The naïveté of the question shocked him and brought him to his senses. What was he doing? This was a child he was talking to. Turning away from her, he took off his glasses, rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head, scrubbing his palms up his cheeks and rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes. What had he done? This was his fight. His and his slayer's. The rules against civilians existed for very good reasons and he had just
been brought up hard against one of them. He'd never have told an adult, neither man nor woman, about the hellmouth. Telling a child was criminal. Sighing, he raised his head and looked across at her, weary beyond measure. "No," he said. "They can't be saved. Your friends are dead. And if you stay near me, you will be too." Hauling himself to his feet, he looked down at her. "Let me get you home," he offered. "Your parents will be worried about you."

She opened her mouth to say something in reply, but stopped and nodded. "Okay," she agreed.

They'd been walking for about five minutes, avoiding by common consent the street where they'd met the vampires although Giles was certain they would no longer be in the area, when she broke the silence. "Are the stories true?" she asked.

"Which stories?"

"The stories about vampires. The ones in books and movies."

"Some of them." Giles paused and thought about the books he'd read as a young man and films he'd seen.
"Not all of them."

"But they do kill people? And drink their blood?"

"Yes, those parts are true."

"I need to know more."

"No you don't." He felt certain of that now. "All you need to do is be careful after dark. Don't go out alone!"

She stopped and turned to face him. "No!" she said. "I could have been killed! By my best friends! I am not going to go back to pretending that there's nothing wrong here! I can't!" Recognising his determination, she got a stubborn expression of her own. "If you won't tell me, I'll go looking for answers," she threatened and there was something about her that convinced Giles she was deadly serious. Deadly being the operative word.

Taking off his specs, he rubbed at the bridge of his nose while he tried to find an answer that would satisfy her and not place her in greater danger than he already had. He came up blank. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out his handkerchief and gave the glasses a polish before putting them back on. Her expression hadn't shifted, she
still looked totally determined. Sighing, he capitulated. "Very well. I'd give you my address, but..."

Smiling now, although it was not a happy smile, she interrupted, "But my parents would freak if they knew I went to a man's house alone."

In spite of the seriousness of their discussion, Giles felt the corners of his own mouth tug up in a reluctant half smile of his own. "Oh dear," he said. "I really haven't thought this though properly. Soon I'll have another young woman around..." He ignored her questioning eyebrow, staying with the point under discussion. There was time enough to explain about the slayer, later. "You're right. I think the library might be a more suitable spot. Do you know Sunnydale High School?"

"Yes, of course. I'm going to be a student there, in the fall."

Giles blinked. "Oh my goodness. Are you? How very, um, well. Er, time for introductions, I suppose. I'm Mr. Giles. The school librarian."

"Willow Rosenberg," she replied, holding out her hand.
Gravely, they shook. "You can come over tomorrow, if you like?" he suggested. "I have keys and I'll leave the door open." A thought struck him. "Oh dear. Do you think I should find someone to act as chaperone? Although, I'm not exactly sure who..."

Willow grinned. "Don't worry, my parents won't mind the library."

"Oh. Alright then. Well, I'm busy putting away the new books, so we'll have plenty to do as we talk." Bending a stern gaze upon her, for all the good he suspected it would do, he added, "Just be certain to only come over during daylight hours."

Willow nodded her agreement to that stipulation and turned to point out the street they needed to take, to reach her home. Five minutes later Giles stood on the pavement and watched until she had unlocked the door and entered the house, before he turned back towards his own flat. Somehow, he doubted that his tenure on the hellmouth was going to be a normal watcher's assignment, if such a beast existed.

*Note: Giles' Latin quote is part of a line from the Roman poet Horace - *Dolce et decorum est pro patria mori* - it
translates as 'it is sweet and right to die for your country' and was made famous to non-classic scholars by the First World War poet Wilfred Owen in his poem about a man dying in a gas attack, where it was described as 'the old lie'.

39 Crux

Prompt: 100 - Previous Prompt from #64 - Promise

Tuesday 6th August

When Spike entered the living room he was feeling buoyant. They now had the last element for the ritual in their possession. By this time next week Dru would be restored to health. He refused to contemplate any alternative. Drusilla, herself, was sitting dealing her tarot cards onto the coffee table, which had been pulled up in front of her chair. Angelus wasn't there, but the kitchen door opening heralded his entrance, carrying a mug which he immediately put down on the bureau, leaving it neglected as he came over to see what they had brought
back with them. Dru looked up, but didn't say anything. Spike figured that his expression was enough to tell her that he'd been successful in his mission.

Approaching her, he carefully placed the rag wrapped bundle he was carrying in his gloved hands down next to her cards and peeled away the layers of mouldy fabric, until the contents lay exposed. Although he'd studied it as he removed it from the reliquary, in the bright light of the room the detail of the pierced work and casings on the gold cross were now clearly visible. Peering more closely at one of the piercings, Spike could also see the more sullen gleam of steel running up inside the shaft. Yes, it was both beautiful and deadly, in more ways than one.

Behind him, he felt his grandsire lean close. "What is it?" Angelus asked.

Without looking around, Spike shrugged. "Don't know. A weapon, by the looks of things. Dru just told me where it was and that it's needed in the ritual." Pointing, he added. "Has a blade inside, see?"

Angelus let out a breathy whistle of appreciation. "So it has," he agreed.
Looking up, Spike noticed that Xander had retreated to a spot behind Dru, obviously repulsed by the religious aspect of the thing. Dru however was leaning forward to get a better view. She reached out her hand, allowing it to hover over the cross. "It hums" she whispered. "I can hear it." Sitting back with a satisfied expression she reached down into the cushions beside her, retrieving her doll.

Sitting the doll gently on her lap, Dru petted its hair and cooed at it, before viciously twisting its head off and tossing it aside. Sticking her middle and forefingers down through the hole into its body she withdrew, one by one, five folded scraps of paper and handed them to Spike.

Quickly stripping off his gloves and dropping them on the floor beside him, Spike took the papers from her and spread each one out on the coffee table. They appeared to be pages torn from a book. "This is it?" he asked, glancing back up at Dru. "This is the spell that'll make you well again?" Dru merely narrowed her eyes and smiled.

A hand reached over Spike's shoulder and picked up one of the pages. Twisting around, he watched as Angelus scanned the sheet he held. "Where did you get this?"
Angelus asked.

Dru laughed. "From a watcher who wasn't watching well enough."

Angelus gave a grunt, still studying the page in his hand, but Spike had turned back to his sire, a sudden chill causing him to speak sharply when he asked, "When?"

"In London," she replied, her voice smug.

The chill transforming itself into suspicion and then into certainty, Spike stared at her. "That night?" he breathed. He didn't need her slight nod for confirmation. "And you never told me?"

Dru looked back at him, one eyebrow raised in disdainful question. "I told you."

Surging to his feet, needing some sort of action, Spike took one step towards her before he managed to stop himself. Rigid with suppressed anger he yelled at her, "You didn't tell me you were out hunting a watcher! You didn't tell me you were going to beard the bloody lions in their bloody den!" Throwing up his hands, he spun and took two paces away before rounding on her again.
"Bloody hell woman! London's the centre of their powerbase and you went after one? You could have been hurt!" As suddenly as it arose, the anger drained out of him. This was his sire and Angelus was right, he never could keep up with her. "I could have come with you," he said. "Made sure you were safe."

Instead of snapping back, however, Drusilla raised one hand to her head, bending forward in her chair and emitting a strangled whine.

In a flash, Spike was at her side, remorse shaking him as thoroughly as his previous anger. Getting his arms around her shoulders he eased her back upright. Contrite, he rested his forehead against her brow. "I'm sorry. Forgive me?" he murmured. Crouching down next to her chair he continued, "I shouldn't have shouted at you. But you know I hate to see you like this and the thought of you..."

Drusilla petted weakly at his arm. "It hurts," she moaned.

"I know, baby. I know. But we'll make it better. We'll make you well. I promise!"

Sighing as the fit passed, she gave him a weak smile.
"Yes, yes, you will. I know you will."

Putting his hands around her neck, he kissed her gently but firmly, knowing he was forgiven and confirming his remorse. When she eventually pulled away she leant back in her chair, resting her head against the cushions. Spike stood up again and turned his attention back to his grandsire.

Angelus was frowning, his brows pulled together as he paced back and forth. While Spike had been preoccupied with Dru he had apparently picked up a few more sheets and as Spike watched he shuffled them, studying each in turn. Eventually, just as Spike's limited patience was reaching breaking point, again, he turned to look at them all and announced, "This doesn't make sense."

'No,' Spike thought. 'Not another problem. Not now.' They were so close. "What doesn't make sense?" he snapped.

Angelus shrugged. "This. It's gibberish."

Grabbing the sheets away from him, Spike scanned them quickly. "What d'y' mean, Gibberish? It's Latin! You do read Latin, don't you?"
Angelus made an attempt to retrieve them, but Spike danced back and held them away from him. Giving up on that, Angelus simply pointed. "It's not. Look at them. It looks like Latin, but it's not."

Behind him, Spike heard Drusilla protest, "Don't..." but he was too busy giving the papers a more thorough study, to take any notice of her. Angelus was right. It wasn't Latin. At least not any form of Latin Spike knew, and he considered himself fluent. Shocked, he looked up and caught Angelus' eye. They stared at each other for a long moment and Spike wondered what would happen to them if this last ditch plan came crashing down in failure, as all his previous attempts to find a cure had. He got no answer from Angelus, who broke their locked gaze, his eyes focussing past Spike. Spike turned.

At some point, Dru had returned to her cards. Now she was gazing down at them. "You can't read it," she intoned and Spike wasn't sure if she was simply seeing something in her cards, or whether it was a minor vision. She pointed down at the card closest to her, answering that question at least. "Not without the key."

"The key?" Bugger! Why hadn't he realised? "This stuff is
written in some kind of code?"

Looking up, Dru smiled. "Yeah."

She didn't sound worried, but Spike felt like he couldn't face even one more complication. Tossing the pages down on the coffee table, he brought both his hands up to his face and scrubbed them back over his head, clasping them behind his neck. "Seven days!" he growled. "We have seven days. If we'd had a chance to study them before, we could've been working on them. But now?" Squaring his shoulders and dropping his arms he took a deep breath. "Shit!" He looked across at Xander. "Don't suppose you have hidden cross-word and code breaking skills, pet?" Xander grimaced and shook his head. "Shit! Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" He turned on Angelus. "Now what the fuck do we do?"

Angelus had picked up another page and was pacing again, but he stopped abruptly, his eyes coming up to meet Spike's. "Who do we know who might be able to translate dark necromancy written in code?" he asked rhetorically. His mouth curled into a small smile. "Time to call in my marker, I think. Aren't you glad now that I didn't let you kill him?"
Spike scowled and looked over at Xander. "Get the minion," he ordered. "We have a pantry to stock." Turning back to Angelus, as Xander scooted out of the room, he growled. "And you," he observed. "Don't say a word. We've got exactly one week to crack this and I don't intend to waste any of it on hunting. Just get Ethan Rayne here! If we don't sort out this mess by next Tuesday we'll have to wait another month. And frankly, I'm not sure there's time for that!"

Friday 9th August

Pausing at the top of the stairs leading up to the bookshelves, Giles watched the girl, the young woman, sitting at the library table. She was still reading, although the pile of books next to her right hand was smaller than it had been last time he'd checked on her. In the three days since she'd talked and threatened her way into his secrets, she'd worked her way through every reference book on vampires in his possession and had moved on to more general texts. On the first day she'd read silently and he'd hardly noticed she was there as he went about his business, shelving books and searching for information on rituals to cure sick vampires. When she left in the late afternoon she looked sad. On the second
day she'd begun to ask questions and Giles had been surprised to discover that there could be some children whom he did not dislike on sight, as her obvious intelligence and her ability to absorb, retain and make sense of what she read were clearly apparent in what she asked. Today there was an air of grim determination about her and again she'd hardly said a word since she first arrived.

Giles had decided to leave her alone, unless she needed him. He'd continued to busy himself, putting away the last of his books, while scanning through those that he thought might contain something useful. It was unfortunate that Liam's information had been so slight. His main concern had been to get out of town and head home, curtailing his summer road trip. However, Giles had quizzed him carefully and believed he now knew everything the young man had heard.

Having spent three days searching with no success in the usual texts, Giles had eventually remembered the diaries of former watchers. It was there that he'd found the information he was looking for. It had not been reassuring but the tattoo he'd glimpsed had clinched the matter for him. The vampire, Angelus, was in Sunnydale.
Tracking down information on Spike had proved easier, although Giles was seriously worried that none of the references mentioned the familial relationship between the two. He'd sent a letter to the Council, informing them of the omission and asked that they do their utmost to speed the arrival of the slayer. To his mind, the advent of two very old and powerful vampires was more than enough to warrant her presence. All he'd had in return was an excited telephone call from some young woman wanting more information. He'd supplied what he could, until she'd explained that she wanted to know for her thesis. At that point he had regrettably allowed his frustrations to get the better of him and had slammed the phone down on her. She hadn't called back.

Liam had said that there was something wrong with a member of Angelus' family and it appeared, from the few scraps Liam had overheard, that whatever they had planned was an attempt to cure her. That had also gone into the letter, since it was obvious this must be Drusilla; which meant that the memo reporting her demise in Prague was overly optimistic.

The problem facing Giles now was that the information Liam had been able to supply was just not enough. The fact that the ritual would happen in a church on the night
of the new moon was too little to draw any firm conclusions. The mention of a magical artefact of some kind might have been of some help, if he'd only known what it was. Without an idea of the type of magic, the task of discovering more was like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Until now.

Giles stared at the book in his hands. If he was right. The pieces all seemed to fit: the fact that William the Bloody had brought Drusilla to Sunnydale, the fact that Angelus had surfaced after a hundred years of obscurity, and finally, the fact that Josephus du Lac was interred here in Sunnydale... Giles pulled himself together and continued down the stairs to the central floor of the library.

Coming to a stop next to the table, opposite Willow, he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry," he said when she looked up, "but I have to go out. I, I need to check on something."

Willow carefully placed a scrap of paper in the page she was reading and closed her book. "Er, okay. Um... does that mean you need to lock up?"
"Oh! Oh dear. I hadn't thought, but, but yes, I suppose I should."

Tilting her head, Willow silently read the title of the book he still held and obviously concluding that his mission was not mundane, asked, "Where y'going?"

"I need to go and, um... I'm going to check a tomb. To, to see if a magical artefact is still in it."

"Magical?"

Something in the tone of her voice irritated Giles. "Yes," he explained, "magic also exists. I would have thought that the existence of vampires were proof enough of that!"

Willow's eyes widened. "Oh, yes. Umm... I'm sorry?"

Giles was immediately sorry too. Really, there was no need for him to have snapped at her like that. "It's getting on a bit anyway," he offered. "Won't your parents be expecting you home for tea?"

Apparently recognising the olive branch, Willow grinned. "Oh no, they're not back yet."
"Not back?"

"They're at a conference. Well, at a number of conferences. They'll be home in three weeks. At least, I think they will. That was what they said when they phoned last week."

But this was shocking. "My god! And they left you at home? Alone?"

It was obviously the wrong thing to say, arousing the stubbornness he'd witnessed in her on the night they met. "I can look after myself! I've been doing it for years."

For someone normally so polite, in her indignation she was amazingly rude. Giles opened his mouth to say more, but some instinct thankfully caused him to pause before he could make the awkward situation worse. He was really not accustomed to conversing with young women and there was obviously nothing to be gained by railing at Willow for her parents' shortcomings. "Yes, yes, I'm sure you can," he said instead. "I, I was just surprised."

Willow, also seemed to be regretting her tone because
her voice was hesitant when she asked, "Er, so, um... Can I come with you?"

Considering that there were few risks, given that it was still daylight, Giles paused. He'd actually enjoyed her questions yesterday. It was a new experience to have an apt and eager student. And teaching her would be good practice for when he also had to teach his slayer. Since she had now learnt so much, it would be a shame if she lost interest through lack of encouragement. Also, if she went with him, he could ensure she got home safely. "Okay," he agreed. Heading into his office, and it was an unexpected luxury that he had an office he could hide in from the swarms of students when the school year began, he grabbed a torch and his keys. "It shouldn't take more than an hour," he said as he returned.

Willow was already half way to the door.

40 Bad Moon Rising
Prompt: 101 - Entice

Saturday 10th August

Ignoring the minion under the table and the open door to the living room, Spike pulled the four ready meals out of the pantry, one at a time. Turning them to make sure the gaffer tape across their mouths and wrapped around their chests, arms and legs was still secure, he was pleased to note that none of them had made any attempt to get free. Any successful attempt anyway, he thought, adding fresh tape to an area of chafe at the small Asian woman's wrists. Once satisfied that they were all secure, he placed them carefully back, rotating them in the space so the ones from the front, with the better access to air, were now at the back, allowing the others a day of more effortless breathing. They all seemed to be relatively fit still, even after three days with no food and little water. The pantry was beginning to stink, but after tonight they wouldn't be so squashed against each other, which would probably be a temporary relief to the ones that were left.

Four days, Spike thought, four days to go before he could shake the dust of this town from his boots. Even with Angelus drinking from the bag and Dru drinking from
Angelus, that still only amounted to one meal a day between the remaining three of them. Jesse could have half rations, but Spike didn't want to starve either himself or Xander.

His initial idea of spreading the stock across seven days and staying home had lasted less than twenty four hours, before the tension between Angelus and Dru had driven him out of the house. If he didn't need the big lunk, he'd have thrown Angelus out, but instead he dragged Xander and Jesse down to the docks area where they glutted themselves, saving both the stores in the pantry and Spike's sanity.

Cocking his head Spike listened to the sounds of stirring from the living room - a groan, followed by a muttered curse. Ethan was waking up. Closing the pantry door, Spike went to set him free so he could see to his human hygiene needs.

When he entered the room the mage raised his head from his pillow and offered a weak smile. Sticking his right leg out from under the blanket, he lifted it in the air and shook it, making the chain jangle. Angelus swore the chain wasn't necessary, but Spike was taking no chances. If Ethan ran away precious time would be lost and, since
it had taken three days for him to present himself back in Sunnydale after Angelus' call, Spike's stress levels were already fit to send him off into violence. They'd made no progress with the text since Dru had volunteered it and he really couldn't afford to kill the only chance they had for a translation. Once again he cursed Dru for not handing over the pages earlier.

Ethan rolled off the sofa and waited patiently as Spike unlocked the padlock from the eyebolt he'd fixed into the floorboards. Then he gathered the loose length of chain into his arms and shuffled off to the bathroom attached to the side of the house.

At least he'd managed to identify the author of the text; evidence that gave Spike some confidence in his skills. It made sense - the cross had come from the Du Lac mausoleum, the manuscript had been written by Du Lac. Unfortunately, that was where Ethan appeared to have stalled in his initial attempt. He'd spent five hours poring over the pages after he arrived last night and had made absolutely no progress in the translation. Eventually Angelus had persuaded Spike to allow him some sleep and had promised to stand over him tonight, to make sure he was not trying to cheat them. It was good to see the sincerity in Angelus' face. He was obviously as eager
as Spike to find a cure for Dru; but in spite of that, Spike didn't intend to allow the chaos mage out of his sight. He was grimly gratified that he'd decided to save the stored meals after all. Until he had that translation, there was no way he was leaving the house!

Returning to the kitchen, he kicked Jesse awake. "Coffee," he ordered when the minion scrambled out from his nest. "Enough for all of us. Bacon, eggs and toast for the wizard, then heat up a couple of bags of blood and take them through to Angelus." Catching Jesse's wistful glance at the closed pantry door, he added, "You eat after Xander and me. And that's after Angelus feeds Dru. So get moving, if you're hungry."

Jesse jumped into action and Spike watched for a moment to be sure he knew what he was doing, then he went to check on Dru and wake Xander. At the door into the passage he paused. "And when the magic man comes back," he added, tossing the padlock to Jesse, "lock him to the cross bar on the table leg. He can work in here."

Dru lay unmoving on her back in the middle of the big bed, like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty waiting for her prince to wake her with a kiss. Spike longed for such a simple solution. Being dependent upon the chaos mage,
even if he had honoured his debt to Angelus, was almost unendurable. Carefully he sat down on the edge of the mattress and stroked the back of a finger up her cheek bone, easing her hair back from her brow. She stirred and he pulled back. He'd let her sleep until Angelus was ready to feed her. She was so weak now that he and Xander had moved out of the bed onto the floor. Looking across the room, he watched his childe snuffle and turn over, his arm reaching out to the space Spike had occupied. It encountered nothing but disturbed sheets and that apparently was enough to bring Xander to consciousness because he lifted his head and peered around blearily. Finally his gaze settled on Spike and he let out a small breathy sigh of relief. Spike remembered that feeling as a young fledge - the sense of reassurance that sire was there, so all was right with the world. He forced a smile, even as he wished with all his heart that it was indeed so.

"Bathroom free?" Xander croaked.

"Should be, in a minute. The wizard was in there a moment ago, but Jesse's sorting him some breakfast, so he'll be out soon." He raised an eyebrow. "Feeling grubby, pet?"
Xander grinned. "Bit sticky, maybe?" he offered. Nodding towards the bed he added, "Is she okay? We didn't disturb her, did we?"

"No, she slept right through." He sighed. "I almost wish she hadn't. She's getting worse with every day. If it weren't for Angelus feeding her..." He trailed off. They both knew that without the added power in the blood, because it came through her sire, Dru would have faded away completely before now.

Xander crawled out from under the blankets and across the room, curling up at Spike's feet and resting his head against Spike's knee. Unable to touch Dru for fear of waking her, Spike settled for stroking Xander's hair as he felt his childe relax against him.

They stayed like that for about ten minutes, until Spike caught the sound of footsteps in the hallway heading to the kitchen. He gave Xander a nudge. "Go get clean, pet. Then get some clothes on. I'll go make sure Jesse locks up properly."

Two hours later, Spike was pacing. "Well?" he asked, for the fifth time. "Come on, now. Enlighten me."
Ethan looked up warily and Angelus took a step forward, as if to intervene. "It's not Latin," Ethan said. "If it were, I'd have this done in a jiffy. But it's not, I, I think..."

Spike interrupted, "If it was Latin, we'd not have a problem and we wouldn't have brought you in."

Rolling his shoulders in a painful shrug, Ethan stuttered, "No, no! Listen! I... I'm not even sure it's a language."

With a growl of pure frustration, Spike yelled, "Then make it a language!"

Ethan raised his hands above his head in a surrender position and tried again. "Hang on! You-you can beat the crap out of me. Go ahead, I can't stop you! Or-or you can listen to what I have to say."

Spike felt Angelus' hands on his shoulders and allowed himself to be restrained. "I want the cure! And I want it now!" Turning around he shrugged Angelus off, growling at him, "Some people find pain very inspirational."

Angelus grabbed his arm, but he pulled away and took a step towards Ethan who lowered his arms and cowered back in his chair. "Wait. It-it-- calm down! I can't do this if
you kill me!"

Narrowing his eyes, Spike considered the mage carefully. He gave a reluctant nod and Ethan took a deep breath, the tension in his shoulders relaxing slightly. "I think it's in code," he explained. "It has to have a key. Was there anything else, apart from the pages? Anything at all?"

Spike looked up at Angelus and saw the same arrested expression on his face that he imagined was on his own. "I'll get it," Angelus said as he hurried from the room.

A moment later Angelus was back with the bag containing the cloth wrapped cross. He placed it on the kitchen table with a gesture to indicate Ethan should open it. Ethan cautiously reached inside and withdrew the bundle. Carefully he lifted away the wrappings. As the gold of the cross came to view, he let out a breath of awed appreciation.

"It's a knife," Spike explained.

Picking it up, Ethan studied the detail of the cross. With a shake of his head he gripped it at top and bottom, tugging the sections apart. Slowly the blade slid free of its costly sheath. With a sigh of relief, Ethan put the T-
section that had held the blade down and lifted the knife to the light, twisting it. He smiled. "There," he said. Angelus and Spike crowded forward and Ethan laid the blade down. "See?" he asked. "There, on the blade. Runes." Tearing a sheet from his yellow legal pad he placed it over the length of the steel and began to run the edge of his pencil lead back and forth. Slowly the markings on the blade came clear on the paper. "Ah," he sighed. "Yes! This I know. This I can read." Looking up he grinned. "As an ornament, it may be rather crass, but Gentlemen, I think we have the key to the text. Give me a couple of hours and all will be revealed."

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Giles looked at his watch as he placed the telephone handset back in its cradle. They'd been researching all day, but it was still a couple of hours until sunset and it seemed their search was finally at an end. "Du Lac," he breathed. "Of course. Oh dear, oh dear."

Returning to the table, he sat down heavily. Willow looked up at him over the top of her computer screen. "Have you found something?"
Giles nodded. "I rather fear I have. Uh, I've, I believe I've discovered the reason the vampires are in town. The exact reason they're in town. It would appear that the ritual they're planning to perform was created, or discovered, by a dark mage called Josephus du Lac."

"The guy from the cemetery?"

"Er, yes, quite. The guy, um, the guy from the cemetery." He took a deep breath to help him gather his thoughts and began to explain. "As a young man he belonged to a religious sect that was excommunicated by the Vatican at the turn of the century. He ended his days here, in Sunnydale. Du Lac was both a theologian and a mathematician. The artefact we went looking for yesterday was an invention of his, which he called 'The Du Lac Cross'." He opened the copy of the National Geographic that had sent him to the telephone in the first place and handed it to her. The photograph of the cross occupied a full page. "It was more than a mere symbol. It was used to understand certain mystical texts, to, uh, decipher hidden meanings and so forth." Taking off his glasses, Giles pinched the bridge of his nose, allowing Willow to quickly scan the text that accompanied the picture.
Willow looked up sharply. "This photo's in colour and according to this, Du Lac destroyed every cross except the one buried with him."

"Yes. Well, if you look at the credits at the end of the article, you'll see that he died in 1952."

Willow nodded and put the magazine down. Slipping his glasses back on Giles picked it up and took one last look before closing it and laying it aside. "He also had a number of books of the dark arts printed. Most were destroyed at his death, like the crosses. I thought the only remaining copies were in the safekeeping of the Council."

Catching the note of concern in his voice, Willow grimaced. "From your expression, I'm guessing there are more?"

"No, the, uh, book I was thinking of was in the Council library. It was said to contain rituals and spells that reap unspeakable evil. I've just been on the phone to the Council and it would appear that it has gone missing. Mr Fellows, the Council's librarian, believes that it was taken from the possession of one of our researchers."
"Believes?"

"Er, yes. The researcher in question was found dead a few months ago. He had a very distinctive wound on his neck."

Willow gasped. "And you think it was this Spike guy who took it?"

"Quite possibly. One small consolation is that it was written in archaic Latin so that nobody but the sect members could understand it."

"So we're safe?"

"I don't know. I daren't assume so. Spike went to great lengths to free Angelus, and although that could be because Angelus is his grandsire, from what Liam overheard I believe we must fear the worst. If they have the cross..." He paused and he could see that he didn't need to spell it out for Willow. "The ritual would appear... I believe its purpose is to restore a weak and sick vampire back to full health."

"A vampire like Drusilla?"
"Exactly."

"I've been reading about her. She is so not good." Willow stared down at her fingers resting on the keyboard, for a moment, her forehead scrunched in thought. Then, taking a deep breath she looked up straight into his eyes. "So how do we stop them?" she asked.

The question jolted Giles out of his own train of thought. "We don't," he said. "The slayer does. I, I need to telephone the Council Executive immediately and demand that they send the slayer here, at once. If Drusilla is enfeebled and needs to be cured using such arts, the danger she would represent at full power is too serious to contemplate. And the three of them together are too much for anyone other than the slayer to handle."

Willow looked sad. "And if they don't send her?"

It had been Giles' own thought, tossed back at him. "I... I don't really know." He smiled weakly. "Get out of town?"

"We can't do that!"

Rubbing his hand across his mouth, as if to wipe away his
flippancy, Giles sighed. "I know. But... I don't know what to do. I... I'm a Watcher, I haven't the skill to fight vampires... A, a Slayer slays, a Watcher..."

Willow raised her eyebrow, looking at him sceptically. "Watches?" she suggested.

"Yes. No! He, he trains her, he, he prepares her... He doesn't go into battle."

Cocking her head, Willow gave him a wistful smile. "It looked to me like you were doing the whole battling thing, when you rescued me."

Giles dismissed that with a flick of his hand. "I waved a cross around. Entering a pitched battle is another thing entirely." Slumping back in his chair, he contemplated the ceiling wearily. "Besides, we don't know where they are."

He wasn't sure if she was simply trying to buck him up, or whether she really thought they could do something useful when she replied, "But we know where they will be." Turning the screen of her computer slightly towards him, she gestured him over. "I've been doing some research too."
Giles stood up and walked around the corner of the table to stand behind her. With one hand on the back of her chair, he leant forward to see what she had. And found himself looking at the web page for the Sunnydale Historical Society. It took him an agonising minute to register exactly what she wanted him to see. He could scan a printed page and glean the salient information in moments, but web pages confused him, with their bright colours and random layouts. Then he saw it. He straightened up. "There are forty-three churches in Sunnydale?" he asked. "That seems a little excessive."

Willow twisted in her chair and grinned up at him. "It's the extra evil vibe from the Hellmouth. Makes people pray harder."

It was a good thought. Giles hated leaving things to the last minute, but in case the slayer couldn't come before Tuesday, preparation would be most helpful. "Are any of them closed or abandoned?" he asked.

"Two," Willow replied, her cheerfulness undiminished.

They exchanged a long look. "I'll just go and make
another phone call," Giles said, picking up the National Geographic on his way to the office.

~*~*~*~*~

They reconvened in the living room. Spike left the chain attached to Ethan's ankle, but he didn't bother fixing it to the eyebolt. They were all there. Dru had walked through to her chair under her own steam, so she could witness the explanation and tell him if the mage was being truthful. Even Jesse had crept in and taken up station by the door, apparently as interested as the rest of them in hearing the details of the cure.

Ethan sat on the sofa, hunching forward in his seat, and tore the sheets of his notes free from the legal pad, spreading them out in a row on the coffee table. Shaking his head his voice was full of smug satisfaction as he explained, "It's written in Trionic." Looking up, he obviously noted the incomprehension around him. "See this passage here?" he asked, pointing at the top of the first page of his notes. "It continues with this passage here, then concludes with this one," he finished, pointing in turn to different paragraphs of his spinderly handwriting on different pages. Then, placing the original
pages, with their continuous block type, down in a row below his notes he continued, "Now that the code's broken, the rhythm of the original sentence structure, here," he indicated what could have been a random word in the original text, for all Spike could tell, "tells us that from there, we go back to this page," he pointed back to another paragraph on the first page of his notes, "then to this section, and finally to this bit." On each occasion he pointed at a different part of his notes. "Put the whole thing together in the right order, and you have the ritual, all laid out in nice clear English, ready to use." Sitting back he grinned at them. "I'll have that drink now," he said.

Spike considered him thoughtfully, then he smiled. "Okay, mate. I reckon you deserve a drink." He waved a hand at Jesse who jumped to obey. "And how long will it take to finish doing that?"

An expression of apprehension crossed Ethan's face. "I could do it in a few hours, or it could take me until Tuesday evening. It really depends on what you have planned for me after that."

Before Spike could reply, Angelus jumped in. "He'll let you go. And I'll release you from your debt to me. You
have my word."

Ethan nodded, but Spike wasn't prepared to let it go quite that easily. He jerked his head towards Angelus. "Yeah, like he says. I'll let you go. After the ritual."

Reaching up for the glass Jesse offered, Ethan tried to look offended. "So untrusting," he mocked. "and there was I thinking the childe obeyed the grandsire in well regulated families."

"Yeah, well, this family is as well regulated as a barrel load of cats, so you can let that thought go for starters. You're staying here until I have proof that the ritual works. If it does, if Dru's well again when we finish, I'll let you go. How's that? Seem fair to you?"

Taking a sip, Ethan nodded again. "Alright," he acknowledged. "In your place, I'd probably do the same. It's a deal."

Spike looked across at Dru and she nodded her head slightly. "I'll be well again," she murmured. "I'll be well. I hear the drums of the dark god calling me. He's going to make me whole."
Ethan's eyebrow quirked. Suddenly his attention was wholly on Dru. "The dark god?" he queried. "How very intriguing. Do tell."

"The dark god in the primal lands. My Angel won't share. But he wants it too."

Draining his glass, Ethan leant forward and held it out for a refill. Looking over at Spike he asked, "Mind if I just get drunk tonight? I promise to finish tomorrow. It really won't take long."

Spike thought about it. "Alright," he agreed. "We could all do with a drink. And if I'm going to be stuck here for the next two nights, I'm going to need to get drunk to stop myself going mad." Bending down, he reconnected Ethan's chain to the eyebolt and sat at the other end of the sofa. Xander settled at his feet and Angelus disappeared, only to reappear carrying the easy chair from his bedroom. Jesse got busy pouring.

Sitting back with his newly refilled glass, Ethan smiled. "I bet we could pass the time entertainingly with some stories. Like The Canterbury Tales, or The Decameron. I'm sure you all have some wonderful tales you could tell."
Spike was thinking more about helping Dru to bed, but she smiled at him and he could see that the idea of bedtime stories appealed to her. She looked better for having fed well and maybe she just wanted the illusion of a happy family. How could he refuse her, when Angelus would leave as soon as the new moon was past? He looked across at Angelus, suddenly realising that he felt good. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders, leaving him slightly euphoric and very relaxed. After all his planning and scheming, Dru's cure was finally only two and a half nights away. "Yeah, why not," he agreed. "Why don't you tell us what you've been doing since you ran out on us in China, mate?"

Angelus took a large gulp from his glass. "Okay." He smirked. "If you'll tell me exactly how it was you ended up wearing the local trollop's clothes that time in Moscow."

Spike laughed. "Sure." If Angelus had hoped to embarrass him, that was the wrong story to demand. The way he'd used the courtesan's favourite dress and mannerisms to entice her protector to his end was one he didn't mind telling at all. "But you go first, eh?"
It turned into one of the most relaxed evenings Spike could remember in years. The stories ran free, with much barracking from the listeners, Dru had more energy than he had seen for days, and if Angelus spent a bit too much time watching her, Spike couldn't raise the energy to care. He was too busy laughing at Angelus trying to explain Detroit, at Ethan's tales of his misdeeds with the oh so respectable watcher and Dru's reminiscences of how she had tricked Darla out of her favourite pearl necklace. Xander was snug against his leg, gently stroking up and down the back of his calf, Jesse kept the glasses full and for once all was well with his world. He didn't notice any change in tone when Ethan suggested, "Let me tell you a story about a demon I met once in Africa."

41 Showdown

Prompt: 102 - Thus spoke Zarathustra

Tuesday 13 August

The church had been empty for years, but no ruling body had come to reclaim the furniture. The stained glass was still in the windows, the statues of the saints in their niches, the pews had not been removed, even altar cloth was there, covered by a cotton sheet. But in spite of that, the place was in a state of severe neglect and disorder:
the hymnals once used by the congregation were scattered everywhere, torn and moth eaten tapestries hung on either side of the entrance and lay across the floor, perhaps pulled down by some homeless person seeking material for a nest to sleep in, some of the pews were overturned, others pushed to the side of the space. At least it was dry, there was no smell of mould and decay, apart from in the corner by the organ where a large damp spot showed that the whole of the roof was not sound.

Dru managed to walk to the church, but by the time they reached it her weakness was apparent so Spike eased her down to sit in one of the front pews, while they prepared the scene. Angelus claimed the inherited memory of an altar boy, which made Spike smirk, but saved Spike having to deal with getting the charcoal and Frankincense alight. Xander busied himself placing the thick candles from the box he carried into their cups in the large candelabras to either side of the altar, while Jesse mounted the torches in the brackets set into the walls along the length of the nave. They looked as if they were originally intended to hold flags. Maybe it had been a church with military links, Spike thought.

Once it was all done, Spike opened the notebook into
which Ethan had copied the final version of the ritual and checked that the details were all correct, counting them off in his head and nodding with satisfaction. Angelus handed Dru into position in front of the altar. He had to wrap his arm around her waist to help her to stand. Clasping her left hand in his right, he lifted them above his head, holding them there. Xander and Jesse took up position next to the front row of pews to act as witness.

Pulling on his heavy leather gloves, Spike picked up the censer and began to walk up the main aisle, away from the altar, swinging it from side to side to encourage the pungent smoke to belch out into the room. "Eligor," he intoned. "I name thee. Bringer of war, poisoners, pariahs, grand obscenity." He turned on his heel and began to walk back through the smoke to where Angelus and Dru waited.

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The dirty cream Citroen drew to an arthritic halt in front of the church and Giles gave the steering wheel a pat, half admonitory, half thanks for having made it. He'd have to take it back to the garage, there was something wrong. He'd had a Citroen before and, in spite of it being French, it had actually performed to perfection, but
getting into this one with the aim of getting anywhere, was an act of faith. "Well done, Betsy," he said.

Willow glanced over at him with a tight smile before climbing out, pulling the grip bag from her footwell with her, stepping back and slamming the door. Giles got out too and stood for a moment taking a good look at the church. Twin square towers flanked the west front where a flight of shallow steps led up to the main entrance. The light in the street was sufficient to show that one leaf of the door was cracked and broken. That was where they would enter. No doubt there was a side entrance, through the churchyard gates, but the deep shadows under the trees were not welcoming. Giles knew that was a ridiculous consideration, in view of what they were about to do. The obvious entry might be a trap. Briefly he considered that alternative, but so might the side way, with less chance of an easy escape into the view of human passers by. With one last, almost affectionate, pat to the roof of the car he walked around to Willow's side, taking the bag from her. Together they climbed the steps and when they reached the door he placed the bag down, crouching next to it to open it.

Extracting his best crossbow he placed it down at his side. Pulling out the second, he handed it to Willow. He
glanced at his watch. It was a quarter past eleven. "The exact moment of the new moon is 11.34," he observed, "so, hopefully we'll be able to stop them before they can begin." Looking up at Willow he noted the tension in her stance and hesitated. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She shook her head but her voice was firm. "Oh yes, I'm sure! My friends are dead and those things killed them. I really want to do this!"

"Alright." Giles took a deep breath and pushed open the broken door a crack. There was another beyond the porch which was only slightly ajar. Pressing through the gap, he tiptoed towards it. Looking back at the young woman he added, although they'd gone over it a number of times already, "As soon as I've fired, I'll drop this one," he lifted the cross bow slightly, "then you pass me that one. Okay?"

Willow nodded. "Yes. Then I reload so it's ready for you to fire again. Like a Napoleonic infantry square."

Giles felt his lips twitch but he refrained from pointing out that between the two of them they hardly made up more than a point, let alone a square. He nodded.
Turning back to the door and taking another deep breath, he burst through, into the church proper. And came to a shocked halt at the top of the nave. The space was empty, not a pew, not a cross, not a single statue of a saint. Their footsteps echoed hollowly as they walked tentatively forwards. Even the altar was gone.

Beside him he heard Willow sigh. "Oh, darn! I was sure it was this one."

~*~*~*~*~

Walking back up the aisle, through the smoke of his previous passing, Spike continued to swing the censer. "Eligor, wretched master of decay, bring your black medicine," he read, from the book held before him in his left hand.

Up in front of the altar Dru seemed to be hovering on the edge of unconsciousness. "Black medicine," she echoed. Angelus adjusted his hold on her waist, pulling her closer to his chest. Her head lolled as if it was only loosely attached to her shoulders, until her forehead came to rest against his breast, then she was still.
Spike climbed the three steps to the chancel, set the censer down on the altar and put the book down next to it. Reciting words memorised earlier, he picked up the Du Lac Cross, peeling away the wrappings. "Come. Restore your most impious, murderous child."

Holding the cross carefully inverted he walked up to Angelus and Dru in time to hear her murmured echo of his last words, muffled though they were by Angelus' body.

Taking the head of the cross in his other hand, he pulled the ends apart, drawing out the dagger and laying the sheath back on the altar. Lifting the dagger high he added the next part of the ritual: the promise, "From the blood of the sire she is risen. From the blood of the sire, she shall rise again."

With one stroke Spike stabbed the blade through Angelus' and Dru's clasped hands. As Angelus gasped and Dru gave a small convulsive twitch, a bright, pink light encompassed them both from elbow to fingertips and Angelus' arm sagged, before jerking up again, rigid above their heads. The intensity of the light grew by pulses, then burst outward in a shockwave across the open space of the nave, before dying back to a glow at the
point where the dagger joined them. Angelus' head slumped onto Dru's shoulder and their joined hands fell to rest on Angelus' shoulder, but they remained upright.

"Right, then!" Spike said in a more normal voice, grinning at Xander as he walked towards the steps to join him. "Now we just let them come to a simmering boil, and remove to a low flame."

A sound at the door gave Spike a moment's warning before it burst open and the watcher rushed in, crossbow held up in front of him, the little girl of the week before trailing behind. The sight that greeted him, however, apparently caused him to freeze. His eyes darted from Jesse to Xander to Spike and then behind him to Angelus and Dru. "Oh God!" he gasped.

Jumping down the three steps, Spike laughed. "God has nothing to do with it," he said. "In fact, as Nietzsche said, 'God is dead. And we have killed him.'" He looked around at the mess. "Well, either that or he's gone to visit friends for a while."

Spike's voice seemed to drag the watcher out of his immobility and he raised the crossbow. The little girl crept up close behind, second crossbow clutched to her
Xander and Jesse had turned at the watcher's first words, but they waited to see what Spike intended. The watcher apparently intended war. As he released the trigger, Spike, who had expected to be the target and was ready to jump aside, realised a fraction of a moment too late that the bolt was actually going to pass to his left. With a cry he spun and shoved Xander, sending him staggering. Xander screamed as the bolt lodged in his right shoulder and he half fell over the end of the nearest pew. Spike pulled him back upright, grabbed the shaft below the fletches and tugged it free. Xander gasped again and Spike gave him another shove so he stumbled backwards and sat down hard on the seat of the pew.

Returning his attention to the watcher, Spike saw that he had dropped his crossbow, but had already swapped it for the other. The girl was on her knees, trying to reload the first one. The watcher was raising his new weapon, this time pointing at Jesse. That left Spike free to attack. He leapt forward, just as the second bolt fired and found its home in Jesse's chest. The minion froze, for a second his skeleton flared, then he was nothing more than a slowly settling shower of dust. Again the watcher seemed to have surprised himself and as a result he
hesitated to take the crossbow the girl was holding out to him. The shock as Spike collided with him sent them both stumbling. Spike wrenched the crossbow from the watcher's grip and tossed it aside. Grabbing the man by his shoulders Spike pushed him back into the wall, forcing the air from his lungs.

Spike could almost taste the blood, it seemed to buzz with remembered power, although that might have been in his imagination - a result of Ethan's stories. He bent his head towards the watcher's neck. Behind him he was dimly aware of a shout from Xander, but he couldn't spare the attention and his childe should be able to overpower one small girl. Spike leant forward, as the watcher's hands came up in a vain attempt to fend him off.

A blow to the side of his head caused Spike to lose his grip and he fell to the floor. Looking up he saw the girl, Willow, with the second crossbow held like a club. She'd clocked him with the stock. He took all that in in the moment before the watcher fell on him, knees either side of Spike's hips and crossbow bolt raised like a stake. Spike shot out his hand, halting the downward plunge by grabbing the watcher's wrist, but unable for a moment to find the leverage to throw the man from his perch. They
seemed to hang frozen, the watcher attempting to force the bolt down to pierce Spike's breast, Spike with his grip on the watcher's wrist holding him off.

Even as his feet scrambled for purchase on the floor, Spike was aware that Xander had finally joined the fray. He had the girl by the neck, against the wall. Although Spike was pleased to note that Xander's voice was calm, he wanted to shout at the boy for allowing himself to be distracted. "Not going to turn you, Wills," Xander said. "I may have been on the slow bus when I was alive, but that's not true anymore. I'm strong now. And smart. You want to know how smart?" He must have tightened his grip because the girl's only answer was a strangled squeal and he didn't wait for a better answer. "I learnt that lesson with Jesse." Xander laughed. "You're going to die," he promised.

It appeared that the watcher had also been half listening, because he suddenly increased his efforts to force the bolt towards Spike, but Spike had finally managed to plant his feet flat on the floor. Offering the watcher his friendliest smile, he asked, "Really think you have me?" He flicked his eyes to the side, towards the two figures up near the altar. "Every moment we stay locked like this, is one moment closer to my Dru being well again."
One moment closer to my boy clearing away more of the mess of his human life."

The watcher's eyes widened with shock and his mouth hardened into a straight line as he redoubled his efforts. Spike laughed. Using the leverage his bent legs gave him, he humped his hips off the ground, unbalancing the man astride him. "Didn't know you swung that way, watcher." He smirked. "Oh wait, yes I did, what with your old mate crashing at our place and telling tales out of school."

"Shut up," the watcher gritted out between teeth clenched tight with effort.

Spike let out a theatrical sigh. "Bored now," he announced, giving one more thrust of his hips as he pushed the watcher's arms wide, causing him to overbalance forward onto Spike's chest and lose his grip on the crossbow bolt. Using his legs and shoulders for leverage, Spike arched his back and rolled, so that he was on top and the watcher beneath him. But the watcher was a good scrapper and he swung with the momentum Spike had created, attempting to continue the roll. Spike managed to stop them, before the watcher got into the ascendancy again, but when he tried to pull away the watcher lurched up, looming over him, left hand with his
entire weight behind it splayed flat over Spike's chest as his right scabbled across the floor after the dropped bolt. Spike rolled his head to the side and saw the bolt, just beyond the watcher's fingertips. He waited his moment and when the watcher released some of the pressure behind his left hand, to reach for it, he brought his arms up and shoved at the watcher's waist, sending him flying through the air into the wall next to Xander and Willow, where he stayed, winded and shaking his head to clear it.

Spike rolled on his shoulders, swinging up onto his feet. Xander was looming over the girl who had her back to the wall. At first Spike didn't understand what was holding Xander back, then he saw the crossbow jammed between them, the point of the bolt inches from Xander's heart. The girl had tears in her eyes and she was pleading, "Xander, please! Don't make me do it. I know there's still a part of you in there."

Xander cocked his head. He seemed unconcerned by the danger of his position and Spike made a mental note to have words with him later. "Of course there is, Wills," he agreed. "I'm still your Xander. I'm still me. I can do the snoopy dance, if you like?" he offered. "Would that convince you?" He paused as if thinking. "Or how about
this - On my seventh birthday ... I didn't get the toy fire truck I wanted, so you burnt down the house next door for me, so the real fire trucks came, remember that?"

Blinking, Spike considered the girl. If she was capable of that... but she was shaking her head. "I didn't," she whispered. "I didn't do that."

With an internal shrug Spike abandoned the thought that had tickled at his mind. It was time to interfere. His heart was in his mouth as he edged forward. One false move and his childe was dust. The girl was obviously reluctant to fire, but accidents happened so easily. He placed one hand on Xander's shoulder and the movement caught her eye. Spike saw her finger twitch on the trigger even as he yanked Xander back spinning them both, bringing his right leg up at the same time and kicking at the crossbow. The twang of the mechanism was followed immediately by the whistle of the bolt as it skidded between them, close to Xander's ear, but his boy was safe.

In his new position Spike could see Dru and Angelus. Angelus was struggling to pull the dagger free. Had it been enough time? Spike didn't know. He took a step towards them, still hanging on to Xander, but the
watcher had reclaimed his faculties and had grabbed one of the torches from the wall. Advancing on Spike, he swung it from side to side, requiring Spike to jump back to avoid being set alight. He let go of Xander who also scrambled away. The girl stayed where she was. "Giles," she called.

The watcher looked over his shoulder and saw her. He threw his torch at Spike, who ducked. It flew over Spike's head, landing next to a torn hymn book and a length of moth-eaten cloth. Spike saw the first little flame as the tinder caught.

Giles rushed back to the girl, grabbing another torch from the bracket next to her. Turning, he threw that one too. It rolled across the floor and came to rest against a length of torn velvet curtaining. There was a whooshing sound and the velvet went up like it had accelerant on it. The flames spread rapidly to the hymn books and the other rubbish on the floor and in moments it was like a wall between the humans and Spike, who retreated backwards towards the altar and his sire. Above the roar of the flames, he heard the watcher shout that they needed to run but he didn't have time to consider them now. The fire was spreading towards the chancel and Dru seemed to be in a swoon and unable to save herself.
He almost tripped in his headlong rush, but he managed keep his feet under him and ran up the steps to Angelus and Dru. Grabbing Dru's wrist, he pulled the dagger from their joined hands and caught Dru is she collapsed. "Sorry, baby. Gotta go," he gasped, lifting her into his arms.

Angelus fell to his knees, sitting back on his heels and gazing glassily around. Spike searched the room. The fire had caught with a vengeance and was now licking up the walls. Up by the altar they were not only separated from the watcher and the girl, they were also cut off from the only way out. And Xander was trapped by the flames, forced back against the wall, his fledgeling instincts causing him to cower away from fire. As his eyes locked with his childe's terrified gaze Spike was vaguely aware of the watcher shouting to the girl that they needed to get out.

Turning to Angelus, Spike thrust Dru into his arms. "Get up! Take her!" he yelled. "The choir loft." He pointed to the narrow door half hidden in the panelling of the walls to the side of the organ. Waiting only long enough to see Angelus clamber to his feet and be sure he had Dru safe, Spike took five steps to gather speed and leapt over the
flames trapping Xander, crashing into the wall at his childe's side. He took Xander's chin in both his hands, forcing his hypnotised gaze away from the roar of the fire. "Listen," he shouted. "You saw me do it. You can do it too. But we have to be quick." A quick glance around offered a possible route. "Come on!"

Xander nodded his understanding and followed Spike along the wall to where one of the misplaced pews stuck out towards the flames, which were lapping at its end. But the wood was old and worn smooth, so it hadn't caught yet. Jumping up on the seat, pulling Xander behind him, Spike pointed. "Follow me," he instructed. "Do what I do." He began to run along the length of the seat. Placing his last footfall on the armrest, he launched himself out over the rapidly spreading fire, coming to a running stop on the other side of the knave. Turning he watched as Xander came flying towards him and stepped aside as the boy landed in a sprawl which turned into a somersault, like a kitten that tries to stop too fast on its front feet.

Hardly waiting for him to get himself up, Spike grabbed Xander's hand in a renewed grip and started running again, tugging Xander back into motion. They headed for the door to the choir loft with the flames licking at their
heels. Together they dashed through and slammed it behind them, safe for a moment. Taking a totally necessary breath, Spike pelted up the stairs into the choir loft. Angelus was standing in the middle of the space with Dru still in his arms. Relieved of one worry, Spike spared a moment to look down over the balcony rail. Below them the nave was engulfed in flames. Pulling his eyes away, he checked out the loft, there was no obvious way out. He turned to Angelus and noticed that his gaze was focussed on the big window in the back wall. He caught Spike's eye, a question in his own. Spike nodded his agreement.

Turning to Xander, Spike placed his hands on the boy's shoulders and gave him a little shake. "Follow me," he instructed, "and jump backwards, yeah? Angelus will follow through the gap."

Xander nodded, although Spike doubted he knew what he was agreeing with. He'd see soon enough. Running towards the window, Spike turned at the last moment and crashed backwards through it, twisting in the air to land with a thump on all fours on the ground twenty feet below. A moment later more glass crashed down around him and Xander landed next to him. Angelus followed, still carrying Dru.
Getting up, Spike dusted glass fragments from his clothes. "If this didn't work," he growled. "I'm eating the wizard." He glared at Angelus. "And I don't care what you say."

Looking at the expression on Angelus' face as he gazed down at Dru, Spike wasn't sure he'd heard. But even if he had, he didn't think Angelus would object to the sentiment.

42 Epilogue

Dru had still not regained consciousness as they all trailed back up to the house. Spike had allowed Angelus to continue carrying her while he walked with Xander, his arm securely around his boy's waist. The sky was clear, the stars were bright without a moon to dim them, and he took deep breaths as they walked, enjoying the smell of clean air, with just a hint of soot. Xander appeared unaffected by the night's adventure, unless the extra
bounce in his step from the adrenaline hype counted. Spike on the other hand still had some concerns about Dru. He'd seen the spell in operation, but he couldn't feel totally happy until she woke up.

Angelus carried Dru like the precious burden she was, her head resting against his shoulder and every few moments he glanced down at her, his expression soft in a way that Spike had never witnessed before. He seemed to be recovering his strength with each step away from the burnt out wreck behind them. The spell might have knocked him for six for a while, but the effects didn't appear to be long lasting.

Unlocking the front door, Spike pushed it wide and held it open for Angelus to enter. "How you feeling, mate?" he asked. "I mean, did it work?"

Shaking his head slightly, Angelus smiled. "I felt it," he said. "I felt something. Yes, I think it worked."

I spite of Dru's continued unconsciousness and her drawn expression, a small portion of Spike's worry lifted with that reassurance. Leading the way into the living room, he gestured at Ethan, sitting still shackled on the sofa. "Off," he ordered. Ethan hurried to obey, hovering close
as Spike waved Angelus forward. "Lay her out there," he said. "I'll get you some blood and you can feed her as soon as she wakes."

In the kitchen the pantry was empty, but there were half a dozen hospital bags in the fridge. Just this once Spike would lower himself to eating old blood. He wasn't leaving the house again tonight. Not until he saw Dru awake and well again. And if that didn't happen... he shoved the thought away. Maybe he'd still eat the wizard.

Pulling a large pan out of the cupboard he half filled it with water and put it on the stove, adding all of the remaining bags of blood. Eating bagged blood was one thing, but he wasn't going to eat it cold. Behind him he could hear whispering and movement coming from the living room but he kept his attention focussed on the water in the pan, checking it with a finger tip at regular intervals. It didn't take long to warm the chill off and it was better to err on the side of caution, to avoid it starting to cook.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually it was ready. Hooking three mugs and the kitchen scissors over his finger tips, he picked up the pan with both hands and
pushed through the door into the living room, plonking the lot down on the coffee table. Dru was now stretched out comfortably on the sofa, Angelus perched next to her. Ethan was sitting on the floor, as far from them both as the chain around his ankle allowed, and Xander had flopped down in Dru's chair.

He hauled himself up as Spike returned and knelt down next to the coffee table, straightening the mugs. Looking up at Spike he picked up the scissors. "Shall I?" he asked.

Spike nodded absently, his focus on Dru. "What's taking so long?" he asked. "Why is she still out?" Catching Angelus' eye again, he added, "You sure you felt something?"

Angelus raised an eyebrow. "You did see the light show back there?" he asked. "Yes, something happened. I felt the strength flowing out of me, into her. I'm certain it worked." Leaning forward, he stroked a loose lock of her hair away from her face. His hand looked huge, his fingers like sausages against her delicate beauty. Spike knew that the apparent fragility of her bird-like frame was an illusion, but he'd lived with her illness for so long, it was almost impossible to imagine she could ever again be the fierce, strong willed, invincible sire he had once
believed her to be.

Angelus briefly gripped her hands, where they lay loosely clasped below her breasts. "Is that the last of the blood?" he asked.

"Yeah. I reckon we'll be leaving tomorrow. You'll have to sort out your own supply from now on."

Angelus nodded. "I don't think I'll be staying either," he said seriously. "You were right, I haven't a chance of helping the slayer, not with her watcher knowing what I am."

A nudge at his elbow distracted Spike from answering and caused him to look down. Xander was holding a mug up for him to take. Dismissing Angelus' comment as irrelevant, he took the blood, draining it without attention or pleasure, as he sat himself down on the arm of the sofa next to Dru's head and watched her face.

Together they sat vigil over her body. With each passing moment, as she continued to lie motionless and didn't fade to dust, Spike felt himself relax a little more. Half an hour passed, then an hour. Still Dru lay unmoving, but solid, in front of him.
Some small sound made Spike look up and he found Angelus studying him intently. He raised an eyebrow in question and Angelus smirked. "Good moves, in there," he said.

Spike was flabbergasted. Angelus paying him a compliment? Unsolicited? "You too," he acknowledged, grudgingly.

"No, I mean it. You got us all out. I didn't notice the door to the loft." Angelus looked slightly embarrassed and shrugged. "I was still a bit out of it," he explained, in excuse.

Spike decided to go with the flow and enjoy this strange, genial Angelus while he could. "Wish I'd got the watcher though," he admitted. From the corner of his eye he saw the wizard react to that and turned to glance at him. "Yeah, your old mate was there. And he got away." He jerked his head towards Angelus. "He didn't tell you?"

Ethan was sitting cross-legged by the coffee table. "No," he replied drily. "We didn't get that far." Sitting straight, he grinned. "I wish I could have been there."
"Think you could have helped take him down, do you?"

"No. But then, I wouldn't want to. I might have helped distract him though." He gave an impudent smirk. "People like Ripper... they come in useful for all sorts of reasons." There was a hint of a question in his voice when he added, "Rather like me."

Spike grinned back. "Useful, eh? So I should just let you go?"

Angelus cleared his throat. "Spike, you promised."

Waving his hand airily, Spike agreed. "I promise a lotta things."

"But this is one you're going to keep."

Was that a threat? Why was Angelus suddenly so serious? "And why should I?"

"Because he's human." Angelus closed his eyes as he apparently realised that he'd just made a supremely stupid statement. He frowned and tried again, "Because I'm asking you to?"
"And you're asking because he's human?" Spike suggested. Angelus nodded tightly. "No!" Spike stared at Angelus' face, watching it twitch in response to his blunt refusal. "That's not the reason. You want something." He injected a sneer into his voice. "This isn't about your mission. You're in love with the idea of humanity, but you don't give a damn about them individually. There's something more here." He glanced at Xander, who was sitting on the edge of his seat, ready to jump if Spike gave the signal. Turning back to Angelus he stared him down. "If you want me to spare him again, you'll have to come out and give me a very good reason why."

Angelus' face went blank and Spike recognised that expression - he was thinking, trying to work out if he could lie, or whether he'd really have to tell Spike the truth. The fact that he didn't point out that it wasn't Spike who let the wizard go, last time, was itself an indication of how serious he was. Spike waited.

After a pause that seemed to stretch for whole minutes, Angelus sighed. "The other night," he said. "Ethan told us a story about a demon..."

Spike thought back to the evening they spent getting drunk and swapping stories and being a family. "The one
in Africa," he agreed.

"Yes, that one..." Angelus stopped abruptly as Dru stirred, her hands twitching before falling still again.

Spike leant forward, gazing down into her face as her eyes opened. He twisted off his perch onto his knees at her side and bent over her. "Hey, baby," he whispered. "How do you feel?"

Slowly Dru sat up, Spike helping her with a hand at her back. She twisted in her seat, placing her feet on the floor and reaching out her hand, ran it gently down his cheek. "Shhh," she murmured. She turned to look up at Angelus and it was only then that Spike realised there were tears in his eyes. Angrily he scrubbed at them. "My Angel," Dru continued, pulling her hand away and offering it to her sire, who took it and held it tenderly. "You saved me." Spike opened his mouth to make some protest, but she turned back to him. "You both saved me. I'm strong again!" Slowly a smile spread across her face. "I'm well! I can feel it, the power, the wonder, the call." She looked around the room, fixing at last on Ethan, who tried to scramble back but was prevented by the chain at his ankle. "And I'm hungry."
Spike was ready to offer the wizard up for her, but Angelus jumped in first, "Drink from me, Dru," he offered. "Come and drink from me." He flicked a glance over at Ethan. "We need him, remember?"

She turned and smiled back at him. "Oh yes, I forgot."

Before Spike could demand an explanation for that statement, Dru had lunged forward into Angelus' lap and her mouth was at his throat. Angelus closed his eyes, a blissful expression on his face, and when he opened them again he was looking straight at Spike. "I thought I had a mission to help the slayer," he said, apropos of nothing. "But I think Whistler talked in riddles and the obvious interpretation was not the true one." He stroked his hand up Dru's back, fisting it in her hair and Spike thought he was going to pull her away, but instead he released his grip and sank back into the seat, petting her head. After a moment he looked up at Spike again. "I can't go on without believing in something. I need that. I need to know that there's something beautiful in the world. I need to know that there is worth in what I'm doing. That I'm doing good."

Puzzled by this sudden burst of confidences, Spike did his best. "So you're an idealist?" he hazarded. "An idealist
with a soul?"

Angelus sighed. "William, you're a poet. Don't f*ck with me. You were never wrong. Without my soul, I'm a bastard."

Spike grinned at him. "Won't hear me argue with that," he agreed.

Unable to nod with Dru at his neck, Angelus gave a slight smile in acknowledgement. "I was a bastard," he repeated. "I'd never felt love. I didn't believe in it. I didn't even know what it was." His eyes flashed yellow before returning to brown. "But somehow I found it. And it was staring me in the face the whole time." He paused a moment and frowned, apparently trying to find the words to explain his thoughts. "We have eternal life," he continued. "We have to do something with that. We have to do good." He paused again and studied Spike, then he amended his statement, "I have to do something good."

Cautiously, Spike nodded. "And so you are. You have. You've cured Dru. 'Course, you owed us that."

"I owed Dru that."
"'S what I said."

"No, it isn't." Angelus hesitated and his voice was soft when he continued. "Dru and I..." A flicker of dread uncurled at the back of Spike's mind, ready to bloom into full flower and he realised that he didn't want to hear whatever it was Angelus was leading up to, but he couldn't stop him. "I think Whistler showed me the wrong woman," Angelus finished.

Spike stared at his grandsire, but was met by such a steady gaze that he had to look away. Across the coffee table from him, Ethan was watching with an expression of avid curiosity. In Dru's chair Xander looked as alarmed as he was beginning to feel himself. Slowly Xander began to edge forward out of his seat, onto the floor.

Spike looked back at Angelus and Dru just as she pulled away from her feed and sat up. "It's all... wrong!" she moaned, "I can't abide it! The Moon started whispering to me... All sorts of dreadful things. Temptation and truth and sin and guilt. And then she went dark and I knew... psst, psst, psst, psst, psst... He fills my head. I can't hear anything else. He calls me." She twisted around and fixed her mad gaze on Spike, her voice abruptly normal. "I
have to go to Africa. Want to come, pet?" she asked.

Behind her Angelus stirred. "No!" he said. Looking over at Spike he added, "You need to go out and prove yourself."

Suddenly angry in his confusion Spike pushed himself to his feet, yelling, "I've been fucking doing that for a hundred years. I don't need to prove myself to anyone!"

Angelus pulled Dru against him and put his arms around her. She wriggled back into his side and settled her hands over his. "You do!" Angelus pronounced. "You may not think you do, but you do. Once you're alone, without your sire... it's different."

Spike refused to recognise the significance of Angelus' wording, concentrating on the petty accusation. "Yeah, like you did? When did you go out on your own? Let me think... Oh yes, that would be a hundred years ago, when you abandoned us!"

Dru smiled at him from Angelus' arms. "My beautiful boy," she whispered, "all grown up. Ready to be a daddy."

"No! Dru! You don't..." Spike couldn't go on. He fell to his
knees, a tearing sensation ripping through his chest and he clutched at it. It felt like his heart was breaking. Literally.

Dru sighed. "It's time," she pronounced.

Spike curled forwards, his head bowed over his arms which were clenched at his waist. Dimly he was aware of a scrabbling sound, then strong arms closed around him and he was pulled into a hug and rocked.

Gradually he relaxed into the comfort of the body holding him. The pain of separation faded quickly, as if it had never been, and in its place he felt... a lightness... like relief and power and... It felt like freedom? He stayed where he was though, unwilling to share the sensation, beyond the arms that held him so tight.

When he eventually raised his head it was to see Xander's concerned face peering down at him. Xander who was wrapped around him, like an octopus. Sitting back on his heels he allowed Xander to squirm around so he was seated on Spike's lap, his face buried in Spike's neck. Spike stroked Xander's hair, offering comfort in return for that which he had just received. He looked around the room. They were alone. "They gone?" he
asked.

Muffled as it was in his neck, he had no trouble understanding Xander's reply. "Yeah, they just up and left. Took Ethan with them."


Pulling back, Xander looked up at him. "Who? Ethan?"

"No, Angelus! Bloody coward couldn't hang around long enough to check I was alright."

"Um... Are you alright?" Xander's forehead scrunched again with worry. "What happened?"

Spike grinned. "Never felt better in my whole bloody unlife, pet." He shifted, so he was sitting on the floor with his legs stretched out in front of him, with Xander still on his lap, holding the boy close. "I just got my freedom." He took a deep breath and let it out again. He felt almost giddy, "A hundred and twenty years, and at last, I'm free."

Looking down at Xander, the boy didn't appear much happier. "It looked like it hurt," he ventured, tentatively.
"Yeah, for a moment it did. But then... then..." There were no words to describe the sensation. The night Angelus released him, in China, he'd been too hyped up on slayer blood to recognise it for what it was. But this time... this time he was fully aware and the feeling of release that replaced the pain was something he'd remember and treasure for the rest of his existence.

Xander, however, was apparently not on the same page. He gave Spike's t-shirt a tug, to get his attention. "Promise you'll never do that to me," he begged.

Spike smiled. "I promise not to do it until you're ready," he agreed. Xander looked like he was going to say something else, so Spike got in first. "Fancy a trip to Blighty, pet?" The euphoria coursing through his body causing him to laugh out loud at the expression of confusion on Xander's face. "Britain. England," he clarified. "It's a crowded island, compared to here - twenty percent of the population in two percent of the space. Lots of good hunting grounds and lots of people to go missing without anyone raising the alarm." He studied Xander's face critically. "You could pass for eighteen, now you've fined up a bit, lost that human puppy fat and built up some good muscle." He leant back against the sofa.
"But there's still loads of wilderness, if you want to see the stars. Places you can go where you'd think humans had never been. We could have some fun there."

Xander grinned back at him, apparently happy now that he could see his sire really was okay. "I need a new name," he announced.

Spike considered that proposal. "How about Alexander?"

"No!" Xander shook his head. "Xander's parents only called him Alexander when he was in trouble. I don't want the reminder."

"Huh! You're still too attached to the human, pet." He gave Xander a hug. "But I don't mind. I liked the human." Again he studied Xander's face. "But I like you more," he added with another laugh.

Smiling in return, Xander suggested, "How about Nightwing? That's dark and mysterious."

Spike pushed the boy off his lap and got up, stretching his arms above his head and luxuriating in the physical sensation of stretched muscles. "Phhhh! Rubbish name!" he said, walking to the door to get his duster from the
Xander scrambled to his feet and followed. "Lex? As in Luthor?"

"Hmm.. Has promise," Spike conceded, opening the front door and stepping out into the night. "Tell you what, why don't we try it for size and see how you go. You'll find your new name by proving yourself. Or you'll find the one you have fits you after all." He looked around as he dug in his pockets, checking that his fags and his car keys were there. At least they hadn't taken the wheels. Turning back to his childe, he held out his hand. "Come on. Either way, I reckon we're going to have some serious fun, finding out."

The End

End note

Almost from the start of this story, I've played with the idea of ending it with Giles hearing that the slayer and her mother have moved to Cleveland, making this a
version of The Wish 'verse

This is how it would have ended, if I'd done it -

Giles and Willow in the library -
Giles - "I just received a letter from the Council. They say that the slayer has moved to Cleveland."
Willow - "She's not coming here?"
Giles - "Apparently not."
Willow - "But... Hellmouth?"
Giles - "It would appear there is also one in Ohio."
Willow - "Oh."

Giles sat down at the table and put his head in his hands.
Willow - "Well, um... we'll just have to do it ourselves."
Giles stared at her, surprised by the certainty in her voice. "After all," she added, "we just killed three really old and powerful vampires." Her mouth turned down and her lips quivered slightly. Giles knew she was thinking about her friends. He reached across the table and gave her hand a slight squeeze. Looking up, she gave him a tremulous smile.

I know, they didn't kill them, but there would be no evidence either way, once the fire was put out...