Crossover with The Sentinel

Rated: Adult for Sexual Content (No Partner Betrayal!)
Jim/Blair, Blair/Xander, Xander/Spike

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The following pages are not for minors!!
The fanfic on these pages contains m/m slash (male on male sex), bondage, BDSM, rimming, oral sex, anal sex, bloodplay, and violence.
For adults, this is a nice little fantasy. For children, this is a good way to really warp your sense of sexuality!!
If you're not of legal age, go read something else.

I don't own any of these guys and I don't make money off this.
I'm just having some fun.
Oh, and if you're looking for abuse, rape, torture, chan, or sexual violence, go somewhere else! My guys like what they're doing, and they don't do anything unless both partners are getting off on it!
"Xander, we really need you to do this for us," Willow blinked in that helpless little girl expression she'd been using on him ever since the yellow crayon. Xander crossed his arms and squinted his eye. The look didn't work nearly as well now that she was one of the most powerful witches on earth.
"Right. And the fact that it's on the other side of the world?" Xander demanded.

"The council hasn't seen an active Sentinel in like five hundred years. This is big. It might be some sort of apocalyptic sign big."

"You're just trying to make me feel better, aren't you?"

"Maybe," she admitted in a small voice. "But knowing how to work with a Sentinel, that would of the good, yes?" she quickly added. "I mean, we already know that a lot of Sentinels end up doing the crazy thing, and if you understand Sentinel psychology, and then we find another Sentinel and this Sentinel is losing his, you know, marbles... what with the seeing and hearing things, and really that does sound a bit like schizophrenia, so you really can't blame the doctors for thinking the Sentinels are doing the crazy thing. There was a guy in the 1800's who might have been a Sentinel and he... let's just say it didn't end well what with mental health field using more chains and boiling water than Prozac." Willow paused in horror, and Xander jumped in before she could continue. He knew her babble well enough to know that she'd just keep right on going.

"So you want me to train to work with some weird nearly-human thing even though no one has seen one in
five hundred years and it'll probably be another five hundred before another pops up? Thinkin' I'm not going to be around in five hundred years."

"Bloody hope not," Spike growled as he aimed his car at another hapless citizen of Springfield. Xander glanced over as Spike backed the car up and aimed it at Ned Flanders again, sending the man rolling down the street. No wonder Spike could never beat his scores on the game, he was too busy mowing down the pixilated population.

"Of course you'll probably still be here mooching," Xander snapped.

"At least I'm of some use, mate. Red's sending ya on this chase 'cause none of us need ya 'round here."

"HEY!" Willow protested that, but Xander turned his back and started walking out of the common room. Yeah, he knew he was big on the useless scale, but he didn't need it pointed out by Spike. The missing eye meant he was more a danger to his own side in a fight. He couldn't even count the number of times Buffy or Spike had to save him from some baddie running up on his blind side. They kept trying to blindside him, he quipped to himself as he strode down the hallway, but even he didn't find his joke funny. One little case of malaria and Buffy wouldn't even
hear of him going back on the road to track down slayers. Which left him... it left him nowhere he realized.

He could hear Willow's footsteps running behind him in the hall. She had probably stopped to give Spike shit, which was kinda emasculating, but then he should be used to it by now. He started down the main staircase of Watcher HQ.

"Xander, wait," Willow called. Xander considered ignoring her, but too many years of listening made his feet stop before he'd even made a decision.

"Xander..." Willow came up to him and put a warm hand on his bare arm. He could feel the love there, but he could also feel her helplessness, the fact that she wanted to help and didn't know how. "He didn't mean it."

"Yeah, he did," Xander answered. Spike didn't say things he didn't mean. Spike was rude, blunt, sexy, sadistic, lithe, and honest. Then again, Xander had always fallen for the sadistic ones, and the way Willow was looking at him, he wasn't fooling her much with his 'I hate Spike' campaign.

"You just need some time to sort this out," she said softly, and Xander made the connection.
"You're sending me away from him," Xander accused her. "So, how many of you are in on this little plan? Giles? Buffy? Wait, did you call Angel and talk about ways to keep me from making the worst mistake of my life?"

Willow pulled back in the face of his anger, and Xander immediately felt guilty. Yep, Xand the Insecure Man spreading unhappiness and misery everywhere he went. Xander wondered what kind of cape came with those sorts of super powers.

"No! I didn't... I just thought..." Willow started tearing up, and Xander's anger evaporated. He reached out and pulled her into a hug.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. You know me, I say lots of stuff I don't mean—it's a disease. I'm just a sick, sick boy... got diarrhea of the mouth here."

"I haven't said anything to anyone," Willow whispered into his chest, and Xander knew she was telling him the truth. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

"Yeah, my skills of pickage suck when it comes to partners," Xander admitted.

"You just deserve someone who loves you."

"Yeah, I know. Maybe you're right about needing some time. So, what's the weather like in Cascade this time of
year?" Xander asked as he laid a cheek against her head, smelling the sweet fruitiness of her shampoo.

"Um, I think rainy," Willow said. Xander glanced toward the windows where a grey English drizzle misted the glass.


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Part One

Xander took a deep breath and looked around the airport. Blair's long hair should be easy enough to spot, or at least that's what he'd thought before stepping off the plan in Cascade and discovering at least 10% of the guys had long hair. Xander shifted the duffle bag higher on his shoulder as he walked off the ramp and into the crowd waiting as families reunited with loud calls and group
hugs. Xander detoured around a happily chatting Asian family as he searched the edges of the crowd.

It was funny how every airport in the world looked just the same... the same light colored walls, the same big windows overlooking the planes as they crept over the grey asphalt. Xander looked up to see a display of Native American headdresses and decorated spears behind bulletproof glass. Yep, there was the obligatory cultural display put up just to prove that this building wasn't interchangeable with the one in Zimbabwe with the shield collection or the one in Phoenix with the Indian pottery collection.

"Xander?" a voice asked from behind him, and he turned around to find the bluest eyes surrounded by a mane of brown and red curls. Blair.

"Blair?" he asked just to be on the safe side.

"Oh man, I'm so totally stoked to meet you. Jim was half convinced this was some sort of practical joke." Blair gestured toward a second man, and Xander turned to smile a hello to Jim. His expression just sort of froze in place as he found himself looking at the scariest guy he'd ever seen. The expression was pretty much like Spike's 'one second away from killing something' face with a bit of Angel's jaw-twitching 'I think you're an idiot but I'm
not going to say it' face thrown in on the side. Oh yeah, someone was not feelin' the love.

"Nice to meet you," Xander finally choked out as he held out a hand. Jim took the hand and ice blue eyes searched him for a second, stopping at the duffle bag before that gaze returned to the crowd. Something from Xander's soldier memories screamed about threat assessments and covert ops, and Xander found himself taking a step to the side to get closer to Blair.

"So, are we ready to get out of here?" Jim suddenly asked.

"Um, yeah. This is all I brought since I don't really trust the airlines with luggage. One time when I was flying to Africa they sent this tribal god carving thing I was supposed to use as a way to prove I wasn't some nutcase because it had this big truth mojo, and they mixed up the bags and sent the thing to Denmark and there I was in this village trying to convince them that I was interested in their young girls because of the whole slayer thing rather than the whole creepy pedophilia thing." Xander groaned to himself as he realized that pedophilia might not be a good topic of discussion around cops.

"Tribal carving? Cool. What tribe?" Blair asked as though Xander hadn't been babbling.
"Um, not sure. Might have been demonic," Xander said. He didn't miss the twitch in Jim's shoulders as the man walked ahead of them.

"Demonic tribes? Oh man, that is so cool. I wonder how Dr. Stoddard would react to a demonic fetish," Blair mused without missing a beat. Funny, Xander had expected more freakage, something more like Jim whose back kept going stiffer until the man could give Angel a run for his money in the stick up his butt department. But Blair seemed strangely okay with it. Xander didn't answer since he really had no idea what to say. Anyway his words seemed to either come all at once or not at all.

"Wait here," Jim said brusquely as they reached the curb. Xander thought he was talking to both of them until Jim's hand reached for Blair's back, herding the shorter man away as Xander stood on the sidewalk wondering whether either of them were going to come back. He had a feeling that if it were up to Jim, the two of them would drive off and leave Xander standing in the grey Cascade morning trying to book a flight back to England. Not that Xander necessarily would head back right now. Time away from the demon slaying and time away from Spike suddenly seemed like a good idea.
Xander shifted his bag to his opposite shoulder as people around him hailed taxis and disappeared into the traffic. When an old blue pickup pulled up to the curb, Xander ignored it until the door opened and Blair leaned out.

"Come on, if we make Jim late for work, we'll never hear the end of it," Blair called, and Xander tossed his bag into the back before climbing in the cab.

The ride to their apartment was uncomfortable with Jim's jaw twitching in very Angel-like ways, Blair filling awkward silences with descriptions of the historical significance of nearly every building they passed and Xander watching them in uncharacteristic silence. He didn't know what to say, especially since there wasn't a good reason for him being here. Sure, Willow had a reason for wanting him out of HQ, but these two were just the saps he got dumped on.

"I left some paperwork in the loft," Jim said in clipped syllables as he parked the truck in front of a bakery.

"You've got time, man. Simon isn't expecting you 'til ten."

"I know, Sandburg," Jim practically growled. Xander had already gotten out and had his bag half out of the bed of the truck, and even though the words weren't aimed at him, he still flinched at the growl.
"Ignore Jim. He's just perpetually cranky," Blair offered as he got out the passenger side and slammed the door. Blair didn't miss the way Jim waited at the hood of the truck and then dropped a hand onto Blair's shoulder as they headed to a door next to the bakery. Xander wondered whether those two were doing it or if his own recently discovered interest in the same sex was just making him look at the world through gay-colored glasses.

"Yeah, no problem. Spent years living with the perpetually cranky myself, only in my case it was the perpetually cranky and occasionally murderous in the blood sucking demon kinda way, but then at least Spike never shaved his legs with my razor the way Dawn does every time she forgets to put razors on her shopping list," Xander said as he followed the pair up the stairs. Or at least he followed after eyeing the elevator for a second.

Jim stopped on the first landing, only a half a story up. "Sandburg, we're out of that organic cleaner you keep under the sink. Unless you want me to use Comet..."

"Oh man, that stuff leaves welts on your skin."

"And it leaves the sink actually clean."

"The organic orange cleaner works just as well."
"If you scrub twice as long," Jim countered. "But do me a favor and run down to the store for some while I get my paperwork together. You know, this would be a lot simpler if that car of yours wasn't always breaking down."

"Hey, she's a classic." Blair protested.

"She's a piece of junk," Jim said with a snort. Xander watched as Blair's gaze went from him to Jim and then back to him. Xander knew that he knew that it was a set-up, but Xander didn't protest despite a pretty good feeling about what was about to happen. Hell, he'd given a few intimidation speeches in his day, so he knew about the whole thing. Blair was obviously the one who had believed Willow's story about Hellmouths and demons and watchers, and Jim... not so much.

"I'll be right back," Blair finally said. "You wanna ride along?" Blair offered.

"Nah, I think I'll stick around and let the Neanderthal intimidate me," Xander shrugged. Blair opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it with an audible snap. Jim's jaw just tightened until Xander could see the jaw muscle bulging.
"Oh man, do not let him scare you. His bark is much worse than his bite," Blair finally said as Jim started up the stairs with heavy footsteps that suggested that Xander had just broken some sort of unwritten rule.

"Yeah, I've dealt with that sort a lot," Xander said as he looked up the stairs. "It's probably just better to let him get it out of his system." He said the words, but he wasn't sure he entirely believed them as he considered being alone with Jim in an apartment. The man was big. And dangerous. And definitely set off the old Hellmouth radar in a vague creepy feeling up the backbone kinda way. And he clearly didn't like Xander.

"I'll be back as quick as I can," Blair promised as he dashed down the stairs and out the door. Xander wondered for a moment if it would be too cowardly to just sit on the steps and wait for Blair to get back, but then again, he had to face Jim sometime. With a sigh he switched his bag from his left shoulder to his right before heading up the stairs. He only hoped that Jim was waiting in the hall because he couldn’t remember the apartment number.
Part Two

Fortunately for Xander, Jim stood with his arms crossed outside one of the doors on the third floor. Xander hitched his bag further up on his shoulder and walked past the man despite the slight Hellmouthy vibes. Or maybe vibe was too strong a word since he was only getting a tingle of Hellmouthiness.

He dropped his bag near a couch and turned to watch as the detective locked the apartment door. It really was a nice place, but Xander didn't spare much attention for the room considering the aggression pouring off every tightly controlled gesture Ellison made.

"Want a beer?" the man asked as he went into the kitchen.

"Um, really rather not. Kinda have some bad memories with beer, and since I figure you aren't going to stop growling at me until we talk this out, I'd rather get to the talking part, not that I want to do the talking part, but if we're going to talk, I really just want it all out on the
table. Not big on the waiting. Waiting bad. And I babble when I get all freaked out by impending talkage," Xander trailed off, and the expression on Jim's face suddenly lightened. The man was possibly even biting his lip to keep from laughing, but laughing was better than pounding.

"Freaked out?" Jim asked as he leaned again the square pillar, taking a drink from a bottle of water before crossing his arms. "I thought you people dealt with Hellmouths and demons." Xander couldn't exactly miss the disbelief in the voice.

"And guys who can hear dog whistles miles away," Xander added. He had to remind himself not to flinch when Jim's expression suddenly darkened again.

"Are you suggesting I fit into the same category with demons?" he demanded.

"No! Well, maybe. Giles said there was a theory that Sentinels might somehow be related to slayers like the male half of the line or something because they have these protective instincts like slayers, although really slayers to a lot of hunting and killing considering they're supposed to be protectors."
"Slayers. You mean the vampire slaying girls Ms. Rosenberg described." Jim said cautiously. Xander fidgeted and moved closer to the door even though he knew Blair couldn't get back this quickly.

"Um, yeah. They're extra strong and have this vampire radar thing going on. But Giles also said that the Sentinels might come from some sort of warrior-priest clan that battled demons like thousands of years ago, and some people think they might actually have some demonic blood in their ancestry." Xander stopped when Jim's hands closed around his jacket and slammed him back into the door hard enough to knock the breath out of him. The man was fast, faster than anyone Xander knew who wasn't a vampire... or a slayer.

"Oh, hey, no grabbing the guest. Willow said you guys were the 'protect the tribe' types, definitely not the 'eviscerate the guest' type."

"You aren't part of my tribe," Jim pointed out, and Xander felt cold fear wrap around his body at the expression on the man's face. "And I don't buy your line. So tell me who you work for and what you want with us," Jim demanded. The hands tightened so that the jacket dug into Xander's underarms.
"The Watcher's Council sent me just to learn about Sentinels. Who else is going to hire a one-eyed carpenter?" Xander's desperation ratcheted up a notch as Jim turned him and pulled one of Xander's arms behind his back. Ellison pushed Xander face-first into the door, and then used his leverage on Xander's arm to keep him there. "You know, if you're trying to convince me you don't have demonic grandparents hidden up in the old family tree, this probably isn't the way to do it," Xander said as one large hand quickly and efficiently frisked him. The grip on his captured arm changed and then his other side got an equally official frisking.

When the cold of metal went around his wrist, he used the hand he had braced on the door to try and free himself.

"Hey, just hold on one second because I am not into that. Handcuffs were definitely not in the travel brochure, and if you're that cranky about houseguests, just let me know, and I'll find a hotel. Never let it be said I stayed where I wasn't wanted." Xander tried to turn and regain control of his hand, but a kick to the back of one of his knees sent him crashing to the floor, his cheek plastered to the door. "HEY!" he complained even louder as his second arm was pulled to the small of his back before being handcuffed in place.
"Right, so now we're going to have that talk you mentioned," Jim said as he pulled him up and pushed him toward the couch. He briefly considered a sweeping kick aimed at Jim's legs, but considering how easily the man had cuffed him, Xander wasn't making any bets on how well that would go over. He decided on going for the helpless approach instead, which wasn't all that hard handcuffed in a strange city in a strange man's apartment. Why was he the only one who always got into these messes?

Strong hands turned him and then pushed him back into the couch, and Xander flinched when the handcuffs tightened uncomfortably as Jim pressed him back against the cushions.

"Who do you work for?" Jim demanded as he stood over Xander, arms crossed.


"Do you work for the CIA?"

"What? No. I don't even know anyone from the CIA. Well, except these two guys that showed up in Sunnydale to get this invisigirl I went to school with."

"The FBI?"
"No."

"Secret Service?"

"You mean the counterfeit money guys? Just no."

"MI-5? MI-6?"

"Okay, I don't even know who that is." Xander's soldier memories suddenly supplied the information. "Oh, hey, wait, do I sound stuck up and British to you?"

"Army?"

"No." Xander suddenly found Jim Ellison's face an inch from his, Jim's arms on either side of him as he leaned on the back of the couch.

"What branch?" he demanded in a voice that made Xander shudder as much as any fledge's growl ever had.

"What part of 'no' don't you understand?" Xander demanded. "Not big with the military types here, and I'm not going to pass the physical with only one eye."

"So why did your heart speed up at the question?" Jim demanded. Uh oh. Xander considered how to explain that little hitch to someone who didn't even believe in vampires much less chaos mages.
"Um, I might have some Army memories in here after a small Halloween accident with a cursed uniform. But I have hyena memories after a small zoo accident with a cursed hyena, and I don't go eating raw meat... any more. Anyway, my point is that I'm no more a soldier than a hyena," Xander pressed back into the couch as Jim leaned even farther in. "Personal space, buddy. You're definitely in mine, and I really don't know you well enough to be comfortable sharing body heat unless there's some apocalyptic disaster."

"Cursed uniform? At least you're original," Jim announced as he stood up.

"Um, not really. Everyone sort of got cursed that night. Well, maybe not everyone, but most everyone."

"Wait here," Jim ordered before heading up the stairs.

"Yeah, like I'm going anywhere like this," Xander snorted in disgust as he leaned forward to take some of the weight off his wrists. And there he sat and waited as Ellison slammed around on the second floor. When the lock on the door ground roughly, Xander looked up as Blair pushed the door open with a hip.

"I decided to get a few extras while I was out, so if you he-men types are finished growling at each oth..." Blair
stopped as he came around the door, and Xander figured it wasn't hard to guess why.

"Um, I think the growling part is over and we've moved on to bondage and general intimidation, which is a bit over-the-top-ish in my book, but seems to be making your partner happy."

"What would make me happy is if you had never called," Jim said as he came down the stairs with a length of chain in his hand: one of those heavy industrial chains with huge links.

"Ya know, technically I never called, so if it's the callage making you grumpy, you really should take that up with Willow." In his head, Xander added, 'the woman who could turn that thing into a daisy chain and leave you making froggy noises as you hopped across the room.

"Oh man, this is the definition of uncool. I told Willow that he'd be perfectly safe here, and I don't think handcuffs and chains fit the bill," Blair added.

"His heart spiked when I asked if he was Army. You may believe this demon crap, but I sure don't, and now that I know where to focus, I plan on finding out exactly who Mr. Harris is representing." Jim wrapped one end of the chain around the pillar and closed a padlock around it.
"Would it help if I once again pointed out that I work for the Watcher's Council? 'Cause I can keep saying that if it helps any," Xander offered as Jim walked over and pulled him to his feet.

"Don't bother," Jim said as he did something with the handcuffs.

"Jim, man, don't do this," Blair finally got around to putting the bags on the counter, and then both of them got to watch as Jim handcuffed Xander's one hand to the end of the chain.

"Chief, if you're right, he won't die from a day chained to the post, and I'll apologize later. If I'm right, I won't risk leaving you alone with him." Jim said to his partner, turning his back on Xander.

"I should be complimented. I normally just get ignored," Xander joked as he sat down on the floor with his back to the post. He might have room to reach a kitchen chair, but he wasn't going to amuse Ellison by trying to reach and finding the chain just a little too short.

"Xander, I am so sorry. He isn't usually such a dickwad," Blair said with a glare.

"Better safe than sorry, so I'll take these keys with me. And don't you go cutting him free. If he isn't still chained
to that post when I come back, there's going to be hell to pay."

"Don't go telling me what do to," Blair shot right back, stepping forward until he was chest to chest with Jim. Xander really thought that the anthropologist would have a better chance if he didn't stand a good five or six inches shorter. As it was, it reminded Xander of a Vinji demon trying to take on a Kleynach demon, or a poodle trying to take on a pit bull, and maybe he really needed to stop hanging around Spike and Buffy if the Vinjis and Kleynaches came to mind first.

"Sandburg."

"Ellison," Blair snapped back in the same frustrated tone.

"I'm not leaving you here with someone dangerous. So, the handcuffs stay, or you can both come down to the station and sit your butts in front of my desk until I check out his story."

"So not cool. You think I didn't check out his story? Oh man, you must think I'm a real idiot."

"Chief, I think you're trusting. And I love that about you, but the Army has some deep cover operatives and I'm not letting them get their hands on your research." Jim put up his hand and brushed the unruly curls out of
Blair's face. "Or you." Xander could practically feel the connection flare to life between them as they touched, Blair's face turning up to Jim, and in return, Jim's features softened. Xander felt his own loneliness grow in the face of that bond. And really, he wasn't about to be the one who made them turn on each other. Nope. Not going there. Well, not going there again, anyway, he amended that as he thought of his own parents.

"Guys, hey, strangely enough this is hardly the first time I've been tied up. As long as you don't try eviscerating me to summon the fires of hell, I'm weirdly okay with the chain," Xander offered. Jim turned to look at him with ice cold eyes.

"Good because you're staying there until I get some answers." He turned back and dropped a quick kiss on Blair's lips before heading for the door.

"Hey, wait," Xander called just as Jim reached out for the knob. He turned and looked at Xander with the same interest that Spike sometimes gave bugs right before smashing them. "What if I have to pee?" Xander asked as he pulled at the chain.

"Use a bucket." Jim pulled the door open and was gone before Xander could even protest.
"Well, I think your lessons on Sentinels have started. Lesson one, they get really pissy when they think their territory is being invaded," Blair sighed as he went back to the kitchen and started unpacking groceries... groceries that included way too many fresh fruits and vegetables for Xander's preference.

"Ya think?" Xander replied from his spot on the floor. Oh yeah, this was going to be like fun--only not.

Part Three

Xander was starting to consider the bucket by the time the door opened and Jim walked through with an expression even grimmer than the one on his face when he left. Xander looked up from his nest of cushions where he was trying to read a huge binder Blair had loaned him. Okay, to be fair he sort of read two or three words, asked Blair a question, and then listened as Blair explained the stuff
with more enthusiasm than Willow describing the atomic thingy during a convergence spell whatsit. Yeah, he didn't really listen to her, but he listened as Blair described a Jim who he hadn't yet met, a Jim who was noble and self-sacrificing and overprotective, and maybe he had seen a bit of that last one. And from the expression on Jim's face, he might be about to see more of that, but Xander really didn't know what would have put such a grim look on the Sentinel's face considering Xander really wasn't some top-secret super spy.

"As much as it pains me to say this, my bladder and I are very happy to see you," Xander said with a crooked smile despite the look of murder in Jim's face.

"Give me your hand," he ordered as he pulled out the keys. Xander stood up and offered his handcuffed hand.

"Told you," Blair loudly whispered from near the stairs where he stood with his own arms crossed. As long as he got to use a bathroom, Xander didn't care who told who what or when they'd told it. As soon as the handcuff came free, Xander darted toward the door where Blair had earlier flushed the toilet and nearly made Xander ask for that bucket.

After peeing about a gallon, Xander wandered out of the bathroom wondering what exactly he was going to have
to face. At this point, he'd be happy with a quick order to get out of Dodge. Not that he would, but at least then he could grab his bag and call Blair from the relative safety of a hotel. However, when he opened the door, he found Jim standing in his way.

"Can we just avoid the touchage, more specifically, the man handling? Just tell me where you want me to sit, and I'll sit there -- no pushing, pulling, man handling, frisking, intimidating, or handcuffing required," Xander offered as he held up his hands in a show of surrender.

"I, uh, called around some," Jim answered, in Xander noticed both that the words weren't instructions as to where to sit and that Jim looked mildly... well, embarrassed was the closest word he could come up with.

"And I'm assuming you found out that I'm not some big government spy. 'Cause I'm not."

"Yeah. I found one or two people who could confirm that."

Xander waited for Jim to continue, but instead they stood with Xander in the bathroom and Jim right outside it. "Um, not to complain since this is actually better than my accommodations for the afternoon, but are we going
to have this entire conversation in the bathroom?" Jim flinched a bit before backing off a step and waving a hand toward the living room. Xander slipped out of the bathroom keeping as far away from Jim as possible.

"Oh man, I knew he had nothing to do with the military. Don't you owe him something?" Blair asked without getting up from the couch. Xander made his way into the living room and sat in the chair.

"Oh, hey, no. No biggie, nothing to make the absolutely huge and still slightly cranky Sentinel apologize for," Xander hurried to say.

"Xander," Jim started in a tired voice as he walked into the living room.

"No, really, I mean it. All's fair in love and when being incredibly and completely overly protective." Xander really wasn't about to push things, especially with Jim still looking so cranky. He really didn't want to spend the night chained to the post.

"Xander, have you ever heard of The Initiative?" Jim demanded, and it was suddenly very clear that an apology was about the farthest thing from his mind.

"Maybe in an 'I really don't want to talk about it' kinda way," he admitted carefully. It was obvious that Jim
could sense a lie, well, that and he really wasn't infallible. Xander definitely did not want to get into discussions about the Initiative around the guy. There were a couple of slayer secrets that did not need to go outside the group who had taken Adam down. Hell, he really didn't want to talk about Adam either. It really wasn't a good time what with Spike trying to break up the group and Adam trying to kill the group. Spike's words still stung at him a little.

"You sound a little defensive there, buddy."

"Oh hey, earned the right to be a little defensive here."

"Who is the Initiative?" Blair interrupted.

"Bad guys, well not really bad guys as much as totally clueless guys, but still. Whether they meant to be evil or not, they still kinda ended up doing evil stuff."

"That's what Major Finn suggested, just not in quite those words..." Jim said.

"Riley? He got promoted? Good on him. So now you know I'm telling the truth. Do we get to skip the Houdini impression... or the half of the Houdini impression. The chaining up half without the escape half since my powers of escape kind of suck."
"I want to hear your version. Who are the Initiative and what is your connection with them?"

"Hey! No connection at all, at least not after I helped blow up their little secret base."

"Whoa -- you blew up a government base?" Blair asked with wide eyes.

"Um, yeah but demons had taken over most of the place by then."

"Start from the beginning." Jim ordered as he leaned back on the couch his one arm resting on the back, and his hand resting on Blair's shoulder.

"Oh man, I'd love to hear that story," Blair added, and Xander smiled at the man he was quickly learning to see as a friend. The comment made him feel like he was just telling the story rather than getting interrogated by Ellison. He started at the point where a smoking and chipped Spike had shown up and kept talking until he got to Riley's last visit. Yeah, the one where Spike was sleeping with Buffy, and that didn't hurt him in the least. Not at all. Yeah, he was just going to keep telling himself that. And really he didn't know whether it was the secrecy part or the fact that Buffy said yes to Spike after turning him down or the fact that Spike said yes to Buffy
after years of making fun of him. And really, this wasn't the time to try and figure it out.

Jim had just opened his third beer when Xander finally stumbled to a stop.

"Oh man," Blair whispered.

"Yeah, Chief, that pretty well covers it."

"So, is that pretty much what Riley told you?" Xander asked as he tried not to play with the hem of his shirt. Spike always told him it made him look like an insecure six-year-old being sent off to kindergarten. Xander had tried pointing out that five year olds went to kindergarten, not six-year-olds. Spike and just smirked wider and answered with an "Exactly" that it had taken Xander several minutes to figure out.

"There are parts that definitely don't match," Jim said slowly, and Xander opened his mouth to protest. Jim's voice cut him off," Which actually makes it more likely to be true. The only way two people ever describe an event the same way is if they practice their stories."

"No more chains?" Xander asked hopefully.
"No more chains." Blair answered definitively as he turned to glare at his partner. Jim looked back impassively and unapologetically.

"Of the good," Xander said to try and derail the growing tension.

"I am sorry about that, but you have to admit your story sounds a little..." Jim stopped.

"Completely, entirely fucking insane?" Xander added helpfully.

"Yeah, that," Jim conceded.

"So tomorrow the three of us are going to hit the field." Blair said excitedly.

Wha... no way. Simon is not going to sign off on a carpenter doing a ride along." Jim protested.

"So we don't tell him, but man, Xander cannot learn what he needs to know from books. He needs to be out there seeing how you work, learning how a Sentinel uses his senses, observing you as you defend your territory." Blair might have been impassioned in his words, but Jim's stony expression didn't change a bit.
"Um, I'm really not big on the book learning, so if I could learn things more hands-on..." Xander blushed at his own phrasing. He didn't think he wanted to get as hands-on as those two who had somehow moved closer together at some point so that Jim's whole arm was thrown over Blair shoulder and Blair's hand rested on Jim's thigh. The touching seemed so natural -- so unconscious -- that Xander couldn't resist watching longingly. And despite their clear frustration with each other, the touching continued.

"No," Jim insisted firmly. "This is Simon's job on the line if something happens."

"Oh man, this could make the difference between a life in an asylum and life as a functional Sentinel defending his territory for some Sentinel who the watcher's Council manages to find. The council has resources we can't dream of, and with a good enough understanding of Sentinel abilities they have a chance of finding and helping potential Sentinels. Think what would happen if no one had frowned and helped you. We have an obliga..."

"Chief this isn't..."

"The structure they set up to find potential slayers turned actual slayers could be easily adapted to make a
global search for Sentinels using existing reporting agencies and some creative hacking...

"That doesn't mean..."

"And if we can help them find and save other Sentinels, the ability to then empirically study this phenomenon in a larger population could give us clues about how to better protect Sentinels from zones outs or even the phenomenon you experienced when Alex came..."

"Chief," Jim growled, and Xander shrank back into the chair is the two men battled.

"Hey, it's no problem," Xander tried interrupting.

"Oh man, we cannot just keep ignoring the fact that she hijacked your senses. With a larger population..."

"Sandburg, we're not discussing this." Jim's expression came pretty close to the one that Angel would get right before he killed something that he really didn't want to kill. Xander shivered.

"Man, you cannot repress this away. With a larger sample population we could isolate the phenomenon."
"Enough," Jim said as he stood up from the couch, breaking the physical contact that had continued even into the fight.

"Says who?" Blair demanded as he stood.

"Chief, please," Jim said softly and Xander was amazed at the sudden transformation as Blair's mulish expression faded, and he reached out to touch Jim's arm. For several seconds they stood there touching, looking at each other.

"We can talk about it tomorrow, huh? Maybe with some sleep things will seem clearer. Hey, I know, maybe we can just use experiments and demonstrations with Xander after work," Blair suddenly compromised.

"We'll figure it out tomorrow," Jim promised as he reached up to rest a hand on Blair's shoulder, the fingers playing with a curl of hair. "Right now I just want to order some pizza, watch the game, and pretend vampires don't exist."

"I bought all the supplies for my ostrich chili and my mango walnut green salad."

"Pizza sounds good," Xander threw in at this point. What with being chained to a post all afternoon and then having to watch the fight, he was having a bad enough
day already. He really didn't need to cap things off by having to eat vegetables.

"Whatever, man. I just have two words for you guys: Heart Disease." Blair sighed and rolled his eyes, but he also sat on the couch without further complaints while Jim went over to the phone. At least something was going Xander's way today.

Part Four

"So tell me, what did you have to do to beg, bribe, or blackmail Mr. Macho into letting me ride along?" Xander asked as he looked out the front window of the truck.

"Oh man, lesson number... what number are we on now?" Blair asked.

"I lost track somewhere around the forties. Not that I remember any other than to expect general pissiness, and I'm really hoping you have a Cliff Notes version somewhere, because I was never big on the remembering."

"Yeah, no problem. I probably need to write up something that looks less like an anthropological dissertation and more like a practical set of guidelines. But back to your question, don't expect a Sentinel's
decision-making process to make sense to mere mortals," Blair told him in a tone of voice that teetered between aggravated and amused.

"Not of the good, huh?"

"A little questionable," Blair agreed. "I totally wish I were joking, but I've seen Jim go on guilt trips when it would've taken Superman to do a better job than he did. And then as much as Jim likes to deny it, he does have instinctive behaviors that make it very clear that Sentinel abilities are linked with the primitive brain. Oh man, you should see when some poor FBI agent comes into town. Jim's territorial imperative kicks in and he will not let them near his case." Blair nodded out the front window where Jim was speaking to one of his snitches, the cop's arms crossed over his chest aggressively. "And then he gets these mystical dreams that send him running off in some crazy new direction. He kicked me out of the house once. He has one weird dream and he packs up everything I own and tells me to leave. My best advice is just go with the flow. God, we must help like real flakes to you, huh?"

"Um, not so much. When it comes to the weird, it takes more than that to even hit my weird o'meter," Xander assured him. "I mean, the guy who hit me upside the
head with a microscope hard enough to give me a concussion when I was 16 lived with me in my parents' basement when I was 18. And then there's the weirdage with the dating, and you really don't know weird until your date has spent the evening explaining ways to emasculate men."

"Oh man, I hear you. I dated this feminist literature major once... oh boy." Blair rolled his eyes and held his hands up in surrender to emphasize the horror of the experience.

"Yeah, only Anya tended to use things like branding irons and communicable diseases to do her emasculating.

"Literally?" Blair demanded in a shocked voice. Xander nearly laughed as Blair closed his legs unconsciously. He knew the feeling.

"Literally," he agreed. "Six months after we broke up, I'd still wake up every morning and check to make sure I still, you know, had it."

"I hear ya. Man, I so totally hear you."

"Um, is that normal?" Xander asked as he watched Jim grab the snitch by his jacket and slam him into the brick wall. "I know Hellmouth cops do that, but they're just
slightly on the completely worthless side, and I somehow
didn't think your normal cop on the street type did that."

"My guess, the guy lied. Jim doesn't take well to being
lied to."

"Remind me not to lie to him... not that he's all sunshine
and light when I tell the truth, but that... yeah, not really
feeling a need to get that roughed up."

"Trust me. Jim may bear his teeth and growl, but he
would never hurt someone who wasn't threatening the
tribe."

"Are you really sure of that, because I have to tell you
that I would be pissing my pants right now because he's
looking kinda of the serious there."

"The point of dominance displays is TO look serious, but
it's like a stag shaking his antlers to challenge other
males. It's not actually meant to cause harm," Blair
explained, and the man did know his Sentinel pretty well
because Jim suddenly stepped back and crossed his arms
again.

The snitch's mouth moved at near Willow speeds, and
Xander had to admit that the cop was effective. A little
over-protective and more than a little cranky, but then
he hadn't been Mr. Accepting when Buffy had first shown
up in Sunnydale. Hell, he'd just really wanted to hide his head under his pillow and pretend to not know about the things that went bump in the night.

Problem was that Jesse had been the one he had always hid from bullies with, and since he had sorta staked his best friend, it was hard to do the denial thing. And Xander definitely remembered the lesson about Sentinels being over-protective of guides, and Xander had just introduced Jim to a whole new world of bad guys who might not just kidnap but could also eat, eviscerate, or sacrifice the guide. Yeah, he got the cranky part. Didn't mean he had to like being glared at, but he got it. And speaking of the cranky devil…. Xander watched as Jim stomped back to the truck.

"Hey, looked like he talked," Blair said enthusiastically.

"Unfortunately, most of it was babble," Jim growled, and Xander could have sworn the man looked his way. Xander quickly looked out the side window and scooted closer to the door.

"So, where to next?"

"Harry said this guy has been picking up girls in the low-rent strip joints. You up for some nosing around, Chief."

"Hell yeah am I."
"You don't have to sound quite so enthusiastic."

"Hey, just because I am happily monogamous with my occasionally cranky roommate does not mean that I can't occasionally look elsewhere. Fantasy is a healthy component of any sexu..."

"Hold it right there, Chief. We have an audience, remember?" Jim asked in a voice that sounded more amused than offended. Xander just focused on the interesting, interesting grey buildings out his window. Yep. There was another one. How interesting—one grey, square warehouse after another. How very, very interesting.

"I'm talking about accepted psychological concepts, I'm not outing you to your golf buddies."

"I don't play golf, and if I did, I wouldn't care if they knew about you, Chief. I just don't think sex is really polite conversation."

"Hey, I'm supposed to be teaching him everything I know," Blair teased, and Xander could feel his heart sputter into second gear at that comment. Oh yeah, just focus on the warehouses and not the hot body next to him. Hot temperature-wise, not hot as in sexy-hot, and here we are focusing on the warehouses, Xander
mentally babbled, but babble was good if it could just
distract him from thinking about what Jim would kill him
for thinking about.

"For right now, can we focus on finding this creep and
teaching the kid the boring stuff you usually make me
listen to? I know, give him your theory on cultural
depression."

"Culturally-motivated repression of the senses. You have
a college degree, so I don't know why you pretend to be
so obtuse."

"I'm not pretending, Sandburg. I just tune you out after a
while. Anyway, give him that lecture and maybe his heart
will stop speeding," Jim said.

Xander could feel his heart give another jump as
adrenaline flooded his system. Oh shit. Busted. Maybe
Jim just thought it was him being weirded out by the
whole discussion. Xander focused out the window and
tried to ignore the friendly fight that continued next to
him. Now that he had known these two for a full day, he
could tell that these little mini battles of words were just
friendly teasing, but the sex talk was hitting a little close
to home.
Xander wondered what Spike was up to. He kept trying to just let his stupid case of lusting go, but every time he thought he had gotten the bleached one out of his brain, the asshole would make some gesture like volunteering to drive him to the airport. Hell, the vamp had even managed a nearly non-insulting type farewell with a final order to avoid any demons large enough to eat him. But maybe Xander was lucky that the whole never been gay before thing kept his mouth sealed shut on the crushing front. If he ever 'fessed up to liking Spike the vamp would make his life a living hell.

"Xander," Jim's voice called, and Xander shook his head as he turned to face the two men in the cab. Jim was leaning forward, his head cocked slightly to the side as he looked over with a concerned expression, and Blair's hand rested on Xander's knee.

"Man, are you alright?" Blair asked. Xander gave a crooked smile before opening his mouth to reassure them that him mentally wandering... not of the new. Instead he opened his mouth and made a different sort of announcement.

"There's something with a big ol' Hellmouthy vibe here, guys," Xander said as he felt the tiny spider feet of creepiness crawl up his backbone. He hadn't even
realized there was a Hellmouth vibe until he got off the Hellmouth since Hellmouthy vibes were the norm there. Now he suspected that something was definitely not right. Hellmouthy not right.

"Okay. Can you describe what exactly a Hellmouth vibe feels like?" Blair asked. Xander looked at the man incredulously.

"I'm telling you that something out there is putting off danger or evil vibes, and you want to know what evil vibes feel like? Shouldn't you be more worried about out there than in here since something out there has the vibage going on?"

"Welcome to my world," Jim said dryly, cutting Blair off as the man opened his mouth. "Tests later, right now I want to know what's got the kid twitchy," Jim interrupted. Somehow he had expected Jim to do the

Part Five
disbelieving thing, but instead Xander could see the tension in the man's body as he stood next to the open door of the truck scanning the area. Xander slid out on his side and slammed the door before walking around the truck.

The air was thick with a fine mist that refused to turn into an actual rain, and Xander could practically feel the cold soaking into him. Oh yeah, something really, really Hellmouthy around here.

"So, which way?" Jim asked, his head turning as he scanned the various strip clubs and bars and cheap hotels in the areas.

"Me?! You're the Sentinel."

"You're the one with the Hellmouth vibe," Jim countered.

"And I told you I'm vibing, so it's all yours from here," Xander protested. Jim and Blair exchanged a glance that Xander couldn't even begin to interpret and then Blair took a step forward.

"Okay, let's take this one step at a time. When did you start feeling the vibe?" Blair asked.
"Um, I don't know," Xander said helplessly. "When we pulled in?" He certainly wasn't going to admit that his own lusty thoughts had distracted him.

"Okay, let's walk around a bit and see if we can get more specific," Blair suggested as he slipped a hand under Xander's arm and guided him away from the truck and toward the gas station on the corner.

"Can't superman over there... I don't know... sniff the air or something?" Xander complained.

"What exactly am I supposed to be sniffing for?" Jim asked wryly as he trailed behind. Xander turned his neck to look at the Sentinel.

"You're not supposed to be big on the believing me, anyway. Why are you believing me?"

"Man, argue later, focus on the Hellmouth vibes now," Blair demanded, and Xander stumbled a bit as Blair picked up the pace. "So, are they stronger or weaker or about the same?"

"I don't... weaker I guess," Xander admitted as he realized the invisible spiders were starting to just crawl down his spine instead of running.
"Awesome, man. Let's try across the street." Xander really didn't have a choice as he found himself just sort of pushed along by Blair. They crossed the street a second time before the spiders started tap-dancing their way up and down his back.

"Um, feeling something creepy here," Xander admitted as he came to a stop in front of a sign advertising topless dancing, complete with a caricature of a woman with impossibly large breasts.

"Okay, Chief, you stay here," Jim said as he stepped forward.

"No way," Blair countered.

"Chief, I don't want a civilian in here, and I don't want to leave him out here alone," Jim insisted, and even Xander saw the logic in that. He wasn't exactly Helpful Guy in a fight, and even Blair looked half-convinced by the argument.

"How about I just go back to the truck and wait?" Xander offered.

Jim's snort of laughter was unexpected. "And here I thought you were so much like Blair. Obviously not. Just stay in the truck, and we'll be back as soon as we can,"
Jim ordered, putting a hand on Blair's shoulder as he stepped between his partner and the door.

"If he came, he might be able to narrow down the suspects," Blair argued.

"Not a chance. This guy is dangerous, and I have enough trouble keeping track of one of you, Chief," Jim said absentmindedly as he focused on the building. Xander backed away a bit, and he tried to tell himself that it was stupid to be so insanely jealous of people he didn't even know. It wasn't even the sex part... with Willow busy running the magical side of the Council and Buffy running around with the Immortal, no one ever touched Xander like that... like he mattered. Spike smacking him on the arm was as close as he came to good touching, and that wasn't exactly good touching since the soul didn't stop him from leaving bruises.

"I'll just go wait in the truck," he turned around and made a near dash for the truck before he lost all his manly points with a good old fashioned bout of pathetic self-pity.

Xander sat and tried not to look like some pervert sitting in the truck between a strip club and a cheap bar. From the way people looked at him through the front window, he wasn't doing a very good job. When he first heard the
sirens, he was half-afraid that someone had called the cops on him.

Then people started running out of the strip club across the street, two young men dashing for the beat up yellow Dodge parked in front of the bar. A fat older man hurried to the adult bookstore next door. A whole group of seven or eight men made a beeline for another strip place, hurrying as the sound of sirens grew closer.

Xander shifted in his seat, suddenly aware of being vulnerable sitting here, and he reached over and pressed down the door lock. Yeah, because a lock would certainly stop a bullet, he thought to himself sarcastically.

A Cascade police cruiser came around the corner, followed by a second unmarked car with lights flashing through the front grille of the car.

The door to the bar slammed open and Blair came out, yelling something to the two uniformed officers who went running inside while a huge black man got out of the second car and went up to Blair.

Soon enough Jim came out, followed by a short balding man in handcuffs who was flanked on either side by a uniformed cop. Xander could tell from the smiles that everyone was happy and Blair was moments away from
doing a Snoopy dance of victory, but Jim's summoning
gesture caught him off guard. Yeah, and turning around
to see if Jim was gesturing to someone behind him, that
was just of the stupid. And embarrassing.

Xander unlocked the door and slid out before heading
across the street that newly arrived cop cars had blocked
off.

"No one beyond this point," a uniformed officer stopped
him.

"He's with us," Blair said as he came bounding over.
"Simon, this is Xander," Blair said as the large man
followed.

"Another ride along?" the man demanded as he turned
to Jim.

"Not my fault I keep collecting geeks," Jim said with a
shrug.

"Hey!" Blair complained. "Man, that is uncool."

"Jim, our paperwork on Blair wouldn't stand up to
someone taking a good look at it. What's the story on the
new one?" Simon stuck an unlit cigar in his mouth as he
glanced in Xander’s direction, frowning.
"He's temporary, but he helped track Kent."

"Oh?" Simon turned at looked at him again with new interest, and Xander struggled not to squirm under a gaze that reminded him of Snyder. "How did he do that?" Simon asked.

"Trust me, sir. You do not want to know. Just mark it up as a Sentinel thing," Jim said as he started toward the truck. "Come on you two, time for the fun part of the day's adventure—paperwork."

Part Six

"Oh man, that was really something. I can't believe we nailed the rapist on the first day out," Blair practically bubbled as the truck bounced over some road construction.

"Teamwork, Chief," Jim answered with a smile, and Xander felt the warmth of that word.
"Yeah, let's talk about that," Blair interrupted Xander's moment of basking.

"Talk about what?" Jim asked cautiously.

"Talk about how you went from chaining him to a post because you refused to believe his story to believing in Hellmouth vibes enough to follow his lead." When Blair laid it all out like that, it did sound a little strange, even to Xander who made strange a way of life, but Jim only shrugged as he parked the truck in front of the building with the loft.

"Have my reasons."

"Which you are going to share, correct?" Blair asked as he slid over the bench seat and scrambled out the truck after Jim. Xander got out of the truck on his side feeling suddenly left out at the two men started arguing again. Funny, the only people he knew that argued this much were him and Spike. Willow would have pulled out the pouty lip to get these two to stop it, and she had pulled out the pouty lip more than once to derail him and Spike. However, these two seemed to take the fights in stride. Hell, they seemed to enjoy it.

"God, you're a nag, Sandburg."
"Yeah, yeah. Spill. Something changed your mind." Blair followed Jim into the building, and Xander tagged along after. Personally he didn't care why Jim changed his mind as long as he didn't get chained to another post.

"Don't have much to spill yet," Jim answered and then the words ended as the three men went up the stairs, but Blair picked up the minute they reached the third floor hallway.

"Maybe you don't have much, but you have something, man. I am not letting this go, so spill."

Jim sighed heavily as he stood next to the front door to the loft waiting for Xander to come in. "I might have had a dream," he finally admitted.

"Whoa, one of those dreams? Oh man, this is heavy. Was Xander in it?" Blair had started heading for the refrigerator, but now he stopped and turned back around.

"You're dreaming about me?" Xander asked, confused. Not that confused was new, but Blair had said the dreams were some sort of Sentinel warning system, and Xander wasn't sure he wanted to be in the middle of a warning.
"Not exactly," Jim said as he came in and dropped onto the couch. "You two aren't going to let this drop, are you?"

"Not a chance, man. Not a chance," Blair agreed as he came over and sat on the arm of the couch nearest Jim. For his part Xander kept his mouth closed and retreated to the chair despite a growing nervousness that made him want to fill the silence with noise, any noise.

"I saw a cat... Xander's spirit animal."

"I have a spirit animal?" Xander asked, shocked. "And it's a cat? I always figured if I had one it'd be a hyena what with the possession, but then again Dru with her crazy talk did call me a kitten, which really is not high on the list of animal names a man wants to hear applied to himself," Xander said, shock blasting his resolve to not talk. You couldn't spend years half-listening to Willow without knowing that having a spirit animal was big. Really big.

"It's a cat," Jim confirmed, ignoring the rest. "You were tracking something, and I tried to keep up, but you kept disappearing into the underbrush."
"He got away from you?" Blair interjected. "The great Sentinel couldn't keep up?" Blair laughed as he used his leg to nudge Jim playfully.

"Keep it up, Sandburg. I'll give you beard burn in places you don't even want to think about," Jim threatened as he grabbed the attacking knee, sliding his hand to the inside as he captured it. Xander found something else to look at before he embarrassed himself again. Stupid Sentinel senses.

"Okay, so do you see a lot spirit guides?" Xander asked as he tried to remember what Blair had said about the dreams. He really wasn't good with learning out of a book, and Blair's book was nearly as confusing as Giles' books.

"Nope, my own, Blair's, Incacha's, yours, and a rogue Sentinel."

"Wait, you think Xander's a guide," Blair said as he practically bounced on the arm of the couch. "Oh man, that is so cool. So when he said he felt Hellmouth vibes..."

"Slow down, Darwin."

"Hold on, I'm not a guide. I'm the normal one of the group who gets kidnapped and hit over the head and..."
knocked into tombstones and has to be rescued. I'm the one the First ignores, the average-Joe middle-child Jan Brady of our little Hellmouthy Brady Bunch," Xander added. Guiding meant having to watch out for a Sentinel and keep him safe and he was not signing up for Blair's job. Besides, Blair already had Blair's job.

"You have a spirit guide. That doesn't make you a guide, but it does mean you have a connection to the spirit world. It means you might be a Shaman," Jim corrected him. Xander heard the words, but he couldn't quite get the brain to engage. Blair didn't seem to have any trouble with the brain-engage problem because he was already off and running.

"Oh man. But if he found a Sentinel..."

"Darwin, not everyone wants to be around some Sentinel who between the guilt and the sensory spikes is grouchy about as often as not. I wouldn't put up with me." Jim's hand was still wrapped around Blair's leg, and Blair reached down to touch Jim's cheek.

"Wouldn't trade my grouchy Sentinel for anything," he said in a tone of voice that made Xander ache with longing.
"Wait. Confused here. So, am I a guide or not?" Xander interrupted the moment. His pity button and his lust button were way too close to the surface here to take any Jim/Blair mush.

"The word 'guide,' it's something Blair and I use, but really a Sentinel works with a Shaman. So, a guide is a Shaman who has chosen to help a Sentinel."

"Giles had this Shaman in to work with Willow when they were trying to convince the spirit of this postal worker to stop with the decapitating of dogs in this neighborhood, and I'm seriously hoping you don't think I'm going to paint my face red and stick bird feathers in my hair. With the patch, I don't think I can pull that off. Now if I had the whole bird sitting on my shoulder, that might be a possible look for me."

"Hey, I'm the Shaman of the Great City, and basically I just help Jim with interpreting the dreams, when the big idiot isn't forgetting to tell me he had them. So, start from the beginning." Xander smiled at the image of the man ordering his partner around, especially since Jim looked strong enough- and what with his covert ops background definitely had the knowledge- to break Blair in half. Instead Jim just gave Blair an indulgent look.
"I'm in the jungle and I see the jaguar and the wolf lying next to the temple. I don't see anything else until the jaguar sits up, and looks over my shoulder. When I turn, I catch a hint of something yellow dashing through the trees. I don't know how I know, but I know it's tracking something through the jungle, and I start running after it. Next thing you know, I am the jaguar and I'm racing through the jungle at top speed, my claws ripping through the forest floor. But no matter how fast I run, this flash of yellow dodges away after whatever it's chasing."

"Running, I can do running. Lots and lots of practice with running," Xander confirmed.

"But he was tracking something, so when he said he had a Hellmouth vibe--" Blair's voice broke off and when he started talking again, the hesitation had turned to awe. "You think it's part of some Shaman powers. Cool. Oh man, I would love to have powers."

"You mean you don't?" Xander couldn't help feeling a little guilty at that revelation. He was supposed to be the normal one, not the one with some sort of special powers that made people who were normal feel like they were somehow smaller.
"No Problemo. But you know what this means? Oh man, if you can find a Sentinel, you could be a guide. You could keep them from losing themselves in the sensory spikes because trust me when I say I will *not* be getting near another Sentinel. And you could help them track down threats. So now it's more important than ever that you train. We should do some tests to determine how you lock on to whatever you're tracking. You didn't even know the suspect, so I wonder what set off your 'vibes'?

Blair mused in a string of words that would have made Willow proud.

"Watch it, kid. When Sandburg gets going like that, it means he's thinking up new ways to torture you with testing," Jim said as he looked fondly up at his partner two seconds before getting swatted on the arm.

"This is important. Oh man, how could he have picked up on our rapist?"

"Well, considering the suspect is a garden variety human, it wasn't anything related to a Hellmouth, no matter what he calls it."

"I think you guys are making way too big of a deal out of this," Xander protested. Suddenly being the normal one sounded good because being of the un-normal variety meant people relying on him, and relying on him to
remember the doctor's appointments was very much okay, but relying on him to track down evil was way outside his comfort zone.

"No way man. Xander, I know you guys have faced major bad guys. Now imagine if you had some way of latching onto the evil, tracking it down before it could hurt someone. You could help save people." Blair kept talking, but Xander had long practice at tuning out babble. He also had a series of images suddenly running through his head. He'd been drawn to Faith the minute she came to town. He managed to hit on the only vampire in a hardware store full of humans... a vampire who had then tried to sacrifice him to the Hellmouth. He remembered a feeling of serious Hellmouth vibe right before following those bullies into the hyena house where an evil zookeeper shoved a primal spirit in him.

Xander had heard of people's lives flashing before their eyes when they died, and when Caleb had stuck a thumb in his eye and come within an inch of killing Xander, he had relived every mistake and regret he had in life... most importantly, never really committing to Anya. Now his life flashed before him in another series of moments. And suddenly he questioned the whole demon-magnet reputation.
"Xander!?!" a voice broke into his thoughts.

"Uh, what?" Xander asked as he blinked and found Blair in front of him.

"Oh man, you scared the shit out of me. Are you okay? You're, like, white as a ghost here."

"Yeah, just... thinking," Xander answered, his hands trembling a little as his entire world suddenly shifted two inches to the left. And things really looked different from two inches to the left. Really different.

"Might help to talk about it," Blair said encouragingly.

"Give him some space, Sandburg," Jim's voice interrupted. "In fact, why don't we go out for dinner? Xander, you want to come with us or stay here and eat leftover pizza?" Jim asked. Xander looked over and realized that Jim was being protective of him. He smiled at the Sentinel.

"I hate to let good pizza go to waste," he said weakly, still struggling with the idea that he'd spent half his life cursing his bad luck, only to find out his bad luck WAS his superpower. And as far as superpowers went, this one kinda sucked.
"But..." Blair started, and Jim stood up, and put his hands around Blair's shoulders as he pulled the man backwards.

"No 'buts' Darwin. Xander can watch the fort while you accompany me to a nice little place I call Wonderburger."

"Oh man, not that crap. That stuff will clog your arteries."

"But I'll die a happy man. Get your coat."

"Jim," Blair started, and Xander had to smile at the pathetic tone of voice.

"Not gonna work, Chief. I've been trained to withstand torture," Jim said as he manhandled his partner out of the room, leaving Xander alone with his thoughts.

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For several minutes Xander continued to sit and stare at the wall. Then he picked up the phone and started punching the numbers he had memorized while in Africa. The phone rang several times before someone picked up.
"What the bloody hell do you want?"

"Spike?"

"Harris?"

"I was just... Is Willow there?" Xander asked.

"Some big nasty after you?"

"No, Spike, despite the rumor, I am not actually a demon magnet."

"Tell that to someone who hasn't lived with ya, mate," Spike snorted his disbelief. "But if ya don't have some butt-ugly nasty tryin' ta eat you, why are ya callin' at near three in the morning?"

"It's three?" Xander counted in his head. Usually he was only two or three hours off from them, but usually he was in Africa and not on the other side of the globe.

"Bloody hell. You really are a moron."

"Says the man who fell for the fake seer bit."

"Oi, that didn't have nothin' to do with you lot."

"Yeah, but it's still true. Listen, I don't suppose Willow is doing her sit up and read all night thing, is she?" Xander
asked. He really wanted to talk to someone and fighting with Spike didn't actually qualify as talking.

"Hold on a bit, yeah?" Spike asked.

"I'll wait."

Xander pulled his feet up under him in the chair as he waited in the fading light inside the loft.

"She's sound asleep over her books, and I'm not wakin' her up for you," Spike said when he finally came back to the phone.

"I don't suppose the G-man is around, is he?" Xander asked. Giles really was his last chance to get any info on Shamans.

"Git went over to Paris ta talk to the froggies 'bout some demon treaty."


"Oi, didn't know you were the thought police."

"Yeah, well someone needs to police your thoughts because you obviously don't. Offensive much?"
"You're the one callin' me. So if ya don't want to hear my opinions, ya can just bloody hang up."

"What do you know about Shamans?" Xander blurted before his brain could tell his mouth to just say 'goodbye' and hang up.

"Ya mean like the voodoo Shamans?" Spike asked cautiously. "Told ya not ta mess with anything big enough ta kill ya, didn't I?"

"I'm not 'messing' with a Shaman, and what you told me was to stay away from demons large enough to eat me."

"Close enough. So what the hell are ya into over there?"

"It's just that Blair, the guy who works with the Sentinel, is a Shaman and I was just wondering what it really meant to be a Shaman since Blair seems to be of the normal." Xander shifted uncomfortably, and really he didn't know why since he wasn't technically lying. And even if he was lying, it was Spike which meant it didn't morally count as lying.

"Shaman are a strange lot. Most do seem normal when they aren't puttin' on a bone and bell rattle show for the tourists. But their powers... well, ya just don't mess with 'em since ya can't tell their powers until ya piss 'em off." Spike's voice carried a clear warning.
"So, do they all have powers?" Xander asked, as nonchalantly as he could fake.

"It's what makes them Shamans. Some just have more than others. So, if this git seems normal, what makes you think he's a Shaman?"

"Jim, the Sentinel, says he can see the spirit animals of Shaman and Sentinels. Hey, why animals?"

"How the bloody hell should I know?"

"But is it true? Do Shaman all have a spirit animal?"

"Seems like. Played poker with one who claimed his power totem was lightning, but who the hell knows. Could be his spirit animal was a dormouse and he just didn't want to admit it."

"Wait. You played poker with a Shaman?"

"Did until I figured out his power let him tell who was bluffing. Soddin' cheat."

"But a Shaman playing poker?" Xander demanded. He had an image of a man with lines of red painted across his cheeks holding cards with one hand and a staff with eagle feathers in the other hand.
"You said yourself that this Shaman you met seems normal. Shaman aren't saints, and they're just as likely to have human faults as anyone else."

Xander thought about that. So being a Shaman didn't have to change who he was, but just knowing that he had this power somewhere in there made him feel... well, it make life make this weird sort of sense at the same time that it completely creeped him out.

"Xander, if you're uncomfortable 'round there at all, ya need ta get out of there. Don't care how normal this guy seems, if he's a Shaman, he's got some ace in the hole. Ya can't let down your guard."

"Gee, you sound almost concerned, Bloodbreath," Xander sniped about two seconds before his brain could point out that it was kinda nice talking to Spike without fighting.

"Not bloody likely," Spike snapped back. "But if you get your pathetic arse killed, the girls are goin' to be in a foul mood for months. Not goin' to put up with the Bit mopin' around like Peaches for the next six months because you're too stupid to keep your own arse out of trouble."

"Well if I did get killed, I'd be dead a lot longer than six months, so not feeling sorry for you here. And actually,
not planning on dying, at least not soon, so why are we having this conversation?" Xander asked as he lost track of what they were even arguing about.

"I've had better arguments with a turnip," Spike groused, and then the phone line went dead. Xander held the phone for several minutes before setting it back down and going for the pizza. If life had taught him nothing else, it had taught him that nothing was so bad or so confusing that cold pizza couldn't fix it.

Part Seven

Two weeks into guide training, Xander was nearly as cranky as Jim. Of course the fact that Blair kept trying to sneak in tests of Xander's new-found tracking powers didn't exactly help matters. Unfortunately, Blair had a resolve face and pouty-eyes that made Willow seem like a rank amateur. At night, lying on the futon in the office, Xander would swear that he wasn't going to do one more of Blair's tests. The next morning, he would shave and shower while giving himself a pep talk about not doing any more tests. He would sit at breakfast while Blair drank green sludge and order himself to not go along with any more tests.
Then they would be on the street, and Blair would start bouncing with some new theory, and Xander would find himself trying to track someone from a clinical forensic description of some horrible and brutal murder. Like now.

"Okay, just clear your mind and try to focus. The star he carves into their backs... that should be unique enough, so just clear your mind and focus on the feeling the killer must get when he's carving her flesh."

"Have I told you lately how much I hate this?" Xander asked as he really tried to clear his mind. He hadn't always been on good terms with his brain, though, and it showed now as the attempt to clear it meant that a thousand images flooded it, from the fact that he needed to get to the Laundromat soon to the memory of Spike's fists flying under the full moon.

"Jim, you gotta help me out here. He's testing me to death," Xander looked past Blair to the smirking man behind the wheel. "There's got to be some law about homicide by test, right?"

"Not a chance, kid. I try to save you, and he's going to have me trying to identify perfumes from across a mall. You're on your own."
"Oh man. That would be... I wonder if you could actually do that. We already know you can piggyback your hearing on to sight, so I don't see why you couldn't do the same for smell. Why didn't I think of that?"

This time Xander smirked as Jim's shoulders hunched.

"No way, Darwin."

"Come on, Jim."

"Shouldn't you be focusing on the test you already have running?" Jim asked, and Xander shot the ex-soldier a dirty look.


"All's fair in love and testing, Sport. Suck it up." Jim answered as he turned the corner and brought the truck to a stop.

"I've got an interview to do. You and Sandburg can keep working on the vibe from here, right?"

"Yeah, no problem," Blair answered at the same time Xander gave a firm, "No!" Jim gave Xander an evil smile before slamming the driver side door shut with him safely on the other side.
"Coward," Xander said to the closed door, not even doubting that Jim would hear it.

"Come on, Xander. Just close your eyes and clear your mind of everything except the case."

"You do know that the minute you say that, the brain instantly goes into hyper-drive, right?"

"Just take deep cleansing breaths."

"Not my breathing I'm having a problem with. Been breathing my whole life without problems, but clearing out the brain? Okay, true, the brain is usually kinda clear of actual useful information, but getting all the useless stuff to clear out is not as easy as breathing." Xander sighed and looked out the window. He wanted to find this killer, he really did, but he just couldn't seem to focus today.

"Okay, let's try something different," Blair said in a voice that was just as enthusiastic when Xander had really been expecting a whole lot more exasperation and a whole lot less patience. "A lot of times when people have trouble clearing their minds it's because their subconscious is trying to send them some sort of message. So, what keeps coming into your mind."
"I have to get my laundry done soon," Xander said as he looked back to Blair with an expression that challenged the man to find a hidden meaning in that.

"Oh man, do you normally spend a lot of time worried about your laundry?"

"Not generally. Usually a sniff test with the underwear and I'm good to go," Xander admitted.

"Okay, that might have been a little too much information, man," Blair laughed. "But I'm betting that you're worried about the fact that a Sentinel can do a sniff test from the next floor down."

The minute Blair said those words, Xander realized the man was right. He didn't really care if his clothes weren't springtime fresh, but the idea of Jim smelling him... kinda ew, both from the smeller and the smellee sides.

"Maybe," he admitted.

"Which is one item taken care of because Jim dials down at home. He isn't smelling your laundry any more than I am, and I'll show you the laundry room in the basement when we get home. So, what else is running through that overactive brain of yours?"
Xander snorted, and then shrugged when Blair gave him a confused look. "People don't normally describe my brain as overactive," he admitted. "Why don't you try reading that file again," Xander asked as he braced his stomach for another round of gore that rivaled the inside out swin team members."

"Oh man, that was the saddest piece of distraction I've ever seen someone try. If you can't clear your mind, that means that you need to deal with whatever is interfering with your ability to concentrate. Keeping it in just corrupts your chi, man. Blocked energies create havoc in the body."

"Some things should stay blocked," Xander said dryly as he imagined what Willow would say about the other thing getting unblocked.

"Man, you are sounding more like Jim every day. He is not a good influence on you," Blair said with an elbow in Xander's side. Xander grabbed at the arm and they had a friendly game of tug of war before Xander lost due to a quick finger jab in the side. As soon as Blair retrieved his own arm, he sat back and looked at Xander, clearly waiting for an answer. Xander tried avoiding that look, but as the silence continued, he squirmed with the need to fill that empty space with sound.
"There are just things I don't want to talk about," Xander finally insisted, unable to keep silent any more.

"Like Spike?" Blair asked softly, and Xander sucked his breath in through clenched teeth.

"Wha...? Just don't go there," Xander finally managed to spit out.

"For someone you don't want to talk about, you talk about him a lot," Blair said as he leaned forward and dropped the clipboard with the case information on the dash.

"This is me doing the not talking thing."

"Xander, you obviously admire him, and from what you've said, he's gone out of his way to protect you more than once."

"Only because he has to. Trust me, there's not a lot of love lost between us." Xander blurted right before remembering he was doing the not talking thing.

"But you wish there were?" Blair prodded. Xander turned and looked back out the window as he tried to rein in his emotions.
"Spike is more about the big romances and self-sacrifice and that is more than a little weird because he was like that even before the soul. And I'm just not the big romance type. I'm sort of the use 'em and leave 'em type. Or the hide 'em in the closet type. Or maybe the leave a girl at the altar type. At most, I would be a drunken roll in the hay type."

"And you'd still rather have that than nothing." Blair said the words softly but in a tone that made Xander realize that he had told Blair more about himself than he had meant to. Blair seemed to get it better than Willow anyway.

"I... I just don't know, okay?" Xander said in a voice that he could feel tremble and crack with uncertainty. "But what I want doesn't really matter since the only thing he feels for me is contempt."

"I don't know what to say about that, Xander, but your powers... they're incredible. Simon said that we should offer you a job and he'd find a way to get the paperwork through. He was floored with how you tracked Kent and then Luther, and Simon does not impress easily."

"Maybe," Xander said, suspecting that even Giles would be impressed with his growing ability to control the evil vibe that had always hovered just below the surface. Not
that he'd been telling anyone. In fact, he'd been big with
the not telling much in his reports.

"So I don't think he'd feel contempt if you showed your
strength. And he does seem to worry. Gotta say ordering
you to not get eaten is a strange way of showing
concern, but a rose by any other name, man." Blair
reached out and put a warm hand on Xander's arm, and
that alone was enough to make him take a deep
shuddering breath as he tried not to lose it at such a
small gesture.

"You obviously don't know Spike or you'd be pulling a
Willow on me and trying to keep us on opposite sides of
the globe," Xander said as he pulled back, the touch
painful because of all the things it reminded him of not
having.

"But that doesn't seem to be keeping him off your mind.
And I may not know Spike, but I know how you see Spike.
I know about a vampire who fought to get his own soul
because he didn't want to hurt the people he loved any
more. And I know that you let him live with you twice,
and with your ability to sense evil, I'm taking that as a
character reference." Blair didn't reach out again, but the
words struck Xander deeply.

"But... I didn't really let him live with me," Xander argued.
"But you flew to LA to try and find him after the world nearly ended, and you feel safer with him than with Angel who everyone seems to see as the champion."

"Okay, Angel... just no. Every time I'm around him, I get the vibe big time. It's like he's carrying around this big well of evil and I keep expecting him to slip and drop all our asses into it."

"And you don't get that from Spike?"

"Hell no. He's just more the annoy-you-to-death type. Unless you really piss him off and then he's the snap your neck type. But he's not the torture and maim and throw the world into hell type."

"Oh man, there could be a whole new field of psychology here."

"Yeah, if your test subjects didn't eat you," Xander pointed out.

"True. So, if you trust Spike and you're interested in Spike and you are starting to have more confidence in yourself, it sounds like you need to make a decision."

"I'm not big on the good decision-making. I tend to go more for the cowardly avoidance and occasional denial," Xander said with a shrug.
"Well, you have lots of options here. You could be lusting after Spike as a way to avoid forming any other relationship. It's equally possible that after Anya's death you're attracted to someone who can't die. On the other hand, you could be feeling compatibility there. Sounds like it's time for some serious meditation."

"It's like having a Hellmouth psychiatrist. I wonder if there's money in that field? Considering there's still one active Hellmouth in Cleveland and a second in Uruguay, you could have a nice little client base," Xander joked.

"Xander, what's bothering you?"

"Nothing,"

"Says the man who's joking and fidgeting and sweating despite the fact that it's cold in here," Blair pointed out.

"Pushy," Xander complained.

"Oh man, you have no idea. Your powers are sidetracked by whatever is bothering you, and you've got to work through it. I know—close your eyes and we can do some light hypnosis. You know, pull it up into the light so to speak." Blair's words made Xander choke as he considered _this_ issue coming into the light, and just no.
"I already know what's bothering me, and as Jim would say, it's not polite conversation."

"What the hell does Jim know? We aren't polite people, so polite conversation is so totally not required," Blair said lightly.

"Blair." Xander’s voice was heavy.

"I'm going to keep being this annoying until you cough it up."

"Listen…"

"Possibly even more annoying. I'll wake you up in the middle of the night and ask you to describe your dreams. I'll play my aboriginal music until your head throbs. I'll nag you until you consider taking a dive off the balcony." Blair’s voice was teasing, but his gaze was steady.

"Is this how you get your way with Jim?" Xander asked as he faced Blair's determined expression.

"Totally, man... totally."

"Look, it's really something personal."

"It's really interfering with your tracking, and man, you have to learn how to process these emotions."
"It scares me, okay?" Xander finally snapped, and then he pressed his lips together as he realized he had said too much.

"Spike scares you?"

"No," Xander said cautiously, praying for Blair to just drop it there.

"Oh," Blair said in a voice that made it clear he had figured it out. Xander blushed, he just knew he was vivid red. Not of the good. "Xander, that's normal. I was kinda freaked myself, and I started with a partner who has an instinctive need to protect me. Spike's instincts may work against him in this department."

"He tried to rape Buffy. I don't... I know he's different now and even back then, he didn't want to hurt her, but he's a demon and his instincts sometimes don't match up with human needs. Or human biology," Xander nearly whispered. This fact had stopped him more effectively than Willow's quiet disapproval or Spike's contempt or his own sense of self-preservation, which wasn't actually very good.

"You think he'd hurt you," Blair nearly whispered.

"Not on purpose," Xander admitted, "but yeah."
"Oh, Xander," Blair said softly, and Xander flinched away from the pity and sympathy he could feel starting to gather.

"Okay, how did you two get on? Any vibes to chase down yet?" Jim asked brusquely as he pulled open the truck door. "I just completely blew out with Mr. Andrews, so any leads would be more than welcome."

"Um, no luck, sorry," Xander said as he ducked his head and felt the heat in his face intensify.

"Not a problem. We were solving crimes before you came along... it's just nice to solve a crime without giving myself a headache sniffing the carpet," Jim offered. "You can catch the next bad guy, Sport. Since you're not vibing, why don't we drop you off at the loft so you can write up some of those reports you need to send back to your group?"

"Um, sure," Xander said as Jim started the truck. The offer was just so reasonable, so logical that he couldn't quite figure out why he was suddenly suspicious.
"Hey, who's up for Chinese?" Blair called as he came in the front door looking like the cat that ate the canary.

'Gotta go, B 'n J back from the wars' Xander typed into the chat window.

'Stay safe' Willow typed back, and Xander could practically hear her worry. He really shouldn't have mentioned the shoot out last Friday, especially since he'd stayed in the truck like a good little sidekick the whole time.

'Promise' he typed back before clicking off the window. Willow's goodbyes could last longer than her conversations if he didn't take drastic action, like cutting the power.

"Sure, Chinese sounds good," Xander agreed as he looked at Blair suspiciously. The man was bouncing a little too much, even for Blair whose bounce levels were only slightly lower than Willow's.
"Good, because we already brought it," Blair said as he went for the kitchen. Jim followed with plastic sacks decorated with red Chinese characters.

"I hope you feel like eating a lot because Sandburg went a little overboard with the food," Jim said wryly as he put half a dozen sacks on the table.

"Food good. I've been known to eat my own body weight in food," Xander agreed as he started pulling cardboard bins out of sacks. He stopped when he found the sesame beef. Oh yeah. Food of the gods. Well, not gods as in hell gods since they were not of the good and didn't deserve Chinese food. Xander knew he was doing the internal babble, but the alternative was watching Jim who had an arm wrapped around Blair's waist and was leaning against Blair's back.

Jim reached around Blair and snagged a fortune cookie, and now he wrapped his second arm around Blair so that he could break the cookie while holding Blair, and oh hey, there were peas in the sesame beef and that was sacrilege. Xander picked the green contamination out of his container, dropping them onto a napkin before retreating back to his chair in the living room.

Time for some TV. Nice distracting TV. Xander flipped to a football game and staring at the game as Jim and Blair
settled in on one end of the couch arguing about something, and Xander was not paying attention. Nope. He was inattentive man. He was also hoping that Blair was telling the truth about Jim dialing down at home because he was also becoming sweaty, musky man as Jim groped his partner.

"You screwed up the order, Chief, you live without the sweet and sour chicken."

"Oh man, that is not fair. Just let me have some of yours." Blair reached over and tried to stick his chopsticks in Jim's container, but Jim used his longer reach to move the food out of Blair's reach.

"Give it up," Jim laughed, but Blair wasn't ready to admit defeat yet. Xander nearly choked as Blair half rolled onto Jim, reaching across to get the food. Jim laughed again and arched his back to get the food farther away as Blair proceeded to plaster himself to Jim's front, pulling himself up toward the food with one hand on Jim's shoulder.

"Not going to happen, Chief."

"So you say," Blair answered, and Xander really did start choking as Blair wiggled a bit causing Jim to groan. Blair
used the moment of distraction to dart out with his hand and grab the container.

"Cheat," Jim said as he gave Blair's ass a slap before his partner settled down on the couch next to him.

"Whatever. I still got the chicken, and unlike some selfish jerks, I'm willing to share," Blair pointed out as he held the container within reach of Jim's fork. Jim grabbed a forkful and held his free hand under the fork as he took a big bite. Xander took huge forkfuls of his own beef and shoved it in his mouth before he could say something completely and totally inappropriate. Something that would get him killed. Something that would get his pathetic arse, as Spike would call it, tossed out into the hall.

"Good stuff," Jim said when he finished chewing. His free warm went around Blair's waist, pulling him close, and Blair toed off his shoes before hooking his heels into the couch cushions sort of curling up into Jim's side, his arm with the food resting on Jim's stomach. Xander tore his eyes away from the sight of them curled together, their bodies fitting together perfectly.

"So, you get your reports sent off to home base, Sport?" Jim asked, and Xander kept his eyes on the television. Unfortunately, the image of full grown men tackling and
grabbing and rolling around on the ground seemed suddenly very gay.... very, very gay. Gay enough that someone should be out on the field protesting type gay.

"Um, yeah," he answered in a strangled voice.

"Good. We don't want them to think we've kidnapped you," Jim said calmly enough, but Xander could hear a shifting of bodies that suggested that he really, really didn't want to look at what they were doing even though he really, really did.

"Um, kidnapped. Right." Xander stared at the screen, but really, watching one guy slap another guy's ass wasn't helping. Xander shifted his cardboard container down to camouflage his growing problem. The only reaction from the couch was a deep moan that made Xander squirm in his chair.

"Um, I think I'm going to, um, go to... bed," Xander stumbled over his tongue as he stumbled over his awkward feet as he tried to get past the couch without looking at the couch because he couldn't deal with lookage right now. He totally didn't need to see them wrapped up in each other, and besides, it was their living room, so if they wanted to play tonsil hockey they should be able to, and Xander took the last few steps at a run. The thin French doors to the office were on the flimsy
side, but at least Xander had the privacy to throw himself on the bed and open his jeans before closing a fist around his sore aching cock. Maybe they would take their show upstairs and he could sneak into the bathroom.

Xander panted heavily as his mind refused to let go of the image of the two men's bodies fitting perfectly together. Jim's arm resting on Blair's shoulders, Blair curled up into Jim's side. Even more, Xander couldn't escape the image of Jim's face looking down at Blair with such incredible love. And the way Blair's face softened when Jim suffered from a headache or sensory spike. And the way Jim's voice gentled when he said 'Chief.'

Xander was so focused on these memories that he didn't hear the knock until it came again. Taking a deep breath and holding it for a moment, Xander tried to calm down before he closed his jeans over his protesting cock.

Standing was definitely not of the good as he tried to ignore the frustrated ache in his crotch. If he was going to be around these two much longer, he needed bigger jeans. Unless of course that was Jim at the door ready to throw him out for jonesing, which wouldn't be out of character. When it came to anything even remotely related to the guide, Jim had an overprotective streak.
about the size of New Jersey. Or New York, whichever was the big state.

As he opened the door, he expected pissed off Jim. He got Blair with an indecipherable expression.

"Xander, mind if I come in?" Blair asked even though it was his house.

"Yeah, I'm really sorry about the whole bailing thing, and you know, if I've outstayed my welcome I have no problem giving you guys some space because, you know, you look pretty space needing out there what with the naughty touching," Xander said as he turned and went to the bed. Sitting turned out to be as awkward as standing.

"Did it bother you?" Blair asked as he closed the door gently behind him.

"Define bother," Xander blurted before he could get the brain in gear. Yeah, real subtle.

"'Bother' would be making you feel bad about yourself. That wasn't the point," Blair said.

"Point?" Xander asked suspiciously. "There was pointage here?"
"Possibly," Blair admitted as he sat on the desk chair near the foot of the bed. "I know you're scared, and I want to help you through this the way I helped you with the Shaman stuff." Blair's soft words made Xander do a literal double take as his brain tried to decode that message. Help couldn't possibly be....

"Um, okay, I'm slow on the uptake boy, and you need to use really small words because otherwise I'm going to get the mistaken impression that you're offering things that I don't think you're offering and that Jim would turn me into a puddle of guts for thinking about, not that it keeps me from thinking about it," Xander blurted, biting his tongue as the last part sort of slipped out without permission. Bad, bad mouth.

"Jim's not going to turn you into a pile of guts," Blair said amused as he moved from the chair to sitting on the edge of the bed.

"So you say, but I'm not big on the believing that when he looks at you like..." Xander stopped because he really didn't want to describe the way Jim looked at Blair because it was the way Tara had looked at Willow and the way Spike had looked at Buffy, and boy didn't that just hurt.

"Xander, neither of us wants you hurt."
"Makes three of us. That's why I'd prefer to avoid Jim-sized fists."

"We both want to help you through something that really seems to scare you."

"Both?" Xander kind of choked out.

"He's upstairs, but if I know my Sentinel, he's listening."

"But." Xander stopped. "Yeah, I'm going to need shorter words. Much shorter," Xander finally admitted as he tried to interpret that statement.

"Xander, you're obviously scared of what it means for two men to be together," Blair said softly as he scooted a little closer on the bed. Xander focused on the blue striped fabric of the sheet. His only answer was a cough as his throat seemed to close around any possible words.

"Oh man. I don't want to freak you out, but I really do want to help you with this. You're a beautiful man, inside and out. That sounds pretty cliché, but I would really like to be with you."

"You should have Ellison check you out for concussions because now you're really not making sense," Xander laughed as he stood up and retreated to the wall. He
kept his right shoulder to the wall as he tried to hide his own erection behind a slightly bent knee.

"Man, you have to see yourself in the mirror every day. You have to know that you're a handsome man." Blair stood up and stood next to Xander, his hand resting on Xander's shoulder so that Xander could feel the heat soaking into him.

"Oh yeah, I do pirate impression in the mirror as I shave," Xander joked, but it came off more bitter than distracting, and he really needed to work on his powers of distraction because Blair wasn't buying it.

"Such a strong face, and beautiful hair," Blair said as he reached up to run fingers through curls. Xander closed his eyes at the feeling of such an intimate touch.

"I think we should... you know... stop," he whispered.

"Why?" Blair asked while continuing his slow exploration of Xander's curls.

"Oh because the man you love is upstairs listening and I can I just say that's more than a little creepy."

"Would you rather go up there?" Blair asked.
"No!" Xander practically squeaked. Jim was... okay, Jim was impressive and only just slightly totally stunning, but the man was more than a little intimidating. "Not that... I mean... he just..."

"Is almost as scary as Spike?" Blair asked, and Xander turned to see a small smile on Blair's face.

"Maybe," Xander admitted.

"Yeah, for a long time, that kept me from telling him the truth about how I felt. If I'd known he had a demon under the surface... I might have been so confused and afraid that I might have never told him. I might have packed my bags and run for the other side of the globe." Blair's words stung a little, but the fingers intimately stroking his hair soothed the sting away.

"I just..." Xander realized he had no idea how to end that sentence. He just wanted life to make sense. He just wanted to know how Spike felt. He just wanted to stop being afraid. And okay, if he was being honest here, he just wanted Blair to keep touching him like that. Maybe he even wanted to do a little touching back.

"You know the really sexy part? You are a powerful Shaman. I'm in awe of how you can track evil and protect the tribe. And yet, in the last two weeks you haven't let
that power change you at all. You still speak in that same quiet voice. You still do all these small things and never expect people to notice or thank you. Trust me, I know that Jim didn't fix the stove hinge." Xander shivered as Blair ran the back of one finger over his cheek.

"Haven't really been called sexy before. I'm kinda feeling like I'm not holding up my end of the compliments here," Xander said with a small huff of laughter. When in doubt, insult self. It was a strategy that had worked for a couple decades.

"This is about you, Xander. Let me show you. Let me love you," Blair asked as he moved in, pressing himself to Xander's side, and now Xander could feel Blair's hardness.

"I don't know what, well, I technically know what, but I can't really..."

"Just say yes," Blair interrupted him, Blair's arm slipping around his waist as Blair laid his cheek against Xander's shoulder. "You are so damn beautiful that I just want to share this with you. Oh man, just say yes." Xander could feel himself start shaking at the possibility being offered here. Blair was a beautiful man, and looking at Blair's face, he could see that passionate expression focused on
him. Those blue eyes had a depth that made him ache in both body and soul.

"Yes," he whispered.

Part Nine

Blair pulled him gently back toward the bed, and Xander didn't even realize that he was holding his breath until he started getting grey blobs in his vision, and how sad was it that he recognized the symptoms? He took a deep shuddering breath and sank to the edge of the bed. He hadn't felt this awkward since Anya had burst into his room asking for orgasms.

He didn't have time to worry about it though because Blair's hand slipped between his legs, massaging a thigh though his jeans. Xander groaned as he brought his own hand up to Blair's forearm. He pulled back almost
immediately, feeling somehow guilty for that simple touch despite Blair's far more intimate caress.

"It's okay, Xander. I like the touch," Blair promised as he let go of Xander's leg long enough to unfasten his buttons and pull off his outer shirt. Wearing only a thin t-shirt, Blair leaned into Xander and suddenly stole a kiss. Xander gasped in surprise, and a strong tongue slipped into his mouth, tickling the sensitive skin behind his front teeth. Xander bucked up and instinctively brought his arm around Blair's waist.

When Blair shifted and pushed, Xander let himself be maneuvered down onto the futon with Blair on top. And then Blair let his weight settle in on Xander, and suddenly Xander's cock went from cramped to screaming as the jeans seemed to tighten around them. His moan was actually one of pain as much as pleasure as Blair continued teasing his mouth, nibbling at Xander's lower lip and running a knuckle along Xander's cheek. For his part, Xander just held the smaller man's waist.

Blair finally pulled back, trailing kisses along Xander's jaw.

"Ow," Xander complained as he squirmed a bit.

"Are you--" Blair started before he cut himself off. "Oh," he said as he slipped a hand down between them,
popping open the button on Xander's jeans before sliding the zipper down with his thumb. "Better?" he asked with a smile as he settled his weight down on top of Xander again.

"Much with the betterness," Xander agreed as he felt the air drifting over his cock, the dampness making his cock twitch as the air cooled his hot skin. Xander slid a hand up and under Blair's t-shirt, feeling the heat of Blair's skin under his hand as he pushed the shirt up. "Much, much better with the betterness," he repeated as he considered the wrinkled and peaked brown nipple now revealed. Xander ran a thumb over it and felt Blair's groan vibrate his body. As a wave of pleasure rolled through him, he reached down to grab his own exposed cock.

"Let's slow down some," Blair said as he caught Xander's wrist, pulling their linked hands up next to Xander's head before leaning in for another kiss. Xander opened his mouth and thrust up against Blair's weight. When hands started pulling up on the bottom of his t-shirt, Xander arched his back to make it easier. Blair pulled the shirt totally off before shimmying out of his own t-shirt so that as he now lay back down, Xander felt the heat of skin against skin. He could feel his entire body tighten with need and lust and just a little fear.
"Slow. I can do slow... maybe," Xander said as he trailed a hand up Blair's backbone, enjoying the feeling of the muscles contracting under his touch. Blair shifted so that he was half on the bed while still leaning into Xander's side.

"God you're handsome," Blair sighed as he traced a finger along one side from Xander's collarbone down to the waistband of his jeans and then back up to a white line in the skin just below Xander's ribs.

"What's this from?" Blair asked as he outlined the scar.

"Um, vampire, I think," Xander answered. "Didn't know there was going to be a quiz." He leaned forward and kissed Blair's shoulder. Blair leaned farther in, and Xander moved up to the neck, first kissing and then nibbling on the skin. Blair seemed to enjoy that as he pressed his crotch into Xander's leg and moaned deeply. Xander moved up to an ear.

When Blair started pushing on Xander's jeans, he arched up off the bed so they would slip off more easily, toeing his shoes off without giving up the earlobe he was gently sucking. A sudden image of Jim outside the French doors listening made Xander hesitate, but then Blair wrapped a warm hand around his cock and Xander couldn't have
cared if a legion of the First's minions waited outside the door.

"You like that?" Blair asked as he pushed himself up on one arm. He reached down into his own jeans and came back with a red foil square. Xander swallowed at the sight of the package. As much as he wanted this, and he really, really, really wanted this, he didn't know if he wanted this enough to actually go through with it. When Blair tore the package open and took out the condom, Xander bit his own lip to keep from blurting out a refusal that he really didn't mean.

Instead of putting the condom on himself, Blair reached down and slid the condom over the tip of Xander's engorged cock, rolling the rubber down over the sensitive skin. Xander watched in confusion until Blair leaned down and sucked the head of his cock into that warm mouth, and Xander almost hyperventilated on the pure pleasure that shot up his spine and turned his whole body into a giant nerve that quivered on the edge of orgasm.

Blair ran his tongue over the head, and Xander couldn't help bucking up into that mouth. Instead of choking, Blair fistied the base of Xander's cock and allowed Xander to drive the rest of his cock up into that waiting mouth. The
sight of Blair's cheeks puffed out with his cock nearly
drove Xander over the edge, but then Blair pulled back
and settled himself on top of Xander's body once again.

"So, are you okay?" Blair asked.

"What is it with you and talking during sex?" Xander
asked blurrily. He really couldn't focus on much except
the feeling of his cock threatening to break off if it didn't
get to come. Blair just laughed. When a touch of
something cold ran over the skin behind his cock, Xander
jumped, his foggy brain cleared by the sharp spike of
need as his whole body tightened and his balls drew up
on the verge of orgasm. One touch on his cock and that
would be the show. Obviously Blair was evil because he
didn't touch, and he intercepted Xander's hand when it
tried to play sock puppet.

"Trust me," Blair whispered, and that touch returned,
making Xander writhe helplessly. "Put your feet flat on
the bed," Blair ordered. Luckily he followed that up by
moving one of Xander's legs into position because
Xander was far beyond being able to comprehend
English. It had been so long since he had touched or had
been touched like this. His body pressed into the feather
light kisses Blair trailed on the inside of his thigh.
"Hand me a couple of pillows," Blair asked, and Xander blinked as he tried to gather enough brain cells to figure out what a pillow was. When he did finally process it, he passed two of the three pillows down to Blair who started shoving them under his ass. Xander pushed up to make it easier, and boy howdy could two pillows make a man feel vulnerable... and horny.

Then Blair's fingers moved down to cup Xander's balls gently, holding them until the heat of Blair's hand burned and Xander thrust up until his ass left the bed. Only when he dropped back down did he realize something was different. Blair smiled and planted a kiss on Xander stomach before starting to work a finger in and out, stroking the skin around the pucker. Xander would have pointed out that he had expected it to hurt, he might have even complimented Blair's technique. However, he couldn't manage more than a needy moan.

"Just relax. I won't hurt you," Blair promised, and Xander felt a cool track of a tear across his face. Instead of answering, he spread his legs farther to give Blair more room to work as he ran his own fingers through Blair's thick long curls. He wondered if his own hair would curl that much if he let it grow.
Blair reached down and took the head of Xander's cock in his mouth again, and Xander thrust up into that warm embrace as he felt the pressure at his ass increase. This time the intrusion felt uncomfortably large, and Xander could feel his own erection soften with the sting. Blair pulled back, and his cock softened even more.

"Press back if you have to, like you're pushing something out," Blair suggested before once again taking Xander's cock in his mouth, this time taking half Xander's length into his mouth before humming. Xander gasped and closed a fist around Blair's hair as the vibrations traveled the length of his cock. Following Blair's instructions, he pushed back and suddenly he felt a fullness stretch him.

Xander hissed in both need and discomfort, and Blair's fingers stopped moving while Blair bobbed gently up and down on his cock. Suddenly realizing that he was fist ing Blair's curls and probably ripping a few out, Xander let go and smoothed the hair down with gentle touches. Blair sat up with his fingers still in place.

"Oh man. You are incredible. I was so freaked out by this point that we had to call it quits for the night."

Xander just gasped as a sudden pressure made his cock twitch. It felt like someone almost tickling him from inside, and Xander pushed up as he tried to escape that
uncomfortable feeling, but Blair's fingers followed, pressing harder. Suddenly the uncomfortable tickling turned into a burning pleasure that engulfed his entire groin. Xander squirmed and pressed back down onto those fingers, bracing his hands on the wall to press his shaking body onto those fingers.

"Seeing you like this, open and needy, it's seriously hot. Oh man, seriously hot. Man, I'm going to be lucky to get through this without coming all over the sheets," Blair whispered hoarsely, and the needy words washed through Xander, warming him. The long slow stroking returned now, the fingers spreading his hole so that he could feel the muscles strain. Then on every in stroke, Blair would hit that spot inside him. Sometimes lightly, making Xander squirm uncomfortably at the tickling sensation like when he'd had an itch under his cast and then harder, making his cock harden with need and then hard enough to make Xander's vision white out and his whole body shudder.

"Breathe out," Blair said, and Xander hadn't even processed the words before the pressure increased again, and he couldn't help but tense at the pain. "Press down, like before," Blair said, but Xander couldn't. The fingers were too much.
"Hurtage. Big with the hurt," Xander gasped.

"Shhh. It's okay, we won't go any farther unless you say to," Blair promised, and the fingers remained in place stretching him uncomfortably while Blair planted a kiss on the inside of Xander's left knee. Then he moved to the thigh, kissing and licking and putting his cheek against Xander's upper thigh before moaning so that the vibrations traveled up to Xander's cock.

Xander fist ed his hands into the pillow to avoid grabbing Blair and ripping the rest of his hair out as Blair slowly worked up until he was blowing puffs of warm air over Xander's balls, nuzzling in the hair before sucking one into his mouth.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck yeah, Xander swore as he fell into a near trance where only Blair's mouth and his groin existed. Blair pulled back and moved to suck at just the head of Xander's condom-covered cock. Now Blair's motions were teasing. He ran a tongue up the underside and scraped the head gently with his teeth before pulling back.

"More," Xander begged, and Blair swallowed a good three-quarters of Xander's cock while sucking enthusiastically. Xander cried out in need. When the fingers in his ass slid in and hit that spot inside him,
Xander arched up off the bed and stiffened as his balls drew up and started shooting. The first and second waves of orgasm crashed through him so hard that he was barely aware of the third wave or of Blair's whispered question. He just gasped and writhed and cried out his pleasure as his body turned into one giant happy spasm.

He was still gasping when he felt something pressing uncomfortably against his hole. He hadn't yet won the battle to open his eyes when something large spread his hole impossibly wide before popping into place. "Oh fuck," Xander whispered as he realized that Blair was inside him.

"Xander, are you okay?" Blair asked, and Xander opened his eyes to find Blair holding his own condom-covered erection with one hand and bracing himself on the mattress with the other.

"Oh yeah," Xander said as he trailed a finger up Blair's arm.

"Breathe out, nice and steady," Blair said, but Xander was just a limp puddle of Xander-shaped goo, he couldn't have done anything else. He lay there feeling Blair slowly rock in and out one centimeter at a time as he worked his way deeper into Xander's body. When the thick cock
hit his prostate, Xander felt a warmth travel up his body in a shiver even though his own cock couldn’t react so quickly.

Lying there, he watched as Blair's face contorted with lust, his eyes squinting shut and his one arm trembling. Knowing that he was making Blair feel this and knowing that it was Blair's cock stretching him open until he could feel the stretch and burn made Xander's own cock ache a little even if it couldn't manage a second show quite that quickly. Blair's thrusts grew longer and harder, and Xander could feel the length of Blair's cock sliding across that tender skin, reminding Xander's cock that two shows in a day wasn't unheard of. Suddenly Blair thrust all the way in and started coming. Xander watched as the energy drained from Blair and he pulled out, carefully keeping the condom in place before pulling it off and collapsing onto the bed next to Xander.

Xander hadn't bothered with his own condom, and now he looked down and considered the mess. Yeah, shower time. Shower and thinking. Shower and brooding, he admitted to himself as he now realized that Blair would be going upstairs to sleep with Jim and he'd be in this bed alone. Xander suddenly started wondering why he'd gone through with it at all.
"I need to clean up," he said as he scooted out of the bed. Blair's arm tightened around his waist.

"Xander?" Blair looked over.

"It was great. God, I didn't know it could be that good, and you've certainly won over a convert, I'm just feeling a little sticky," Xander quickly added as he pulled away. Eventually Blair let go, and Xander grabbed his sweatpants and robe as he darted for the shower.

Part Ten

Xander showered until he exhausted the hot water heater, and then he sat on the toilet seat rather gingerly. Yeah, he had done it. He could now officially call himself gay. Or bisexual maybe because there were still Faith and Anya in the old closet of love. Not that Faith had been a love. Faith had been more of a quick fuck. Xander flinched away from comparing that night to tonight.

It hadn't been the same what with Faith just using him, but still, he wasn't going to get what he wanted more than anything else. He wasn't going to get held. Sure, this time Blair would leave instead of handing him clothing and kicking him out half-dressed. But still.
Xander took a deep breath as he tried to sort out what had happened. Okay, Blair was the big guru, teacher type and he wanted to help Xander through a tough spot. It wasn't some sordid one night stand. Or actually, it probably was a one-night stand in that it wouldn't happen again, but it wasn't sordid. Or Xander assumed it wasn't sordid. Xander realized he didn't actually know what sordid meant, so maybe what he'd done was sordid.

Xander felt the pain of loneliness more sharply than ever, and suddenly he wondered if it was possible for Giles to send him to some place like Mars looking for potentials. Buffy couldn't worry about malaria on Mars. Nope, Mars was a big non-malarial planet. He could wander around picking up rocks and then have a reason for feeling lonely because feeling lonely when people who should make you feel safe and loved were standing two feet away...

Xander reached over and turned on the sink to cover the sounds of his own rough breathing. He hadn't ever realized it, but that's what was wrong. While he was in Africa he could tell himself he was lonely because Willow was back in England. What the hell was he supposed to tell himself when she was in the next room and he still felt like he had this empty place in his soul where she
used to be? She didn't need him, not him or his jokes or his help, and god he was worthless.

And Spike? Oh god. He had always told himself that it was the whole him not being gay thing, but now he would have to look Spike in the eye knowing that he technically was gay and the only reason he wasn't with Spike was because Spike didn't want him. Xander pushed his eye patch up and off so that he could rub his face without feeling that thing in the way. God, he was pathetic. Standing up, he looked in the mirror at the bloodshot eye and puckered skin around the missing eye and the wet hair plastered against his head, and he had no idea who he was looking at.

Xander put a hand in the running water and splashed it over his face as he tried to force all of the feeling back into whatever pathetic little corner of his mind they had slipped out of. Okay, he'd probably been in the bathroom close to an hour, so if he was lucky, Blair was upstairs asleep in Jim's arms and he could slink into his own bed. Or maybe he could quietly pack up while the guys slept. He'd pretty much learned whatever he was going to learn about Sentinels already, and even Willow had commented that his reports were a little light in the actual reporting part.
Slipping the eye patch back in place, Xander pulled the door open a little and peaked out. A light was on in the living room, but Blair probably just left it on so that Xander didn't come out in the dark. He debated going and turning it off, but he voted instead for a quick dash to his room just a few feet away.

"Xander," a deep voice said as Jim walked out of the kitchen, appearing without warning near the table.

"Jim, hey. Sorry about the bathroom. You could've just like told me to get out if you needed to use it 'cause I'm a big old bathroom hog, but at least now I'm one less person trying to get a shower in the morning, which is of the good, right?" Xander babbled as he wavered between running back into the bathroom and making a dash for the bedroom. The bedroom was the obvious choice, but that meant getting dangerously close to the Sentinel less than an hour after sleeping with that Sentinel's guide. Oh yeah, not of the good.

"I don't need the bathroom, Sport," Jim said as he leaned against the pillar. "How are you doing?"

"Me? Fine. Very much of the good, and boy are you a lucky man and please don't kill me for saying that," Xander blurted.
"Harris, I'm not going to kill you. I am however, a little worried about you."

"Okay, killage would be better than talkage right about now," Xander said with a sigh.

"Tough because I'm not killing you, Sport. Not unless you upset Blair that badly again."

"Blair?" Xander looked at the ceiling above him where he had expected Blair and Jim to be wrapped up in each other.

"He thinks he hurt you. Sent me down to sniff for blood, see if you were hiding some injury."

"What? He didn't. I mean, not that I want to talk about this with you, but it was sorta good in the absolutely mind-blowing way."

"Yeah, I know," Jim said, his voice getting soft, and Xander felt that stab of pain again. Blair had Jim and Jim had Blair, and he was the afterthought. He should be used to that by now. "Let's go sit down; I can't have this conversation without a beer. You want one?" Jim's voice became far more businesslike as he talked about things other than Blair.
"Um, am I going to be looking for a cab soon because I find drunk and homeless a bad combination."

"Harris, I'm not throwing you out."

"Okay, maybe one beer then," Xander said as he went in the living room and pulled his robe around him before sitting in his favorite chair. He watched cautiously as Jim pulled two beers from the fridge, offering him one before dropping onto the couch wearing just boxer shorts.

"First, I'm not upset. Blair and I talked about how much you needed someone, how much you needed a connection. I don't have a problem with what you two did."

"Um, okay?"

"I also have a pretty good guess about why you just spent two hours sitting in my bathroom."

"Two...?" Xander looked over at the clock.

"Blair doesn't get what it's like to have your insides rearranged, to watch people die and see pieces of yourself go with them. I get the feeling you do," Jim said it so calmly that the words didn't sink in right away as Xander tried to figure out where the missing time had gone.
"What? You have that totally wrong since I am so not the warrior type. I'm the sidekick who stays in the truck unlike you and Blair. Only difference is that I usually hide behind Buffy and Spike... or Buffy and Angel although I'm not big on the hiding behind Angel part. Of course there was the summer I hid behind the Buffy-bot, and boy do I have some interesting stories from that time."

"And you've seen friends die, and you've seen your own death coming right at you," Jim interrupted him before taking another drink.

"Hey, I don't know..."

"I do. I've seen too many men with that same desperate need to hold onto something who have an equally strong belief that whatever they hold onto will turn to dust in their arms." Jim's words drove a knife so deeply into Xander that he gasped in pain as though physically hurt. Silence filled the loft for several seconds before Jim started talking again. "Xander, I've been there. I married a woman because I needed to hold someone and then I drove her away because I was terrified that I would wake up and find her gone. It's a hard way to live."

"I don't..." Xander started, and then he had to take a deep breath as he felt the pain deepen and the tears
threaten. "Okay, pathetic much?" he asked himself as his breath shuddered.

"Human much?" Jim returned in the same tone of voice. Jim drained the last of his beer and rested the bottle against his thigh. "It's human to need that contact, and it's human to be afraid of it after seeing the kinds of things I think you've seen."

"I'm just having some freakage. I'll be fine in the morning," Xander promised as he looked at the ceiling and tightened his hold on the beer he hadn't yet touched.

"No, you'll have your front back on in the morning. It's not the same thing," Jim countered.

"I thought Blair was supposed to be the pushy one," Xander said as he glanced over at Jim's determined face.

"He is. He just doesn't understand what he stepped into. I guess I thought he understood since he walked into this emotional mess with me." Jim shrugged. "I guessed wrong. He doesn't understand why he hurt you so much by offering to let you in. His heart is big enough for everyone, but I don't think he understands.

Xander would have asked what Jim was talking about, but he understood all too well. Blair had shown him
something that didn't fit in his life anymore, and now he found himself dying for a connection he couldn't have. "I'm fine," he lied softly.

"I know what it does to a person to see battle," Jim said calmly. My worst was probably this kid I had in my unit. We were doing a joint mission with another agency and he took a bullet in the leg. He kept telling me that he was only shot in the leg and he knew he'd be fine. He kept saying that as I held a field dressing that turned into a red sponge as his femoral artery pumped out all his blood. He fell asleep and died telling me how he'd be fine." Jim's voice sounded so calm that Xander almost missed the tremor at the end. "I've had more than one nightmare where Blair's face is on that boy. So, how about you?" Jim asked as he stared at the empty beer bottle resting against his thigh.

"I had to, um, stake my best friend," Xander said as he felt the tears start. "And when Sunnydale went down, I listened to those girls fight over the bathroom and talk about their dreams, and then I watched as they saw their own guts spill on the floor. And afterwards, I would give the survivors the big pep talk about how they were fighting the good fight." Xander's face felt alternately hot and cold as his tears slid silently down his face leaving wet trails to dry in the air.
"I hated working with recruits," Jim agreed. "When I went out with seasoned soldiers, they knew the score, but the new ones expected battle to be heroic."

"It's just ugly," Xander said.

"Yeah, it is. Xander, come to bed."

"Huh?" Xander looked over to find that Jim had stood up.

"Come sleep upstairs, Sport. That way Blair doesn't have to give himself the guilt trip in the morning. If he wakes up grumpy, he's a pain in the ass all day." Jim took a step closer and snagged the untouched beer bottle from Xander's hand before heading to the kitchen and dropping them on the counter.

"I don't want to..."

"You don't want to be alone, Sport, so get your ass upstairs while I use the bathroom," Jim ordered. Xander considered ignoring the order when Jim turned and disappeared down the short hall. In the end though, he really didn't want to be alone. He climbed the stairs slowly and looked at the large bed where Blair sprawled near the center. He walked around to the far side where Blair's body left a smaller gap on the bed. Pulling his robe off, he draped it on the railing of the loft before slipping under the covers.
The heat of Blair's body warmed Xander and he lay in the dark waiting for Jim. When the man appeared at the top of the stairs, he stood for a moment considering the bed.

"He's a bed hog, but at least he sleeps like a log," Jim whispered as he leaned over the bed and got an arm under Blair's shoulders and hips. He pulled until Blair's body slid away from Xander and to the edge of the bed closest to the stairs. Xander stayed put, allowing that heat to slide away. He imagined it was hard enough for Jim to have him there at all, so having him touching Blair was probably more than Jim's instincts could take.

Jim walked around the bed to Xander's side.

"Shove over." Jim pushed at Xander's shoulder. In shock, Xander slid into the middle of the bed as Jim slipped in behind him, a strong arm sliding around his waist as he pressed into Blair's warm back. Suddenly Xander realized how utterly exhausted he was, and he closed his eyes and let himself drift to sleep as strong arms held him.
Xander flipped past a dozen different channels as he searched for something to help keep his mind off the subject of temporary roommates. Jim and Blair would be home soon, but until they did come home, Xander really wasn't sure where to go to bed. Waking up in the middle of a pile of slowly moving male limbs had been... okay, it had been more than a little nice. He'd woken up warm and safe, and Blair had accepted him with a simple kiss and a quick grope. He'd also woken up with a slightly throbbing ass that had lasted through a day bouncing around in Jim's truck.

He desperately wanted to wake up like that again, and he really wouldn't mind waking up throbbing again. However, he wasn't sure the invitation was still open. And if he went to bed in the small room under the loft before the guys came home from the big emergency meeting, he wouldn't ever know if he did still have that invitation. So instead he sat on the couch in his robe and flipped through advertisements for extra-special cheese graters that could make meals by themselves through the magic of made for television kitchen gadgets.
The sudden pounding at the door was so loud that Xander dropped the remote and nearly fell off the couch.

"Oi, open the bloody door," a familiar voice yelled from the far side of the door. Xander leapt up and stood in the middle of the room feeling a wave of panic wash through him. He so did not want to deal with this, not now. He was still trying to figure out where he was with Blair and Jim and he did not want to figure out where he was with Spike, especially since he had a pretty good idea where his place was with Spike. And that place was not a place he wanted to go what with the mocking and the eye rolling and the British insults.

The pounding at the door came again, loud enough that Xander was fairly sure all the neighbors could hear. And considering the weirdage that went on in this apartment, the neighbors were probably already calling the cops.

"Open the soddin' door," Spike yelled, and Xander flinched even as he went for the door.

"I'm coming," Xander yelled back as he worked the locks on the door. Pulling the door open, he found Spike complete with leather coat leaning against the wall in the
hallway.

"Spike?"

"Yeah, who else would get sent ta fetch your sorry arse back? Now invite me in," Spike said as he threw a cigarette to the floor and crushed it with his boot.

"Um, not my house, not sure Jim would appreciate me doing the invite thing," Xander pointed out as he crossed his arms.

"Fine, then pack your bags and come out here."

"Hey! I'm the boss of me here. You can't just come here and..."

"Bloody fuckin' hell. Buffy sent me ta get ya out of here and that's what I'm going to do. Ya got three choices. One, you invite me in. Two, you come out here. Three, I burn the bloody building down and grab your sorry arse when you go running out like a rat off a sinkin' ship."

"HEY! There will be no burnage! Jim would be so hacked off he'd give birth to kittens or something, and I mean that as a figure of speech since we aren't on a Hellmouth
and that kind of stuff generally doesn't happen."

"Invite me in or I'll just start the fire now," Spike threatened as he took out his silver lighter and flipped the top open.

"Ass," Xander complained, "Come in, oh great pushy one." Xander turned his back and returned to the couch where he dropped onto the cushion before reaching down for the remote on the floor.

"Why are you here?"

"Ya still are a few brain cells short of retarded, aren't you? I told ya that Buffy sent me. She don't like the idea of you tangling with a Shaman."

"Not tangling with one," Xander protested before his brain sent an image of his limbs and Blair's limbs tangled together in that big bed upstairs, and maybe there was some tangling involved, but it wasn't of the bad. "And how did she know about the Shaman thing?"

"Wot, you think Buffy and Red don't talk?"

"No, I'm thinking I never told Willow. In fact, I'm thinking
you're the only person I told, so if there's a rat here, that'd be you." Xander didn't miss the look of surprise on Spike's face at that one, but the vamp recovered quickly.

"Yeah, well I already told you that I'm not going to have months of weepin' and hair pullin' because you've gone and done somethin' even stupider than usual."

"Rat."

"Just pack your bag so we can get the hell out of this soddin' dump."

"Not going."

"You bloody well are."

"Am not."

"Pack your bags."

"Nope. Nuh-huh. Not going to happen," Xander insisted as he crossed his arms and leaned back into the couch.

"Listen lack-brain, you've got yourself mixed up with a Shaman. Don't bloody care about some Sentinel since a
Sentinel is still a garden-variety human in a fight, but a Shaman has powers that you don't want to mess with. So get your bloody arse up and pack your things or I'll drag you out without the soddin' clothes. Be better off losing some of those abominations ya wear anyway.

"Hey! There will be no draggage. I will so call Willow and tell on you if you try to drag me out of here."

"Yeah, and maybe then I'd be tellin' her how the place where you're stayin' smells like a whore house."

"Okay, rude much?"

"So, ya finally get your cherry popped then, pet? Is that why you're hanging around here? Find someone willing to have your sad little arse?" Spike's smirk grew into something ugly, and Xander just looked up at the vampire in frozen horror. When Spike just stared back with a smug expression, Xander focused on the television where a bald man was spray painting his head.

"Get out, Spike," Xander said softly as he focused on the dots of light from the television.

"Get your things."
"No." Xander was focusing on the television, so he didn't even see Spike move before supernaturally strong arms pulled him over the back of the couch and slammed him onto his back on the dining table. Xander pulled at the hands that fisted his robe, but he couldn't move them an inch.

"Let go!" he shouted.

"You bloody little wanker. They're all worried that you're in over your head again, and you're fucking these bastards. Newsflash, Harris, fucking a Shaman is bein' in way over your head. If ya want to get your sorry hide stripped from your bones, don't do it on company time. Don't you make Willow and Buffy and even the stuck up prick of a watcher live with sendin' ya into a battle where you don't come back."

Spike was in full game face now, yellow eyes flashing down at Xander whose prey instincts had kicked in so that he lay still in Spike's grip, like if he were really, really quiet the big bad predator would forget he was there. It occurred to Xander that the bunnies on National Geographic who used this strategy usually ended up wolf-food. He didn't want to be wolf-food. He didn't
want to be food for anything, but Spike's expression was bordering on homicidal and Xander thought he might be about to be vamp-food.

"So if you want to get bloody killed, do it on your own time."

"And if you don't want to get killed, you'll step away from Xander," a cold voice came from the door. Xander looked over to find Jim pointing a crossbow at Spike's heart. For a half-second, Xander could see a warrior imposed over Jim's body, face paint and a naked chest decorated with lines and circles. With a blink, that was gone and Jim stood there in a casual shirt and beige pants and a crossbow. Slightly freaky choice of weapons for a cop but effective.

Spike stood so that he wasn't bent over Xander, but one hand stayed on Xander's chest, keeping Xander bent over backwards and trapped.

"So, would you be the Sentinel or the Shaman?" Spike asked calmly. Xander tried to push himself up, but Spike's hand kept him pinned down. Nice... now Jim and Blair got to see him doing his helpless and needing rescuing routine.
"I'm the Shaman," Blair said as he stepped to the side far enough to see while still standing behind Jim.

"Right then. So I'm takin' the whelp and we're goin' back to merry old England. Get your kit together," Spike's last order came with a fist pulling him up by the lapels of his robe.

"And again, I'm repeating the 'you are not the boss of me' portion of our earlier discussion," Xander complained as he stood next to the table with Spike still holding him still with one hand.

"And I'm seconding that. Step away from him before I have to use the vacuum cleaner to get your ashes out of my carpet," Jim said in a voice that had absolutely no emotion. It was even scarier than Spike's scary voice, and Xander held his breath as his heart tightened with fear. Now if he could just figure out who he was afraid for.

"Not likely, mate. Faced off against more than a single crossbow in my century or so of fighting."

"And I don't go into battle without being prepared. So step away from Xander before you discover just how prepared I am for a vampire attack." Spike looked from Jim to Blair before stepping away as he searched his pockets for his ever-present cigarettes.
"So, you're the blokes who fucked the boy even more senseless, huh?" Spike asked as he pulled a cigarette out of package and stuck it between his lips.

"Don't you even..." Blair started, and Spike flipped his lighter open and lit it before cutting Blair off mid-sentence.

"The Slayer sent me to fetch the boy back, and that's what I aim to do."

"Um, guys, this is Spike. Spike, that's Jim and Blair," Xander said as he gestured toward the two men still in the doorway.

"I figured that. Otherwise he'd be drifting in the breeze," Jim growled.

"Better than you have tried, mate."

"Hey, I have an idea, let's not threaten each other with permanent death," Xander interrupted. "So, Spike, nice of you to drop by, but it's getting late and I'll catch up with you tomorrow. You know, after I call Buffy and explain why you coming here is big on the bad o'meter. We humans are just going to go to bed... to sleep. Sleepage is good at one in the morning."
"Actually, Sport, we aren't. We have a problem, and we just stopped by to pick you up. Any chance you could give us a hand with the vibes?"

"Vibes?" Spike turned and looked at him with a single raised eyebrow.

"Later, huh? Like after the next Armageddon or so," Xander answered Spike's unspoken question before turning to Jim. "Just give me a chance to get dressed." Xander glanced at Spike whose body practically trembled with coiled energy and Jim who still stood in the open door with the crossbow leveled at the vampire. "Blair, any chance you could, I don't know, keep them from killing each other."

"I'll do my best," Blair answered as he put a hand on Jim's arm. Jim kept the crossbow aimed, but Xander could feel the tension in the room drop.

"I'll just hurry," Xander said as he made a dash for the room under the stairs.
"No bloody way," Spike cursed when he spotted the truck.

"Good. You can wait here then," Jim shot back, and Xander could feel the Sentinel's hand on his back urging him forward, away from Spike. He was starting to feel a little like a pull toy as Spike darted forward and gripped his arm, pulling him away from Jim.

"I stay, he stays."

"I'm not staying. They need my help," Xander protested and then he flinched as Spike snorted his disbelief.

"Oh man, you're just rude. Death is no reason to cop an attitude," Blair said, and Xander felt his other arm grabbed by Blair who pulled him away. Xander was surprised Spike had let go, but the vampire had dropped into a defensive pose focused on Blair, and now Jim stepped in, pulling both him and Blair behind his own large frame.

"Anyone else feeling like we're having some sort of bizarre dance?" Xander asked quietly.
"Yeah, a Maori haka... a kind of tribal dance," Blair whispered. "Of course, not all haka were about war and killing. Some were just about intimidating the shit out of the other side."

"Ride in the back or stay here, I don't care, but Xander makes his own decision," Jim snarled. Xander found himself pushed toward the cab of the truck. He scrambled to get in and then Blair got in behind him. He watched out the side window as Spike considered him with narrowed eyes. He somehow thought Spike would be happy to go through Jim to get to him, but the vamp was strangely reluctant to get in a direct fight with Blair. Xander turned away from that angry glare as Jim got in the driver's side door and started the truck. Xander thought that Spike had given up, but when Jim put the truck into gear, the entire truck shook from the impact of Spike landing in the back.

"Great," Jim snarled sarcastically.

"Hey, at least he's not in here," Blair pointed out.

"He better back off or I'll give him to Miss Schmidt for her roses. She's always asking for the ash from the fireplace." Jim said the words so calmly that it took a second for them to sink in.
"Hey!" Xander protested. "No stakeage. Yeah, he's a big undead pain in the ass, but he's died saving the world and that deserves some... well some putting up with his general pissiness."

"Jim's not going to stake him," Blair promised, and Jim just rolled his eyes as he guided the truck around a turn. "Besides, we have more important problems than a vampire with an anger management problem." Blair pulled a file off the dash and handed it over. The minute Xander opened the brown folder, he wished he was back on the Hellmouth chasing some slime demon. Slime demons were nicer. The pudgy face of an average-looking man was paper clipped to one side of the folder and inside were crime scene photos--dozens of them. Little girls dressed up in women's make-up, their legs sprawled obscenely in death... their skin red and slick with their own blood.

"Stop the truck... stop it," Xander demanded. Jim didn't even ask, he pulled the truck to one side immediately, but Xander still didn't even have time to let Blair out. He lay over Blair's lap and vomited out the side of the truck. He heaved as Blair ran fingers through his hair with one hand and put the other hand on the small of his back, anchoring him as he continued dry heaving long after his dinner was gone.
"Xander? Ya alright?" a British voice asked.

"Peachy," Xander answered as he continued to hang head down out the passenger side of the truck. He heard a door open and slam shut before hearing paper rustling and he figured Spike was looking at the file. That would explain the colorful string of curse words from Spike.

"Why the bloody hell would ya show him rot like this?" Spike demanded with murder in his voice.

"No killage," Xander protested weakly without raising his head. Blair started tracing circles on his back and then a water bottle came into his line of vision. Xander grabbed for it, twisting the lid off.

"We need him to help catch this bastard. I wouldn't show him this if I didn't need his help."

"What the fucking hell do you think he's goin' to do 'cept decorate the sidewalk with his guts."

"I think he's going to help track him." Jim answered. Xander swished the water around in his mouth and then spit it out before answering.

"Ixnay on the Amanshay," he barely whispered, just knowing that Jim would be listening closely to him.
"What about a Shaman?" Spike immediately demanded, and damn vamp hearing.

"That's something you can take up with Xander later. We have a criminal to catch," Jim said. Xander pushed himself up in time to see Jim walking around the front of the truck. He pushed himself farther up to find Spike staring at him with a suspicious expression.

"Great," Xander said shakily as Blair helped push him back up. Xander took a deep breath before drinking more water.

"Xander, we hate asking you this, but this guy slipped away from the surveillance units and if he gets out of the area he may disappear..."

"And more little girls will show up like that," Xander said with a shaky voice.

"Yeah," Blair answered softly. Then Jim got in the truck and started it without a word.

"Sport, don't focus on what he did. Focus on stopping him from doing it again."

"Right. I can do this," Xander whispered as he let his eyes fall closed.
"Okay, just relax and let yourself feel the vibrations," Blair counseled him. Xander shivered as he managed to open that door in himself that Blair had spent a good week teaching him how to close. The tingles that he had always called a Hellmouth vibe shimmied across him like fingernails down a chalkboard. Some were far away and some close. Most were soft, a minor aggravation humming just below the surface. Xander allowed the image of that little girl to float to the top of his mind as he felt the vibrations around him.

A sudden twang told him that it was there. Somewhere. Xander turned his head in the direction of the sound and pulled up the girl's image again. He could feel his head starting to pound with the effort of listening to the aggravating noise. A second echoing twang had him turning a slightly different directions.

"All cars we have a location on the suspect on the Charlie-1-7-2. Blue Ford Mustang, white racing stripe, two doors. Southbound Central Ave. All units respond. Code Niner. All units respond." The sound of the car radio slammed Xander out of his half trance and back into the real world. Jim flipped on the lights on the truck and hit the accelerator.
"We're minutes away," Jim said as he reached for the radio. "This is unit Echo Seven responding to the Code Nine, southbound on 3rd toward Central."

"See, I'm not so needed after all," Xander said, relieved that everything wasn't going to rely on his own slightly wonky sense of evil vibes or danger vibes or whatever they were vibes which had a bad habit of blinking on and off now that Xander understood it better. Which really... was still better than having it always on and just being drawn to evil.

Jim took a corner much sharper than the truck was designed for, and Xander found himself plastered to Blair by the force of the turn.

"Got him," Jim said as the turn brought them onto Central where three patrol cars with sirens running already followed the Mustang. "Okay, Xander, if you can, lock on to him just in case he has a trick up his sleeve," Jim ordered, his lips pressed into a thin line and his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"Right, just in case," Xander said. He focused on the car and let the door in his mind creak open a slot. Instantly, the threads of sound wormed into his awareness. Xander really wished that focusing his power didn't screw up his
hearing since he hated this muffled partial deafness he seemed to suffer when he intentionally opened himself.

"Uh, guys? Problemage." Xander opened the door in his mind wider as he searched for the thread he had early found.

"Problem? What problem?" Jim demanded darkly, his expression making Xander wish he wasn't pressed right up against the man in the truck as they took a turn in the opposite direction. He hoped they hadn't left Spike plastered to the side of some building somewhere. That would be bad. Xander pushed that thought away and concentrated on the job.

"The guy who hurt those girls... he isn't in that car," Xander said as he closed his eye and started sweeping again, the sounds of the sirens muffled by the undercurrents that hissed and squealed in his mind.

"Shit. This is unit Echo-Seven ending pursuit. Engine trouble," Jim's voice immediately announced, sounding like a radio someone had dropped a wet towel over.

"Oh, yeah, like that's believable. Sweetheart runs better than most of the patrol cars."
"So maybe I should say our visiting Shaman has the wrong vibes and I learned that ignoring Shamans leads to big trouble?"

"Oh man, go with the engine story." Xander ignored their distorted voices as he thought of what the man had done and then found that echoing twang in the vibe. He could feel the truck turn under him.

"Major vibage," Xander said as the sound sent a cold shiver down his spine that made his muscles tense up.

"Close?" Xander could barely hear Jim over the sound that vibrated his soul. A warm hand rested on his forearm and he focused on that rather than the noise that made him flinch.

"Way too close for comfort," Xander said, struggling to close that opening into his mind that allowed him to hear those echoes. The evil he could feel threatened to overwhelm him.

"The playground," Blair said, and the truck rattled to a stop. Xander blinked his eye open and found the truck parked under a street light, the colorful playset appeared to be shades of gray in the low light, and trees cast black shadows from the dim streetlights along the perimeter.
"Is he here?" Jim asked as he opened his door. Xander slid out after Blair.

"Oh yeah. It's just... I can't..." Xander struggled to explain why he couldn't open himself up enough to track the man any farther.

"Don't worry about it Sport. You've gotten us this far, so I think it's my turn to take over," Jim said as he came around the truck and put a hand on Xander's shoulder.

"Bloody hell. Don't need any help to track that scent," Spike snapped as he jumped from the back of the truck. Xander was nearly knocked over as Blair flinched back from the sight of Spike in game face.

"Spike?" Xander asked at the same time that Jim stepped forward while reaching for his waistband. Before Xander had a chance to worry about impending stakeage, Spike took off across the park still in game face.

"Shit. He's right, that's blood," Jim said before taking off across the damp grass. Xander and Blair exchanged a quick glance before taking off after the two. "Stay behind me," Jim yelled.

"Yeah, yeah," Blair gasped as they followed. "Oh god," he added as they came around the corner of the brick
building that housed the bathrooms. A small arm was visible in the hallway beyond Jim's kneeling form.

"She's alive. Call it in," Jim said tersely and that's when Xander spotted Spike holding the suspect up a good foot off the ground, yellow dripping off the man's shoes from where he had peed himself. In the background he heard Blair on the cell phone as Xander closed the distance between himself and Spike.

"You soddin' little piece of shit. I ought to rip your throat out."

"Spike," Xander said softly.

"You can't. I have rights... rights... I have 'em." Xander recognized the true babble of terror, and the smell of pee. Kinda ewww. Not as eww as what the man had done though.

"Small problem... not a cop. As far as the constables are concerned, I don't exist. I'm the shadow in your nightmares."

"Spike, killage would be bad. Hard to explain bodies when the police aren't Hellmouthy stupid. Come on Spike, don't make me call Buffy on you," Xander pleaded. Yellow eyes turned to look at him sharply.
"Fuckin' well deserves ta die."

"Not arguing. Just thinking that he fucking well deserves to go to prison where he'll be raped and tortured by people who hate him as much as you do. Scary people. Scary people with tattoos and names like Bubba." Xander put a hand on Spike's shoulder and the vamp tilted his head to one side as though struggling with his own thoughts.

"Listen ya little wanker," Spike snarled at the man. When he didn't get any response, Spike shook him, grinning with a feral expression as the man's head snapped forward and back. "Fuckin' listen up. You hurt anyone ever again, and I'll find ya. Never been much for torture, but I learned from the best. I bloody well know how ta make it last for weeks, and if you ever touch another child, I'll find ya.

"I'll tie you down and skin your cock before makin' you eat it one piece at a time. I'll torture you 'til ya scream for mercy and then beg for death in a hoarse whisper and then fall silent because you've screamed your voice away. I'll break you until you don't have a coherent thought left. Then I'll turn ya so that I can rip your guts out of your body over and over again. I'll stick splinters into your eyes until you rip them out of your own head to
make the pain stop. So you think of that if you ever consider hurting another person."

Spike dropped the man who fell to the ground and hid his face in his arms, shaking so hard he was doing a good impression of a seizure. When Xander turned around, Jim stood there with a satisfied expression on his face as he looked down.

"Sorry mate, didn't mean ta step on your territory there," Spike said as he stepped back and started digging through his pockets. "Think we might want to take a hike seein' as how I can hear sirens."

"Not a problem," Jim said in a satisfied voice. "Just take off."

"Right, come on then," Xander didn't even realize that Spike was talking to him until the strong hand landed on his arm and started pushing him back from the weeping pedophile.

"He stays," Jim insisted as he stepped forward.

"Xand, we need to do some talkin', and I'd rather your name not show up on some police report. So tell Starsky and Hutch here ta back off." Xander looked at the open expression on Spike's face, the slight confusion and concern and something that looked like it might be relief.
"I'll see you guys later. Spike's right about the whole police report thing because Simon is starting to look constipated every time I just happen to show up on a scene," Xander said with a shrug as he started backing away. For a second, Jim looked like he might follow, and then Blair came up behind him, a small body in his arms, and put a hand on the Sentinel's shoulder. Xander couldn't hear what he said, but he watched as Jim snapped back into cop-mode, pulling the suspect up and cuffing him.

"Right, get the lead out then, pet." Spike started trotting across the parking lot to a gas station on the corner, coat flying out behind him, and Xander had to run to catch up.

Part Thirteen

"Wow, the Council went all out on this trip," Xander said as he followed Spike into the suite.

"Bloody right they did. And when the Watcher finds the bill, I'll be sure to tell him it was worth every penny," Spike added, dropping his coat across a green wingback chair in the small living room area of the suite. "So, think you might have a few things to explain to me," Spike said as he dropped onto the couch and sprawled across the end.
"Don't owe you anything," Xander pointed out.

"Talk," Spike insisted as he narrowed his eyes in aggravation.

"Hey, I thought you said it wasn't wise to piss off a Shaman," Xander blurted. He might call Spike dumb, but the vamp really wasn't, so he knew Spike had put two and two together.

"Yeah, not until you see what their power is. For all I know that shaggy little one might be a fire summoner. You, though, you I got all figured out. Ya seem to still be a demon magnet. Only now, ya seem to be in a little more control."

"So, hey, you figured it out, and now we don't have to talk," Xander replied cheerfully as he stood next to the small counter with the coffeepot and ice bucket, and hey, the hotel had little packets of hot cocoa and how cool was that?

"Bloody hell. Xander, just tell me what the hell happened in the last two weeks." Spike's voice was tired, something Xander hadn't heard since the vamp had shown up straight from ground zero of the latest Armageddon.

"Um, Jim thought I was a secret agent, I rode around in the truck, their boss complained about me not being all
legal with the riding around in the truck, the truck got shot at once, I discovered I'm a Shaman, and then you showed up." Xander finished and Spike had a look of supreme aggravation on his face.

"Most days I can't get you to soddin' shut up. Now let's start with the important part. How the hell did you figure out you're a Shaman?" Spike demanded, and Xander could tell he wasn't going to get out of it that easily, and so he started over from feeling the Hellmouth vibe while tracking the rapist. Xander didn't even get a quarter through before Spike was madly smoking.

"So, wait. Ya always felt this?" Spike asked once Xander finally stopped talking.

"Um, something like it... I think. I remember vibing when this group went into the hyena house and I thought they were going to beat up this geek they had followed in there. I thought I was having geeky sympathy pains."

"Right, and you were going to save him from the bullies, I suppose?" Spike said dryly.

"I know I'm not saving-people man. I'm well aware of that, Spike. So, now that you've gotten the whole story, I'm just going to call Jim for a ride." Xander stepped forward to get the phone from the cherry wood desk, but
Spike darted forward and grabbed for it. Xander jerked his hand back to avoid touching.

"Hey, I need that."

"No, you don't, pet. You're not going anywhere with them." Spike emphasized his words by tossing the cordless handset across the room where it hit the wall and then separated into plastic and battery before falling behind the chair.

"Okay, I know we've covered this before, but I'll give it a third try. You're not the boss of me," Xander pointed out.

"Yeah, reckon I am. From what you say, you're like a private evil warnin' system. So when we head back into demon territory, I bloody well will be the boss of you and make sure you don't get eaten while doing that mojo. No bloody wonder you lose your concentration in a fight. So, ya got better control now?"

"Spike, this isn't your problem. Besides, I haven't decided whether I'm going back," Xander defiantly announced, and a look of fury flashed across Spike's face. Maybe he should have taken that as a signal to run, but he had been away from Spike's sudden emotional twists too long, and he didn't notice the danger until Spike had a forearm across his chest pinning him to the wall.
"Goin' to stay here and fuck your little friends?" Spike demanded with a sneer.

"Fuck off, Spike." Xander tried pushing Spike away, but Spike flashed into game face and slammed him back into the wall. For the second time that night, Xander felt like the rabbit at feeding time. Spike stared at him with a predator's yellow eyes, and his whole body froze in fear. Maybe fear. Maybe not since not all parts of him were frozen. Some were heating up nicely. And oh god, Spike was going to smell that. "Get off me," Xander insisted as he started struggling harder. He had to get free before his body outted him and then he'd never live it down. Bad enough to have Willow's sad eyes looking at him, but Spike's mocking eyes were more than he had the ability to endure.

"No," Spike said simply. "I can bloody smell them on you. The shaggy Shaman, his scent is all over you. And the Sentinel, I can smell him here too." Spike lowered his head to Xander's neck, and Xander had a sudden flare of panic.

"Hey, no necking... neckage, no neckage, no neck- anything with a vampire," he spluttered as he tried to squirm away. Unfortunately, Spike used a knee to keep him still, and a knee pressing into his groin wasn't helping
him hide his problem although it did keep him mighty still.

"Want you, pet. Always wanted you from the day Angelus came back to the lair yelling about you makin' him back down. Wanted ya in the basement when you were afraid of me and still mouthed off. Wanted ya when you took me in even after I went a little bat-shit crazy with the soul. Wanted ya when you were dyin' of loneliness and pain in the middle of your little gang and none of them saw it. They saw the jokes and didn't see any farther, but I did, pet. Wanted to take you in my arms and bloody bite them." The words spoken in that low rough voice that Spike would so often get when he talked about Dru made Xander tremble with desire. It also confused the hell out of him.

"Spike, um, I hate to point this out, but you hate me, remember? Did you get hit upside the head when I wasn't looking? Willow can probably unscramble the brain... maybe. With the chip and the dying and the soul, it's probably pretty messy up there." Oh yeah, babble, thy name is Xander. And where the hell had he gotten that phrase, and what the hell was Spike doing with his hand and what did he have to promise the vamp to make him keep doing that with his hand? Xander groaned softly as that hand rubbed his nipples through his shirt.
"Thought ya wanted to kill yourself. I'd smell that lust rollin' off you when you came in the room, when ya came near me. But instead of lettin' yourself touch me, ya kept tryin' to get yourself killed. Got to where Buffy didn't trust ya enough to send ya to the store without an escort. I saw all that, and I thought you wanted to be dead before being with me."

"Oh god, Spike, no," Xander ran a thousand memories through his head as he considered the possibility that he was an idiot.

"I'm just stupid," he finally admitted as he realized the truth. "Seriously stupid. You were so grouchy and I thought you were still lusty over Buffy and I didn't want to make a fool out of myself and now I've gone and slept with Blair and you can't be too happy about that, not that you have any room to talk with Harmony in your sexual closet."

"Shut up," Spike said before cool lips met his, tasting and nipping until Xander gasped and squirmed in lust. Spike's tongue darted and claimed his mouth aggressively that made Xander ache for more. When Spike pulled back, Xander was left speechless and breathless and slightly bloodless because all his blood had drained into his cock.
"Want you to answer with one word only, pet. Got that?" Spike asked without releasing him. Xander squirmed a bit and Spike's knee just pressed in holding him against the wall.

"Yeah," Xander finally answered.

"Good. Now the Shaman. He taught ya to control the feelings, the vibes?"

"Yeah."

"And can you always control the feelings?"

"Not even," Xander snorted and the knee in his crotch leaned in hard enough to make him gasp. And oh yeah, he was so very, very wrongly wired because damn that felt good. Xander gasped at the sensation of heat traveling up his backbone.

"One word answers, pet," Spike said as he reached down and soothed the abused cock with long, slow strokes through the fabric of Xander's jeans. Then slim fingers slid the zipper down. Xander shivered and grabbed Spike's shoulder as his knees threatened to go out from under him.

"Ya forget, pet, vamp sense of smell. When I would grab ya, hold ya, pin ya to a wall as Buffy took out the nasty,
I'd smell your need teasing me. Used to infuriate me that ya wanted me so much but ya didn't want me enough to stop tryin' to get yourself killed." Spike popped the jeans' button open, and Xander involuntarily bucked into the feeling.

"Oh, shit," Xander hissed. The knee was back, pressing into him momentarily causing another flare of heat and desire.

"Now, pet, didn't ask you a question." Spike's hand slid in under the boxers, and Xander lost his entire vocabulary at the first feel of a finger sliding across the head gently. "So, can ya track from an image of the nasty?"

"No," he answered with a voice that trembled.

"Do ya want me to stop?" Xander opened his eye to find deep blue eyes searching him.

"No," he answered honestly. He would have added more, like a threat if Spike did stop, but that would have been outside the one-word rule.

"Are ya plannin' on stayin' here?" Spike put a finger over Xander's mouth to keep him from answering. "I'm done with bein' used and tossed aside, pet. If you plan to stay here or dump me on my arse or get yourself killed, you speak up now. So think careful on this before you say
anything." Spike leaned forward so they were no more than an inch apart. "Do you want me?" Spike voice was low, whispered right into his ear so he could feel the air stir his hair.

"Yes," Xander answered.

"My very own Shaman," Spike whispered as he slid strong arms around Xander who could only clutch at Spike helplessly as he tried not to fall on his face since face-falling was not really of the good.

"All this power runnin' under your skin, and you're mine, aren't ya?" Spike pulled Xander away from the wall, backing up toward the double doors.

"Yeah," Xander agreed as he followed, pliant in Spike's embrace.

"Pet, don't want us to hurt each other. Ya have to know I'm still a demon. Won't rip myself apart between the demon and the soul and that means I can't do the Ozzie and Harriet deal."

"The what?" Xander asked as he pulled back and looked at Spike in confusion. Oz he knew, Harriet he didn't.

"Oh, I know that. That's why I was freaked out about you being my first and maybe being a little too demony. Well, that and I thought if you knew I was doing the crush thing you'd make fun of me until I died of embarrassment."

"Pet, now that you understand your powers a mite bit more, I expect you to have far fewer brushes with death, including dyin' of embarrassment," Spike said seriously as he continued to pull Xander into the bedroom, toward the bed, and oh buddy that was a big bed Xander realized as they got closer.

"So, ya already thought about what it meant ta be with a demon?" Spike asked.

"Yep," Xander agreed as talented fingers reached down the back of his open jeans and under his boxers to cup his ass, pulling their bodies closer together.

"And what did you decide?" Spike asked before nipping at an ear. Xander hesitated. It was one thing to have revelations in the privacy of your own mind where they were nice little sock puppet fantasies with a little perfectly normal before-bed activities. It really was another to admit to those things out loud.
"Can think of better things to do than talking. Talking bad," Xander said as he pushed himself into Spike, pressing their bodies together as he kissed and then nipped the side of Spike's neck. Spike's hands tightened on his ass.

"Need to know that you understand what you're getting yourself into, pet," Spike answered as he twisted his body so that Xander was suddenly standing with his back to the bed and they were falling. After a brief flicker of instinctive panic, Xander let himself fall, not even trying to free himself when Spike landed on top.

"Read Giles' vampire books," Xander hedged. Spike just snorted his contempt.

"Problem is that about half those are rot," he pointed out.

"But I lived with a vampire. I can recognize the things that make sense," Xander pointed out. "So when I read that for vampires it's about who's in charge, that sounds about right."

"And you're okay with that?" Spike asked. Xander just groaned and tilted his hips since the rest of him was pretty well trapped under Spike. Spike smiled wickedly as he reached out and snagged Xander's wrists and pressed
them to the bed. "You smell good, pet," Spike said and then Xander was lost in another kiss.

"So, what else you get from those books?" Spike asked as he pulled back.

"Now? Do we have to do this now?" Xander demanded as his cock throbbed. "Don't have enough blood for both heads, Spike."

"Maybe I want to just smell you laying here all needy for me. So, what else ya find?"

"Um, the vampire on the bottom, not that I'm a vampire, and hey, not going to be a vampire but the books usually focus on two vampires. Um... where was I?" Xander lost his train of thought at Spike started rubbing his body slowly and rhythmically across Xander's.

"Vampire on the bottom, pet."

"Um, yeah. They're usually really strong because another vampire wouldn't claim them if they were weak. Thought that meant that I'd never get your attention because I was never the strong one."

"Bloody hell, I started wanting you when you were strong enough to face down Angelus although back then I would have turned ya first."
"Yeah, not so much for the turning."

"I have a soul now, ya git. Not going to turn ya. Well, not unless you go and start dyin' on me and then we can worry about the soul later. Anythin' else?"

"Ah, the vampire on top was judged by how strong his underlings were."

"Yep. Goin' to bug Angelus no end that I have a Shaman. Angel's going to spend the next six months tryin' to get the bastard to quiet down in there. A powerful Shaman. My powerful Shaman." Spike punctuated the words with hard thrusts down into Xander's body. Xander writhed, but with Spike holding him down, he couldn't do much else. "So, you're alright with all this?" Spike asked.

"No. I'm not okay with the lack of sex here. If you don't get on with the sex part, I’m going to come in my underwear, and since I don't have my other clothes here, I have to wear these things tomorrow," Xander practically whined. Spike rolled off and onto the bed.

"Right. Can't have you gettin' messy. But first we have the small problem of you breaking the one word rule, pet." Spike pushed himself back so that he was leaning against the headboard, and Xander looked up at that
smirking face. His cock took even more notice, and Spike's leer grew wider.

"So, strip and get over here so we can figure out a proper punishment for a Shaman," Spike ordered.

"Oh yeah," Xander agreed breathily as he sat up and quickly pulled his shirt over his head, ignoring the buttons. He smiled. Some days it was good to be the Shaman.

Part Fourteen

Jim stood in the living room with his arms crossed, but even with the suspicious looks, the tension had somehow dropped between him and Spike since they had arrived at the loft just after the setting sun.
"Bloody hell, we'll never make customs if you don't hurry your arse up," Spike complained from his own spot leaning against the wall.

"And wouldn't that be a shame," Jim offered.

"Oh man, would you just stop baiting the vampire?" Blair threw in as he chopped vegetables in the kitchen.

"Soldier boy can't handle that he bloody lost," Spike said, and Xander didn't have to stop shoving shirts in the bag to know that Spike had a smirk on his face.

"Xander isn't a prize at the county fair. He made a choice."

"And you bloody lost."

"You'd better hope that you never die because with this attitude, your karma must be—" Blair made a whistling sound, and Xander imagined the man was making hand gestures to show the size of Spike's karma.

"Mate, you have no idea. But never plan to die, so I can't say I worry about it."

Xander zipped the bag and stepped out of the small room that had been his for the last few weeks. "Blair, Jim, I'm really glad you let me come do the whole tagging
along thing, and well, you know all the things I have to thank you for that I'm going to avoid thanking you for because I'm not kiss and tell guy."

"Not like I don't already know, pet. Especially the way this loft smells," Spike interrupted with a leer.

"The loft smells of Blair's orange cleaner and soap," Jim said with a hint of frustration in his voice.

"You're no bloody fun, mate. Can't give the boy shite if you go undermining me. 'Sides, maybe I just have a better sense of smell than you," Spike suggested.

"Oh man. That would be fascinating. Testing a demon? Talk about opening up new frontiers," Blair replied. Xander turned and Blair had put the knife down as a look of awe and curiosity slowly transformed him into the hyper super-scientist he both loved and dreaded.

"Oh shit," Xander whispered.

"Spike, just run for the door, and I'll cover you. As long as he doesn't have his notebook yet, we have a chance," Jim added with a fond look at his partner.

"Very funny, man," Blair complained, but Xander noticed Spike actually was moving toward the door.
"Xander, hurry up. Not goin' to be here when the Shaman starts the mojo."

Xander looked up at Spike sharply, as did Blair and Jim. "Mojo? Blair has mojo?" Xander asked.

"Of all the... what the soddin' hell do you think makes a Shaman a Shaman? They do mojo."

"Whoa. I have never been the one with mojo here. Jim does the prophetic dreams and the super senses, and I just cover his back," Blair make a half-laugh that Xander recognized all too well, the whole make fun of yourself before someone does it for you laugh.

"You honestly don't get it, do ya?" Spike asked curiously. No one answered. "Bloody hell, it takes years to train a Shaman. You got this one up and running in two weeks, and as much as I love the git, he's not known for his ability to learn. Then ya got a Sentinel here, and from what I read in Xander's reports, ya taught him to use his sensory "dials" in one sitting. That is mojo."

Xander looked at Blair whose eyes were wide with shock. "He's mojoing his teaching? God, where were you when I almost failed algebra? I so could have used a mojoing teacher with the powers of making people learn." Xander
walked toward Spike giving Blair a little shove on the shoulder as he passed by.

"Oh man. Are you sure?" Blair finally asked in a voice weak with surprise.

"No, I'm not. But I'm willin' to bet your mojo has something ta do with that. So, if you're goin' to go trying to use your powers of persuasion on me, I'll just be leavin'. I don't go for the mojo," Spike answered as he pulled the door open. Xander smiled when Spike's free arm slipped neatly around his waist. Spike tightened his grip for a moment before guiding Xander out of the apartment.

"Xander, hold on," Jim called. "I wanted to give you this." Jim came over, grabbing a manila envelope off the table as he came.

"If that's garlic," Spike snarled.

"He was joking earlier," Blair interrupted, but Jim just smiled coldly at Spike as Xander pulled open the flap. Inside were printouts. A small wildcat with rounded ears and round brown eyes looked at a photographer from behind a wide leaf. The next picture had a cat's body laid out next to a yardstick, and Xander realized the animal was smaller than the average housecat. The third sheet
had information about the animal's habitat in South America and how the animal lived in social groups... males actually rumored to help raise the kittens although scientists had never been able to study the elusive creatures well enough to confirm those reports.

Xander looked up at Jim. "Um... thanks? Can't say I'm getting it though," Xander admitted as he looked down at the sheets of paper.

"It's what I saw. That's your spirit guide," Jim answered as he nodded toward the envelope. Xander looked up at Jim's earnest expression and then down at the papers.

"A kodkod? I have a spirit animal named kodkod? Oh no. There has to be a return desk for these things. You know, trade up for something in a nice lion shape or actually anything that isn't small enough to get eaten by a housecat," Xander complained. "Come on... kodkod? I mean, the universe isn't this cruel."

"Least it's better than a dormouse," Spike pointed out as he looked over Xander's shoulder. Xander turned his head and glared at his lover, which earned him a slap on the ass.

"Thanks, mate," Spike said to Jim, and the man nodded his head in answer.
"We're here if you ever need us, you know," Blair said as he came over and joined Jim next to the table, leaning his body into Jim as the man slipped an arm over Blair's shoulders.

"We'll keep that in mind," Spike answered.

"Bye, and thanks," Xander barely had time to add before he found himself pushed out of the loft and into a new life. As Spike's hand slipped around his waist and then the fingers dipped into the waistband of his jeans above his hipbone, he decided change was good. Now if he could just figure out how to trade in his spirit animal, it might even be perfect. Sometimes it paid to learn a new trick or two.

The End

Experience Curve

*The Sequel to Learning Curve*
Spike and Xander hit L.A.

"I can't believe the sod came back here. Not like he has a lot of good memories associated with this place, but he always has been one for sulking in the dark," Spike said as they stood at the entrance to the Hyperion hotel.

"Whoa, big fire," Xander said, noticing the black streaks that wrapped around the corner, staining the stone.

"Yeah, either lightening or a dragon hit there, depending on who you ask."

"Okay, with your luck, I'm guessing dragon," Xander said as he bit his lip. "This is where they all died, isn't it?"
"Yeah, out back, but they're gone, and hanging out on top of California's newest Hellmouth isn't going to make them come back any time soon," Spike said, and he moved away, pushing in through the doors. Angel might brood, but Spike ignored, Xander had discovered. He followed silently because having seen his own share of disasters, he knew that sometimes you had to ignore the broken bits and the pain and the losses until you glued yourself back together well enough to talk about it without breaking down into tears.

"Angel-cakes?" Spike yelled, and that was a new nickname. Xander snickered.

"Spike?" Angel came out from the back, his face barely visible in the low light, but the big old ax looked fairly ominous. Xander started to back up, but Spike's arm slipped around his back, holding him in place.

"You're looking mighty broody, mate."

"Spike, I have a job. I don't have time for this right now."

"Yeah, you never do. So, what's the job and I'll throw in for old times sake," Spike said as he stepped closer, dragging Xander with him.
"Xander," Angel finally acknowledged him. "Spike, what are you doing with Xander?"

"Wot? You need the birds and the bees speech? Seems like you knew what to do with my arse well enough the one time you came home drunk enough to miss the girls' beds, so figure it out."

Xander choked. Angel... and Spike. Oh god, some things he did not need to know. "Hey, about those Clippers? Looking good this season," Xander tried to deflect the conversation, but both vampires ignored him. Well, Angel ignored him, Spike told him to shut up and gave him a slap on the ass that made Angel's eyebrows raise.

"Spike, I'm going to assume you've forgotten how little patience I have for you, but let me try this again. What the hell are you doing with Xander?"

"The boy warms my bed, not that it's any of your business. We just thought we'd drop in for a family visit, but if you have nasties to kill, all the better," Spike shrugged.

Xander stayed silent, even when Angel tightened his lips
and scrunched all his facial features toward the center as though some demon were trying to suck off his face. And staying silent, not so easy, because he could think of any number of face sucking jokes that he could make.

Spike's hand moved up to Xander's neck, grabbing him by the scruff, and Xander hunched his shoulders instinctively at the pressure.

"Hey, I'm big with the non-insulty manners, here," Xander protested. Spike tightened his grip a little more.

"Oi, can hear ya thinkin' them," he said. Xander just sighed as Spike pulled him a little closer and the hand around his neck moved so that it draped over Xander's shoulder. Angel's face now sort of dropped into a frown that made his eyes nearly disappear under his eyebrows. Okay, so Xander might be exaggerating a little, but it wasn't a good expression.

"I don't need help."

"Never said you did. I figure we can just punch the hell out of whatever nasty you're hunting, and then we can talk some. So, let's go," Spike said as he pulled Xander around and started heading for the door they'd just
come in. Angel got in front of them.

"He is not going." Angel said as he glared at Xander, but then his voice choked off at the end as though something had wrapped around his throat and squeezed off the air. Xander was fairly certain that the something was disgust since the fingers of Spike's second hand crept under the waistband of Xander's jeans.

Xander could feel his ears warm with embarrassment. Spike tightened his arm and Xander allowed himself to lean back into that strength. He knew facing Angel would be hard. But, like Spike said, better to deal with one overbearing, obnoxious, stick-their-nose-into-other-people's-business friend at a time, and if they didn't tell Angel, Buffy sure as hell would. Xander just really wished Spike wasn't enjoying this quite so much.

"He's not going with us," Angel finally ordered.

"Not your call, Peaches," Spike said with far too much amusement in his voice. Xander rolled his eyes. He wasn't sure how he felt being Spike's 'secret weapon,' the shaman powers hidden until Spike could show them off and rub Angel's nose in them. Personally, Xander didn't think there would be much rubbing. No matter
what Spike said about demons and power and wanting to claim power, Angel would never see him as anything other than annoying: he could see that in the barely contained fury on Angel's face.

"Then neither of you will come, William," Angel growled.

"Oi, seems to me we settled this little debate. Don't have to do jack-all that you say, mate," Spike answered, amusement still coloring his tone. Angel's fists clenched.

"And you didn't want me to piss him off?" Xander whispered.

"Careful pet, wouldn't want me ta punish you in front the poof, would ya?" Spike asked sweetly. Xander's ears burned even hotter, and Angel made a strangled squack-like noise.

"I've got demons to kill," Angel snapped as he stormed out of the office, slamming the door.

"Right, we're right behind ya," Spike announced cheerfully as he herded Xander after Angel. The convertible was parked along the side of the building, and now Xander could see one whole wall scorched
black, and the ruins of a building next door which had turned into a giant pile of bricks.

"In you go," Spike said as he practically tossed Xander into the backseat. Angel had already rolled away from the curb when Spike landed in the passenger side seat. Angel tightened his fingers around the steering wheel, but didn't say anything as he navigated the streets.

Eventually, he turned in at a fairgrounds on the edge of town, bright lights whirling high in the air and screaming voices drifting on the breeze. Demons at a carnival, and that was actually pretty cliche, Xander thought as he hurried after Spike and Angel.

"Right, so what are we looking for?" Spike asked.

"I'm looking for vampires."

"Doesn't narrow the field much. This type of place always attracts a few random minions picking off the careless. What are they doing to get your ire up?"

Angel stopped, and looked at Spike with murderous eyes.

"I fight every vampire I find. There is no such thing as a
death too small to fight."

"Right," Spike said disbelievingly.

"Go away, Spike."

"I will, mate, just as soon as these baddies are taken care of. So, why drive half way across the city to hunt here?" Spike prodded again. Xander trailed along after them feeling vaguely like the family pet, but then he got the feeling that these two were dealing with shit that had nothing to do with Xander and Spike and Xander or even Xander and shamen, not that Angel knew that bit yet. They walked in silence, and Xander couldn't spot anything that screamed "vampire" other than a Goth chick with a huge cross necklace which sort of suggested she wasn't actually a vampire. Angel stopped.

"They're collecting sacrifices. Children. They're going to drain their blood and summon a demon," he finally admitted.

"I don't smell 'em," Spike said. "Pet," Spike looked back and Xander stepped forward. Right, time for the floor show. "They're planning on draining children, probably excited by how helpless the kiddies are. Hungry,
frustrated at not taking a taste... either that or they have tasted them. They want power, and they think they're going to get it tonight."

Xander nodded, and then closed his eyes tightly.

"What are you doing?" Angel asked, but Xander ignored it as he opened his eyes to a new landscape. Xander felt for the lust for power and blood, seeing a few possible threads appear in the tangle of faint shadow threads. Xander focused on one, making it thicken as he concentrated. Lust, but lust for money.

Xander turned his head and followed a second thread. It was dark, and throbbing, inhuman, but he abandoned it after feeling the fear and disgust roll off one of the workers, a thick necked man who clearly wasn't human.

"Watch it," the guy complained as Xander bumped him, and some sort of scuffle broke out behind Xander as he felt it. There. The dark cords tangled together, three or four. All pulsated with hunger and lust and power and a raw superiority. Xander followed, blindly ignoring the people and the ropes until hands grabbed his shoulders, pushing him away from his goal.
Xander fought to turn back, but the hands moved him forward until finally Xander could turn to the source of that evil.

"Bloody fuck, they're starting," Spike hissed. Xander shook his head, making the vision retreat as Spike and Angel raced away from the fair and out into a field of broken stalks. Xander raced after them, grabbing the stake from the back of his jeans as he heard the first sounds of flesh hitting flesh.

Xander reached the fight and found children, their hands tied to stakes pounded into the ground. When Xander pulled out a knife, a girl started to scream, and Xander shushed her. "I'm just cutting the ropes. Just sit still and let me get you free," he begged. A little boy desperately scooted away so that Xander couldn't slip the knife between the rope and the hands without cutting him.

"I'm with the police. I'm a policeman. I'm trying to rescue you," Xander finally lied. The girl immediately stopped screaming and the boy held out his hands with wide eyes. "Stay together. Stay together now," Xander said as he cut loose the boy and then a quiet girl and finally the screamer. The fight was still going on.
"Stay together. Run to the lights and find the first person with a uniform, but stay together," Xander said as he put the boy's hand into the quiet girl's custody and then did the same with the screamer. "Run. Run as fast as you can, but stay together," he said as he gave them a push. The three children fled toward the fairgrounds, and Xander focused on the fight in time to see Angel and Spike grab the last minion. Angel swung his ax just as Spike struck out with a stake, and who knows which hit first, but the minion turned into another pile of ash.

"The kids," Angel said as he looked around.

"All three are heading for the fairgrounds. They'll be fine as long as they stay together and find a guard," Xander said as he put his knife and stake away.

"No more of them, then?" Spike asked as he waved toward the ash still settling to the ground.

"Greed and general not-niceness, but no more murderous demons with blood rituals," Xander agreed.

Angel just stood and stared. It was too dark here for Xander to see his face, but Spike obviously could.
"You look like a bloody idiot with that expression on your face," he said smugly as he moved to behind Xander and wrapped his arms around Xander's waist.

"Hey, why do you get to insult him if I don't?" Xander demanded.

"Not an insult... just an observation."

"Um, that sounds like something I'd say, so I'm calling it an insult. Well, except for the bloody part. When I say bloody I usually mean bloody as in blood." Xander shrugged.

"What is going on?" Angel demanded. He took a step closer, and now Xander could see the suspicious expression on his face. Okay, maybe that was suspicion. Xander wasn't actually sure.

"Wot?" Spike asked. "Ya wanted the buggers found, and we found them."

"And how did you find them, exactly?" Angel demanded, his eyes never leaving Xander. Xander squirmed a bit under the attention, and Spike's arms around his waist tightened.
"Interestin' question. I figure you've known the boy a lot longer than I have, so it's your own soddin' fault for never noticing."

Xander could feel Spike shrug, the movement telegraphed from his vampire's body to his own.

"Not noticing what?" Angel took another step forward, and now Xander could see the muscles under Angel's shirt tensing so that silk shifted over his body. Funny, that expression was looking more Angelus than Angel, and with the silk shirt, Xander could feel the first tendrils of worry. He opened himself slightly, allowing the shaman part of his mind to see the threads of the universe that tangled around them all.

Immediately, Xander sucked in a deep breath. From Angel came a corded, twisted thread, a silky, slick black rope of sickness and hate that twisted and snapped before smaller threads wove around it, sticking to it and obscuring the raw fury with guilt and sorrow and need and fear.

Xander looked up at Angel, seeing the demon inside as clearly as he could see the nose and the brown eyes and
the confusion.

"Pet," Spike's voice drifted around him, pushing away the image of those threads, and Xander blinked himself back into this world.

"Hey," Xander answered, a good sort of non-committal answer since he really didn't know what to say after seeing that. The purity of the evil horrified Xander now that he could see it clearly. He pressed back into Spike's embrace and blinked away the ghost images that crowded his vision. And really, it was almost worse to see Angel's soul's threads wrapping and twisting and sometimes snapping as they struggled to embrace that evil, cocooning in so that it couldn't touch the world.

"You don't use the sight again, not around him, pet, understand?" Spike said in a low voice, and Xander nodded, happy to have that particular order.

"What sight?" Angel demanded. Without the shamanic vision, Angel just looked annoyed, but even now Xander could feel the darker thread lurking just beneath the surface.

"Gotta wonder how you could fight next to him all those
years and ya never noticed."

"Spike, if you don't start explaining what is going on, I'm going to crack your head on the sidewalk," Angel growled. Xander couldn't help the tremble that went through his limbs and Angel backed off a step.

"Xander?" he asked.

"Okay, are we done with the Angel torture now? I'm thinking hot bath. Hot bath and bed. Bed would be good," Xander quietly pleaded.

"He's a shaman. He couldn't figure out how ta control it, but he'd get sucked toward evil because he could feel it sliding just under the skin. We thought he was trying to off himself, but it was just him bein' a white hat, trying to save everyone else without understanding how to save himself."

"A shaman?" Doubt colored Angel's voice, and Xander couldn't really blame him. But he'd better learn how to convince people because Buffy and Giles and Willow weren't going to be any less with the doubting.

"I can see Angelus," Xander said softly, "like an oily black
cord straining, only you keep twisting around that hate, trying to hold it. You can feel him surge forward, and snap through the threads of your control, and you just have to cling to the hope that you can hold him. That's why you hold on to your guilt. It sticks to Angelus, clings to his essence so that you can hold on to all that hate inside," Xander said softly. He looked up at Angel's face, and Angel staggered back as though he'd been punched.

"But you aren't Angelus. I can see your threads as clearly as his. And I could see the life threads of the demons we tracked here, I could see their hatred. I am a shaman," Xander finished.

The distant sounds of the carnival rumbled as the three of them stood in the field. Angel stared at them until Xander pressed back against Spike, feeling his arms tighten protectively, and Xander chewed his lower lip.

"Seeing that. Knowing what it means to have a soul and a demon, how can you let Spike touch you?" Angel finally demanded.

"Oi, I do more than touch him. Own him, don't I? He's mine, gave himself to me, the way demons in a clan do," Spike objected.
"Spike," Angel growled, and Xander blinked, watching as the black cord twisted up in rage and impotent jealousy.

"Angelus hates that Spike has what he wants," Xander announced. The black cord surged before again being buried beneath the threads of Angel's own soul.

"I hate to see Spike manipulating you into something you don't understand," Angel corrected him.

Xander shook his head.

Spike chuckled darkly. "I told you the old sod would be jealous as hell that I have myself a shaman. And the longer you use those powers of yours, the more powerful they seem to be getting."

"And you just want bragging rights. You want to be able to rub my nose in having something that you think I want. That's why you went after Buffy. That's why you tried so hard to make Dru love you, because I was always number one in her life and you knew it."

"You don't know the first thing about me. Never did anything but love who I loved," Spike snapped back.
"You can't tell me that he loves you, not if he can see our
demons," Angel countered.

"Oh, I can see what Spike is, just like I can see what you
are," Xander interrupted the fight. "You aren't the same.
Spike's soul doesn't battle his demon, and I gave myself
to both his soul and his demon because it's the best way
to keep him from ripping himself apart."

"Shh, luv. Bastard doesn't deserve an explanation." Spike
reached around and put a hand on Xander's chin, pulling
his gaze away from Angel.

"But he's going to call Buffy or Buffy's going to call him,
and I don't want them doing the conspiring thing," Xander
protested as he turned back to Angel. "I can read
you and Spike better than most people because with the
whole demon and soul thing, it's like having the parts
separated out so that I can see them clearer. I'm not
walking into this blind, and I know how possessive Spike
is, and maybe that's a good thing, but don't try making it
seem like I don't know what I'm doing," Xander insisted.

Angel just looked at him with wide eyes. Finally he
shifted his gaze to Spike. "If you hurt him, I will hunt you
"Not going to happen, Peaches." Again, the silence fell between them.

"And if I lose my soul, you get him as far away from me as you can," Angel finally added.

"Goes without sayin'," Spike agreed.

"You two take the car back to the hotel. I need some time," Angel said as he tossed Spike the car keys. Spike snatched them from the air and used his arm around Xander's waist to urge him away from Angel.

Xander followed Spike's lead, stepping over the dried corn stalks that stuck up out of the ground and crunching over the brown leaves.

"Okay, that went..." Xander paused. "It just went," he finally finished.

"Oi, the sod is jealous as hell, and he's given us his approval, so Buffy won't find an ally with him," Spike said. "Went a hell of a lot better than I expected."
"What, you thought you'd have to battle over me?"
Xander snorted a laugh, but when Spike didn't answer, Xander stopped, digging in his heels when Spike tried to pull him forward. "You thought Angel would try to take me?" he demanded.

"Well, yeah."

"And you still brought me here? Hello! What is it with you two? I am not to be given away or stolen away or won like the prize bull, and feel free to start apologizing now."

Instead of apologizing, Spike pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Xander had an image of him dropping the thing and setting the whole field on fire, but right now he had bigger complaints than Spike's smoking.

"Pet, watch your tone," Spike warned, blowing smoke out into the cool night air.

"Watch my tone? Watch my tone?" Xander demanded incredulously, okay, that might have been a small squawk, but he was entitled. Spike obviously didn't agree because he closed the distance between them, grabbing Xander by the back of the neck with one hand while he
held the cigarette away in the other.

"Yes, bloody watch your tone. You said you understood what it meant, givin' yourself to my demon, but you obviously don't. I'll bloody well dust before I let someone take you, but you have to trust me to know how to keep you safe," he growled, and Xander could see the fear in every tight line of Spike's face. He relaxed his body, leaning forward into Spike, and the hand that had grabbed him turned into a fierce hug.

"I'm just freaking out here. And you are not allowed to dust, ever," Xander whispered. "But fighting over me is kinda medieval in the knights fighting over a girl way, and I'm not really wanting to be the girl in that scenario."

"You're not a bloody bint," Spike said as he let Xander go. "But demons fight over control, and Angel soddin' well wants you."

"And you know, I was getting that feeling too, which is big with the creepiness," Xander said with a shudder as Spike led them back toward the carnival, a hand on Xander's back.

"Angelus wants the shaman in you; it's why he took Dru,
to get control of her powers."

"Which is why the telling you to keep me away if his soul goes on shore leave," Xander nodded.

"Fuck yes. If the soul takes a crapper, we're vacationing in another dimension, pet," Spike agreed. "But at least now I can have it out with Buffy without Angel coming in on his white horse trying to play knight in shining armor. If it came to a fight, don't care to know which side Buffy would take," Spike said indifferently, even though Xander could guess at his pain.

"So, no potential fighting over me like I'm the princess in the tower?" Xander asked.

Spike snorted. "You're soddin' strange, you know that, yeah?"

"Totally," Xander nodded.

"Angel isn't going to fight over you, so I figure that just leaves Willow, Giles and Buffy."

"You can take them," Xander tried joking, even though the thought of them fighting over him made his guts curl
up into a little ball.

"If I had to, yeah," Spike agreed. "Not really my first plan, pet."

"You mean you actually plan?"

"Oi, someone's looking for a spanking," Spike warned.

"Oh yeah, because that's a threat that's going to keep me from mouthing off," Xander rolled his eyes. Spike was entirely too serious, but Xander knew how to keep his vampire from getting all obsessive about Buffy and Angel and things that were in the past that needed to stay in the past.

"Brat," Spike said with a swat on Xander's ass.

"Hell yeah," Xander agreed. "Your brat." He wiggled his ass and walked faster so that he would get ahead of Spike. They had nearly reached the edge of the carnival, and Xander glanced back to make sure Spike was watching before he dashed off.

Xander heard a British curse behind him, and he ran faster, grabbing a support pole for a tent and swinging
around a corner with a laugh. A group of teenagers who stood too close for Xander to dash through forced him to slow down, and he caught a glimpse of white hair pushing through the crowd after him.

Xander smiled and detoured around the back of the food alley, where the trash cans smelled of fried bread and sugar. Not wanting to get caught here, he ran faster, dashing to the edge of the parking lot and skirting it south into the dark where the security building squatted. Ducking down to avoid the windows, Xander didn't even see the figure racing across the dying grass. He just felt the body slam into him, pushing him down into the warm earth of a flower bed.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Spike demanded mischievously, showing his fangs.

"Um, to the car?" Xander blinked up innocently, and then he thrust his hips up toward Spike who was firmly sitting on him.

"Looked like someone was running away from his master," Spike corrected him. Xander remained silent. Spike must have taken that for permission because he leaned down and commanded Xander's mouth in a
dangerous kiss.

Xander lay quiet, not moving as those razor sharp fangs slid over his lips, sharp front teeth nipping at his mouth. And while Xander knew that Spike would never actually hurt him, that sharp danger made him gasp for breath.

"Someone's naughty," Spike whispered as he pulled back, and then he licked Xander's neck. Xander had no idea if the naughty was the running or the fact that Xander was now very interested in sex with a room full of security guards inches away, but he didn't care as Spike sucked as his pulse, making him thrust up into Spike's body.

"Over," Spike ordered, and used his supernatural strength to physically lift Xander, urging him onto hands and knees, and Xander obeyed, pressing his face toward the smell of healthy earth and crushed daisies as he felt hands at his belt.

"Oh shit," he breathed.

"Best be quiet or we're going to have some company out here," Spike hissed in his ear, and Xander felt his heart race, which made his cock all the happier.
Spike pushed his pants and underwear down to his thighs, leaving Xander's cock dangling, and Xander squirmed until strong hands grabbed his hips. Oh yeah, he was wired funny because that just made his heart pound faster and his cock ache with need.

Xander felt one hand disappear, and he made a strangled, protesting noise, but then slick fingers pressed into him, and he just focused on not crying out. Sex in public, hot. Getting caught by security guards with big sticks, not. Getting Spike to dress up like a security guard with a big stick.... Xander groaned contentedly as another finger pressed into him and Spike found his happy button.

Xander arched his back and panted as Spike pulled out his fingers and something larger slowly pressed into him. Fuck, yeah. Oh he was so going to scream and get them caught. He pressed his forehead to the ground and just endured as pleasure made his spine tingle and muscles stretched and came to life. Spike pressed up to the back of his legs, and Xander whined in need and excitement and maybe even a little fear.

Taking pity, Spike pulled out and thrust in again quickly, grabbing Xander's cock as Xander dug his fingers into the
dirt and thrust back and choked on his own silent cries. When he came, his body jerked until Spike grabbed him, yanking him up and sinking fangs into his neck.

Xander couldn't hold back his keening sound as his body spasmed, impaled on both ends.

"You hear that?" a male voice asked, and Xander silently finished his orgasm, shaking as he grabbed the arm Spike had slung around his waist. Spike first licked and then kissed his neck, and Xander let his head loll to the side.

"Hear what?"

"I don't know, heard something."

Spike pulled up his underwear, awkwardly tucking Xander Junior in directions Xander Junior didn't like, and Xander rearranged himself, tucking everything away quickly as he pulled his jeans up.

"You're always hearing things."

"I'm telling you I heard something."

Xander stood up, wiping off his arms where dirt clung to
him. Spike stepped forward and brushed his face, and Xander cursed himself as he felt the damp dirt on his forehead. Oh yeah, real subtle.

"So go check it out," one of the voices said dismissively, and Xander looked toward the guard shack in panic, his brain shutting down right about when a coherent thought would have been helpful. A strong grip closed around his wrist, and Xander found himself pulled off balance, and he ran after Spike just to keep from being dragged behind him. They raced along the bushes that lined the south edge of the parking lot, staying just outside of the pools of light created by the lamps, and Xander noted a number of surprised, and sometimes half-dressed couples as they jumped over them.

Spike didn't stop until they reached Angel's convertible, by which time Xander was gulping air, and Spike was laughing hard enough to make the sides of his eyes go all crinkly.

"Not. Funny," Xander finally huffed.

"Oi, bloody well is. You're still all full of muck. Guess we'll just have to get Peach's car dirty then," Spike smiled as he opened the passenger side door.
"Angel's going to go a grrrr over this car," Xander said as he slipped in, his ass grinding dirt into the upholstery.

"I'm counting on it, pet. Well, that and I'm counting on us being on a plane for England before he finds it." Xander snickered as Spike walked around to the driver's side and got in. "One family member down, three more to go, pet," Spike said as he started the car.

"We'll make it," Xander said confidently.

"Bloody well right we will." Spike agreed.

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**Part Two**

**Heading for London**

Xander leaned back in the seat, ignoring the fear that always crawled into his belly when the aircraft started to land. Oh, he could face demons and gods and African food and blinding humiliation, but
one little aircraft landing and his stomach tied up like... like something really knotty. And for that matter, he didn't know why he was bashing African food because it was good compared to English food.

When Spike's hand slid over his, Xander gave a weak smile.

"Down in a sec, pet."

"I'm fine. See me be fine? Big with the fine," Xander protested weakly. Spike didn't answer, but he tightened his hold on Xander's hand, the one that was clutching the seat's arm. No matter how often he told himself that the fear was stupid, Xander failed to actually believe it so he held his breath until the plane touched ground, bouncing slightly and then rolling down the runway to the screech of tires.

The plane turned and slowly rolled toward the airport, and Spike pulled out his cellphone.

"You're not supposed—"

"Oi, I don't follow stupid rules, do I?" Spike asked as he slipped the earpiece into one ear and shielded the phone
in his lap. If a stewardess hadn't been walking by right then, Xander might have argued about signals and towers and controllers, but instead he just smiled silently at the lady as she walked by.

Spike pretty much did what Spike wanted, and right now, making a fuss would just get them pulled off by airport security and frisked so thoroughly that Xander would end up wondering if he should add the guard to his list of lovers. It had happened once at the Bulawayo airport in Zimbabwe, and they'd been all apologetic after going through his bags and leaving him sitting in his underwear in an interrogation room for an hour, but he really didn't think he needed a repeat.

"Hey, we're back," Spike told the person in the phone, but he turned to Xander as if talking to him, and Xander nodded knowingly. They were so going to get caught.

"A ride would be nice.... Then send one of the girls...." Spike paused for a long time, his face impassive as whoever was on the other end went on and on and on. He rolled his eyes and then sucked air through his teeth in a way that suggested someone was about to get eviscerated. "Bloody hell, has to be some way!"
"And I'm really sorry, but no with the wayage. I'm not seeing a way," Xander babbled in Spike's general direction as the man in front of them turned around with a confused expression. "Nope, no way, so sorry, and I'm sorry, we'll just keep our conversation down," Xander told the man as he did his best to cover for Spike's little outburst.

Luckily, Spike had fallen silent again, listening with an expression that did nothing to make Xander feel any better. Maybe if they were all too busy to come to the airport that meant another apocalypse. In general, Xander was not fond of apocalypses; they made his eye socket ache. However, right now a little Hellmouthy action would be good for the distraction.

He suddenly remembered that Willow had sent him off to study Sentinels specifically to get him away from Spike, and as much as he loved Willow, she wasn't really known for going with the flow. She was more the try to redirect the whole river to make it flow where she wanted it to flow, and Xander wasn't really fond of her ways of redirection.

Oh yeah, a little apocalyptic fun might be the thing to distract Willow from any attempts to redefine reality.
Yeah, she had given up the magical memory wipes and manipulation, but she still had the Willow eyes and pouting and the all-powerful 'listen to me because I know you better than you know yourself' speech. But then, if that was true, why hadn't she ever noticed that he was a shaman?

"Just do it," Spike snarled far too loudly, and this time a number of people turned and looked. He yanked the earpiece off and shoved the phone in his pocket just as a stewardess came through, her eyes scanning the rows.

"Is there a problem here?" she asked primly in her stiff English accent, holding on to the seat backs as something bumped the plane.

"Just a git who's annoyin' me," Spike said as he turned to Xander. "Andrew must be the most annoyin' piss ant on the whole bloody planet," Spike growled, and Xander got it.

"Sorry," he said with a half-shrug. Let the stewardess think he was Andrew of the annoyingness if it got them off the plane without a police escort. The stewardess looked at them for a second and then wandered off.
"We're on our own for a bit, pet," Spike said as he stood up and retrieved their bags from the overhead.

"I got that," Xander confirmed.

Xander followed Spike through customs and a more thorough than usual body search. It wasn't up to Zimbabwe's standards, but the guard got to at least second base with him. He kept waiting for some sort of explanation from Spike, but he suffered through the security with tight lips and as few words as possible.

Figuring that Spike couldn't talk about it with so many people around, Xander just followed him through the airport, grabbing the bag they'd checked and searching for something American from the various food vendors. Xander had spent over a year in Africa eating things that where he couldn't identify the meat... or the vegetables for that matter. Now he wanted good old fashioned American ground mystery meat. The airport slowly filled as planes landed, but board after board showed planes being delayed from taking off. But Spike led them away from the crowded center.

They ended up sitting on the floor of the main terminal, Xander leaning on the bags and munching a hot dog piled
with all the fixings while Spike bounced a tennis ball against a garbage can. The thing would hit with a dull thud, bounce once and then Spike would snag it from the air and throw it again. Thud-bounce-catch.

"I'm assuming that the hang up isn't demonic since everyone else seems to be hung up too," Xander said as he looked at the crowded airport. People clustered around the few public televisions, more crowded around those ones that you had to put a credit card through to get to work. He shoved the rest of the hot dog in his mouth, chewing as Spike sat silent. Thud-bounce-catch.

"Someone blew up the Tube," Spike finally said after Xander swallowed.

"They... WHAT?" Xander looked over, but Spike just kept bouncing the ball.

"Seems like a few dozen dead... maybe more. City's just pretty well shut down, which is why Andrew can't get a car in for us, roadblocks are making travel hard, and the slayers are busy with the nasties who've decided to take advantage of the cock up. The phones aren't doing well either, so it's lucky Willow mojo'ed ours. Might be here for a while." Thud-bounce-catch.
"Spike, who?"

Spike tilted his head and gave Xander an incredulous look.

"Okay, ruling out demons, I can guess who, but what are we going to do?"

"Pet, people have tried ta shut down the city before." Thud-bounce-catch. "Dru and me left for New York after nearly getting blown to bits by an IRA bomb outside a pub. Now that's just wrong, bombing people who are just trying to get pissed enough to forget their crap-all lives."

"Okay, this changes things. No way can we go pushing in there and announce to them that we're all couply after this," Xander said. That made Spike pause with the ball bouncing.

"No, it doesn't. City'll get up tomorrow, sweep up the streets, and keep right on going. If the jerries didn't stop us, a few cowards with bombs sure as hell aren't."

"But—"
"Do you want to hide us?" Spike asked, the tennis ball still in hand.

"No, of course not, but—"

"No buts. Life goes on, pet, at least for those that survived. And for us, life means telling the others that we're together now."

"Which would be where life ended," Xander tried joking. Spike shifted around, reaching out and grabbing Xander's hand with enough force to make Xander flinch.

"Your life isn't bloody ending."

"Just a joke," Xander tried defending himself. "Jokage, you know, where people exaggerate or say things that aren't true in order to make others laugh."

"'M not laughing."

"Okay, it was bad jokage," Xander agreed. "I'm just.... Look," Xander struggled, "I'm the sidekick, specifically, I'm Buffy's sidekick, only now, I'm not, and change is not always good. Every time I try to change, it actually turns out really bad, and you were there for many of those
disasters, like the whole kicking Buffy out thing, which looking back... I'm just blaming the pain pills because that didn't even make sense."

"Pet." Spike shoved the ball behind their bags and pulled Xander close. Xander sagged into that strength, letting his head rest on Spike's shoulder and closing his good eye. If some old lady with blue hair frowned at him, he'd get all weird and want to pull back, and right now he just needed to feel Spike's arms.

"You're English, how can you take this so calmly?" Xander asked. He'd ridden the Underground after he wrecked the one car Giles had authorized. He remembered seeing the group of kids who'd bundled on, some adult madly counting heads as the doors closed.

"It's what we do, pet. We've been around terrorism a good bit more than you lot, and there's nothing a good cup of tea can't fix," Spike said softly. "But you're upset because you can't stop it, you can't fix it."

Xander lay in the dark of his own closed eye and thought about that one for a second. "I can't really stop any of the evil," he finally said.
"Bloody hell, Xan. You're the one who brought Buffy back from the dead, and you faced down Angelus. I’m still surprised the wanker didn't grab you after that trick, and if you ever do anything that stupid again, I'll chain ya to the bloody bed. You fought on that last day, thinking you were going to die. You smelled of resignation and bitter acceptance, but you still waded into battle and you helped close the Hellmouth."

"Willow called the slayers, Buffy and the slayers fought the minions of hell, and you died in a big blaze of glory. I just stood at the edges," Xander disagreed.

"Bollocks. You gave everything to the fight, and more than once you did your bit to turn the world back to good."

Xander heard the words, but he had trouble really believing them. When fingers stroked his hair, he dismissed the whole debate and let himself just feel. Thinking bad, feeling Spike smooth fingers through his curls good. Xander pushed aside thoughts of the Underground and children or of demons and Hellmouths as he just let himself drift to sleep in Spike's lap.

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"Rise and shine, pet," Spike voice called, and Xander squinted his eye open. The florescent lighting still made the whole airport feel like noon, but the stiffness in his body suggested that he had slept for a while. Considering the people trying to sleep scrunched up in chairs, it would seem a lot kinder to turn the lights down, but not so much. Security officers walked through, their eyes scanning the waiting room nervously.

"We need to move?" Xander asked as various body parts check in with complaints. He really couldn't comfortably sleep on floors any more, not that floors were ever that comfortable.

"Our chariot awaits." Spike half pushed Xander to his feet and then handed up the eyepatch. Realizing with horror that it had come off, Xander slipped it back into place before he emotionally scarred some kid who happened to look over at the wrong time. "Willow managed to get here," Spike added, "but we need to head out and do a little hiking. She has the car parked over on Hatch Lane."

"Okay, so here we go," Xander said without much enthusiasm. Spike glanced over, but he didn't say anything as he grabbed the larger bag, Xander's bag, and
slung it over his shoulder.

Xander grabbed Spike's much smaller bag and followed him through the maze of the airport. People watched them quietly, the normal chatter of an airport quieted by the disaster that had slowed the system to a halt. Eventually, they reached the front doors. Three busses idled as airport employees ushered people onto them, but Spike pulled him north, away from them.

The night air was cooler than Xander was used to, but summer in England never brought the heat Xander knew from California. The city was quiet, strangely quiet, and the air felt like rain. It was weird. He left for Africa and while he was trying to negotiate with a slayer's family over a bowl of cassava, the Towers fell in New York. He was off playing 'make the vampire jealous' with Angel, and bombers hit London.

Hell, he took a three day trip into the bush to find a slayer north of Habila, and he came back to find Janjaweed militias had rolled through the village he'd been staying in, leaving the dead strewn across the ground. The woman who had laughed as Xander had choked on the local alcohol had laid with her legs splayed obscenely, blood on her cold thighs.
He'd stayed there long enough to help bury the dead. Looking back, he wondered whether he could have used his vision to see the danger coming. Had his instincts sent him out of the village? Xander pushed that thought away. He'd gotten malaria not long after that, despite the antimalarial drugs he took. Yeah, he might end up in the middle of every supernatural disaster, but he seemed to miss most of the mundane ones.

They walked along the side of the road until the airport disappeared behind them and they followed the edge of a field. The traffic was light, and the ubiquitous buses and taxis were completely absent. Two fields, three parking lots, and two very tired feet later, Xander finally spotted the back end of Willow's car, parked outside a house.

"Xander!" Willow called as the door came open, and Xander caught an armful of witch. "Oh goddess, I've missed you, and I was worried." Willow backed off a step and hit his arm.

"Ow!" Xander complained even though it didn't hurt.

"Spike said that Blair was a shaman, and you do not have
good luck with magical people, don't make me bring up Ampata."

"No bringing up of ex's. You have a clanky not-so-good ex or two in your closet, too," Xander defended himself, and Willow hit him again.

"Thanks for bringing him home to us, Spike," Willow said. Xander glanced helplessly over toward Spike as Willow dragged him to the passenger side of the car. Spike just tossed the bags into the trunk Willow had popped open.

"Yeah, no problem." Spike slammed the trunk and then opened the door behind Willow. Xander got into the car and twisted around to look at Spike, but the vampire just gazed back with no clue about how to handle this.

"Seatbelt," Willow chirped. Xander pulled the belt across his chest before he even registered the words.

"So, you met a Sentinel, and how cool is that. I know you weren't all excited-boy about going, but you're looking good, really good. I bet you're happy now that you went, right?" she asked as she drove through the quiet streets toward the edge of town.
"Totally happy," Xander agreed with a smile toward Spike. Spike gave a small smile of his own, a smirk that let the tip of his tongue slide out from between his lips. "Totally happy, and as soon as we get back to the house, I'll tell you all about it." Xander watched as the smile on Spike's face vanished, replaced with something a little more wary. So not good.

Part Three

The Watchers' mansion was overlit, nearly every window shining in the misty dark of the night.

"I'm thinking I'm glad I don't have to pay that light bill," Xander joked as Willow pulled up to the front, parking the car as close as she could to the front. In the distance, he could hear the dull roar of thunder, but so far the night had just threatened rain without actually delivering.
"Giles is going to give the economy speech again," Willow agreed. "And sigh, and possibly show the chart with the household expenses on a pie chart done with all the different colors."

The front door to the mansion flew open before Xander could answer, and Buffy ran down the steps. Just when Xander expected to have his door torn open so that she could give him a flying hug, Buffy stopped on the driver's side, pulling open Willow's door.

"The psychics report a nest making trouble, grabbing some people as they walk home," Buffy just about gasped.

"Oh goddess," Willow gasped. "Do you..."

"Do a location spell; call me when you get specifics. Spike and I will head for the general area." Buffy pulled at Willow who tumbled out of the car without complaint. "Xander, I'll give you the big welcome-home hug just as soon as me and Spike get back," Buffy offered as she slammed her door closed.

"Boy's coming," Spike said from the backseat. Xander already had his hand on the door to get out, but Spike's
voice stopped him.

"Spike, no time for arguing right now. Xander, I promise lots of welcoming later, but Spike and I have to go."

"All three of us are going," Spike said calmly. "People need help, luv, so drive."

"Spike," Buffy's voice now had the darker tones of warning as she twisted around in the seat.

"Buffy, I'm not arguin' with you. Either drive, or soddin' move and let me drive," Spike said without emotion.

"I so do not have time for this," Buffy huffed as she flopped back into the seat and turned the key. "Xander, please be careful. We do not want to have your welcome home party in the hospital, especially since the hospitals are a little full," she asked.

Xander flinched away from that reminder of the mess he'd left behind when he left for Cascade. As far as the girls were concerned, he was still more of a danger to himself than to any vampires. After a few weeks of getting treated like an actual useful member of the team in Cascade, he'd forgotten how much he hated being the
useless one, the one who got rescued, the one who did nothing while people died horrible deaths and then lay out in the sun as the flies gathered.

Luckily, mortal terror distracted Xander from the whole self-pity party as he clung to the seatbelt, bracing himself against the dash of the car as he wondered why he'd let Buffy take the wheel. Buffy plus driving equaled crumpled fenders and blustery Giles, and Xander suddenly remembered that as she took a corner fast enough to make the car skid into the grass.

"Oi, can't save anyone if ya get us all killed," Spike complained from the back.

"One of the psychics said there was going to be a huge attack on this road. Why can't the vampires just do the stiff upper lip thing and sit home like everyone else? Attacking people who are trying to walk home in high heels is just not playing fair," she complained as she took the next corner.

Spike answered with a snort that Xander could interpret pretty easily.

"So, seems like you guys are busy. I thought you were
doing this month in Italy. Why aren't you off eating pasta and raving about Italian men?" Xander asked, going for distraction before Spike said something and then Buffy said something and then Spike said something really bad... with the news he and Spike were about to drop, Xander really didn't want anyone to get pre-pissed off.

"Willow called me. She said that you'd done your Xander thing and had managed to get in trouble with a shaman." Buffy sounded almost apologetic, like she didn't want to mention it, but Xander still blushed at the idea that the girls still talked behind his back, plotting ways to save him from himself. Yep, they looked at him and saw Xander Harris, twenty-four-year old survivor of multiple apocalypses and incompetent nincompoop.

Buffy slammed on the brake and pulled the car into a side road with a controlled skid. "Come on Willow, call," she said softly as she pulled her cell phone out.

"Pet," Spike said.

"Yeah?" Xander asked at the same time Buffy did. They looked at each other, and Xander could see Buffy's confusion in the way she raised her eyebrow. Yeah, great way to come out to the friend, Xander groaned to
"Xander," Spike clarified. "Vampire's will be excited... the thought of all that prey too tired to really make a fuss. If they're feeding in a group, they're anxious... afraid there won't be enough prey or that some vamp with bigger curlies will take their prey away. But they'll feel the blood lust even more than the fear. They'll be so hungry that all they can think about is the taste of blood rich with fear and pain and confusion."

"Okay, disturbo much?" Buffy demanded. "If Angel talked like that, I'd start checking on his soul." Xander tuned out their complaints as he blinked away the real world until it became a faded picture painted on glass, a ghost-image he could see through. There weren't as many threads out here, and Xander focused on the emotions Spike had described.

"Yeah, well unlike the nob, I earned mine. It's not goin' to come popping off just because I get a happy." Spike shot back, his voice a dim echo from the far side of reality.

"Spike, what has gotten into you?"

"Not really the time or place for this discussion, slayer."
"Slayer? Now I'm 'slayer'? Okay, spill because I'm not really okay with the weirdage that's going on in this car."

"There," Xander said as he pointed out the windshield. "There, that way."

"Any idea how far, pet?" Spike asked.

"I'm not a GPS," Xander pointed out sarcastically.

"Smart ass," Spike shot back as he got out of the car and started walking. Xander got out and trotted after him.

"Obviously, some fairy god-demon sprinkled you two with weird-dust, but we don't have time for this. Willow's going to call," Buffy said as she got out, and chased them.

"Don't have time for Red to get the mojo together," Spike said as he walked faster, his duster flapping as he hurried over the uneven ground and past a row of trees. "Still the right direction, pet?"

"Um, yeah, and there are probably seven or eight vamps," Xander confirmed. Spike stopped so suddenly that Xander ran right into him, rebounding off Spike's
back. Spike slipped an arm around Xander's waist as he cocked his head to the side, listening.

"Spike, Xander, someone needs to tell me what's going on because right now I'm thinking about pod people and shape changers and that movie with the perfect wives where it turns out everyone is a robot," Buffy warned as she stepped in front of them.

"I can hear people that way, a group of them walking together," Spike said as gestured in the direction of the cords Xander could still faintly see.

"And you think these are our vamp victims because... Or an even better question," Buffy interrupted herself, "why are you asking Xander where to go? Unless I missed some memo, he's been big with the out of loop for the last few weeks. So someone better start talking."

"No time," Spike snapped and then he took off, running across the field with his coat billowing behind him like Superman's cape, and Xander didn't think that comparison would go over particularly well. Buffy looked at Xander for one second before turning and dashing after Spike, hopefully to provide backup as opposed to assuming he was Stepford-Spike and staking him. Xander
ran after the two of them.

By the time Xander reached the next line of trees, dust floated on the humid air and Spike battled two snarling vampires. The taller threw himself toward Spike, his fang snapping, and Spike landed a bone-crushing kick to his leg just above the knee. The snarl turned into a scream of pain, but Spike danced away, trading punches with the shorter vamp. A half-dozen women stood in a cluster near the fence, watching with wide eyes and open mouths as Buffy rammed a stake into a vampire's chest.

Looking around, Xander found one fledge on the ground, and Xander pulled his own stake and dived for the guy. Just as Xander reached him, he could see that black cord, twisting with malice and fury, snap up toward him. Xander flinched away to avoid the touch, his heart pounding with fear as he scrambled back. Unfortunately, his heel caught on a tuft of grass, and Xander ended up on his ass before he could recover.

The vampire snarled and lurched forward, which led to much crab-walking backwards on Xander's part. Just when Xander expected to get pinned to the ground and bitten, and bitten in the less fun way than Spike did the biting, the vampire flew off him.
"You don't want him," Buffy said as she practically danced over Xander. The vamp jumped up to his feet, rubbing his ribs with a grimace of pain. "He eats so much junk food that you'll get high cholesterol. And with that waistline, you cannot afford the extra pounds," Buffy finished.

Xander got up to one knee, smiling as the vampire started backing away. He'd finally figured out that his buddies were dead, and he was facing two seriously scary fighters. Spike's opponents had turned to dust, and he now closed in on the vamp who had attacked Xander.

"Ya should know better than to touch other people's property, mate," Spike offered as he snapped a branch off the tree and staked the vampire on the jagged end. "And you," Spike said as he whirled on Xander, "know how to stake a vampire without falling on your arse, so what the bloody hell was that?"

Spike strode forward, toward Xander, but then Buffy was there between them, her back to Xander as she faced Spike. "Okay. Someone explain what is going on, preferably using small words and short sentences because I'm feeling particularly blonde today. Either I'm
blonder than normal or you two are from some bizzaro alternate reality with rules that make no sense."

"Oi, don't go waving that stake at me," Spike said as he stepped back.

"Hey, no stakage!" Xander added. Buffy tilted her body toward him.

"I'm not so sure who I'm waving a stake at. The last I checked in, I had these two friends, Spike and Xander, who didn't like each other much. And Spike was really not big with calling Xander 'his' and if he ever did call Xander 'his property', my friend Xander probably would have tortured Spike with toothpicks."

"Things have changed a bit, luv," Spike said gently.

"Well, duh," Buffy interrupted. "And where did our rescuees go?"

"Um, I think they ran for it," Xander said as he gestured toward the line of houses where the women had disappeared. "And Spike and I haven't actually hated each other for a while now, Buff."
"Okay," Buffy challenged him, her hands on her hips but at least that meant the stake was down and not threatening anyone, "I may miss some stuff, like the whole the Immortal is evil vibe and the reason why the English put vinegar on their French fries, but trust me, I would have noticed any changes on the Spike-Xander hating front. I would have noticed and possibly sent you a fruit basket as a thank you because your constant fighting drove me insane every time I came and, oh my god, you're sleeping together. Okay, I am not freaking," Buffy concluded as she closed her eyes tightly and took a deep breath. "Officially not freaking."

"Hey, what do ya' know. It was easier telling you than I thought it would be," Xander smiled weakly, and Buffy cracked one eye open to glare at him before she started back across the field toward the car.

"I'm not dealing with this," she announced resolutely.

"Now, luv, don't be like that," Spike said as he followed her, and Xander trailed after him.

"Not being like any—" Buffy stopped when her phone chirped. She pulled it out and thumbed it on. "Yep?" she listened for a second. "We already kicked their asses.
We're heading back now…. We got lucky and just found them, I guess," Buffy offered as she turned and stared right at Xander. When Spike sidestepped into the path of her glare, Xander was very happy to hide behind him. "Yeah, see you in a sec," Buffy finished. "Bye." She shoved the phone back into a pocket, but then she just stood there in the field.

"Buffy, we need to talk, before we get everyone else all riled up," Spike finally said, his voice soft and the accent more Giles than Spike.

"Riled up? Oh, there will be riling," Buffy nodded. "And can I just say your timing sucks?"

"Buffy—" Spike started.

"And this whole 'hate turned lust turned love' thing, it never works out. Xander and Cordelia, you and me, Willow and Kennedy getting back together after that break up that required mutual non-aggression treaties... they all fell apart," Buffy interrupted. "Or, they didn't fall apart as much as they exploded causing massive casualties and collateral damage."

"Oi, not going to happen," Spike just about snarled, and
Buffy put on her patented worried look and gnawed her lip.

"Buffy, Spike and I have had the big talk, and this isn't just about lust," Xander added as he stepped to Spike's side. She looked at him with a small frown.

"Would the 'not just about lust' part have something to do with how you knew the vampires were out here?"

"Kinda," Xander agreed.

"I'm going to need aspirin to go with this conversation, aren't I?" she asked with eyes that begged him to say no.

"Probably," Xander said instead.

"Pet, let's save the shaman bit for when we get back, explain it to them all at once, yeah?"

Xander nodded.

"You did piss off that shaman, didn't you?" Buffy asked. "I can't believe Willow sent you off to take on a Sentinel and a Shaman by yourself."
"Let's just get back to the house, and I will turn into explaino-boy," Xander offered, and Buffy turned back toward the car with a sigh. Xander could feel his guts like a rock rolling around in his stomach as he started after her. Within one step, Spike was there, his arm sliding around Xander's waist, pulling him close, and Xander let himself lean into that embrace.

Part Four

Xander got out of the car teetering between an insane urge to babble about the drizzling rain and an inability to get any words to come out of his mouth at all, which was new. Usually he ran to the babbling side of nervous.

When Xander slammed the car door, Spike was there, slipping an arm around his waist as they dashed for the covered porch before they got soaked.

Buffy beat them there, leaping up the steps and pushing her damp hair back as she considered them. "Subtle, guys," she nodded knowingly. "In fact, in the subtle department, I'm putting that up there with Kennedy's whole ritualistic burning of the bedsheets."
"Hey," Xander protested, "not crazy lady here."

"Oi, don't know about the crazy part, but I'll second that ya aren't a lady," Spike offered with a leer, and Xander planted his elbow hard into Spike's side. Spike didn't let go.

"Xander? Spike?" came a confused voice. Xander turned to see Willow standing at the open door, the light spilling out from behind her. While he couldn't see anyone else, the giggles suggested that more than one baby slayer had seen them. "Oh goddess. I have not cast any spells. So, if Spike is all lusty and romanticy, this time, it is totally not my fault," she immediately defended herself.

"Chill, Will. They're going the tried and stupid route of falling in lust after being big with the fighting," Buffy shrugged as she passed Willow in the door, and with support like that, who needed undermining? Spike growled.

"Oi, just because you birds don't know how to--"

"Okay, officially saying time out," Willow rushed to say as she held up her hand as she backed up to let Spike and
Xander into the front hall. "Some things are not discussed here, and you are on the verge of discussing them. Just no."

"If that's the case, then me and Xander are on the do not discuss list," Spike snapped.

"Um, which might be kinda hard since we're supposed to be doing the discussing about us," Xander pointed out, and Spike glared at him. "Or not," Xander shrugged. "I'm okay with not." Xander focused on the way his sneakers squeaked on the tile floor.

"Oh no. No, you two do not get to drop the weirdness napalm and run for the hills," Buffy insisted.

"Drop napalm... run. Um, isn't that the way it's supposed to go," Xander whispered to himself, and Spike's arm tightened around his waist.

"We're only going over this once, so get Giles on the boob-tube," Spike said.

"Your funeral, and I would think you'd done the funeral thing enough," Buffy commented as she disappeared into the main study.
"Giles is going to be not-happy-boy getting woken up to deal with this," Willow pointed out, not taking her eyes off Xander. He squirmed uncomfortably under her attention. And hey, his right and left sneakers made slightly different squeaky sounds. The left was definitely a little higher. He had thoughts of a wet sneaker concert with all the tile around the place. Demon goo cleaned up better with tile.

"Oh Xander," Willow said softly. "I'm so sorry we sent Spike after you. We should have come ourselves."

"Bloody hell. You're making it sound like he's dying or some such rot," Spike snorted as he stepped forward. Willow's eyes narrowed into her expression of superior disapproval, the one that she had copied from Giles, the one that made Xander start thinking about new missions to Africa... or maybe Mars.

"No dying, just some really freaky decisions that's he going to regret as soon as he stops funking, because he has been in a major funk ever since Africa, and maybe we should take you to another doctor, one who knows more about Africa, like maybe some African sleeping depression or something," Willow suggested with a
suddenly hopeful expression.

"I'm not—" Xander started.

"Hey, I am so not going to be the only one in front of the camera when Giles shows up, so get in here," Buffy called from the study.

"Right, time to get this little disaster on the road, innit?" Spike asked rhetorically as he guided Xander toward the study.

Inside, books lined two walls, shelves running right up to the sides of the windows and then up and over so that they had to use a fancy wooden ladder that slid along a rail in order to reach the top shelves. The two short walls held electronics. Xander sighed and stepped to the couch right in front of the television, dropping down onto the couch and trying to smile at the camera sitting on the T.V.

"Hate this bloody thing," Spike complained as he sat next to Xander, so close that their legs pressed together.

"No joke. I mean, reach out and touch someone is all well and good until someone buzzes you when you're in the
ugly pajamas with a cucumber facial," Buffy agreed as she sat on the opposite side of the couch, leaving Willow to sit in the chair.

"And as the person who did the buzzing, can I just second the not-so-good part of that?" Xander said, forcing the joke even though his stomach just sort of curled up inside him.

"Hey, you try to keep your complexion with all the slayer sweat."

"Not really something--" Xander started.

"Good lord, please tell me you did not call me to the camera to witness discussions of complexions," Giles asked from the television. Xander looked over, and Giles sat on his couch in a rumpled button-up shirt and dress slacks.

"Rupert," Spike smirked when everyone else lost their voice. At least, Xander lost his. He suddenly wondered if he even knew how to talk because words slid out of his brain like dead, slimy fish, leaving him with a big, old, empty head.
"William," Giles said dryly.

"Hey, Giles." Buffy leaned forward and waved to the camera.

"Are all of you alright?" Giles asked.

"All present and accounted for," Buffy agreed. "We just have some extra weirdness that showed up, and we know how you hate to be left out of the fun."

"Yes. Remind me to thank you later." Giles looked tired but he sighed and leaned forward. "Xander, Spike. I'm glad to see that you got in alright. I'll admit I was a little concerned about your travel plans."

"Not sleet or imploding Hellmouths or Janjaweed militias will keep me from my..." Xander paused. He didn't really have appointed rounds, at least not any more. "...will keep me from showing up to unplug whichever toilets the girls have irrevocably plugged up with random demon bits," he finally finished. Giles just blinked at him.

"Oh yeah, the third floor toilet on the north side is making this weird gurgle ever since one of the girls flushed a Guanth chunk she pulled out of her boot."
Cathy? Katie? Chelsey?" Buffy struggled for the name of the guilty girl.

"Veronica," Willow provided.

"Yep, that's it. Veronica!"

"Yes, quite." Giles interrupted without saying quite what. "So, what weirdness has led you to disturb me so late? I assume it's something other than Guanth chunks."

And a hush fell over the crowd.

"Birds have their knickers in a twist because Xander's been makin' the beast with two backs with me," Spike commented with a shrug.

"Xander's going to turn into a beast?" Buffy asked, twisting around to look at them in concern while Giles did a bit of spluttering, which, thanks to really high end equipment, was so clear that Xander felt like he should duck out of the potential spit zone.

"No, he's makin' the beast with two back... we're shaggin'," Spike said with a roll of his eyes. Giles just got up and disappeared from the television.
"Okay, calling it a 'beast' doesn't really do much to drop the weird o'meter," Buffy complained. "Not to mention ew."

"Oi, you remember that hungry beast, hips crashing together, ravenous mouths---"

"NO!" Buffy shrieked, cutting Spike off. "No, there is no remembering. And this is supposed to be your intervention, not a journey to the mistakes of Buffy-past. Giles, tell them that they have to stop this before they make themselves and all of us miserable. Tell them that we're their friends, and as their friends, we are officially worried about them making a huge mistake." Buffy did the speaking, but Willow nodded the whole time.

Giles reappeared in the television screen, dropping heavily onto the couch, drink in hand. And Xander could always feel special when he drove Giles to drink.

"Oh yes, because the rest of you would never consider undertaking such an unhealthy relationship," Giles said as he leaned to the side, out of the camera's view. Yeah, like they didn't know he was gulping that Scotch.
"Sarcasm is not helping. Big with the not helping," Willow just about whispered, but Giles leaned back into the picture.

"Quite right, but after the abominable day I've had, it makes me feel a good deal better," Giles pointed out, and not for the first time Xander considered that Giles just might be turning into one of those cranky old men who have the bad habit of sharing large quantities of truth.

"Okay, none of us are batting a thousand on the significant other front... nowhere near a thousand. More like a number far below a thousand, and if I knew baseball, I could give a number," Willow admitted, "but we don't have to sit by and smile while Xander makes this mondo mistake because we do all remember that Xander hates Spike. We all remember this, yes?"

Buffy leaned back on the couch and made a face. "Oh, I remember fighting and snapping and occasional not-so-practical joke including blood and soy sauce, but I'm not sure I remember any hating since Spike came back from the dead."

Spike snorted. "Not that this is any of you lot's business,
but Xander and I won't end up as bollocked up as the rest of you, and we don't need your approval," Spike interrupted. Then he turned toward the monitor and the camera. "And if you think I care enough about your opinion to get you on the line for some sort of seal of approval on my sex life, you're doin' way too much drinking, Rupes. Got bigger fish to fry here."

Xander held his breath as that truth sank into the room. The wind shifted and big drops of rain splattered against the window.

"And this would be where the slightly weird turns to kooky hi-jinx with Xander tracking down the vampires before the attack even took place," Buffy said. She stared at him expectantly and Willow blinked and Giles leaned forward and got that expression where his eyes got all narrow.

"You tracked the vampires?" Giles asked.

"Xander?" Willow prompted. Xander just sat there, unable to find any words in the entire English language that would help.

"He's a Shaman," Spike announced, his voice all smirky.
Willow froze, but Giles sat back in his chair.

"Okay, and I'm assuming you've lost your mind. Xander is not a weirdo with the bird feathers sticking up out of his hair." Buffy used her fingers to mimic the Shaman Giles had called to the estate.

"There's a wide range of shamanic powers, but why would you come to the conclusion that Xander was Shaman?" Giles asked. Because of the whole camera thing, it looked like he was staring down Buffy, but Xander guessed that would be Spike getting the demanding-Watcher glare.

"Pet, tell 'im," Spike prompted, and Xander glared over at his lover. Stupid vampire.

Taking a deep breath, Xander shrugged and focused on the blinking VCR light as he started. "Jim figured out that I was a Shaman because I have a spirit animal." Xander avoided admitting that his spirit animal was a kodkod, that admission would require torture.

"The Sentinel?" Giles asked.

"Yeah. He has these dreams, kinda like Buffy, which
might make Willow's whole theory about a male half of the slayer line a little more plausible," Xander agreed.

"But, how do we know that his dream meant anything?" Willow asked. "Last night I dreamed about vacationing in Arizona with Kennedy and then she started the whole 'I know best for you' crap and suddenly we were in the mall, and a giant Santa fell on her, and guts squished out. I'm thinking it was just a dream."

Xander looked at Willow with more than a little concern.

"Can we please deal with one potential disaster at a time?" Giles asked. "Xander, while prophetic dreams are quite common in some types such as Slayers and Seers, it does not automatically follow that a Sentinel would either possess that skill or correctly interpret it. Understanding prophetic dreams can—"

"I can see another world," Xander blurted. That stopped Giles who just blinked at him through the computer screen.

"I see," Giles finally declared.

"Xander, they might have done a spell, something that
scrambled your vision. I could check, fix it," Willow offered.

"There's nothing to fix, Will," Xander protested. "It's always been there, only I didn't know it."

"Okay, I would have noticed if you'd broken out with the magical powers," Buffy protested. "Xander, you're the heart of our group, and you always will be, but all through high school you wanted some sort of powers that would make you different, and now you're coming in here saying that all that time you were some powerful, magical creature. Is anyone else getting the not-right vibe? You know, like when Dawn thought she was a Slayer? Not that there's anything wrong with normal, and now Dawn's happier doing Cambridge than she would have been doing Slayer." Buffy looked at him with this expression of compassionate understanding—or possibly condescension—and Xander felt the need to shrink into himself. Yep, that was one person who totally didn't believe him. From Willow's expression, probably two.

"Oi, just because you're bloody blind doesn't mean it's not true. What did Caleb call him? The one who sees everything, wasn't it?"
"Oh yeah, and we're taking evil guy's word on that?" Buffy demanded.

"No, you're takin' Xander's word on it," Spike said quietly, and Xander watched as Buffy blushed a deep red. Willow looked down at her lap, picking at the edge of her sweater.

Buffy found her voice first. "Xander, I totally believe that you believe this, but this is a little out there, more out there than you dating Spike which, really, ever since you took one look at the Initiative and asked if you could sleep with Riley, I kinda figured that you had the gayness going on," Buffy said slowly

"Xander dates girls, and there's nothing wrong with boys dating boys, but Xander doesn't," Willow protested. "And he's just been off since he got back from Africa. He did the whole trying to get himself killed thing, and then the hiding in his room thing until he turned pale as a mushroom, and now the dating someone who hates him thing, and is anyone else spotting the pattern because I'm thinking psychological help." Willow nodded knowingly. "Serious, expensive psychological help."

"Bloody hell. Caleb told us way back what we couldn't
soddin' see on our own. This doesn't have fuckin' anything to do with Xander's depression or your bloody fucked up love lives," Spike snapped at both girls. "The fact is that Caleb never did lie to us, had too much truth to use against us, didn't he? And the truth is that Xander is the one who sees everythin'. So pull your heads out of your arses."

Giles cleared his throat in the silence that followed Spike's outburst, and Xander was reminded of the way Spike had ripped all of them when they'd turned on Buffy, accusing her of losing her Slayer-center during the fight with the First.

"Perhaps we could focus on this other world. Xander, can you describe what you see?" Giles asked, and Xander tried to not get his hopes up that someone would believe him because it hurt when hopes fell off that reality cliff and got all smashed at the bottom.

"Um, threads," Xander said. He closed his eye and let the world slip away just a little bit, so that when he opened his eye, he could see the threads tangled about the room. "It's like everyone has this cord in their center, and it unravels as they move around. There's so many of them, but if I concentrate on a feeling, I can block out the
ones that don't match and find what I'm looking for."

"And you always had that power?" This time Giles sounded more than a little skeptical. Yep, good thing he hadn't gotten his hopes up. That fall would have hurt.

"In the feeling a Hellmouthy vibe way, yeah," Xander offered. He took a deep breath and pushed away that little voice that told him to just fake normal, which was more than ironic considering everyone else in the room had superpowers. "And I'm thinking that the whole demon magnet was more of me being able to feel the evil in a person, but then once I found the evil, like with hardware store gal, I couldn't do much with the stopping the evil because I don't have the total upgrade with the super stealthy fighting skills. But the being able to actually see the other world is a little new," Xander pushed ahead.

"So, three weeks with this other Shaman, and you have accessed your dormant powers?" Giles asked without even trying to hide the disbelief. "Xander, as much as I believe that you are telling us the truth as you see it, that simply isn't possible. To go from a potential Shaman to having full access to shamanic powers takes years of training, meditation, often some sort of apprenticeship,
and quite possibly a number of spiritual voyages, either with or without mind altering drugs that would allow you to break down the barriers to access your power. I'm afraid I have to agree with Willow that something might have been done without your knowledge."

"Boy had an apprenticeship," Spike held up a hand to stop Willow who'd already bounded up from the couch, probably to go get some magic herbs to 'fix' Xander. "Xander apprenticed under Blair, and since the fuzzy little Shaman has his powers centered in teachin' others, so it bloody well is possible."

"Blair is a trado Shaman?" Giles asked.

"Yeah, seems like. And the fact is that Xander could track those vamps, just like he would track the criminals back in Cascade. Didn't say anything to him since the title wouldn't mean anything, but unless I miss my guess, he's an animus Shaman."

Giles sucked air through his teeth.

"Okay, was that a good noise or a bad noise, because I'm having trouble keeping up with this conversation," Buffy interrupted.
Giles took another breath. "The Shaman I asked for help with our ghostly postman was a neco Shaman, his powers were with the dead. Spike is suggesting that Xander is an animus Shaman, one who has powers over the soul."

"Oh goddess," Willow whispered, her face pale.

"Okay, still officially not following the conversation, people," Buffy said.

"And make that two of us because I'm big with the tracking, not with the power over souls," Xander agreed. "And does anyone else hear creepy horror-flick soundtracks when someone says 'power over souls'?" Xander asked.

"Unlike witches, Shaman are born, not trained," Giles explained. "They never have more than one power, but that one power does tend to be rather powerful since it is part of them from birth. A casus Shaman can create accidents or chaos, a trado Shaman specializes in teaching, a solis Shaman controls light. Spike thinks that Xander is an animus Shaman, one whose powers center around the soul."
"Okay, here comes that cold, creepy, someone walking over your grave feeling," Buffy asked softly.

"Oh, yeah," Xander agreed. Really, he didn't want those kinds of really big special powers.

"Call Angel," Spike suggested. "Boy put on a show for him, looked right into the sod's twisted soul and told the old man a truth or two he didn't want to hear."

"Angel? You went to Angel?" Giles asked.

"Soddin' right I did," Spike agreed. "The boy's mine, and I had to let Peaches know exactly what he'd let slip through his fingers when he had the boy tucked under his arm on Parent-Teacher night."

"You bloody fool. If Xander is an animus Shaman, Angelus has more than enough reason to come after him if the soul happens to slip free again." Giles stood up, and the camera angle cut his head off so that the monitor was full of Giles' white, button-up shirt.

"Yeah, he does," Spike agreed. "But one of you lot would have told him eventually, or Andrew would have. The git
can't keep secrets."

Giles bent over and stared right into the camera. "I'm coming home. Don't do anything until I get there." He reached up and hit a button so that the monitor flickered and went grey.

"That would imply that any of us had any idea what to do," Buffy said softly. Xander found himself agreeing with her. The whole Shaman bit was great in Cascade, but this was really getting to be a little too much on the stress scale. He blinked away the image of that other world, the gold threads of slayers burning into his eyes for a moment longer than the other threads.

Xander felt fingers at the back of his neck, and he let himself lean back into the touch.

"Right, I'm taking the boy to bed," Spike announced as he stood up, and tugged Xander up with him. Xander felt himself blush, but then Spike pulled him out of the room before he could stammer his good nights.
Part Five

Xander wasn't even sure which bedroom to head for, but Spike's hand at his back guided him up the stairs towards Xander's end of the house, not the basement apartment connected to the training room that Spike used.

"Had to tell Peaches, ya know. Wasn't just about rubbin' his nose in the fact that he's a blind wanker," Spike said as they reached the top of the second staircase and turned the corner.

Xander glanced back at Spike. "Well, duh. I mean, Andrew kept the whole Spike-back-from-the-dead secret for about three minutes. And lots of the slayers do an apprenticeship with Mr. Forehead, so he would have found out."

"Least this way, he knows he has to deal with me first. If Angelus slips his leash, I'd rather have him come for me. And if that happens, you don't bloody worry about me; you get your arse back to Buffy and the others," Spike warned. He stopped in the middle of the hall outside
Xander's room and pulled Xander around so that they faced each other.

"I couldn't—"

"You bloody well could," Spike snapped, and Xander blinked as he suddenly faced the demon's anger, and then Spike took a deep breath. "I need you safe if Peaches goes 'round the twist," he said with a forced calm.

"This animus Shaman... it's big, isn't it?" Xander asked quietly. Sighing, Spike turned toward Xander's bedroom and opened the door, pulling Xander in with him.

"Not as much mojo as a cruor Shaman," Spike mused, but his tone told Xander exactly what he didn't want to know.

"Fuck. That big," he whispered. If Spike could only come up with one Shaman bigger, that was big. Xander walked over to his bed and sank down. Without a word, he let himself fall back so that he lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. "Spike, I don't want this power," he told the plaster above him. "I've seen what power does. Power corrupts—absolute power makes people turn really
strange and start manipulating and eventually killing others until they decide to try and end the world, and this is not a good path to be on."

"You're not the end-the-world type, pet." Spike sat on the bed so that it tilted and Xander slid a little closer until his hip rested against Spike, but he just continued to stare at the ceiling.

"Oh, I don't know. Willow is the white-hat type, more than me. I know she's the one who changed these sheets so I didn't come home to a dusty bed and she reads to the old people at the nursing home and she picks up bugs and carries them outside. But give her a little power and she gets scary. I think you remember scary-Willow: veins everywhere, flinging people around like rag dolls, serious anger management issues." Xander rolled his head to the side and looked at Spike.

"She's alright now," Spike said. He reached down and brushed the curls out of Xander's face before sliding the patch up and off. With his thumb, Spike stroked his thumb across the cheekbone under the missing eye, right where Xander knew the patch would have left a red mark.
"I'm not looking forward to the whole middle part with the world endage, and I'm totally not trusting myself to not end the world if I have some big power."

Spike sat in silence, his hand moving down to rest on Xander's shoulder. "Why do you think you'd abuse the power, pet?" he asked seriously, and Xander expelled a ragged breath.

"You know the hyena thing?"

"Yeah, heard about it," Spike agreed.

"I remember that. I remember the power," Xander turned his gaze back to the blank ceiling. "All through school I wanted power. Sometimes for the good like stopping the annual Hellmouthy apocalypse, but sometimes I just got so angry that I wanted the power to hurt other people as much as they hurt me. If I had run across Larry when I had the hyena in me, I would have beaten the shit out of him." Xander paused. "Okay, I actually probably would have eaten him, but I'm repressing that. But the point is that me and power is not really a good thing. Maybe we should ask Giles to bind the powers."
"Won't happen," Spike said confidently.

"The binding or the me turning into a power-hungry doer of evil?" Xander finally identified the tightness in his chest. Yep, that was fear. Fear that Giles wouldn't bind this power. Fear that the girls were right and he was just screwed in the head. Fear that Spike would figure out that Xander wasn't the white knight, or at least that his armor had more than a little rust.

"What won't happen is that you won't turn evil, but I won't let Giles bind your powers, either." Spike's hand closed around Xander's shoulder, holding him firmly, and Xander took a deep breath as he tried to shove all the emotions back into the dark corners of his mind.

"Aren't you supposed to be the cynical one here?" Xander asked, glancing over to Spike again. "I mean, over a hundred years and twice dead, shouldn't that have taught you that anything that can go wrong, definitely will? I'm just waiting for Darth Vader to show up and start waxing poetic about the dark side of the force."

"Waxing poetic?" Spike asked, his eyebrows raised and his lips twitching into a smile.
"I'm trying to be serious here."

"Right. Might want to think about those metaphors before they come out your mouth then. Hard to take a man seriously when he's worried about waxing poetic forces of evil," Spike nodded.

"You're laughing at me," Xander accused Spike as he pushed himself up onto one elbow and glared. "I'm baring my soul here, and you're laughing."

"'Course I'm not," Spike said as he grinned wider.

"Asshole. Besides," Xander said with an evil smirk of his own, "I'm just following in the footsteps of my master with the poetic turn of a phrase. Like poetic master, like poetic devotee," he offered. Spike glared for a second and then rolled his eyes.

"Buffy," Spike said disgustedly.

"She didn't mean to say anything; it just sort of slipped out," Xander hurried to say. Okay, that was stupid. He really didn't need those two at each other's throats over ancient history.
"The three of you really can't keep secrets from each other," Spike sighed. "Knew she'd let it slip to one of you sooner or later."

Xander flopped back down to the bed, his hands under his head, and this time Spike settled next to him, leaning on his side. When Spike's hand slipped under his shirt, stoking his stomach, Xander just stared up.

"Still freaking," he eventually offered. Spike's hand paused and then kept rubbing.

"You even wonder why Willow's still on the straight and narrow?" Spike asked. "Or why those lot at Alcoholics Anonymous put so much emphasis on God?" Spike waited, and when Xander didn't answer, he continued. "Willow took her shot at ending the world, and you and Giles stopped her. Every time she tried fallin' off the wagon, Rupes was there to hold her feet to the fire. Those alcoholics... they need to believe God's watching them all the time, ready to slap their hands with a ruler the minute they fall off the wagon. Children don't misbehave if the headmaster is there with the paddle, and power doesn't corrupt if there's someone big enough and bad enough standing there to stop it."
Xander thought about that for a second. "Okay, that officially doesn't make sense," he finally announced. "If someone is there with more power to control the person with absolute power, then the person with absolute power doesn't have so much absolute with that power, and the one doing the controlling would be the corruptaboy."

"Bloody hell, I've been hanging out with you lot too long because I actually followed that," Spike huffed. "But not everyone is corruptible, pet. Dru, she had the power to end the world a half-dozen times, and she just couldn't be bothered with it."

"Um, Spike," Xander said with a poke to Spike's stomach. "The Judge. Acathla. Ringing any bells?"

"Yeah, but that was to get Angelus' attention. She didn't give a rat's arse about ending the world." Spike sighed and then sat up. "The demon comes to the body not really knowin' the world, so it takes the human's fears and desires and builds its own twisted personality around that. It's why other demons hate vamps... we don't just use human bodies for procreation, which plenty of demons do, our personalities are formed from the human mind. As a human, Dru always wanted to be a
good girl and do the right thing, so the demon turned that into a need to impress Peaches and do right according to his bollocked up views on the world."

"Okay, this conversation has slipped a couple of feet to the left, and I don't think I kept up. You want to explain how we got from point A to point B because I'm clueless boy here." Xander sat up next to Spike.

"I had the chance, pet," Spike said softly.

"Chance to do what?"

Spike snorted and stood up. "Had the chance at absolute power. Had the chance to take Buffy's life without her even knowing what happened. Had the chance to get the chip out and come back more powerful than ever."


"Yeah, pet, the demon trials. But demon learned from William. He learned from William's loyalty and from his fear of rejection. It wasn't power that I asked for."

"You asked for your soul."
Spike laughed. "Bloody stupid request that was." He stood up and walked to the window where the rain softly pattered against the glass. "William could have said no and left me with a big nothing for all that sacrifice."

"Wait. What? I thought you asked for your soul, and so you got the soul, and what do you mean William could have said no?"

"Pet, the soul earns its afterlife, a demon can't come and take that away. William, the soul, chose to come back and try and make me a better man. If he'd known what kind of memories I had, of the orphanage Dru and me raided, of the people I'd tortured, well, he might have thought twice about that decision. But we've—I've come to terms with that." Spike stared out into the dark, and Xander let his Shamanic vision creep into the edge of reality. Spike's demon, a dark cord stained with burgundy and midnight twisted around the soul's cord like DNA, their curves mirroring each other. Spike's soul wasn't the tangle of threads clinging to the demon that Xander had seen in Angel.

Xander stood and walked to Spike, standing just behind him and wrapping his arms around his waist, leaning into
that strength. "Still not to point B with you," Xander said softly as he held Spike. He could feel Spike sigh.

"Had the chance at power, and I didn't take it. The soul, William, never wanted power, and the demon never learned to crave it. It's why I stayed with Darla until she tried stakin' me. It's why I put up with the Anointed One until he just bloody annoyed me into killing him."

Spike twisted around, but Xander didn't let go, so now they stood just about nose to nose. Spike reached up and cradled the back of Xander's head, pulling him in for a deep kiss, and Xander surrendered to it. By the time Spike pulled back, Xander was breathless and horny.

"Whose are you, pet?" Spike asked, and suddenly, Xander was right there at point B.

"Yours," he said softly, letting the fear fall from him. Spike reached around and grabbed his wrists, forcing his hands away.

"Ya don't have the power to take me, do you?" Spike asked.

"If I ever took you in a fight, check for flying pigs and"
open Hellmouths," Xander agreed. Spike pushed him back toward the bed, and for a second, Xander fought it, struggling to remain by the window. He might as well have gotten in a fist fight with a brick wall for all the good it did him. Spike pushed him back until his knees hit the bed and they both tumbled to the mattress, Spike on top.

"Why won't ya abuse this power?" Spike asked seriously.

"Because you'd kick my ass," Xander answered, and that should not be a turn on, but maybe his cock just liked the way Spike undulated slowly, pressing their bodies together. Xander groaned.

"I don't know about kicking your ass, but I'd sure as hell chain ya to the bed until you learned some manners." Spike smiled as he tightened his hold on Xander's wrists.

"Fuck. That's not really working to discourage me from the dark side, there, Obi Wan," Xander breathed heavily as he squirmed up into Spike's body, desperate for more contact.

"Oh, found a new kink, have we?"
"My kink is sex, Spike, any time, any where." Xander thrust up with his hips, pushing Spike into the air, but not really doing much except putting more pressure on his cock. It was like a delicious slow torture... like the tamales back home that made him cry and his mouth burn but he just kept eating them because they were too damn good.

"Randy bugger," Spike whispered into Xander's neck before he sucked at a bit of skin. Xander bucked and gasped.


"I am," Spike muttered before going back to the Xander torture. He ran dull teeth over Xander's neck and shoulder, and hot shivers made Xander tremble. But no matter how he pulled, he couldn't free his hands. Spike slowly worked his way around, sucking at a collarbone before moving over and nipping at the other side of Xander's neck.

Xander pressed his head back into the pillow arching his neck out as he made vague, grumbly complaints. Spike bit down a little harder, and Xander cried out. Then the weight was gone.
Xander blinked up like a drunk man, not really able to engage the brain as Spike stood beside the bed.

"Trust me, pet?" he asked.

"I think we covered this already," Xander said as he reached down to his jeans, tugging at the zipper. Cool hands closed around his, stilling him.

"Do you trust me?" Spike asked more seriously, and Xander looked up at Spike's earnest face.

"Yeah," he said slowly, wondering what he was agreeing to with that.

"Shirt off," Spike said. "It's one of the few that doesn't make my eyes bleed, and I don't want it getting ruined."

"Your idea of romance could use some work," Xander snorted, but he shimmied out of his shirt as fast as he could. "Not that I need romance. Still a guy here, so any promise of sex works for me."

"So, you're the easy sort, are you?" Spike asked, and there was that smirk that Xander found irresistible.
"Oh yeah." Xander watched Spike pull the belt off.

"Okay, Spike, a little spanking is fun, but a belt is not my idea of kinky goodness," Xander said cautiously.

"Didn't think it would be," Spike said as he moved closer, the belt in hand. Xander scooted back on the bed, but then Spike pounced, landing on Xander and pressing him back into the mattress. Prey instincts took over as Xander tried to roll and escape, but Spike's knees clamped around his waist, holding him still. Spike grabbed one hand and Xander tried to rip it out of Spike's grip. Didn't work.

Reaching up, Xander grabbed the headboard, trying to pull himself free. He managed to pull himself farther up the mattress, but Spike just rode him up. Then Spike forced Xander's second hand above his head, and Xander's brain started working well enough for him to figure out the game.

Sagging under Spike's weight, he didn't fight as Spike put his hands through the headboard and then looped the belt around them several times, fastening it so that Xander was tied to the headboard.
"Coulda warned a guy," Xander said as Spike scooted back and slid off the bed.

"Wanted ya to be able to fight," Spike shrugged. "Doesn't matter how much power you're carrying in that skin because it's all mine, pet."

Xander yanked at his hands, but the belt wouldn't give. Now his cock complained even more, and Xander could see the thick bulge in his jeans. "Spike, please," he whimpered.

"Ya need to learn that I'm strong enough to hold ya even if that power does try to turn my white knight gray," Spike whispered as he reached over and unfastened Xander's jeans. The release of the pressure made Xander breath a sigh of relief, but he almost immediately regretted it because now his cock lay ignored, peeking out from his briefs and Xander couldn't do anything except wiggle and pray that Spike would hurry up as he wandered around Xander's room.

"Ya look good like that, pet. I like seein' ya all hard and aching for me," Spike commented as he opened a box on the top of Xander's drawer and poked through the
various washers and screws that Xander had collected while fixing the manor.

"Spike, not funny," he groaned.

"I'm not trying for funny," Spike agreed as he closed the box and started unbuttoning his shirt. Xander closed his eye and pressed his head back into the pillow as he pulled at his wrists.

"Goin' to bruise yourself."

"So get over here and distract me. I thought power wasn't your thing," Xander said as he lifted his head and glared as Spike let his shirt slowly slide off his shoulders and then slither to the floor.

Spike pursed his lips. "It isn't. But you need to know you aren't going to turn on your mates, and I can give you that."

"Right now, the only thing I'm worrying about is you coming over here before my cock falls off." Xander thrust his hips up to emphasize his need. Spike walked over and started untying Xander's sneaker.
"I doubt anythin' will fall off, but you do look like you're enjoying yourself." Spike pulled off one sneaker and then took a second to run a fingernail over the cotton of Xander's briefs. Xander choked, his body momentarily forgetting how to breathe. By the time he regained the ability to form thoughts, Spike had pulled off his second shoe and his socks.

"Lesson learned, now time for the reward, right?" he asked desperately. Spike laughed as he grabbed the cuff of the jeans and started pulling. The pants came off, and then Xander lay there in his briefs as Spike circled the bed, pacing around it and looking at Xander like the last chocolate in the world, which made Xander's cock even harder.

"All mine," Spike whispered as he knelt on the bed and crawled up Xander's body. Xander held his breath as Spike smirked down at him.

"Oh yeah," he finally agreed. Spike rewarded him with a commanding kiss that left Xander thrusting up into the air.

"Needy little thing, aren't you?" Spike asked, and Xander blushed. He was. Anya had reminded him of that often
enough. "I like that," Spike hurried to say, and then Spike lowered himself so that he rested on top of Xander. Xander gasped and thrust as Spike provided the heavenly pressure against his cock. "I like knowing that you need me to get what you want. I like knowing that ya need me to help with your powers. I like that you need me to keep your friends safe if you decide to listen to Darth Vader waxing poetic," Spike whispered into Xander's ear, and then two fangs bit into Xander's shoulder.

Xander screamed, his whole body stiffening in a desperate need to come. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," he swore as he gasped for air. The sucking at his neck made his whole body feverish and shivery, and when Spike's hand reached inside Xander's briefs, brushing the sensitive head, Xander came in a hot rush.

"Xander," yelled a desperate voice. "Oh Goddess! Xander!" Xander was still floating in the muffled post-coital haze when the heat flashed over his body.

His eye snapped open, and he found white-haired Willow in the doorway, a magical wind blowing her hair and a ball of energy balanced between her hands.

"Will!" he yelped as he yanked at his bound hands.
Part Six

"Bloody buggering hell," Spike snarled as he bounced back up to his feet on the far side of the bed, game face in place. Willow threw the energy ball, and Spike threw himself back to the floor just as it skimmed over Xander's bare chest with another heat wave.

"Will! NO!" Xander yelled desperately, and then Buffy was there, pulling on Willow so that the third energy ball flew into the wall and fried Xander's Seven of Nine poster and a good chunk of wall. Maybe Xander would get that second window he wanted after all he thought with more than a little hysteria as damp air trickled in through the cracked brick.

"He bit Xander!" Willow protested, but at least wisps of red now tinted her white hair.

"Knocking! Knocking good. Getting out better!" Xander
shrieked as he struggled against the belt.

"Daft buggerin' bint!" Spike leaped up again, but this time, Willow didn't do the fireball thing again. "Biting! Biting and screaming!" Willow protested as Buffy pulled her back, her hair now totally red, which Xander could only pray meant the end of the giant fireballs.

"Okay, as the person with the room next to you and Kennedy, I know you know all about screaming, and probably biting, too," Buffy said as she herded Willow out, and now Willow's face was as red as her hair.

"But he screamed," Willow stammered as her eyes darted to Xander and then off to the wall. Xander could feel his balls shrivel up and try to shrink up into space normally reserved for intestines. "There was screaming."

"Boy's just appreciating my talent," Spike snarled as he grabbed the bedspread and flung it over Xander. And really, that was good, but not as good as someone untying him. Xander strained until the leather belt creaked, but nothing loosened, and Spike was obviously ignoring the not so subtle plea.

"Officially not helping," Buffy told Spike through tight
"Don't remember anyone askin' for help or askin' you two to come barging in here, either, for that matter." Spike snatched his fallen shirt from the floor and shoved his arms into it.

"He screamed," Willow said again, but now she stared at the floor and inched backwards.

"Well, yeah," Spike agreed with a very self-satisfied tone.

"Spike, knock it off," Buffy said, and then she took Willow by the shoulders and pointed her out of the room. Xander expected the untying to come now, but Spike just stalked out after them.

"You'll get an even bigger eyeful if ya don't learn to bloody knock," Spike threatened from the hall, and Xander finally gave up and sagged back into the mattress. He wasn't freeing himself.

"Screaming," Willow declared defensively. "Screaming and tying and oh my god, you left Xander in there still tied up, and I am going to have to bleach my brain now. Bad thoughts. Bad, bad thoughts, and bad, bad vampire.
Go untie Xander." Oh yeah, Willow was handling this about as well as Xander had expected.

The hallway fell silent, and Xander could just imagine the cold glare. Either that or someone was either bleeding out and/or floating to the carpet as little bits of ash, but he assumed that death would be at least a little noisier. Hopefully.

"Boy's mine. I'll untie him when I'm done, and I'm not bloody done. I'm just makin' sure we're not going to get interrupted again."

"No, no there will be no interruptus with the coitus," Buffy quickly agreed. "Will there?" she demanded firmly.

"Screaming. Screaming and tying," Willow whispered so softly that Xander almost missed it.

"If ya can't figure that one out, ask the slayer. She knows her bondage," Spike suggested nastily, and even Xander could hear that gasp. Yep, Willow could nearly end the world, but discussion of bondage was clearly outside her comfort zone.

"Hey!" Buffy snapped. "Besides, I don't remember that I
was ever the one tied to the bed."

Okay, officially more than Xander ever wanted to know on that particular topic.

"You didn't complain, pet. You were happy enough to ride me hard and put me up wet and aching." And a Buffy gasp followed that one, but Willow interrupted before Buffy had a chance to say anything.

"No. No nonono. Some demon must have cursed all of us because this is... this is just not okay," Willow said, her voice fading. And Willow had obviously fled down the stairs. Xander gave a tug on the belt and wondered if now would be the time to remind Spike that he was still tied up.

The hall was silent. Xander strained to hear anything, wishing he had Jim's whole superhearing thing going on, but he only heard the gentle rain against the window.

"That could have gone better," Buffy finally said.

"Dunno. Everyone's still alive, so I'm puttin' it in the win column."
"Willow is not going to kill you guys," Buffy snorted dismissively, and then she made that little sucking noise that meant she had thought better of something. "Okay, she might in the whole heat of the moment kinda way, but she would feel really, really bad about it later."

"She bloody well almost had somethin' to feel bad about back there. Lost the hair on my bloody arm." The words might have been angry, but the tone was just more tired than anything else. Something thuddied against the wall, either Buffy or Spike leaning heavily into it, and Xander squirmed a little at his uselessness. He would call out, but the only thing worse than lying helpless would be asking to be let go and still getting left to lie helpless, so he bit his tongue.

"She's just... freaking," Buffy agreed. "And I'm trying hard not to freak, but I'll admit to some minor wattage freak."

"Not so strange, him and me," Spike defended himself, and Xander silently added a "yeah" from inside the room.

"Um, kinda is. Big strange. Humongo strange. Kinda the T-Rex of strange. Big, huge, stomping, eating-of-my-brain strange, Spike."
Spike snorted, and Xander could feel himself blush. He'd cover his ears to avoid this, but not really an option. Silently endure or call for help that might or might not come until after Spike and Buffy had the big convo. Xander voted for suffering in silence.

"I mean, you always went for the type who..." Buffy stopped and the hall went silent for a moment. "He's just not exactly your type, and while the demon thing seems to work for him, I've never seen him go for the male thing. Not condemning," Buffy hurried to say, "I'm totally okay with him doing the male thing and after his comments about Angel and Riley and even you, not even particularly surprised, but... okay, I've lost my point. I'm officially pointless, but I guess I'm just saying... Wow. You two. Didn't see that coming."

"I'm not playin' with the boy. He's as much my type as Dru or you."

"Okay, I'm having trouble seeing that. And I know you wouldn't intentionally hurt him, but I'm worried about the whole unintentional thing we sometimes get going, like I did with Riley. And come on, it's a pretty big switch going from me to him."
"Not so much," Spike disagreed immediately, and Xander twisted. Buffy was big with making the points, and he wasn't sure he wanted to hear these points because they fed this little voice in the back of his head that whispered doubts about him and Spike.

Spike continued softly. "He needs me. I've always admitted to being love's bitch, to needing to be needed. And you don't need me any more, do you?" Spike asked.

"Hey! I'm big with the needing. I couldn't keep this place together without you, Spike. I've told you that." Buffy's suddenly sounded hurt and small.

"Yeah, you need me for this place, alright. Bloody slayers would fall apart in six months if they didn't have someone to kick their arses into shape," Spike agreed, "but *you* don't need me." Deep Spike sigh when Buffy didn't answer. "You don't need me to make you feel alive. You don't need me to stand by your side, any more. You don't even need me to be the one to understand the way you have to turn off your emotions when you watch girl after girl die. Those days are past, and you've healed. Don't need old Spike, do you?"

"Spike," Buffy said softly. Xander squirmed, feeling like
he really had no right to hear this stuff.

"No!" Spike cut her off. "Don't bloody need you either," Spike's accent was suddenly thick and his voice rough. "But the boy does need me. Came back from Africa without all his marbles, didn't he? And no matter how much you and Red try to be his friend, it's not helping any."

"Hey, Xander has plenty of marbles," Buffy defended him.

"Then why send him off to Cascade?" Spike demanded. "Why send a slayer to follow him every time he walks out the door? Why ban him from patrol?" Buffy didn't have an answer for that. Spike sighed so heavily that Xander could hear it in the room. "Go home, Buffy. Go to Cleveland and find some poor wanker trying to open a Hellmouth. Go into London and find some nest. Just leave me and the boy alone," Spike ordered, and then he was there in the door to the room, framed by the light from the hall.

He closed the door slowly, and Xander locked gazes with him.
"Hey," Xander offered, the universal word for 'what the hell else am I supposed to say'.

"Hey," Spike answered as he crossed to the bed, sitting on the edge as he reached out and traced Xander's cheekbone with a thumb.

"Um, want to untie me?" Xander asked with an experimental tug.

"No." Spike continued to stroke Xander's face, his fingers trailing down to his neck, and Xander tilted his head back, closing his eye as the gentle strokes moved down to his collarbone. When Spike slipped a hand under the bedspread and brushed his nipple; Xander shivered. The feeling wasn't exactly lust... although it was certainly connected to his lust-bone... but it was softer, slower. The rising need was the ocean pulled by the moon instead of the storm of desire and completion Xander normally felt. Then again, Xander had never before messed around after coming. He moaned.

"Kept you from gettin' in the middle, didn't it?"

"What?" Xander asked, most of his brain sinking into a peaceful fog of post-sex, post-stress petting.
"Being tied up, it kept you from riding to Willow's rescue."

"I was more worried about Spike's rescue from flaming fireballs," Xander said wryly. He regretfully pulled himself out of his stupor and looked up at Spike.

"Oi, can take care of myself. But the minute the witch blushed you would have been all reassurin' her that we didn't mean anything by it."

"I wouldn't... okay, I might have, but that's what nice people do," Xander admitted. Spike rolled his eyes.

"Good thing I'm not nice, innit?"

"Hey, you're nice. You saved the world, about two or three times, and then you went and died being the big champion guy, and you have saved my ass more times than I can count because I was never very good in math, and that number would require calculus to figure out."

"I am pretty soddin' wonderful, aren't I?" Spike waggled his eyebrows. "But I'm not nice the way you're defining it. I won't forgive her for bargin' in here like she's goin' to
save you from me. You're mine, and she'll learn to live with it."

"Or not," Xander said quietly.

Spike narrowed his eyes and glared down. "There's no 'not' possible, pet. You're mine. I've staked my claim."
Spike stood up and walked to the shelf where the CD player sat under a pile of flyers for decking material. He brushed the paper to the floor and plucked a CD out of the middle of the pile. Tony Bennett. Xander remembered when Anya had picked that out, telling this whole story about a wife who listened to Boulevard of Broken Dreams over and over until Anyanka had granted her wish to turn her husband into goldfish she could keep by her bed.

The music started, and Spike slowly swayed. In the hall, Spike had buttoned the shirt, and now he freed the lowest button. A small triangle of skin appeared and vanished as Spike slowly undulated. Shifting around, Xander rested his cheek on one bound arm so he could watch the show. Okay, of all the things he expected, Spike doing the naughty dance hadn't even entered his mind, and yet there he was, turning his back as he leaned over and unlaced his boots.
With a wiggle, Spike stepped out of his boots and then turned to face Xander, his lips raised in a knowing smirk.

"See somethin' ya want?" he asked as he did a quick step with a hip thrust like the dancers on TV.

"Mmmm," Xander agreed. Spike smiled and slipped two more buttons free and his fingers now brushed over pale skin as Spike slowly stalked forward, half dance and half predatory stalk. Spike reached the bed as the last button popped open, and he let the shirt slither over his shoulders and fall to the floor.

"Lookie what someone's left for me, a prezzie all tied up with a bow... or a belt in this case," Spike shrugged as he rolled his hips and flicked open the first button on his jeans. Xander fisted his hands and arched his back as his cock sluggishly started making plans for a repeat performance.

Spike trailed his fingers over the top of the bedspread, and the lack of contact was exquisite torture. From the smirk on Spike's face, he knew exactly what he was doing as he backed away and opened another button on his jeans.
If Xander hadn't already come, he would have been pleading by now, but instead he felt a slow surge of lust as Spike's first curled hairs appeared.

"Gonna make you beg for it, boy," Spike threatened as he shimmied out of his jeans.

"Oh yeah, like I haven't done that before. Not really hard to get me to beg," Xander pointed out breathily as Spike crept forward like a leopard on the hunt. "So not hard," he repeated when Spike twisted his hips.

"Just easy, huh?" Spike teased as he crawled onto the bed, his knees on either side of Xander. The pressure pulled the bedspread taut against his chest, pressing him into the mattress, and the additional bonds pushed Xander over the edge between warm, fuzzy, comfortable desire and burning, clawing need.

"Easy. Yep, I can do easy," Xander agreed as he squirmed in his bedspread prison. Spike reached out and grabbed Xander's chin, stilling him.

"You're mine, pet. You know it, your body knows it, and the others have to bloody well learn," Spike said
seriously, and Xander blinked up, seeing the demon's desperate need to not let others take what was his.

"Got it," Xander agreed. Spike held his chin for a second, and then Spike smiled lazily and started tugging at the edge of the bedspread, revealing Xander's side before he crawled under the covers.

Xander opened his mouth in a silent plea as their bodies pressed together. Maddeningly slowly, Spike's fingers trailed down Xander's side and then paused at the waistband of Xander's underwear.

"Oh god," Xander managed as he twisted.

"What's the magic word, pet?" Spike teased, and he pressed closer, half laying on Xander and trapping him in place even as Xander tried to squirm.

Xander's brain struggled to hijack enough blood from the cock to figure out the riddle. "Please," he finally offered.

"Not good enough. I want begging," Spike whispered in Xander's ear.

"Fuck," Xander swore as Spike ran a fingernail over the
fabric, teasing his cock and then vanishing. "Please, Spike. Please just, whatever."

"Whatever? That's a wide open field, pet," Spike warned. Xander tilted his head and Spike was looking at him seriously, propped on one elbow.

"Whatever, Spike. Please, I'm begging." Xander said each word slowly, an offering laid between them. With a blink, Spike's demon surged forward, and Xander tilted his head away, exposing his neck.

"Please," he begged again softly. Xander gasped as a hand tore at his underwear, making the fabric dig into his legs before it mercifully ripped away. Closing his eye, Xander surrendered. He lay trembling in need as Spike quickly prepared him and then pushed in past muscles barely stretched, his mind sinking into a place where even his own aching hardness didn't matter as much as the hands that manipulated him or the yellow eyes that devoured him.

Sharp fangs slid into his shoulder, and Xander bucked as his shoulder mimicked his hard cock; the same aching need for more erased everything from existence except Spike. A hand brushed over the damp head of his cock,
and Xander came in hard waves that crashed through him leaving him trembling and gasping.

"Love ya, pet," Spike whispered after he laved the bite closed.

"Need you," Xander answered sleepily as his whole body sagged into post-sex sluggishness. He felt Spike untie his hands, and he just lay still as Spike arranged him before curling around him. Warm, sated, and held… it was more than Xander needed, it was all he wanted.

Part Seven

Xander woke to an empty bed and a note talking about an emergency in the London underground with some demons. Xander turned the paper this way and that trying to figure out what kind of demons, but Spike's looping, girly handwriting defied reading.

"Shit," Xander cursed at the letter before dropping it to the bed and heading for the bathroom. He'd only shared Spike's bed for five days now, and yet it felt weird waking up by himself. But hey, at least he wasn't waking up to dust, and hopefully that meant that Willow hadn't gone all white-haired witchy again. Five days. Nearly a week.
Yep, Xand was a taken man again. Staring into the mirror, Xander studied his face. He still looked the same with his morning whiskers and missing eye, but he didn't feel as ragged as he had just six days ago.

No wonder Jim had thought he was some sort of secret agent man when he first showed up in Cascade because Xander kinda looked the part. Although, honestly, he looked a little more like the dark, brooding terrorist ready to blow something up than the secret agent hero. Grabbing the shaving soap, Xander thought about the brochures the nurse handed him in the hospital. A glass eye would make him a look a little less piraty, maybe the council could pay for the facial reconstruction.

Sighing, Xander leaned against the edge of the sink. Right. Fix an eye and he'd go back to being old Xander... Not. Looking less like a refugee from a war zone wouldn't necessarily fix all the other things he had rattling around in his head. What had Jim said? Pieces of him were gone, dead with the friends and slayers he'd watched die. Xander blinked the world real away and studied his reflection with his shamanic sight, but the cords of his own soul didn't reflect.

Looking down, he tried to find some hint of it, but he
could only see arms with defined muscles from helping carry water to villages and pull rocks from fields. The fat he'd developed during those last years in Sunnydale had melted in the African sun.

Looking back into the mirror, Xander wondered when he grown up. Even more importantly, when had he grown old? Shaking away the ghost-image of the world and the faint tangle of slayer cords that floated past his vision, Xander focused on shaving.

"Xander," a soft voice called from outside his room, barely loud enough for him to hear over the running water.

Xander grabbed his robe and opened the door to find a tiny Asian woman nearly bouncing as she waited in the hall.

"You're home!" Yi practically squealed as she threw her arms around him. "I got my first vampire!"

"Hey, I told you that you'd do great," Xander answered as he hugged her back. She was quiet and almost as uncomfortable around Spike as Spike was around her, so Xander had ended up spending more than a little time in
the workout room with her, especially after the whole getting banned from the slay-gig. Besides, Xander understood her insecurities where the other baby slayers tended to be more on the overconfident side.

"Blackbeard's back!" Janie called as she bounded up the steps, and Xander couldn't help thinking that someone needed to cut back on slayer caffeine in a big way. "I heard you and Spike got in last night, but Spike said if we woke you up, we'd be running laps around the property 'til our legs fell off."

"That's sounds suspiciously Spike-like," Xander agreed as he held Yi with one arm and opened his other one for the second slayer's hug.

"The others were really bummed that he was making them go do slayer shit before saying hi to you," Janie said as she threw arms around him. Most of his girls from Africa had gone to the slayer school in Nouakchott, but Janie, the red-haired daughter of Baptist missionaries, had voted to come back to England.

"Hey, simple mortal here, watch the ribs," he complained at her enthusiasm. Yep, definitely less caffeine.
"I thought you were just supposed to be gone for a week. You totally ditched us," Janie complained.

"No. No ditching. I just had work that had to get done."

"Yeah, sure," she said as she elbowed Yi, trying to pull her in on the joke. "You just got tired of having to unplug the sink, and given the goo that gets washed down these sinks, I am not blaming you. But you still totally ditched us, and you didn't even write, you booger!"

"Guilty as charged and very sorry." Xander held his hands out in surrender, and Yi smiled shyly. "But I am distinctly unboogerish, and after a lifetime on a Hellmouth, can we keep the slimy metaphors to a minimum? I know a few too many vengeance demons and wish demons to be comfortable with random booger comments."

"Just don't do it again!" Janie said with a determined glare. "So, I hear Spike spent the night up here." For all of her religious upbringing, Janie was just not one to avoid the sexually embarrassing. Yi, however, blushed deep red.

"And I'm not going to discuss my life with a couple of girls who aren't old enough to drink," Xander countered.
"Prude," Janie snorted. "But we're glad to have you back safe and sound," she slapped Xander on the arm hard enough to leave a bruise before bouncing back down the stairs.

"It is nice to have you back. I missed you," Yi said quietly as she followed Janie back down the stairs.

Xander watched them, and suddenly his conversation with Jim floated back up into his memory. They obviously had missed him, but he hadn't given either of them a second thought. Hell, if he hadn't known it would bring the wrath of Willow down on him, he probably wouldn't have emailed home at all after the first few reports when he actually had something to report. How did Jim describe it? Pushing everyone away because he was convinced they'd turn to dust?

Yeah, not in this business. The vampires turned to dust, and the girls bled and cried and died messy deaths. But then again, they hadn't lost any girls since the Cleveland Hellmouth went hot two years ago. Xander shook his head as his thoughts scattered. He couldn't exactly figure out the meaning of life in the next ten minutes, so dressed and showered would be next on the agenda, and
probably not in that order.

Africa had taught Xander the advantage of moving fast through a shower, and he finished up and dressed in minutes. That done, he ran a comb through his hair. It had gotten long at some point. Xander ran damp fingers through the unruly curls, pressing them away from his face. He almost looked human. He just wasn't sure if he felt human.

Back in his room, Xander pulled out his cell phone and looked up one of the newest numbers. Sitting on the bed, he punched the "talk" button before he could do the whole thinking twice and telling himself to stop being a baby thing.

"Hello?" a voice on the other end answered.

"Hey, I’m really hoping it's not too late, but I figured you guys wouldn't have gone to bed just yet, but if you have, feel free to tell me to take a hike," Xander said as it suddenly occurred to him that the guys might be in bed even if they hadn't gone to bed.

"Breathe, Sport," Jim's voice came back. "We haven't hit the sack yet, and Blair has been wound up like a tinker
toy about the bombings over there, so I'm glad you called." Someone muttered a protest in the background. "Excuse me," Jim corrected himself, "Blair is not wound up like a tinker toy, he is just expressing a perfectly normal sense of concern." Xander could almost hear Jim rolling his eyes, and he knew that would have drawn a wicked glare from Blair.

"Yeah, we're fine," Xander assured him.

"Flight okay?"

"Great. They served those little tiny tomatoes." Weird with the pauses. Xander struggled for something more intelligent to talk about than little tomatoes. And hey, in Shakespeare's time, they thought tomatoes were poisonous, and that was so not where he wanted this conversation to go.

"You run into any demons on the flight?" Jim finally asked, breaking the silence.

"There was this one guy who smelled suspiciously demon-like, but Spike insisted it was Limburger cheese," Xander joked.
"So, what's up, Sport?"

"Nothing. I just thought I'd call and let you guys know we weren't splattered on the inside of some bit of the Underground."

"Uh-huh." Jim sounded unconvinced. "How are the friends taking the news?" Xander picked lint off his pants.

"Um, partly freaked with a chance of total denial later this afternoon," Xander admitted. "But the baby slayers seem happy to have me back."

"Baby slayers? The new ones from after big spell?" Jim asked, and even through the phone, Xander could hear Jim flinch at having to use a word like 'spell.' Jim had joked that if anyone heard him talking like that, they would assume it was code and start tapping his phone and reading his mail.

"Yeah. Most took off with Spike for some job cleaning out a nest, but Yi and Janie were big with the welcome although not much for the wagon."

"I don't think you ever mentioned those two," Jim said slowly, and Xander took a ragged breath, sure that Jim
was getting the point even though Xander couldn't quite spit it out. He couldn't even make it make sense in his brain.

"I don't think I told you guys about them. Probably all busy with the Spike obsessing." Jim didn't answer. "Yi is Chinese and really shy, but she's fast. She got her first vampire when I was gone. And Janie is..." Xander struggled for a way to describe Janie. "Janie is Blair with more estrogen, less hair, and a really bad habit of breaking things that aren't physically nailed to the floor," he finally finished.

Jim laughed. "One Blair is enough for me. But they sound like good people."

"They are," Xander admitted. They were good, they just weren't people that he thought about when they weren't right in front of him threatening to crack ribs with the hugging.

"I bet they're glad to see you. I know this place is quieter without you around. And I know I'm having to do a lot more tests. Blair made me drink slime yesterday." And that was definitely an outraged protest on Jim's end of the phone. "It was slime, Sandburg. Slime."
Xander smiled as Blair obviously gave Jim some shit right back. "Then next time, you drink it, and I'll get a Wonderburger or a steak." Jim kept his voice flat, but Xander could hear the teasing in it anyway. He paused, and Xander could just imagine what Blair had to say about that. "But I'll die a happy man," Jim cut in. "So, how long have you known Yi and Janie?" Jim asked Xander, and for a second, Xander's brain stuttered because he'd been all caught up in the mock fight and not actually expecting a question.

"Um, Janie for about two years, Yi about a year," Xander said. "I found Janie out in the field at a faith mission in Kenya where her parents were working for a month. They were pretty weirded out, but they knew something had happened, and they actually took the whole protecting the world from demons thing pretty well. I didn't mention that we had a few demons on the payroll."

"And two years later, she's still putting up with you?" Jim teased.

"Yeah, well she needs someone to unstop her toilet," Xander shot back. "But I guess I didn't expect..." Xander
paused. Okay words gone.

"My first years back here, I kept waiting for someone to fire my ass because I had so much attitude. Every time I walked in and guys talked to me, I wondered why the hell they put up with me," Jim said. To someone else, it might have seemed a strange bit of conversation, but Xander got it.

"I didn't write them once. I just put them in the corner of my mind labeled 'baby slayer' and walked away. Pretty shitty of me," Xander confessed. The phone was silent. Xander took a deep breath. "I kinda wonder what I would have thought if the vampire had gotten Yi instead of the other way around."

"And?" Jim prodded him.

"I don't know. I'm thinking that box labeled 'baby slayer' is marked 'do not get emotionally attached.' And I used to be the heart of the group, and I'm feeling pretty heartless right now. Big with the heartless. Or small with the heart, one or the other."

Xander took a deep breath. "And I'm wondering why I'm just noticing this now, and does this make me a horrible
person that I never noticed this before, and I'm really losing it, and I really don't have a right to call you up and dump all this on you, but Spike is out with the making the world safe for morning commuters, and I'm looking in the mirror wondering when I turned into scary guy."

"You're not heartless," Jim said quietly, ignoring the rest. Xander heard a scuffling and then Blair's voice came through.

"Xander, are you okay?" Blair asked immediately.

"Yeah, just freaking out," Xander admitted.

"Man, if you even let yourself think you're heartless for even a second, you're more than freaking out, you're like off the deep end. Xander, you throw yourself into trying to save everyone, and with the possible exception of Jim, I've never known anyone who cared more about the tribe."

Xander snorted a cold laugh. "I didn't think about them once."

"Buffy and Willow?" Blair asked, clearly confused.
"Yi and Janie, and the other slayers. I didn't think about them at all because I just... I'm missing something."

"Xander, you know you can come back here, right?" Blair asked softly. "You and Spike are both welcome, and Jim even promises to play nice with the other alpha male. If he doesn't, I'll put hair remover in his shampoo and he needs all the hair he can keep."

"Thanks, but I think I need to get my own head screwed on straight. I guess seeing the others and the whole not-approval thing with me and Spike and them doubting me, it's just a little much."

"Man, sometimes you have to step back and find your own center. You know, step back from the conflict and just let it all go," Blair advised. Then Jim's voice came back on the line.

"Sport, you've had some tough times, but you can't go blaming yourself for not living up to some standard in your head," Jim said seriously.

"And what about the whole human standard where people care about each other? I have been doing a lot less caring than I'm comfortable with, and now with the
shamanic powers being on the big side, I'm feeling like I'm not really a safe person with a whole lot of power because I'm not really of the trustworthy. How can anyone trust me when I just figured out that I'm a cold-hearted bastard who doesn't even think about people unless they're on the email demanding attention?"

"I trust you." Jim's voice was so steady that Xander closed his eye and fought the emotion that welled up inside him. "Xander, I can only tell you what was true for me. I pushed everyone away, and when I realized what I had done, I didn't know how to stop being a bastard. Carolyn pushed her way in and I let her because I wanted someone, but eventually I just pushed her away too because all I knew how to be was a cold bastard."

"How did you stop it? How did you stop feeling like you had to push people away because you couldn't stand to see one more person bleed to death on the floor?" Xander whispered his question, and for a second, the thought Jim might not have heard as silence filled the line.

"I don't know," Jim answered truthfully, and Xander desperately wished the man had given him just one easy lie. "But after I realized I was a cold bastard, things
started getting better. Sport, you aren't heartless, you've just had a little more pain than you can carry. And if this Shaman thing is big, then I know you'll handle that just as well as you've handled everything else life has thrown at you."

Xander couldn't help it. He started laughing. "I'm not really known for handling everything life has thrown at me all that well. I dated a vengeance demon famous for cutting off men's private parts, and then I left her at the altar... literally. Later, I abandoned her dead body on the floor of a school that sank into the hole that is Sunnydale. I turned my back on Buffy because she was being too warrior with the war, and while I’m thrilled to have my old, not-borderline-psychotic Buffy-shaped friend back, I was big with the judgmental. And Africa...." The image of a body lying in the dust assaulted Xander's mind, the moment so real that he could smell the rot of meat and hear the flies buzzing through the heavy air. "Not handling much well," he admitted.

This time, Blair's voice came over the phone. "Xander, do you need us to come out there?" Blair asked.

"No, that would just make things a whole lot touchier because Giles and Spike are all big with the thinking that
you're a trado Shaman able to influence what people learn, and I think we've reached a freaky limit here with my shamanic stuff and the gay stuff."

"Xander, I can't know what you and Jim have gone through, but I know that for all your claims of not caring, you care. You're lying to yourself if you think you don't, and maybe you needed to lie to yourself, but if you didn't care about the new slayers, this wouldn't bother you so much."

"Hey, no fair using logic on me," Xander complained.

"It bothers you that you hadn't thought of them, doesn't it?" Blair asked, ignoring Xander's interruption.

"Yeah, big with the feeling like the Grinch before the heart-expanding ending."

"It wouldn't bother you if you didn't care. It's really that simple. And maybe you just pushed those thoughts aside the way Jim pushed his senses away, but can't beat yourself up for that. You have to forgive yourself for not being able to save everyone. Trust the universe, that there's some plan and that you can't control that plan any more than you can control a hurricane. You just do
"Willow moved a hurricane once. These Ama demons were going to use some mystical power of the wind to try to harness a portal. She shoved the whole hurricane off-coast while Buffy went stomping through the swamp to kick demon ass." Xander had been in Africa then, but around here, stories got told and retold until everyone felt like they'd been at every battle, even when they had been demoted to fray-adjacent support staff.

"And you were doing whatever you could to help, just like always," Blair added confidently, "because you care."

"I was off in Africa," Xander told him.

"Then you were doing your best to do good there. You care about those new slayers just like you care about the whole damn world. More than that, man, you have made the world better because no matter how many times the world knocks you on your ass, you're still out there trying to find girls and trying to learn about Sentinels and trying to track down pedophiles—all because you care."

Xander sat and stared at the little brass knobs on his dresser as he thought about that one. He tried. He tried
to help and to care and to not become one of those weird guys who lived on the Hellmouth and discussed neighbors who died from freak barbeque fork stab wounds without batting an eye.

"Sometimes I just don't know if it's enough."

Blair sighed. "Oh man, if you ever feel like you've done enough, you're ready to retire from the human race. There's always more to do, but getting in there and fighting is the whole point. Xander, you never stop fighting, and if you didn't care, if you weren't a good man, you would have given up a long time ago."

"You keep this up, and I just might give up on the whole hating myself plan," Xander warned him. Before the words slipped out, Xander hadn't even realized he felt that way, but saying them, he suddenly realized that he did hate himself. He hated how he always failed.

"Maybe we should come out, or maybe you should come back here, just for a bit," Blair suggested.

"And I'm thinking that would be a nice way of putting off the crappy shit that seems to be leaking out my ears here, but as much as I feel good tracking down bad guys
in Cascade, that doesn't make me feel better about all the things I didn't manage to do back here," Xander said quietly. "And I really want to just run away, and maybe that's the best reason for me not to."

"Just remember, Xander, no one's perfect. Spike has to deal with his whole unsouled past, and Willow had her addiction to magic, and you only told us the highlights, so I'm guessing there was much more fucking up back there than you told us about. And they're still good people. Give yourself some slack. If you screw up, that doesn't make you a bad person."

Xander really thought about that one. The others had fucked up as royally as he had. Jim screwed up a whole marriage, which trumped his fucking up the wedding. And Spike... he'd promised to protect Dawn from Glorificus, but no matter how hard he tried, Glory had still gotten her hands on Dawn. He'd failed, picked himself back up, and thrown himself right back into playing homicidal, over-protective, older brother. And Buffy really had made some horrible calls in those last days, but she came back to lead them against a whole army of demons.

"My head is a little screwed on backwards." Xander
spoke slowly, "But maybe if I get it screwed back around, it's not the end of the world that I walked around with a backwards head for a little bit."

"Not backwards. Maybe a little crooked, but not backwards," Blair teased.

"Crooked. Maybe," Xander mused. "But it's late there and if the baby slayers found me, I know Buffy and Willow aren't too far behind, and I really don't want to have part two of that conversation in my bathrobe.

"Hey, I'm really glad you called."

"Yeah, don't say that too much because I can get to be a real pest if you don't chase me off after a while. My babbling has even been known to approach Willow-levels from time to time. But thanks for picking up the phone because with caller ID, it'd be really easy to duck me."

"Man, never happen," Blair insisted. "But bed is sounding really good, so we'll talk to you later?"

"Next time I have a nervous breakdown because someone tries to give me a hug, you'll be the first call I make," Xander promised.
"Smartass," Blair laughed. "Good night."

"Night," Xander answered before he clicked the phone off. Maybe Blair really was a trado Shaman because Xander could suddenly see things in a slightly different light. Okay, if he was going to try and stop being the weirdo hiding in his own head Xander, he needed to make a change or two.

Part Eight

By the time Xander had dressed, he'd made a few decisions. Ignoring the bright floral shirts that took up a good third of his closet, he picked a shirt Giles had given him for Christmas. Yeah, it was yellow, but at least it was a pale yellow and not something that looked like it was scavenged from Screech's dressing room on the last day of "Saved from the Bell." New day, new man, new shirt.
He headed out of his room silently chanting a new mantra to himself as he trotted down the stairs. 'Screw up, get over it.' Yep, that was his new mission in life. And while he had the screwing up part down pat, the getting over it part... still needing some work.

"Xander," a man's voice called from his blind side when he got to the bottom of the steps. Xander turned to find Giles in a polo shirt and a worried face.

"Hey, G-man."

"Sleeping Beauty awakes," Buffy said as she came around the corner. "I was ready to send out the cavalry, which would have been Willow with a big cup of coffee, so it's probably good that you're up. She's in the serious-talk mood and getting trapped in a room with her? So not good."

"Thanks for the warning," Xander offered Buffy. "So how was the driving, tall and tweedy?" Xander asked Giles as he headed past him toward the kitchen. Coffee sounded good... really good. Giles spluttered a little.

"Surprising, I actually find G-man less objectionable than that name," Giles commented as he followed.
"Tall and tweedy?" Xander asked with a smile.

"I would prefer we discuss the recent changes in your situation, and not my dress habits," Giles insisted. "Not that I'm even wearing tweed right now," he complained quietly, and Xander smiled as she pushed into the kitchen.

"Giles! You found Xander," Willow said with a wide smile.

"Wasn't lost," Xander pointed out as he focused on the strong smell of coffee. Oh for good imported American coffee. Or probably not American since they didn't grow coffee in America, but at least it wasn't English. Spike might complain about American beer, but they knew their coffee.

"You know what I mean," Willow answered him, and then Xander found himself wrapped in Willow arms. "I've been so worried about you, and you know we love you, right? You don't have to go looking for love because you will always have our love." Willow still clung to Xander, but she turned to Giles and Buffy. "We love him, right?"

"Big with the love," Buffy agreed. Giles just blushed, but
then he never did do emotions well.

"Yes, well," Giles stammered.

"Hey, driving all night to get here is quite enough to excuse you from having to answer that," Xander told Giles. "In fact, as men, we are officially excused from ever having to say the 'I' word, especially about other men. Except now that I'm doing the gay thing, I think I'm exempt from the exempt because I should probably be able to declare love for the guy I sleep with," Xander mused.

"And let the weirdness begin," Buffy commented with a thoughtful expression as she headed for the coffeepot.

"Slayer or not, if you drink the last cup, you're going down, sister," Xander threatened. Buffy rolled her eyes.

"Yes, well, you seem in rather high spirits," Giles commented as he sat at the counter. Xander did feel good. Maybe his mantra was working.

"By which I'm assuming you mean that he's acting like a teenage boy who just got some," Buffy answered as handed over the cup of coffee to Xander before she
turned to raiding the refrigerator.

"Not a teenager, although I got more than some last night," Xander confirmed as he finished his cup of coffee. And yep, Spike-sex would probably be up there with new philosophy of life on the making him feel less sucky.

"Okay, just stop. Stop now," Willow insisted. Xander looked over, and Willow was near tears, her eyes bright under the florescent light.

"Willow?" he asked uncertainly.

"No." She held up a hand to keep Xander from saying anything more. "You're acting like this is all normal."

"Will," Buffy said softly. "I get the weirded out bit. Totally get it. But he and Spike..." Buffy trailed off.

"Spike and I are sleeping together and happy together and waiting for some support from the friend group," Xander finished for her. Willow shrunk back and Giles studied the tile on the floor. "And as the friend who played cheerleader through others' relationship choices--"
"Hold on there," Buffy interrupted. "He's a vampire; vampires bad. I can't believe you're dating him. You slayer, him vampire," Buffy mimicked Xander's tone of voice.

"Hey! Okay, I kinda said all that, but I bit my tongue with Spike."

Buffy raised an eyebrow at him, and Xander blushed. "I might have thought a whole lot of stuff, but I never said it. And I deserve an award for not saying the many things I thought about Kennedy."

"Oh, you said it. Even without saying it, you said it," Buffy announced sarcastically.

"That's it. Stop it!" Willow demanded. "Okay, we just need to look at this logically. Xander, you've been upset and depressed ever since Africa, and maybe even before Africa, back when you lost..." Willow's eyes flicked toward Xander's eyepatch, and he found himself twitching with a need to make sure the black fabric covered the ugly scar.

"But the point here is that you've been big with the sad, and we haven't been the best friends because we haven't
said the right things to make things better. You needed better, so you went out looking, and I don't know why you decided on Spike being that Spike is not usually the kind to make someone feel better, more with the mocking than the supporting," Willow paused and slipped on her most determined expression. "But you have love because we love you, and you don't need to go looking for love."

Xander stood in the silent kitchen staring at Willow as he tried to process that bit of babble. The clocked ticked. Buffy stood by the open refrigerator door as the machine made a low mutter as the motor ran and ran. Giles blinked, and Willow looked precariously close to crying. Add Faith trying to kill him, and it would be just like old times.

"Will," Xander said softly.

"He tied you up. This is so not healthy, and I want healthy for you. I want healthy and happy." A tear slipped past Willow's lashes, trailing over her cheek, and she pushed it away angrily.

"He would have let me go if I asked," Xander said softly. Last night, he hadn't been so sure, but this morning, he
was a good 80 percent sure Spike would have untied him, maybe even 85 percent.

Giles cleared his throat. "I really had rather not get into discussions of sexual practices, but suffice it to say that first, not all deviant practices are inherently unhealthy, and second, we really should discuss the shamanic powers Xander seems to have developed."

"Tweed man to the rescue," Xander muttered as he turned to his coffee. Suddenly, he didn't want anything going into his stomach, but after threatening Buffy's life for the cup, it hardly seemed fair to just let it go cold. He forced himself to take a sip and swallow past the solid lump in his throat.

"Xander, let's focus on the extent of the powers as you used them in Cascade and in your recent hunt with Buffy."

Xander glanced over towards Buffy, and yep, that was guilty look. So people had definitely been doing the talking behind his back bit, and he should not have been surprised.

"I started tracking guys," Xander shrugged, and off came
"That description is rather vague," Giles prompted, and Xander felt like he'd been called into the principal's office so that Snyder could try and catch him saying something stupid, and it really wasn't that hard to catch him with the stupids. But Giles had that same expectant expression as though he just needed one slip-up so that he could prove to Xander that the shamanic powers were just some funky spell someone had cast for kicks.

"Blair and Jim would let me see the police file and I would get a feel for what the person was like."

"And you could track them from that?" Giles leaned forward, and Xander nodded. "Perhaps it is some form of shamanic powers, but hardly evidence of an animus Shaman," Giles said as he sighed and sat next to Xander.

"Still, it's just a little much in the coincidence department, yeah?" Buffy asked. "Xander sees a Shaman- Xander is a Shaman."

"Perhaps," Giles agreed.

"I could do a clearing, if it isn't a spell, the clearing won't
do any harm, and if it is a spell, that would de-spellify it," Willow added helpfully, only Xander wasn't feeling all that helped.

"If there is a spell to make someone into an evil tracker, I'm first in line for that," Buffy added.

"Right now, I'm more concerned about potential side effects. If, as Xander has indicated, this affects his vision, I would not recommend trying to duplicate it, especially since we can't be sure the spell allows Xander to track evil or whether it simply gives that illusion. We might be looking at something far more nefarious," Giles pointed out.

"And suddenly I'm missing Deadboy," Xander interrupted all their conversations about him. Funny how no one was actually talking to him, but now all three looked over. "Angel saw what I could do, and he believed me. And how stupid am I to expect my friends to do the same?" Xander crossed his arms over his chest, and ignored the raw feeling that crept up into his guts when his girls got hurt expressions.

"You think we're bad friends," Willow said softly, the tone making it clear that she agreed with him. "We've
been bad friends, but this is us trying to do better. We believe that you believe that you're shamaning," she offered.

Xander felt like shit. Okay, just fifteen minutes ago he had this whole new man thing going for him. He had a lover who looked at him like he was chocolate, he had cop friends who thought he was competent, and he had a mantra. He was mantra man. And bodies in motion are supposed to remain in motion, but his doing-good body was definitely dragging to a pitiful stop.

"This is not a matter of belief or disbelief," Giles said patiently, and Xander's guilt at hurting the girls faded as he glared. He might not be able to stay mad at Buffy and Willow, but he could do mad with Giles.

"Okay, just to recap, you go to Cascade all normal-boy, and you come back a big-bad Shaman," Buffy said, crossing her own arms.

"Sleeping with Spike," Willow whispered. "And it's all my fault because I knew you were crushing on him, and I didn't say anything when Buffy was all 'go get him back' to Spike, and I'm so sorry Xander, and when you come to your senses and get really, really angry with me, I'll
apologize again. Apologize and bake cookies."

"Willow," Xander sighed the word, his anger evaporating under her obvious misery. "Spike's loyal and I was calling him lithe and sexy back when I wasn't doing the gay thing, and yeah, I called Angel handsome back then, but Spike is still cool after you get to know him."

"Xander," Willow's word was a plea.

"I really care about him," Xander interrupted her.

"That's what has me all worried," Willow answered way too seriously.

"Okay," Buffy cut in, "time to worry about the Spike and Xander show later, but right now we have a de-spellifying or a de-shamanizing or a de-somethingizing to get on the road."

"Whoa," Xander stood up and backed away. "There will be no de-shamanizing. In fact, the Xan-man is sitting out any spells because this is not some demon's idea of a wacky practical joke. I can track the bad guys, and this should be of the good."
"If we could be sure that you do track actual evil, and if we could be sure that this is natural and not the side effect of some dangerous magics, and if we could determine that this is something you could learn to control..." Giles paused, turning on his chair and polishing his glasses, and Xander suddenly realized that Giles didn't believe any of those things could be true.

"He certainly seemed to be doing the tracking with those vampires. Spike described what a fledge would feel in disturbo detail, and Xander zeroed right in like one of the dogs at the airport," Buffy offered.

"And isn't that a lovely image," Xander complained as he turned and headed back out of the kitchen. He needed to get away before the metaphors got to something even more insulting than dogs. Hurrying down the hall, Xander ended up at the front door with no real place to go. Story of his life.

"Xander," Willow's voice called after him, and Xander eyed the heavy wood, but he still hadn't come up with any place he could actually go. So he stood while Willow hurried to his side, hanging onto his arm as though he was going to fling himself off a cliff. "We're sorry we're doubting you, and we don't really doubt you..."
"Funny, this feels like doubting," Xander whispered as he kept his eyes focused on the door.

Giles and Buffy followed. "They just haven't seen you do your thing," Buffy shrugged. "Show them some of the tracking and then maybe Giles can figure out what happened, you know, if you actually became a Shaman or something."

Xander looked over, and Buffy had on her concerned face. He could tell that she was praying it was 'something,' preferably something Giles and Willow could fix. "Maybe—"

"Excellent idea. Perhaps we could use one of the slayers as the bait," Giles nodded.

"Xander knows the slayers, so that'd be more like testing his ability to guess their hiding places," Buffy countered.

Giles opened the front door. "Far too early for a vampire."

"Oh, I know," Willow bounced a little. "There's been a Grossar demon and we haven't had a chance to get rid of
"That might be an appropriate task," Giles nodded. "Xander, can you track a Grossar?"

"Before we do this," Buffy interrupted, "am I going to have to change before hunting Gross demons? Because I just got these shoes, and Italian leather does not like goo, slime or grossness." She smiled sweetly, and Xander got the impression it was more for Giles' benefit than for any concern over her shoes.

Giles sighed. "They are little more than animals which probably followed other demons through some portal. Think of them as small pigs."

"Pigs?" Xander asked.

"With razor sharp tusks and hooves and a prehensile tail capable of pulling a man to the ground where the Grossar can then trample a person to death."

"Okay, and we haven't killed these things yet because...." Buffy demanded, her silly side suddenly gone under the seriousness of needing to kill something. Pulling a sword from the wall, she headed out the open door, Willow
"They're vegetarians, and hardly likely to bother the local population as long as they aren't frightened. We had other concerns. So, Xander, you should focus on their apatite. They can eat twice their own body weight, and they don't really care what they're eating. Some reports say they are very territorial against each other, although they don't seem bothered by either other demons or humans." Giles stepped out onto the front porch.

"I'm thinking this isn't the best idea," Xander said as he stood in the front hall. Oh yeah, this was monumentally a bad idea. He had an image of the face Spike would make if Xander walked out that door, and it was humongo bad idea.

"Xander, come on, we have garbage-eating pig demons to hunt," Buffy prompted from outside.

"Guys, this is..." Xander paused and sighed before saying what he really thought. "Spike is not going to be amused at me running around after killer pigs without him," Xander said as he crossed his arms.

Willow immediately came back through the door, her
face a mask of misery. "Xander, you don't need his permission. Does he," she choked on the word for a second, "punish you?" Willow's voice faded to a whisper.

Xander blushed as he thought about being over Spike's lap. "Okay, sex talk from surrogate sister--so not okay. And with Giles in earshot, this is pretty much hitting all the nightmare buttons. A math book and some nakedness would make this pretty much perfectly horrifying."

Buffy stood at the open doorway, leaning against the frame. "Xander, we promise no more sex talk or even Spike talk, but we need to figure out what Blair might have done to you, so you need to show Giles the mojo thing."

"And Spike really wouldn't be okay with me wandering around out there doing the mojo thing."

"Does Spike make all your decisions now?" Buffy demanded. "I mean, how fifties-housewife can you get, Xander? You don't need permission to leave the house, and you've been slaying with me a lot longer than Spike's been souled... or gay. Come on."
Stepping forward, Willow grabbed his arm and tugged gently. "Xander, you're really worrying me, and I'd be less with the freaking if I didn't see you just going along with whatever Spike says. You weren't ever the big follow-boy, and now you won't even leave the house without permission, and you can see how not good this looks, right?" she asked.

Xander blinked at Willow in surprise. He wasn't the follow-boy? Who had she known for the last twenty-five years? "Willow, I don't always know... I get distracted. One of the vamps almost got me last night, and I've been hunting vamps a whole lot longer than I've been hunting demon pigs. I just don't think that this is such a good idea."

"Xander, do you really think I'd let you get hurt?" Buffy asked softly.

"NO! I just think I'm a little clumsy, and you think so, too. In case you guys forgot, I got banned from patrol."

"With the baby slayers," Willow said, still tugging him gently toward the door. "We just didn't want to take chances with you, but we aren't taking chances, we're just trying to figure out what's wrong, and Giles and
Buffy and I will all be there."

"Guys," Xander tried, his guts knotting at the looks they all gave him. Even Giles stood behind Buffy with his disappointed face on. "If we aren't back before Spike gets home, I'm so blaming you guys," Xander relented with an eyeroll. Willow smiled, and Xander let her pull him out the door.

Part Nine

Xander crossed the field, nearly stumbling into a plowed furrow as his shamanic sight made the real world definitely less with the real. A strong hand caught him under his arm, holding his weight as he got his feet back under him.

"Thanks, Buff. Not really up for eating dirt today," he said as he tilted his head and concentrated on the threads that stretched in front of him. Hunger. Endless hunger. So many threads, even from the three behind him.
Willow flashed brightest, the orange-brown of hunger flashing through the other colors of her soul as he tilted his head her way. Funny. He'd never noticed just how many colors were in each thread, not really. Not until now.

He studied Willow's cord, and the colors flared and flashed like on of those optical cords that instantly transmitted the color from one end to the other. Yellow flashed so bright that Xander blinked for a second, the twisting image burned into the inside of his eyelid by the intensity.

"Do you have something?" Giles asked, and Xander shook his head, struggling away from the light show and reminding himself to never ever try drugs again because drugs and shamanic sight would be of the bad. Something could eat his legs and he might not notice.

"Sorry. Just a little distracted," Xander apologized as he again focused on hunger. The other colors faded and the brown-orange glowed. So much hunger, Xander realized, but not so hard to find the one he wanted. He started whistling the tune from Sesame Street, which one of these things didn't belong? Xander was betting the thick, dark orange thread that rippled with black and coiled like
an overfed snake. Yep, if Giles wanted demon, Xander could give him demon.

In fact... Xander tilted his head and followed the direction of a small cluster of darker threads, thin and nearly black with hints of orange surfacing irregularly.

"Um, I think there are vamps," Xander said as he stared at the distant houses where the cords vanished.

"You can sense them?" Giles asked. "How, exactly?"

Xander sighed. "You know, the answer's not going to change just because you ask it again. I can see the cords like a faint trail. What people have in them is a thick cord, but they leave behind threads. And nearly black is usually demon, and I don't know for sure that I'm seeing vampire, but I see a group of threads heading that way. Nearly black, thin, just kind watery with orange. I'm thinking vamps."

"And what are the threads doing?" Giles prompted. Xander sighed. He knew Giles had a good memory, so the repeating thing was just huge with the annoying.

"Laying there. Like always. They move a bit if the person
is really close, like they're attached, but these are just laying there, so I don't think the guys are around, which makes sense since the sun tends to keep vamps away," Xander snarked, and immediately he regretted it. Giles sighed and cleaned his glasses and Xander bit his tongue. Yep, way to prove a point, if the point was being short tempered and cranky.

"And again, I'm saying that this hunger thread is kinda big. Giles, are you sure this thing is on the harmless if not annoyed list?" Xander asked as he focused back on his original target.

"Grossar demons do have an amazing appetite, so I have no doubt that if you are able to read their life force you're identifying a significant hunger. There's a documented case of a Grossar in captivity actually secreting a digestive juice that allowed him to eat the steel bars of his cage. Certainly, that's an extreme case, but when cut off from any other food source, they are resourceful little buggers."

"If he eats my shoes, the council is replacing them out of the contingency fund," Buffy threatened, a laugh lurking under her growl.
"Yes, my primary concern here is for your shoes," Giles answered.

"Hey, maybe we could catch one of these things and dump it on a garbage heap. Insto-recycling. As much damage as demons have done, it's only fair that they chip in with the whole pollution, global-warming issue," Willow offered enthusiastically.

"Perhaps if there weren't that small side effect of eating."

"Oh god," Buffy complained. "You're talking about demon-poo aren't you? No one said anything to me about demon poo because that is one of those things that puts a demon on the list for baby-slayers to slay. Give me a good poo-less vampire any day of the week."

"Bad?" Willow asked.

"In small doses, no. The creatures tend to hide their 'poo' as you call it, probably because they are prey animals in their own dimension. The smell would no doubt warn any food that a hunter was in the area, and larger demons could track their home territories and eat them. However, when they eat large amounts of food, they do
produce large amounts of rather noxious byproduct."

Funny, Xander didn't remember Giles talking so much back in the old days. Then again, the old days, Xander would have had more than a few poo jokes of his own to throw in. Now, not so much.

"Guys, we're getting close, and this is looking really kinda creepy-bad, and not in the annoying demon poo kinda way."

"Demons ahoy?" Buffy asked. Xander nodded.

"The cord is twitching, so it's close enough to the poo factory for the demon's movements to affect it, but this is..." Xander stared at the thick cord pulsing with rabid hunger and dark malevolence.

"This thing is evil."

"Hello, demon! Besides, I hate getting all dressed up with the swords and the axes and the crossbows and then not having anything to kill, so I am kinda hoping for evil." Buffy swung her sword through the air with a harsh whistling sound. "Actually, killing evil sounds so much better than killing harmless little pig-like thing."
"Yeah, but this is really big evil, bigger than vamps evil."

"I hardly think a Grossar could generate a bigger..." Giles hesitated.

"Soul or spirit or whatever this thing is I'm looking at that you think I'm not looking at?" Xander asked, and immediately, he blinked away the shamanic vision. He needed to be able to see Giles. Xander turned to Giles who had a guilty look on his face.

"Xander, I assure you that I believe you are reporting what you see quite accurately," Giles started carefully.

"But you think my vision is all with the wonky," Xander finished for him. He held up a hand to stop Giles from saying any more. "Yeah, I heard the arguments, although why someone would want to make me think I could track evil doesn't make much sense, but I do get that you guys are not actually trying to make me miserable. That's more like an unexpected side-effect."

"Xander," Willow breathed.

"I totally get where you are with this, and with us, and if
I'm wrong, I'm going to be at the head of the line for a big serving of crow with a side of 'I'll never doubt you again'," Buffy said, interrupting Willow, "but this is pretty much like when Dawn thought she was a slayer or when Tara thought she was a demon, or when I thought I was invisible and I did that thing with the Immortal, and let's not go there. And by the way, I want to know why I'm the one who keeps going see-through."

"Xander, we just want you safe," Willow added.

"You know, maybe this whole hunting the demon thing, maybe this is--" Xander started as he looked back across the field. He never got a chance to finish. The ground heaved under him, throwing him to the grass, and he heard Willow scream as she tumbled down a hill, which was odd because they were on a flat field just a second ago.

"Buffy, below us," Giles shouted, and then the ground collapsed, leaving Xander hanging for just a second, mid-air until gravity helped by slamming him back down to the ground.

"Where?" Buffy demanded, her sword still deep in the earth as she tugged on it, pulling it out as Xander's brain
supplied 'Sword in the Stone' quips that he couldn't say with the breath knocked out of him.

She yanked the sword out and swiveled, her sword held defensively low as she sidestepped toward Willow who lay on the ground.

"Ow." Willow pushed herself up on one arm. "That wasn't a Grossar."

"Yes, I had figured that out," Giles said as he turned a slow circle, his crossbow sliding over the area as he backed towards Xander.

"Are you okay?" he asked. Xander lay on the ground still gasping for air. He held up the thumbs up sign.

"I might be more willing to believe that if you could actually breathe," Giles pointed out dryly.

Ignoring the lack of oxygen, Xander blinked the world away until it became the ghost image and the threads of shamanic sight took over. Cord after cord after cord lay tangled all over the landscape, and why the hell hadn't he seen this before? Xander sat up and mutely stared at the lines, most fading, some seeming to unravel, and
others just disappearing into the air. All had this odd grey-yellow color that reminded Xander of runny baby poop or maybe vomited pineapple ice cream.

Something heavy slid toward his foot and then right through it, and Xander shivered in disgust.

"There," he said as he crab-walked backwards.

"Where?" Buffy asked, spinning around.

"There!" Xander pointed to a spot on the ground where the cord writhed and coiled like an agitated snake. Buffy held out a hand to Willow, pulling her up before she came forward, her sword pointed aggressively down.

"Getting warmer?" she asked as she passed Xander. He climbed to his feet with a shudder when the black coil passed right through Buffy, her own gold cord tangling with it for just a second.

"Something's sure setting off the slayer sense," she agreed.

"A little farther," Xander said, "I think. I'm not really good with this part. Usually I just get us into the right
neighborhood and let Spike or Jim take over."

"Just tell me when." Buffy help inching forward.

"Warmer," Xander said. "Warmer... a little cooler, more to your right. Okay, that's pretty warm," Xander took a couple of steps closer to get a better feel for perspective. "You're hot!"

"Why, thank you, Xander," Buffy joked as she drove the sword deep. The sword crunched through the rocks and dirt before the entire ground heaved up bucking wildly. Xander went flying again, watching as Buffy clung to the sword and flopped around like a fish on a hook.

"Willow!" Buffy yelled as she got her feet under her and promptly fell to one knee. Xander looked behind him and Willow stood in the middle of a magical whirlwind, flecks of light twisting around her as she chanted.

"Some help, please," Buffy cried as a crack opened in the ground. The sword came free, and Buffy stumbled back away from the mountain that was opening under them. "Faster would be good!"

The mound of earth split in the middle, the ashy brown
ground erupted from the split and spilled over like a dirt volcano. Buffy fell on her butt as the vibration rolled through the ground, and dirt immediately started piling on her feet and legs. Xander and Giles both ran stumbling to her, pulling at her arms until she could kick free and all three retreated.

Now bodies started erupting with the dirt: decaying arms and random bones and scales with slimy bits of flesh still clinging to them.

"Now you're just pissing me off," Buffy snapped as she held the sword out in front of her. Xander wondered whether the now-ruined shoes or the stench of death had pushed her over the limit, but really it didn't matter. Buffy had on her slay-face, and something was getting slayed.

Willow shouted some word Xander didn't know and white light flashed through the air. For a shining second, Xander could see under the ground as the world turned into an x-ray. Xander blinked and watched a huge form with thousands of little dash-sized bones roll under the ground away from the now silent erupted earth and away from them.
"Oh no you don't. You totally ruined these shoes," Buffy cried as she started forward. It took Xander a half second to realize everyone else could see the giant blobby blob roll under the ground. By that time, Giles had Buffy's arm and was pulling her backwards, away from the demon. Considering its size, and considering that it was moving through the ground, the thing was making pretty good time slithering away.

"Um, Giles, bad guy escaping stage left," Willow said softly, her hair now returned to the more normal red color.

"It's a Slanom. We need to get out of here."

"Giles, you're freaking me out a little. This isn't the plan. The plan definitely called for slayage," Buffy protested, but she also stood still, not complaining even though Xander could see Giles had such a tight grip on her that he was making indents in her arm.

"We don't have weapons that would touch a Slanom."

"I could do the magic kablooy thing," Willow offered, the wind already starting to pick up.
"No!" Giles almost shouted. "No, they feed off magic."

"And demons and people and possible dogs," Xander added as he looked around at the variety of rancid bits that had come spewing up with the dirt.

"Big ew," Buffy agreed. "I'm voting for throwing all our shoes away.

"We have larger concerns that shoes," Giles said with a calmness that made Xander's stomach clench. That was a bad tone of voice—a very, very, very bad tone of voice. That was scary-calm, don't panic the children tone of voice. And it had been a long time since any of them were children.

"Larger just like we need to regroup and attack it with more firepower, right?" Buffy asked, and now Xander could hear the hard edge in her voice.


"Okay, so one of us knows what's going on. Any chance you can translate for the non-collegy type guy?" Xander asked. He blinked, pulling his shamanic vision to the front
as he studied the area. The throbbing cord he'd followed to the field lay on the ground like a sated snake, and Xander stepped over it.

"Xander!" Buffy yelled just as Xander felt his foot sink into something squishy and warm. The smell of rotting flesh crashed into him. "Okay, that's ew. Your shoes, socks and pants are all officially banned from the house," Buffy said quietly. "But I'm with Xander. I need the Cliff's notes version for Slamming demons."

Xander blinked away the shamanic sight and looked down at the sort of piggy leg he's stepped in. It had a claw. "I found the Grossar," Xander said quietly.

"A Slanom demon came through a portal into Pompeii. It sucked up a bunch of magic, and when someone finally killed it, it went ka-plowy," Willow said sadly. "It went major ka-plowy and made a volcano explode and a whole city was buried and thousands died."

"Including the hero who killed the demon," Giles agreed. "And the sword of Vada was lost under the ashes."

"Wait. One demon? One?" Buffy asked as Giles led them all back across the field at a fast enough pace that Willow
was doing a funny walk-run thing. "What is it with super demons? I'm really missing the days of staking a few vamps, killing a few demons, and going home to watch Family Ties."

"Buffy," Giles sighed, but then he stopped.

"Hey, one more super demon is no big deal. We kill super demons all the time, or Buffy does because I'm not really one for killing super demons," Xander tried to reassure the group.

"No, you just seem to be the one who can find them," Giles answered unhappily. Xander glanced over, but Giles had on his best poker face, the one that didn't tell Xander anything about how Giles felt about Xander's shamanic sight now that he believed in it. Biting his lip, Xander ordered himself to not say anything, to not ask for reassurance like some kid. They all had more important things to worry about than Xander's need to know that his friends didn't think he was some sort of freak.

Part Ten
Xander walked up to the porch, trying to hide the urge to limp. The van sat under the covered porch, which meant the girls were back, which meant Spike was back, which meant Xander was suddenly very, very sorry he'd gone at all.

"Shoes off," Willow sighed tiredly, and Xander wasn't surprised. Willow had done fireballs and giant light show within twenty-four hours, so she had to be exhausted from channeling the power. Which, really, was better than when Willow had soaked up the power and it had turned her into something definitely unWillowish.

Xander leaned against the post and pulled his boots off, managing to end up with a finger covered in something gory and slimy. He wiped it off on the bushes. Would he go the way of Willow with the veins and the sudden urge to end the world, because he was voting a big old 'no' if anyone gave him a chance to vote. Somehow he didn't think Willow had voted to end the world, though. It just happened. For some people shit happened, for them, it was more the world-endage that just snuck up and happened when no one was looking.

Shoving all these thoughts to the side, Xander pulled off his socks and headed up the stairs. Three slayers Xander
hadn't seen that morning came bursting out of the house. "Xander!" they all called, and then Xander was in the middle of a giant slayer hug, which would be fun with all the soft slayer parts pressed into him because he definitely still appreciated girl parts, except for the whole slayer strength.

"Breathe. I need to breathe," Xander coughed out, and they pulled back, laughing and all talking at once.

"Nest in the tunnel..."

"...construction worker, just went splat."

"...kicked demon ass..."

"...Spike's waiting inside."

The last comment grabbed Xander's attention. He looked toward the darkness just inside the door.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us that you and Spike were, you know," one of the slayers, Nora, offered. "Man, I would pay money to see..." Buffy ended Nora's comment with a well placed punch to the arm the way only one slayer could hit another slayer.

"Hey, just sayin'!" Nora backed off, rubbing her arm. "Geesh, it's not like everyone else wasn't thinking it."
"I wasn't," Willow whispered almost too softly to hear. Xander turned toward her, concerned that whatever was rising up between them was threatening to split them apart. Ever since Kennedy and the ritual burning of the bedsheets, he and Willow had gotten back to the best friend, finishing each other's thoughts, always-there-for-each-other closeness, and now.... Xander sighed. Now everything was changing. Change bad.

Xander sighed as he headed up the front stairs in his bare feet. One of the slayers, Susan, started humming a death march.

"Much with the not funny," Xander muttered.

"Hey, no one's dying. Just, blaming and recriminations and possible screaming... probably," Buffy offered as she took the front stairs three at a time and headed for the front door.

Xander turned to see Giles looking at him, clearly concerned, and Xander straightened his shoulders. He wasn't afraid of Spike; he just... was terrified of that disappointed look Spike sometimes got. Yeah, terror was ever so much easier to face than plain old fear for his life... or not. Xander walked heavily into the house.
Even being prepared, Xander couldn't help yelping when a hand snagged his arm and jerked him into the shadow.

"Spike!" Xander said as if anyone else would be angry enough to drag him into the study.

"Of all the daft, bloody idiotic things you have ever done," Spike snarled.

Xander opened his mouth to defend himself, but he found himself standing in the corner of the room looking at Spike's back as Spike snarled the words at Buffy.

"Hey, I'm a slayer, I went to slay, it's what I do," she said, not looking worried, exactly, but looking over Spike's shoulder, Xander could see that wasn't exactly her 'in the right here' look either.

"Bloody fucking hell. You're the one who banned him from patrol in the first place!"

Xander looked at Buffy in surprise. He had always thought Giles was the one who went all paternal, but from the guilty flinch, it really had been Buffy.

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence there, Buff," Xander said with just a little bitterness. It was one thing for Giles to go all overprotective because Giles was like a father... or maybe the uncle who frowned disapprovingly
when you ate with your hands at the dinner table, but to have your own friends shove you into fray-adjacent land hurt.

Willow stood at the door, and she jumped in before Buffy could answer. "Xander, you were getting hurt too much... and we almost lost you in Africa. When that doctor called, he said..." Willow stopped, and Xander could feel the urge to go and comfort her, but he could also feel Spike's back keeping him trapped in the corner. "We're protecting you," Willow finished.

"You bloody well didn't protect him," Spike snapped as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Hey, I'm fine," Xander hurried to say as he stood up on both legs, ignoring the twinge in his lower back that suggested his right leg really didn't want to put weight on his right side. He'd definitely hit the ground harder than he thought.

"Pet, shut up."

"I think that is quite enough. Xander simply accompanied us on a hunt for Grosser demons, and your blustering does not change the fact that he had every right to do so," Giles said tiredly as he came in and dropped into one of the chairs. Willow stayed near the door to the hall,
and Xander could see Yi's face peeking around the edge of the frame. Nora was behind her.

"Understand this, mate. The boy's mine. You lot have no bloody idea what it means to protect him. In case you haven't noticed, when he's using his sight, he doesn't bloody see the real world. Did you think about that when you dragged him out there without even enough back up to handle a fucking demon pig?" Spike demanded.

Xander could see Giles' back go stiff. Oh yeah, this was so not good... Monumentally not good.

"Xander, you can't see? Really? Is that why you stepped in the pig pieces? Oh goddess, Xander, I'm sorry," Willow stepped forward and Spike spared her a quick glare before returning the full blast of his glare on Giles.

"You don't bloody take him out without me."

"Xander is an adult. And I am quickly becoming concerned at the tone you are taking with this. Whatever you two engage in within the confines of your bedroom is one thing, but attempting to manipulate Xander is beyond the scope of that. I am uncomfortable permitting that sort of manipulation," Giles snapped back as he stood up, his anger flashing across his face as he stepped toward Spike.
"Permitting? You don't bloody permit me to do anything. Where the soddin' hell are you when the slayers need trainin' or when they come home dragging their sorry arses after nearly getting eaten? You're turning into the same sort of useless lump of flesh all the others turned into. At least Wesley died fighting instead of drinkin' himself to death behind some desk like a bloody Watcher."

"Oh goddess," Willow breathed. "Okay, mister, that was way past the rules of fair fighting. We all went to that seminar and we all promised to always fight fair, and that... that was not fair."

"Not fighting, just speaking some truths and setting some boundaries," Spike said with a smirk that made Xander think he needed to do something fast.

"Does it occur to anyone else we should probably be more worried about the people-eating slug. Anything that eats people is on the not-good list, and right now, that not-good trumps the not-goods that are so not good here," Xander suggested as he tried to slip out of the corner. Spike turned yellow eyes on him.

"The wot?" he asked, his thickening accent setting off little alarms in the back of Xander's head... big alarms... big screaming alarms with matching lights that flashed
and strobed. Spike never had gotten over the whole Giles and Woods trying to kill him thing, and why did Xander really not even consider that until now? Xander cursed his brain's ability to flush the most important parts down the drain while remembering the name of the techies who worked the bridge on Babylon Five. He was as bad as Andrew.

"The big slug... only it had bones, and slugs technically don't, and guess what? Giles is definitely on board with the me as a Shaman," Xander ended with a strained smile. Oh this was so going down like the Titanic.

"Grossar don't look much like slugs."

Giles made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a snort. "I had noticed. We asked Xander to try tracking a Grossar and he overshot the mark and managed to locate a small Slanom demon."

"That was small?" Buffy immediately demanded, but Xander was more concerned about Spike who had covered the length of the room in a blink and now stood chest to chest with Giles.

"You fucking took him to hunt a Slanom?"

"Time out. We're all just on the cranky side, so just put the fangs away," Xander said as he stepped forward. He
pulled on Spike's arm, and for a second, Spike was as immovable as a stone. Finally, Spike yielded, backing off a step and slipping an arm around Xander's waist to pull him close. "I should rip your bollocks off for that stunt," Spike said quietly, but Giles was not going to be intimidated. He had his own cranky face on.

"Enough. I did not take any of them hunting a Slanom. The existence of one in this dimension is totally unexpected, but we also have to consider that finding the demon now before it grows could save thousands of lives."

"Okay, that's the second time you've said that. Do you mean that thing is the baby version of a Slanom?" Buffy interrupted the brewing fight.

"It's a small one based only on the reports from the Watcher in Pompeii who sent some records out with a slave before getting buried with the rest of the town.

"Great. Bad intel, huge demons devouring stuff from beneath, and a missing magical weapon. Is anyone else getting the creepy been-here, done-this feeling or is it just me?" Buffy asked the room.

"So not just you. I'm thinking this isn't the best time to go after each other," Xander nodded his agreement.
"Although the going after each other is feeling deja-vu-ish, too," Xander pointed out. Last time, they had all turned on Buffy, but this time, Xander wasn't sure exactly who was getting turned on. This felt more like a free-for-all.

Giles sighed. "At least Xander's inadvertent tracking has given us warning that it is here. We should create a passive spell, something that will react to the passage of the beast so that we can track its movements without feeding it any more magical energy. Since that species is of limited intelligence, clearly someone else has opened a portal and forced the creature through." Giles had his curious voice, the one that suggested research and long nights with much coffee.

"So, this isn't the taking over and setting up the big fancy court of people-eating sycophants?" Xander asked, happy to see the whole conversation move toward safer topics like uberdemons and Armageddon.

Spike shook his head. "It'd take somethin' big to get them to come into our dimension. We've got too much bloody gravity for them."

"Oh! Barophobia!" Buffy exclaimed. Everyone turned to look at her. "Barophobia, the fear of gravity, which seems a little strange because that's like having a fear of
breathing with the not being able to get away from it." Buffy glanced at Spike. "Except... you know."

"Barophobia?" Xander asked slowly. Buffy mock-glared at him and for a half second, and the whole world seemed to fit together exactly the way it did before Africa, before they'd lost Tara and the darkness had threatened to swallow all of them. Xander smiled, and Buffy's lips twitched.

"What? I can know stuff," Buffy defended herself with exaggerated indignation. She shrugged. "It was on Jeopardy. You know, Giles, I'd learn a lot more about demons and prophesies if you'd just play that Jeopardy music when you talk. Da-da-Da-da-Da-da-dum..." Buffy trailed off into humming the tune.

"We need to banish the demon back to its own dimension before it feeds on enough magic, or local livestock, to grow into a real threat," Giles said, completely ignoring Buffy's suggestion, but then he was ignoring Spike's glares too, so Xander counted that as a score for the team of Buffy and Xander versus the cranky-Scoobies.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't know that the magic would feed it. It was just a reveal spell," Willow offered.
"We're quite lucky you didn't try to destroy the demon. That would have fed it considerably more energy. And, of course, we're lucky that Xander did lock onto the demon even if it wasn't quite what we were expecting."

"See, I told you Giles was down with the Shaman thing now," Xander pointed out, desperate to get them to agree about something before Spike did something with his fangs other than growl.

"Yes, I think we have to accept that Xander has some ability, but your assumption that he is an animus Shaman is hasty to say the least. I saw nothing that wouldn't be explained if Xander were a conspic Shaman, and that would actually fit Caleb's statement far more accurately," Giles offered. Spike's body stiffened at the second half of the comment, and Xander gave a grunt when the arm around him cut off his air. Spike relaxed his arm, but he stayed in game face as he focused on Giles.

"Not bloody likely. If he were a lower-level Shaman, he could have accessed his powers before."

"And if he were an animus Shaman, he would require far more training," Giles said with obvious frustration.

"'Cept for the fact that the fuzzy little Shaman in Cascade is a trado Shaman."
"Whoa!" Buffy held up her hand as Giles was ready to snap back a retort. "Okay, I'm getting that feeling that I used to have in high school. You know, where everyone else knows all the words and you don't?"

"I'm getting that feeling, too, and since they're talking about me, it's kinda freaky," Xander agreed. "Can we either take a break so I can copy Willow's homework or maybe someone can explain in words I'll understand?" Xander asked.

"Sorry, pet. Just got my knickers in a twist."

"Yes, you have," Giles agreed softly, and Spike shot him a death glare that would have sent a weaker man running.

"There are Shaman in my support group," Willow said from her spot rooted near the doorway. Xander flinched at the reminder that Shaman, like witches, sometimes went off the magical deep end and needed support groups. Why couldn't he be a nice little drug addict who messed his own life up? Nope, he had to go for the superpower upgrade with the potential for world endage.

Willow took a step into the room. "Shaman can be really big on the mojo scale, or they can be low-level. One of the guys in the group, his brother is a gustatus Shaman,
which is sorta of the cool because he influences taste, and everyone in the family thought the Shaman gene had skipped him, only he has this job making food that people pay way too much money for, and it turns out he was doing the whammy on his food the whole time without even knowing it. Lower level Shaman don't even need training they just sort of do stuff."

"So, I'm not necessarily all that powerful?" Xander asked, almost hopeful because he could handle being a little less on the scarily powerful side.

Giles had taken off his glasses, but now he slipped them back on as he nodded. "You've accessed your power without formal training, which suggests you're a lower level Shaman, perhaps a conspic Shaman who can perceive the hidden or true nature of things, which is by no means an inconsiderable skill."

Spike snorted. "Not bloody likely," he snapped. "If Xand were a lower-level Shaman, he would have been able to access his power a whole lot sooner."

"And according to you, he was. According to you, he was drawn to evil back in high school," Giles said tightly, crossing his arms.
"Bloody hell. Just admit that ya fucked up and never noticed that he needed training and call it a day, Rupert. I'm bloody tired of having this same argument." Spike stepped forward again, and Xander clutched at his vampire's arm, as if that would actually help if Spike actually did decide to go off the cow blood diet, not that Xander really thought he would, but that wasn't a good face Spike was making.

"Okay, I offered to eat a big plate of crow and never doubt Xander again after the whole not believing him in the first place," Buffy shrugged. "So, Xander, what kind of Shaman are you?" she asked. She dropped onto the couch and tried for a relaxed pose, one arm thrown over the back of the couch, but Xander could see the way she watched, ready to jump in if Giles and Spike actually did decide to go at it. Oh yeah, he was so not the only one who thought this was going down like the Titanic.

Xander looked at Buffy for a second. "You're asking me? I was the one who sat in the back row and copied Willow's notes with you. I am so not the one to ask," Xander finally answered.

"A conspic Shaman would see things others wouldn't, but this could still be a spell," Willow offered. "If you're copying my notes, I would definitely have 'spell' written
in there... several times... highlighted," she added the last part quietly. "But if he's lower level..."

"He's a higher-level Shaman," Spike nearly yelled.

"Your argument assumes Mr. Sandburg is a trado Shaman," Giles countered.

"Trado Shaman mojo the teaching," Xander added for Buffy.

"Whoa. You mean they just magically make the stuff fit in your head?" she asked with a smile that was just a little too wide and a voice just a little too bright. Xander couldn't blame her for trying to lighten the mood a little. Hell, if his funny bone hadn't gone missing, he'd be doing the joking thing. Instead he just nodded in answer to her question. "Can we hire some trado Shaman?" Buffy turned to Giles with a hopeful expression. Giles just sighed.

"I was bloody there. He's either a trado Shaman or a peto Shaman. Could feel the pull," Spike snapped at Giles. In a softer voice, he added, "Peto influence what other people want."

"So, Blair might be making me want to be a Shaman?" Xander said uncertainly. "Um, that's not working for me because I'm really not okay with being a Shaman and I'm
definitely not with the wanting," Xander said. Spike stopped and looked at him for a second. "Well, except for that," Xander added as he realized that being a Shaman is what brought him to Spike. Even now, Spike's demon probably wouldn't want Xander except for the whole Shaman-power thing, and Xander definitely wanted to be wanted.

"Oh! There are spells! If you don't want this, I know I've seen spells," Willow offered, sounding suddenly more cheerful.

"Wills, I'm voting 'no' on the binding," Buffy jumped in as Spike took a breath that he was clearly about to use to verbally explode into cursing. "Okay, enough with the Shaman-talk. I reserve the right to still be a little freaked over the whole Xander sleeping with the undead part, but the rest.... just let it go, people. Xander's a Shaman; we don't know what kind. Xander, welcome to the freaky club, as the president of the freakish, I don't recommend the retirement plan, but the working hours... okay, they officially suck too," Buffy said with a shrug. "So, speaking of sucky working hours, don't we kinda need to work here? I mean, big slug-like thing eating people, I'm voting for killing it."
"Just leave Xander out of it. You send me off on another wild goose chase so you can talk him into some scheme, and I promise, the lot of you'll be sorry."

And yep, the almost end to the fight was almost over, Xander realized.

"Hey, Xander can demon pig hunt if he wants!" Willow now jumped in. "He's a grown man, and yeah, he's been a little issue-y lately, but we're his friends, which means we are officially allowed to help with issues."

"Yeah, because you lot are really good with that," Spike snorted sarcastically. "That's why Buffy went to you lot when ya dragged her out of heaven."

The room fell silent. A couple of baby slayers still hovered near the door, and one of them gasped. Xander couldn't even look at his girls; he dropped his eyes to the floor and studied the tiles. The grout needed cleaning. That was grungy grout.

"I... I was trying to save her. We thought she was trapped in a hell dimension, and it's not like you were big with the helping to stop the evil that came to town to drink and party and celebrate her death by eating the townspeople." Willow crossed her arms.
"Willow, listen to me very carefully," Spike said, his accent dropping into Giles-territory. Xander looked up at him in alarm because Spike with Giles-voice usually meant something was going very, very wrong. Spike took a step forward, away from Xander and toward Willow. "You bloody touch him, you put one spell on him, and I will kill you," Spike said quietly.

"Oh no, no, we will not issue death threats. What? Don't we have enough bad guys out there? Slamming demons threatening to go ka-boom, remember?" Buffy leapt up so she stood between Spike and Willow, looking from one to the other. Xander chewed his lip but he couldn't come up with any joke that could fix this. Hell, he'd settle for a joke that would just distract people, but the jokes were failing him. Yep, he couldn't joke and Buffy's jokes were obviously not doing the job.

"I can't believe.... Don't you dare say that like you need to protect Xander from me," Willow cried, her voice caught somewhere between weeping and shouting. Xander noticed the baby slayers retreating from the hallway. Yep, those were smart girls; they knew when to run for the hills. He considered following them.

"I should have bloody protected Buffy. I didn't though. Got so caught up in my own loss that I didn't even notice
what you gits were trying to do. I would have stopped it. I'm not going to be that bloody blind again, so consider this your warning." Spike's voice was so calm, so matter-of-fact, that Xander could feel the cold shivers crawl down his spine. Warning delivered, Spike backed up, his arm going around Xander's waist again.

"Xander?" Willow asked softly, her eyes turning toward him with the Willow pout.

"What about those Clippers?" Xander asked weakly, as he tried to focus on just how much the grout totally needed to be cleaned. Would bleach or Soft Scrub work better on those stains?

"Oh yeah, subtle," Buffy sighed. "The past is behind you, so let's all take to heart those great words of wisdom and Hakuna Matata. Only, not really because I think we should probably discuss the big bad. So, Giles, what's the game plan for killing great big blobby magic-eating demon?"

"Considering how long it's been since anyone had to kill one, this may require some research."

"Oh joy," Buffy sighed.

"You lot do your research. Boy and I need to have a little talk," Spike said as he pulled on Xander, guiding him from
the room. Xander watched Willow's mouth come open, but Buffy stepped to her side, putting a hand on her arm, and Willow closed it without saying anything. She just looked at Xander with those big eyes that made Xander feel like the slug because he didn't know how to fix things... not without losing the one thing that made sense to him now. Spike's arm tightened and Xander let his lover guide him from the room.

Part Eleven

Xander stayed silent all the way up their room. Africa had taught Xander how to be quiet; he could totally do quiet, he just usually didn't. Now, following Spike's stiff back, he couldn't have found anything to say if the Slanom demon had shown up waving a white flag and drinking a margarita. Not to say that demons didn't normally drink margaritas because Xander knew plenty of demons who went for the fruity goodness, but the Slanom didn't strike him as
the umbrella in his drink sort.

"Can't believe you bloody went off like that," Spike said as opened the bedroom door. He stood to the side and waited as Xander slipped past him.

"I can. I'm not always big with the clear thinking."

"Oi, had nothing to do with clear thinking. That was a bloody set up. I should've known when Willow came and got me without wakin' you. That was a bloody set up, and we both fell for it like a couple of morons."

"Um, isn't that the same as..." Xander stopped when Spike gave him an evil glare. Yep, officially not the time to point out the lack of vampire logic what with the absence of clear thinking being pretty much the same as them being morons.

"Hey, that means you aren't mad at me, right?" Xander changed the subject as he wandered to the tall dresser and turned around to give Spike his best puppy eyes.

"Not bloody likely. I'm fucking furious," Spike said, but the voice was quiet. Xander waited, chewing his lip, as Spike just stood near the door, his fingers randomly
curling and uncurling at his sides. Furious plus quiet equaled disappointment, and Xander felt his guts twist.

"I'm sorry," Xander offered softly as Spike started pacing the room and finally ended up staring out the window.

"I told you to stay put, to not go out without me. We had this conversation before we ever left Cascade, yes?" Spike asked the words so calmly that Xander could almost lie to himself about the anger coursing just under the surface. Almost.

"Yeah," Xander agreed, biting back the urge to make a joke out of it. He wasn't a kid. He didn't need permission, only... he kinda did. Spike had been clear like glass about the whole ownership part of dating a demon, and clear like clear glass, not even the frosted stuff.

"You didn't even tell 'em that you couldn't see."

"I can see," Xander quickly defended himself. Xander picked at a thumbnail as he watched Spike's back. If Spike didn't want him... Xander sighed. Well, he'd been the third wheel before, and at least with Blair and Jim he was the useful third wheel. Hey, he could be like the tricycle, only tricycles and grown men didn't really
match, and Xander really didn't think Jim was the tricycle sort. Now Blair.... The room had fallen silent, and Xander focused his gaze on Spike who looked at him with a cocked head and a blank expression. Xander set his jaw and promised himself to not get all emotional. Hell, after he left Anya at the altar, he deserved this. He hoped she was up in heaven getting a kick out of it because the other option just made his stomach churn even more.

"Yeah? So, that first night we came, you saw the vampire who tackled you to the ground, and you, what... just decided ta stand there and see what happened when he ate ya?" Spike almost snarled the words, and Xander had to fight a little instinct that whispered about prey and predators and running for his life.

"Okay, so I'm not totally good with seeing. It's more like looking at a ghost version, but I can still see... kinda," Xander defended himself.

"I'm going to bloody eat Red," Spike growled as he turned back to the window. "Her and Rupert... probably get fucking indigestion," he muttered.

"Spike, you don't get it," Xander said quietly. Part of his gut just said to throw himself at Spike and beg
forgiveness and another part said he needed to make Spike and Willow be friends again and another part just wanted to let Spike tell him how to handle it because Xander didn't have the energy to make the decisions any more. He didn't want to be decision-boy for anything more important than what kind of donuts to pick for breakfast. And all the parts were turning into some seriously rolling guts.

Xander sighed, feeling the ulcer eat through his stomach. "Our parents, big with the not there. And me and Willow were there for each other way before you or Buffy, and sometimes it was me and Jesse, and Willow was this weird girl who actually brought a stethoscope when Jesse wanted to play doctor, but there was me and there was Willow. And then it was me and Willow and Buffy, and when Buffy ran away or..." Xander swallowed. "Or when Buffy died, it was me and Willow. And yeah, you were right there, but..."

"I get it, pet," Spike said quietly as Xander fell silent, struggling to pull his thoughts together.

Xander blinked, pulling at the Shaman vision that hovered always at the edge of his awareness now. The bed and the walls faded and the cords danced into his
vision. When he looked at Spike, Xander could see the black cords of the demon cording and knotting, stretching out toward him only to grow tangled in Spike's soul and snap back. At the center, Spike had become a storm of colors, and his normally dark green and maroon demon cord had grown nearly black, soaking up the colors from Spike's soul and reflecting nothing back.

Xander flinched when he realized that he had done this... he had created the big old knotty mess where once Spike's soul and demon twined together. Stepping forward, he let his hand rest on Spike's arm.

"She's lost so much, and I know I gave her the wiggins when I nearly got taken out by a plain, old non-demony virus, or is malaria a bacteria? Anyway, she just needed something stable."

"So, you give her the Xander she knew, what, five or six years ago? Bloody hell, Xand, this part you're playin' when you're around them, it's not who you are any more."

"Hey, it is too. This is me. Trust me, I suck at acting. We had to do this thing in high school. It included costumes and lack of talent, and it was so totally ugly, so me and
acting are not best buds. This is me. It's just that I don't always want to go emotionally vomiting on them and some of the stuff from Africa, some of the stuff from before Africa, it's vomit. It's like 'The Exorcist' level of emotional projectile vomiting. And I don't want to vomit and then have to look at the chunks because that's a little gross, even when we're talking metaphor here."

"So, you just let the vomit back up instead of takin' a risk that Red might not be able to handle a version of you that doesn't need her to wipe your nose for you?"

"Way too much bodily function talk," Xander whispered. He wished he could disagree with Spike, argue that he wasn't afraid of how Willow would react. He couldn't. He and Spike were standing side by side in front of the window, but Spike continued to stare out over the property. The last of the setting sun had vanished so the pale light from the walkway lanterns created pools of yellow in the dark garden. Xander chewed his lip.

"Ya can't be mine and hers," Spike said quietly.

"I love you. I just... I can't abandon Willow," Xander said softly. Yep, this would be the point where Spike pulled a quick 'exit, stage left' and Xander tried to pick up the
pieces. "Spike, I just... I don't know how to explain it."

"I'm not a moron," Spike said as he finally looked at Xander, and the snarled soul-cords undulated through the ghost image of Spike. "It comes down to you and Red bein' so bloody co-dependent that you can't shite without her wiping her arse."

"Co-dependent?" Xander asked incredulously. He'd braced himself for Spike kicking him out, even though it was technically Xander's room, and he'd braced for ugly breakups or demon-Spike taking back ownership. He hadn't braced himself for the Oprah Winfrey impersonation.

Spike scowled at him. "Yes, bloody co-dependent. She's lost everyone she loved, including nearly losing you, and now Buffy's off having a life and Rupert's off not havin' a life, so you make her feel better by lettin' her boss you around. But I don't share, pet. Ya can't tell me that you're mine and then go lettin' her walk all over you. It makes the demon..." Spike stopped, turning to stare out the window.

"I'm guessing the demon doesn't think that the doormat look is in this season?" Xander tried for a joke; neither of
"Makes me want to bloody eat someone," Spike admitted, his voice strained.

"I vote 'no' on the eating of random bystanders."

"Wasn't planning on eating bystanders," Spike pointed out dryly as he glanced over. Xander felt a cold chill go through him, the memory of Spike's threat still bouncing around his memory. Willow's face had gone white, so Xander wasn't the only one who thought that sounded just a little too realistic.

"Pet, my soul loves you; never doubt that," Spike said slowly. "But my demon needs to own you. Ya do something like this, and I feel this..." Spike stopped. He tilted his head toward Xander, and his jaw was clenched tightly. Xander had never seen this side of Spike. Spike was always the verbal sort. He yelled and shouted and said whatever crossed his mind when it crossed his mind with no editing.

"I'm sorry. I'm big with the sorry," Xander whispered. "And whatever you do, I know I deserve it because I'm big with the sorry and the stupid," Xander finished.
"Whatever I do? Is that what ya want? You want me to put you over my knee and punish you for being so bloody stupid?" Spike looked at him curiously, but Xander could see the demon cord straining out toward him, coiling and flailing in a way that didn't match the cool, detached interest on Spike's face.

Xander chewed his lip and just barely avoided pointing out that it would have to be mutual spankings because Spike had fallen for it too. "When you spanked me at the hotel..." Xander stopped. He could feel the blush start to heat his face, and he glanced up at Spike. He just stared back. Yeah, no rescue there, Xander thought as he dropped his eyes back to the floor. Okay, he was a grown man; he could talk about this without giving himself heart failure or dying from the blush.

"The whole one-word rule was just kinda silly, so getting spanked for breaking the rule..." Xander took a deep breath. "You punishing me for that was like a forfeit on a game. It was fun. But getting spanked over this would be a little too much like you were my father or something, and if the demon needs it to get past the anger, I'm okay with that, but it's not something I really want. And it's not that I think you would hurt me, because I know you
wouldn't, but kinda ew on thinking of you like a father figure because fathers and sex should never be in the same sentence. But if you want to spank me..." Xander shrugged. He'd done far weirder for his partners, especially after Anya and her experiments with citrus fruit.

Spike started pacing the room, and Xander leaned against the wall and watched him. Spike paused. Fingers pulled out a cigarette and lit it before he started pacing again, this time trailed by wisps of smoke. The silence thickened, and Xander dug fingernails into the wood of the windowsill as he waited for something, some sign that he hadn't just completely ruined what he'd found with Spike. The vampire paused near the dresser and ground the cigarette out in the ashtray even though he hadn't even smoked half of it.

"If ya were mine, you wouldn't have gone out there," Spike said quietly.

"Hey, I said I'm yours, not that I suddenly grew a brain or a backbone. Okay," Xander quickly added when Spike turned toward him with a snarl, "I have a brain, just not one that works well when faced with Willow pout. I've been trained since kindergarten to yield to the power of
Willow eyes. And Giles was all being reasonable man, and Buffy was looking at me like I was the main character in an after-school special about brainwashing and then the Willow pout. There was definitely Willow pout going on. Lots and lots of pout. Spike, I am yours. I'm all yours. I just fuck up a lot, and when they look at me like that, I'm pretty much guaranteed to fuck up. And yeah, looking back, that was a huge fuck up because I should have told them about my trouble seeing, and I should have waited until we could go out together."

"When I saw... I want to..." Spike stopped, but Xander could see the black cord straining at Spike's control, loops of it stretching out toward Xander like a lasso that would pull him close.

"Tie me to the bed and never let me up?" Xander suggested. Spike looked at him without emotion.

"Doesn't start ta cover it, pet," Spike said slowly.

"I get that. Actually, I wouldn't mind getting some of that. I'm so tired of never knowing what to do or who to disappoint or how to avoid some disaster that ends with dead people. I shouldn't have dead people disasters. I think I liked construction work because a disaster there
meant the wrong bolts got ordered and we lost a day of work. So, maybe I need to just let go," Xander said quietly.

"Pet." Spike stopped and ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip while the demon cord thrashed. "Demon is screaming about making sure you never do this again--about keeping you chained, beating you when you fuck up, making you crawl at my feet and beg for your food until you bloody remember whose you are. Demon wants to own you so that you never have a thought except the one I bloody put in you. You're playin' with fire, and I can't keep bloody doing it. I warned you that the demon wants to own or be owned. And when you promise yourself and then go and nearly get yourself killed because those gits..." Spike stopped again, his eyes firmly fixed on the wall. Xander had never seen Spike at such a loss for words. "Get out," Spike ordered, his voice tight with control, but Xander could see the chaos within him.

Xander chewed his lip as he stood and watched Spike, the demon curling around the soul like one python trying to swallow another. Instead of leaving, Xander shrugged off his shirt and let it fall to the floor. The shoes and pants went next, and then the underwear. Vamp hearing
meant that Spike had to know what Xander was doing, but he didn't react. He just stared at the bedroom wall, one hand resting on the tall dresser.

Padding quietly across the room, Xander sank to his knees at Spike's feet. "I really want..." Xander stopped. "I want you," he admitted quietly, the pain in his chest making words skitter away from him as he tried to figure out what to say. "The whole hungry and brainwashed is sounding like a big old 'no,' but I want you.

"Pet." Spike's voice had no emotion; it was a flat warning that Xander chose to ignore as he waited.

Xander recognized the familiar fear that clung to his heart. He'd eaten scorpions' tails in Africa with this same fear. He'd gone back to his tent and waited for the poison to kill him. Yeah, the elders had laughed and promised that the tails were safe, but Xander hadn't believed them because... hello... poison tails. He'd laid on a cot in the dark half the night before he finally gave up waiting for death and let himself fall asleep. It had worked out for him that time, and he'd found a slayer. He ordered his stomach to not turn inside out and prayed for an equally good result this time.
"You bloody idiot. Ya know you're supposed to get out of the way when some demon's furious, right?" Spike asked, but Xander could feel the wave of emotion, the anger and violence crest and recede as Spike shook his head in disbelief. The demon cord unwrapped from Spike's soul and stretched toward Xander, sinking through his skin and leaving cool tracks behind.

"Wisdom straight from the dead guy's mouth," Xander joked, "but I'm more the kind for wandering after demons, or having them wander after me, or just something else vaguely demon-magnetty. But maybe we could do the tying to the bed and ravishing instead of the crawling at the feet because my knees won't take much crawling," Xander suggested as he looked up at Spike. In fact, his knees were already complaining that hardwood floors were not for kneeling.

"Right, up on the bed then," Spike ordered as he suddenly snapped into motion. He pulled a strange box out from under the bed as Xander scrambled to obey. His knees already had twin red circles. "Thought I'd save these for when we had more privacy, but no time like the present, pet." Spike sounded more cheerful even as the familiar clinking of chains warned Xander what Spike had in the box. "Need ta put in some rings in the wall, right
into the stud, something to chain you to, but we can improvise for right now."

"Okay, I'm voting for locking the door now," Xander suggested as long lengths of chain appeared followed by substantial looking leather cuffs: thick, black ones with two heavy buckles on each one.

"Yeah, probably should," Spike answered without leaving his spot on the floor. He grabbed the heavy cuffs and stood up. "On your stomach, pet."

"We are so getting caught," Xander whispered, but he flipped over onto his stomach and stretched his hands to the sides of the large bed. He watched as Spike buckled the heavy cuff around his wrist. Now, the demon cord and soul cord mirrored each other, each stretching out toward Xander and then rolling back. Spike walked around the bed with the other cuff, and Xander blinked away the Shamanic vision. With the one eye missing it was harder to watch Spike buckle the cuff around Xander's left hand.

"Stay put," Spike ordered with a brief slap to Xander's naked butt.
"Just as long as the door stays closed," Xander answered as Spike went back for the chains. He used a padlock to attach one end to the cuff ring, which meant that Xander couldn't unbuckle the cuff without the key. Part of Xander cringed at the thought of getting caught. His cock just started thickening as it caught up with the idea of just how helpless he was going to be in a few minutes.

Spike flung the other end of the chain under the bed with a slithering rattle of metal against wood and then he walked around.

"So not good on the floors," Xander complained weakly as Spike picked up the end and used another padlock to attach a link to Xander's left cuff. Now his hands were spread to the sides of the bed and there was absolutely nothing he could do. Xander curled his hands into fists and pulled with all his strength. Nothing budged.

"Don't give a rat's arse about the floors," Spike answered as he reached up and slipped the eyepatch off. Xander flinched a little as a thumb stroked the side of his face with the ruined socket.

"Why didn't ya get a glass eye, pet?" Spike asked curiously. Xander went to shrug, but he didn't have
enough slack to do it.

"Didn't seem as important as the potential world endage going on at the time. I looked into it later and the doctor said something about bone degrading and needing reconstructive surgery to get the eye to sit right. Didn't seem worth it."

"Should've said something. A healer can't put the eye back, but he could repair the bone so you could get a glass eye if that's what you want," Spike said, his thumb now stroking the cheekbone under the scar.

"You think I should?"

"Do you want to?" Spike countered.

"Um, hello. I creep all the kids out in the store, either that or they want me to take the patch off so they can look at the scar, which creeps me out. I'm thinking there's not really a good reason for not getting it fixed. Nope. No reasons."

"It's a scar just like the one through my eyebrow. Reminds you that you survived. Other people being gits isn't really a reason to change."
"Okay, you chained me up to talk about the eye?" Xander asked in desperation. Spike smirked as he ran his hand down Xander's arm to the leather cuff.

"Could if I wanted. We agreed that I'm the boss here, right?"

"I'm going to be so sorry I said this, but, yeah, you're the boss," Xander agreed.

"Should make ya say master," Spike said with an eyebrow wiggle.

"If it got me sex or the door locked, I would," Xander promised. Spike laughed.

"Wait here." Spike headed for the door, pulling it open.

"HEY!"

But Spike was gone. Xander could hear him stomp to the top of the stairs. "Oi, boy and I need some privacy, so don't come storming up no matter how much screamin' ya hear," he yelled down.
Xander buried his face in his pillow as Spike's footsteps came back and the door slammed, this time followed by the sound of the lock sliding into place.

"Subtle," Xander said with a roll of his eye.

"Ya got your locked door and some privacy," Spike countered, but Xander could hear the laughter just under the mock indignation.

"You're evil."

"Sometimes, pet. Comes with havin' a demon, I suppose," Spike answered with far more seriousness than Xander really wanted. He wanted the smirking Spike who would drive him crazy. Instead, Spike got a serious look on his face as he came to the side of the bed and stroked Xander's back gently. "I don't go brooding about it like Peaches, but I feel that pull."

"If we're talking about Angel, I so want to be unchained because chains and Angel are not a good combination for my libido."

This time, Spike laughed. "Oi, ya should see what that great sod can do with chains when he puts his mind to it."
Sometimes it wasn't even half bad."

"No no nonono. You are not playing fair here," Xander complained as he pulled against the restraints.

"That's the fun thing about being master, I don't have to," Spike answered. He let his fingers trail over Xander's back and down to his butt where he delivered a slap. "Up on your knees."

"Kinda hard all tied up like this," Xander pointed out without moving. Hands caught his hips, pulling him up and Xander pulled his knees under him with a yelp.

"See, no problem, pet. If ya want, I can tie your feet there to make sure you leave 'em where I put 'em," Spike offered cheerfully.

"Hey, I'm okay. Well, not as okay as totally exposed, slightly disturbed by the Angel conversation and horny, but definitely not in need of more chains," Xander quickly assured him.

"Hush. Don't want to gag that lovely mouth of yours, but I will," Spike said as he circled the bed, reaching out to brush a finger over a hip and then a calf and then a
shoulder until Xander's whole body twitched with a need for that touch. Even without the Shamanic vision, Xander could feel Spike's calm amusement.

When Spike pulled a toy out of the box that had held the chains, Xander groaned.

"Now, pet, that's one," Spike warned with a smirk as he held up the large vibrator. Xander turned his face to the pillow to smother another groan as Spike turned it on, letting the cool plastic rest against his thigh. "I figure you need to remember why you're mine and this should be a nice little lesson."

Part Twelve

Spike trailed the vibrator over Xander's thigh, the cool plastic shivering a trail over the bare skin as Xander groaned into the pillow where he'd buried his face.
"That's two," Spike said cheerfully. Xander turned his head so he could glare at Spike, but just as he turned, Spike flipped the vibrator on, and chills danced up Xander's spine.

"Fuck," Xander breathed as Spike pressed the vibrator to his ass for a brief second, making his whole body twitch with heat and need.

"Oi, that's good for two. Earnin' yourself quite the spanking," Spike said cheerfully, moving the toy up Xander's back as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Spike," Xander said, caught between the ocean of lust and need pounding against his thoughts and the little trickle of fear that nagged at him.

"Shh. You're safe, pet. I promised you I wouldn't ever hurt you. Like you said, it's a game. Mind you, you're losing right now, but then asking you to be quiet is pretty much a guarantee you're going to lose." Spike ran his fingernails lightly over Xander's raised ass, and Xander opened his mouth to gasp for air that seemed to be in suddenly short supply. When Spike trailed the vibrator down back over his hole and then to the underside of his
cock, Xander jerked against the chains and shouted.

"One more, so that's what, six?"

"Five," Xander corrected him with a desperate gasp.

"Six, now," Spike said with a smug grin, and Xander barely clamped his teeth over a response that would have earned him a dozen more. Spike continued his torment, turning off the vibration as hands brushed and stroked and lightly scratched until Xander squirmed and wiggled his knees apart.

"My pretty pet," Spike crooned a half second before Xander felt the tongue at his hole, teasing the sensitive skin.

"Oh God," Xander cried.

"Seven and eight," Spike said, the words sending puffs of air against the damp skin. Xander could only bury his face in the pillow and clench his fists and endure the pleasure that took control of his body. Spike licked and gently sucked until Xander lost all capacity for thought or speech, until his body existed only to feel like this.
The tip of Spike's tongue opened Xander. Grunting into the pillow, Xander arched his back and leaned back into the touch. He was so close. So damn close. Xander clenched his teeth as he felt his orgasm gather. Then Spike was gone.

A sharp slap on his exposed ass sent his orgasm skittering away and Xander cried into the pillow.

"Nine," Spike said cheerfully. "Lean forward."

Xander couldn't even decipher words with most of his blood in his cock, but Spike pushed on his butt, a cool hand right over the warmth from that slap so that the nerves tingled deliciously. Following the push, Xander scotched forward on the bed with difficulty.

"Right. Ya feel this?" Spike asked, and Xander did. The head of the vibrator, cool with slick, rested against his hole. Xander turned his head and blinked up at Spike out of the corner of his eye, not willing to talk out of turn again, even if the big cheater had asked a question.

"If ya want to come, it's up to you to get it in that pretty arse of yours." Spike looked down smugly. Okay, that was that expression that clearly screamed 'evil plan.' Xander
blinked in confusion as Spike just held the toy against him, waiting. Slowly a suspicion formed a little tiny seed and Xander opened his eye in surprise. No way. Xander waited for Spike to change the rules or say he was joking, but he just raised an eyebrow and smiled wider.

"Your choice, pet," Spike shrugged.

Xander closed his eye and took a deep breathe through his nose as he tried to relax his ass. Okay, he could do this. If he didn't do this, Spike really wouldn't let him come, and Xander was so not okay with that. Slowly, Xander started pressing back. The tip of the toy pressed into the tight muscle, and Xander groaned at both the desire and the discomfort.

"Ten. Could just stop now. Give ya a nice spanking and then go to bed," Spike suggested. Xander opened his mouth to give Spike his thoughts on that but closed it with a snap and started pressing himself back onto the toy again.

Spike hadn't stretched him, so the blunt head forced him open and made the muscle burn, but Xander kept moving. He was panting now, struggling against the needy groans that caught in his throat as he opened
himself. Spike was officially evil. Xander paused, the toy half in and his body caught between wanting to push it out and wanting the rest of it in him, filling him. Running a single fingernail over Xander's thigh, Spike made the decision easy. Xander took a deep breath and forced himself back quickly. The thickest part of the vibrator slipped into place just behind the muscle, and Xander panted.

Instinct took over and Xander lurched forward the few inches he could. He desperately wanted that thickness out so he could impale himself on it again, but the toy only moved with him, frustrating him even more as his cock hung uselessly.

"Now for the fun part, pet. Oh, and since I'm collecting the debt, the game's over, so feel free to scream all ya want."

Xander opened his mouth to make a comment about what Spike could do with his game, and just then Spike turned the vibrator on so that Xander managed only a mangled stream of noises. He damn near orgasmed, and then Spike's hand landed on his butt, the heat instantly filling him so that Xander felt torn, part pushed closer to orgasm and part pulled back from the edge.
"One," Spike said before he landed two more slaps. This time, they landed right in the center of Xander's ass, pushing the vibrator into his prostate, and Xander screamed as he started coming. Slaps four five and six came during the orgasm, the vibrator driven deeper into his body as Xander thrashed and fought against the chains that held him helpless.

The waves of lust crashed through and then receded so that Xander sagged, his head turned to the side on the bare mattress, the pillow knocked away at some point. Behind him, Spike chuckled before strong hands grasped his ankles and pulled his legs out so that he collapsed onto the bed and right in the middle of a wet spot.

"What about..." Xander sleepily murmured, but Spike interrupted him.

"The other half of the spanking's going to half to wait."

"I was more wondering about the other half of the coming," Xander said as he struggled to twist around enough to see Spike who was kneeling on the end of the bed between Xander's sprawled legs.
"Took care of that myself," Spike said as he moved forward, slipping to Xander's side and using one of Xander's restrained arms as a pillow as he let his hand stroke Xander's back.

"Ya made quite a mess there."

"I think my balls are trying to make up for years of neglect. Well, and some of that may be brains. I definitely think my brains were leaking there at the end. Neglected balls, leaky brains: bad combination," Xander muttered.

Spike snorted.

"What?" Xander asked as he rolled his head to one side.

"I lived with ya in the basement. You and what you called your sock puppet of love were well acquainted, so I hardly think your balls suffered that much."

Xander fell silent. Oh what Spike didn't know, and Xander had no intention of enlightening him. Sighing, he closed his eye and let himself drift toward sleep even though it was hours too early for actual sleeping.
"Pet?" Spike asked, his voice firmly interrupting Xander post-orgasm almost-sleep.

"I'm trying to roll over and go to sleep like a real man, here," Xander protested. "Only not so much with the rolling over since someone hasn't unchained me yet."

"You tryin' to tell me that before Cascade you'd stopped even having a good wank?"

"Okay, first the eye and now my wanking and my lack of wanking... you don't have very good bed manners, Spike." Xander gave a crooked smile as he turned to look at his lover. Spike had propped himself up on one elbow and was looking at Xander with something close to horror.

"I don't have very good manners at all, pet, now answer the bloody question."

"There were a couple of people in Africa," Xander hedged.

"A couple of people as in you thought you'd found your soulmate or you got so bloody pie eyed that you didn't notice you'd fallen into someone else's bed?"
"I'm thinking somewhere in between," Xander said with a sigh. "Sleep good. Sleep very good."

"It's too bloody early to go to sleep," Spike said absent-mindedly. "So, ya seriously weren't wanking?"

"So not your business!" Xander huffed as he pulled against the chains, making the links rattle against the frame of the bed, but really not accomplishing much else.

"Bloody well is my business. Ya didn't pick the fuzzy Shaman; you picked me, demon and all. And I can't very well protect ya if I don't know what's going on in that head of yours."

"Hey, my lack of wanking is no longer an issue because of the definite lack of lack of sex. I mean, the presence of sex. And yeah, there's still a lack of wanking, but the balls are not feeling neglected at all, so there's a big old nothing going on in my head," Xander promised. Spike lay staring at him, opened mouthed for several seconds before he reached up and brushed the hair back from Xander's face. Xander lifted his head to catch one of Spike's fingers with his lips, sucking on it until Spike groaned and half closed his eyes. But then Spike pulled
his hand back, and chained face down on the bed, there wasn't much Xander could do but sigh and hope his vampire would just drop the subject.

"You'd stopped," Spike said softly. "Bloody hell, when a bloke can't even get up the energy to play slap and tickle with himself, something's seriously wrong."

"Okay, this has left rudeland and is driving toward freakyville at 80 miles an hour," Xander complained. "And in case you missed it, I'm flirting here. Maybe even seducing," Xander added as he eyed the hand Spike had reclaimed.

"'Preciate that," Spike said dropping a kiss onto Xander's shoulder, sending shivers down Xander's spine. "Still worried about what happened that would send you off your sock puppet."

"Okay, eye, then wanking, and now Africa. The lust is crashing and burning Spike. I see flames. Big shooting into the air with fire blasts type flames."

"No distracting." Spike placed another kiss on Xander's shoulder and tightened his other hand around his wrist, right above the leather restraint, reminding Xander that
he could enforce that particular rule. Hell, Spike didn't need to pee, so no way was Xander out-waiting him, and that should not be hot... only it was. Xander sighed.

"I just got bored."

"With a good long thrap? Not soddin' possible, especially not considering how often you'd do it, hiding under the covers with your knee holding up the sheet like a lopsided pup tent, you breathin' all heavy under there."

"Whoa. I waited 'til you were asleep. I always waited. No way am I playing pervy entertainment for the night," Xander interrupted as he twisted around to look at Spike, and that was Spike's smug expression. "Shit. Okay, I know that we're big with the mutual perviness now, but the idea of you watching me back then is..."

"Sexy?" Spike offered with an eyebrow waggle.

"Disturbing. Big with the disturbing. My balls would have been voting to apply for internal organ status if I'd known."

"Yeah, luckily you liked your slap and tickle so much ya never did notice what I was doing. So, what made ya turn
all monk-like."

"I firmly believe that monks and priests and nuns and such, they so have to be doing it in their little bunks, I mean, no sex at all? Nope, not buying. I think they have subscriptions to sock puppet monthly magazines."

Xander gave Spike a crooked smile, but the vampire just looked back with one eyebrow up and an expression that clearly said he wasn't buying the distracted act. Xander sighed heavily.

"Look, I just... I remembered Anya."

"Yeah, that bird knew how to deliver, but after a thousand years she'd been around most of the blocks. And I know she appreciated you, callin' you a Viking and all."

"Which would be the point," Xander said sadly.

"If that's the point, ya need to slow down and drive by slower because I bloody missed it."

"Point--with Anya it was all this stuff other than interlocking parts. And in Africa, I tried with the
interlocking parts, and they all interlocked, but there wasn't anything past the parts." Xander scrunched his eye shut as he remembered Aziza with her long legs. "Some of the parts interlocked really, really well."

"Still missin' the point here, pet."

"It was just parts, Spike. And when the parts were done with the interlocking, I would remember how Ahn and I would interlock more than just parts, and I wouldn't have that and I would just feel more..." Xander struggled for the word. "Desolate," he whispered.

Spike reached up, fingers teasing curls and brushing the hair back from Xander's face, but Xander refused to open his eye. "So, ya stopped even takin' care of it yourself?"

"I didn't want to feel alone, and I'd lay in bed after, and I'd always feel so alone that I just... I stopped," Xander shrugged.

"Soul wants to hold you so hard that you bloody forget that ya ever felt that way," Spike said softly, his fingers still stroking Xander's hair.

"Holding that hard would lead to gut-squishing," Xander
gave a half-laugh.

"Demon wants to rip the others to bloody shreds for sending ya out there. Even a vampire needs a clan, some place where he knows he fits, which is why I was so bloody loony after Dru kicked me out. After the chip, that need to belong somewhere sent me to you lot."

"Yeah, where you happily told us exactly how much you didn't belong with us," Xander pointed out as he finally opened his eyes.

"Yeah, there is that," Spike agreed slowly. "Didn't mean it. Said it so you wouldn't say it first because if I didn't have you lot, as pathetic as you were, I didn't have anyone. And I couldn't bloody stand to hear you tell me that I didn't belong knowing that you meant it."

"Wow. Rewriting history time because I would have said you were sticking around to figure out a way to kill us all in our sleep."

Spike snorted, and Xander grinned at him.

"Not bloody likely. Humans, or anything that used ta be human, needs a place to belong."
Xander chewed his lip as he thought about that answer. Back in the Sunnydale days, Spike had wanted to fit in, which led to Buffy chasing and then Buffy catching and then the whole soul.

"Can hear your brain threatening to overload, pet. Tell me what you're thinking," Spike interrupted his memories.

"Is that what this is?" Xander asked quickly before his common sense could get control over his tongue, not that his common sense and his tongue spent a whole lot of time together. It was more like they were classmates who passed each other in the hall between English and history and never really had a class together.

Spike's fingers had paused in their petting. "Is that what ya think?" Spike asked slowly.

"I get it. I'm totally okay with the needing a place to be," Xander hurried to add.

"Pet--"

"And hey, at least the friend group is actually taking the
me and you better than the you and Buffy and since I was part of the non-accepting friend group last time, I'm really sorry."

"Pet, stop!" Spike interrupted, fingers coming up to brush over Xander's lips to reinforce that order. "I'm with you because you accept who I am. After the soul, Buffy told me she didn't need me, not who I'd become. Told me she wanted a fighter by her side and that hurt so bloody much that I would have torn my soul right back out if I could. You never comment on the odd book of poetry or treat me like I'm just the demon. But ya stand up and hold your own in the demon's face."

Xander thought about that as the fingers which had covered his lips now slowly traced the edge sending even more warm shivers down his back.

"Would you have wanted the me without the Shaman?" he asked softly.

"Would you have wanted the me without the soul?" Spike countered.

"Um... I'm thinking the you without the soul would have so eaten me by now. Well, unless that you found out
about the Shaman thing and then the groveling on the floor would have been a real possibility, and I'm still voting 'no' on groveling."

This time Spike sighed. "Got ourselves in so deep that we can't work our way out of our own tangle, can we?" he asked softly.

Xander considered his own fears and insecurities swirling like one of those hurricanes that wiped out entire towns.

"Pet," Spike started again. "Soul loves you. Soul loves the fact that ya took me in when I was still torn up about those we lost back in LA. Love the fact that you didn't treat me like a leper, that I could have some bloody fun with you without all Willow's sympathetic looks and offers of those soddin' cookies that made me feel like I was some sort of pathetic wanker who needed sympathy."

"But it was a 'no' from the demon," Xander added, not sure how he felt about that. It wasn't like he loved the demon because he remembered how he'd felt when Spike became Scooby-adjacent, and those were not warm and fuzzy feelings. But he still couldn't control the thread of rejection that pulled at him at the thought that
Spike's demon really didn't want him.

"Not that simple," Spike finally answered. "Demon wanted to dominate you, put you in your place, but the demon also saw you as mine... same way the demon used ta see Willow as his and see himself as belonging to Buffy," Spike paused. "Leastwise before the immolation and return. Right now, that's about the only reason I didn't eat Red tonight. And as mine, the demon wanted to control you. So when it seemed like you kept tryin' to get yourself killed..." Spike stopped.

"Big with the frustration?" Xander guessed.

"Some days I just wanted to bloody kill you myself and get it over with. If I couldn't put you where I wanted you, I just wanted to snap your neck," Spike agreed.

"Okay, and that would be city limits sign for distruboville."

"You asked, pet."

"Remind me not to ask again," Xander joked.

"Sometimes you bloody worry me, luv."
"It comes with the whole not-so-bright package. I do dumb shit and worry the people who care about me," Xander said softly.

"Oi, enough with that shite or you're going to face a real punishment, and I don't mean a game of slap and tickle."

"Punishment?" Xander asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Yeah, I'll leave you chained here and open that door while I go out on patrol," Spike said with a tone of voice just serious enough to send a cold shiver through Xander.

"You wouldn't," Xander said slowly. Surely Spike wouldn't. It was a bluff.

Spike looked back calmly. "You're not weak or stupid, and the next time you insult the git I love, I'm going to make ya sorry you were born," Spike said as he gave Xander's nose a little thump.

"Love you, too," Xander said as he closed his eye and focused on the feeling of Spike's body pressed to his own.
"Git."

"Bleach for brains."

"I'm not the one insulting the bloke who has the key, so watch whose intelligence you're impugning there, pet."

Part Thirteen

Xander followed Spike into the kitchen, a stupid grin on his face that was so totally going to make Willow go all cringy, and yet he just couldn't care. His butt still tingled nicely from the second half of his spanking, and he was so pleasantly exhausted that he didn't care about cringiness or crankiness.

"Mornin' ladies, and gentleman because I do not in any way shape or form imply that Giles is a lady. That would be disturbing," Xander offered the group already gathered in the large room. They'd actually taken out the formal parlor to make the mondo kitchen, leaving them with just a den, a library and a sitting room, and Xander wondered why the British needed so many rooms to
pretty much do nothing, but no way could he figure out that mystery of life without caffeine.

"Morning," Buffy said as she held out a cup. "Or evening." And that was not a happy Buffy voice.

Xander looked at her even as he ignored the way Willow frowned. Buffy had her back to him as she tended something meatlike and burning on the stove, but she didn't look like she was going to take it off soon, and she had that special stuffiness in her voice that comes from crying... or trying hard not to. Yep, the happy-happy joy-joy feelings were continuing.

"We found some information relevant to the Slanom demon," Giles said, right to business, but Buffy didn't even turn around to join the conversation as she poked at the helpless meat.

"Ya better have found a way to kill the bugger without needin' help from a Shaman," Spike said as he leaned back against a counter and crossed his arms.

"Yes, well no matter what type of Shaman Xander is, his skills clearly focus on finding the danger, not eliminating it. Willow has managed a tracking spell which should
provide any necessary tracking."

"Xander?" Willow called softly as she stepped forward. Xander watched as she stepped close, her eyes focused on his wrists. "Oh goddess. What did Spike do to you?"

Xander looked down and spotted the red marks pressed into his flesh. Shit. Xander froze, and out of the corner of his eye, he watched Spike's eyebrow go up. Okay, he could do this.

Giving Willow his best goofy smile, Xander shrugged. "Hey, let's make a deal. You don't bring up things like, oh, me having marks from leather cuffs, and I won't bring up the teddy bear collection, you know, the one that includes the teddy in the naughty outfit that Kennedy bought you and that you still keep under your bed," Xander suggested hopefully.

Willow blinked several times before blushing a nice deep red. "I don't-- I mean..."

"Exactly. Some things are not worth discussing, which is why I'm voting for a big old no-discussion rule about my sex life," Xander pointed out as he headed for the dining room. The baby slayers were already there along with a
pile of pancakes that looked downright edible, so Xander guess that Yi and Kelly had made them before Buffy offered to help.

"And I would second that." Giles followed behind and dropped into a seat at the table. The pancakes were on the far end of the table, so Giles grabbed the plate with the bacon. Xander was guessing Buffy had helped with that because the strips looked a little charcoal briquette for his taste. Giles tried to maneuver one onto his plate, and the piece crumbled and a bit of it flew off toward Janie, landing in her hair.

"Oh dear, I apologize," Giles hurried to say.

"I totally don't mind getting burned meat thrown at me as long as we keep getting the good drama," she shrugged.

"No. No drama," Willow said seriously. "Just friends working things out."

Spike, still standing next to the door, snorted loudly. "Right then, time for all good little slayers to sod off," he suggested. Yi almost ran for the door, clearly happy to get out of the line of Scooby fire. The others quickly
followed, some grabbing pieces of bread and shoving bacon and eggs between the slices before abandoning the dining room. Janie sat and watched without moving. Spike raised an eyebrow at her.

"I never even pretended to be good," she offered. Spike flashed into gameface and snarled.

"Geez, I'm going. You guys never let us in on the good dirt," she complained, grabbing her whole plate before leaving.

"Time for a few ground rules," Spike started as Buffy came back into the room with a plate of sausages. Xander grabbed several from the plate and shoved them in his mouth. When Spike looked over at him, clearly expecting him to say something, Xander just smiled around the mouth full of burnt pork.

"Ground rules. I can do ground rules. Ground rule the first is that you don't get to tell Xander what to do," Willow started with her best not-backing-down face.

"Oh goody, the fun has started already. I'll get the antacid," Buffy said as she turned and headed back into the kitchen.
"Me?" Spike asked indignantly. Oi, you lot go orderin' him around more than I ever dreamed of!

"What? We don't do that. We don't! Do we?" Willow turned to Giles, but he just continued to poke at the breakfast with his fork.

"I do believe Buffy is more than a little upset this morning," he commented to no one in particular as the scrambled eggs he tried scooping from the bowl slowly oozed through the tines of his fork.

"You giving him orders, like he can't go out with us... that is... is... wrong!" Willow finally finished, but Xander could still hear all the very non-Willowy curse words bubbling just under the surface, straining to come out.

"I don't suppose you guys made up and decided to at least fake adult behavior for a while?" Buffy asked as she came back into the room with a large white pill bottle. She put it down on the table and Giles grabbed for it immediately.

"No chance of that, I fear," Giles said quietly.
"We don't tell Xander what to do, do we?" Willow demanded of Buffy. Buffy froze for a second, looking over at Xander in a way that made it very clear that she totally knew that Xander was follow-behind boy.

"We don't!" Willow protested. "We just want what's best for him, and I'm sorry Spike, but you telling him he can't leave the house... that's..."

"Very fifties," Buffy shrugged as she took the antacid bottle from Giles.

"Having lived through the fifties, I can safely say that the practice of keeping the spouse at home predates that era. However, I don't think this is a conversation we really need to be having right now. Right now, we have more serious concerns."

"We need to take down the Slanom and find whatever big bad pushed him through the portal," Buffy nodded. "I don't have time for the Spike and Xander show, or at least not the sexually inappropriate Spike and Xander show. So, Xander, I really need you to do the freaky follow-the-evil routine again only this time we need to find whatever big and slimy pushed him through the portal."
"What's the plan?" Spike asked, immediately turning to Buffy. The mood in the room shifted as mention of the latest apocalyptic goodness distracted everyone. Putting his chin on his hand, Xander opened his Shamansic vision. Almost immediately, he blinked as Buffy's gold cord slammed against the constraints of her body, whipping wildly and blinking like Christmas tree lights on acid.

"Plan simple. Find. Fight. Kill." Through the cords that blurred the real world, Xander could see a faint impression of a very not-so-nice smile on Buffy's face.

"Can't kill a Slanom without the bloody sword of whoever, so unless you had one Fed-Ex'ed last night--"

"So we put the Slanom on the slay-wait list while we find whatever brought him here. If you and Giles are right, this thing didn't just wander over here on his own, so there's something out there that needs killing. So, Xander can find something with delusion of world-endage, and we stick big swords in it."

"That's your plan?" Spike's voice sounded caught between horror and laughter. Xander blinked the Shamanic vision away and saw his lover giving Buffy his
best one-eyebrow-up look of disbelief.

"Find. Fight. Kill. You have to go with the classics," Buffy nodded.

"No bloody way. He's not going out without somethin' that sounds a little less likely to get us all fucking killed."

"I don't remember asking for your vote," Buffy snapped, her voice suddenly brittle and sounding way too much like old Buffy, like Buffy before Italy, like Buffy who still hated the world after being in heaven.

"Boy's not going out without my say so."

"He's not some housewife in a dress. He can make his own choices," Buffy snapped.

"Yeah," Willow added softly.

"Xander," Buffy started as she turned toward him. Xander realized his mouth was empty and grabbed for a plate. He got crunchy, slightly charcoaly bacon, but he shoved it in and started chewing. "You'll help, right?" she asked.
Xander stared over at her, chewing as he tried his best to make no head movements at all, nothing that could be taken as affirmative or negative.

"You're daft. You don't even bloody know how hard this rot is for him, and you'll risk his neck dragging him out without even a plan?" Spike snarled as he stood up. Buffy stood up at the same time. Giles grabbed for the antacid bottle.

"You're not exactly plan boy," Buffy snapped.

"I don't take stupid risks."

"Parent-teacher night."

"Had an escape plan, and I didn't take any more risks than I had to."

"I killed most of your minions."

"They were minions. Minions are around ta get staked. You're not gettin' Xander staked!" The two screamed at each other, standing nose to nose right behind Giles' chair.
"I'm not getting Xander staked. Who said I was getting Xander staked?! It's his choice if he wants to help, you know, the way he's been helping since long before you even came around."

Xander watched as Buffy's eyes darted toward him, and he grabbed for more food to shove in his mouth. He reached for the cold toast, hoping it would be just a little less disgusting, but Spike jerked the plate away from him at the last second.

"Hey, still hungry," Xander argued, but the glare Spike gave him made him pull back the hand he had used to reach for the bread before Spike grabbed it and used it to drag Xander off to the room for another lesson. Not that he would mind another lesson. Another lesson would be fun, as opposed to watching Spike and Buffy scream at each other, which was making the whole place feel weirdly like the Harris household.


"Good lord," Giles sighed. Xander just looked at the bacon and wondered if it was worth the horrible taste just to have something to do with his mouth other than
be forced to answer. Spike reached over and slid the plate of bacon away.

"You bloody well guilt him into doing whatever you lot want. He didn't want to go to Cascade, but he did because you sent him. At least he'll tell me 'no' if I push too hard. He'll bloody well let you lot push him into losing his soddin' mind before he'll tell you to stop."

"We wouldn't. We care about Xander, and we're looking out for him."

"By sendin' him round the deep end?" Spike demanded. Xander opened his mouth to protest, but really, he had been kinda deep endy lately.

"We don't have time for this," Buffy said tightly. "Xander, we need to find whoever brought the Slanom through the portal, and we need to find them quickly. Giles and I were talking, and if you focus on the feeling of wanting to take over the whole world... or maybe wanting to just watch the whole world go kabang... you could track down the one who opened the portal, and then the Slanom, okay, that will have to wait until we have the sword but then the slugs aren't exactly known for moving quickly, so that is totally slay-waitable. But if someone is
opening portals and trying to end the world, that moves up to slay-now land."

"Buffy," Xander said as he looked up at her. She had such a hopeful expression, like when Anya would stare at him, hoping he would say yes to one of her hairbrained ideas, only her ideas tended to include sex and potential for public humiliation, and Buffy's was more about potential for painful death. Xander glanced over toward Spike, and the vampire was looking at him blankly, his face a mask of indifference. Xander suspected that if he used his Shamanic vision, he'd find that Spike wasn't nearly as calm as he looked. Xander took a deep breath before he answered. "Maybe if we have a better plan, one with less chance of me tripping over the demon half-blind and getting eaten--."

"You don't think I'd protect you?" Buffy's voice was whisper-soft, hurt, her eyes looking at him with that expression she'd had the day they demoted her to non-head slayer and turned to Faith. Only this time, Xander knew he was right. He just wished his guts weren't twisting and that the little voice in the back of his head wasn't demanding that he say something... anything... to make that expression go away.
"We both know you'd try, but ya don't have any idea how helpless he is when he uses the vision," Spike interrupted.

"We were protecting him back when you were still trying to eat him, buster," Willow said as she stood up and went to Buffy's side. Xander sank lower in the chair.

"Bloody hell. You don't get it, do ya?"

"You're twisting Xander's head around all wrong, and not with the literally because that would make him dead what with human heads not twisting around, and I know you wouldn't actually kill him, Spike, but this is... this is not right." Willow turned her eyes to Xander, begging him to stand with them. Xander started studying his thumbnail.

"Enough!" Giles shouted from his seat at the table. He brought his hands down, the palms slapping the solid wood. "Buffy, the plan is precipitous. We discussed that already this morning, and given the circumstances, I do understand your need for quick action, but Spike is-- Spike is an overbearing ass who just happens to be right this time. Xander's abilities, whatever they happen to represent, do make him vulnerable in the field. Going
into battle with an unknown enemy with an untested and untrained Shaman is not the wisest action."

"See?" Spike asked triumphantly, a smirk on his face. Giles finally stood and faced Spike.

"However, your sudden interest in Xander after he developed this supposed power is both suspicious and disturbing. If, as you claim, you care for Xander, you had ample time in which to develop a relationship before Xander went to Cascade. You did not. From what I can tell, you showed frustration, aggravation, and anger toward Xander, but you never once expressed interest. So, while I fully support Xander's choice because he is an adult who has the right to choose whomever he wishes as a lover, I am looking forward to the day when he finally sees that you are not a healthy or wise choice."

Xander flinched from the disapproval and then watched as Spike's smirk faded into something darker and more dangerous. He glared murder at Giles, but Giles simply turned to look at Xander. "This whole situation is difficult at best. However, let me assure you that whatever Shamanic powers you have, you need training, training that Spike cannot provide. I called a Shaman in France last night, and he is willing to take you as a pupil and
evaluate your skills."

Xander opened his mouth to protest, but Giles held up his hand. "I am not trying to forcibly separate you and Spike, so the Shaman is also willing to accommodate Spike for however long your training may take, and I assure you that your sexual proclivities will not shock his sensibilities. However, I do also feel a need to point out that Spike is not the only person who can provide what you need, Xander. You are a strong, handsome young man, and many people share your sexual preferences. I can provide a list of safe clubs and organizations where you could meet any number of people, but I shall hang on to that list for you until such time as you ask for it."

"He's not going to ask for it," Spike snarled.

"Then it shall hurt no one if I simply carry it with me," Giles answered as he turned to calmly stare at Spike. Xander watched as Spike and Giles stood face to face, Buffy and Willow standing behind Giles. Chewing his lip, Xander stood up and walked around the table until he stood beside Spike, and Spike immediately moved, leaving space for Xander to step close and slip an arm around Spike's waist. Spike pulled him close.
"Xander's not stupid. He didn't choose me because he didn't have any better offers. Hell, boy was shagging the furry little Shaman back in Cascade."

"Xander... what?" Willow just about squeaked. "But I thought Blair and Jim--."

"Hell yeah, they shag so often it's hard to tell the smell of one from the other, but that doesn't mean the Sentinel wouldn't have been just as happy to have Xander warmin' their bed. He had choices, Rupes. He had choices, and he bloody well picked me."

"And I'm always going to pick Spike," Xander added softly, but he couldn't quite bring himself to look them all in the eye. He settled for staring at Giles' belt buckle. It was silver... and shiny. Shiny belt buckle. He wondered if Giles shined it.

"So, we're just going to sit around here and do nothing?" Buffy asked, her voice still brittle.

"There are some magical sources we could tap or research," Giles suggested. Buffy gave a frustrated little sob, and Xander looked up.
"Buff?" he asked, concerned by an expression that was way more than just disappointed or frustrated, and Xander didn't think Buffy would be that worried about him, not worried enough to have that expression of imminent world-endage on her face.

Buffy chewed her lip.

"Riley's missing," Willow said softly.

"Riley?" Xander looked from one to the other. Yeah, the soldier had kept in touch with them, but it wasn't exactly like he was a Scooby. Xander watched as Buffy paled and Willow blushed pink.

"Buffy and Riley had been, sorta working it out," Willow admitted with a guilty look over toward Buffy.

"Oi, the therapy. That's why you were going to the therapy, tryin' ta get your head turned around right when it came to the blokes," Spike said, the anger evaporated in a second.

"Therapy?" Xander demanded. "There was therapy involved? Why didn't I know about therapy? Better point, why does Spike know when I don't know? And why didn't
I know about Riley?" Xander turned to Buffy, feeling the sharp point of rejection in his gut. Buffy at least had the grace to look embarrassed.

"I didn't even tell Willow about the therapy. It was supposed to be a secret," Buffy said as she glared at Spike.

"But you told Spike?" Willow asked in her hurt voice. Xander felt the sides shift. Strangely him and Willow versus Buffy didn't feel any better than her and Buffy versus him.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "I needed to play show and tell. I couldn't exactly tell a therapist that I was a vampire slayer without ending up with a nice new wardrobe with long sleeves and buckles in the back."

"So, she dragged me along ta scare the bint with my big teeth."

"But Riley's missing now," Buffy said softly as she crossed her arms and suddenly looked impossibly small. "His unit was ordered to investigate what sounded like a group of Kith-harn, which should have been a quick job, only they never checked in again."
"Where?" Xander asked. Okay, this was unexpected what with Buffy swearing off men and threatening to explore her inner lesbian post-Immortal, but Xander recognized the raw pain in Buffy's face. They weren't sorta working it out; they were a thing. And now Buffy was falling apart.

"Idaho," Buffy said softly.

"Idaho? Potato Idaho or some alternate reality Idaho or maybe a demon dimension called Idaho?" Xander asked.

"Idaho in the Northwest United States," Giles said in a tired voice. "His unit was deployed west of a town called Cobalt, and the area is exceptionally isolated."

"He wandered around the jungles of South America and a hellmouth safely, and he goes missing in Idaho?" Xander asked again. Okay, so he was having some trouble wrapping his brain around that one.

"Yes. Idaho!" Buffy snapped. "And I'm here trying to find one more demon trying to suck the world into hell. I should be..." Buffy shuddered to a stop. "Xander, I just need you to find whatever is opening the portals, whatever pushed the Slanom into this dimension."
Buffy's face had gone hard, the pain of a second ago vanished under the General Buffy face, the one she would put on when they found one more potential slayer lying dead on the ground. Xander hated that face.

"We don't know what to track, pet," Spike said to her softly. "We don't know if this is someone goin' for power or some nutter playing with mojo. We don't even know if the person pullin' the strings is in this dimension."

"Xander's our best chance of finding this guy fast," Buffy insisted.

"He's not goin' to be much help without more information," Spike countered, his voice soft and weirdly logical, but his arm tightened around Xander's waist.

"He has to be," Buffy said without emotion.

"As much as I hate to agree with Spike, and that is a considerable amount of hate," Giles offered, "He's right. We simply don't know enough about the enemy or about Xander's skills to use them effectively."

"I wish I could help," Xander said quickly. "I would be first in line to help. Riley's a nice guy, and I'm really glad
you're getting back with him because I know his divorce really threw him, but I don't know how to find whoever dragged the Slanom through," Xander said helplessly.

Buffy stared at him blankly, and Xander felt the sucking feeling in his gut, the one that told him he was screwing up again. He wasn't fixing what he needed to fix.

"Maybe you can just try," Willow suggested softly, her hand coming up to rest on Buffy's shoulder.

"I don't know what to look for, and I don't see anything big with the weird," Xander said, blinking into his Shaman vision just to check again. Nope, Buffy's cord doing the tornado impression was the weirdest thing on his radar.

"I'm sure you're trying," Giles said reassuringly. "We simply need to research the Slanom's dimension and discover the force behind this the old fashioned way."

"Which leaves Riley with no help," Buffy looked up, and the hardness was still there. "You heard Carter. The military isn't sending anyone. They're just sitting back and if Riley and his guys can get themselves out, fine, and if not, the military will just call them casualties of some freak plane crash or something." Buffy turned from Giles
to Xander. "Maybe we could drive around... you could see if you spotted any potential world-endage. I can't leave when I'm needed here, but I'm needed there, too. If this takes too long, Riley could die. He could be dying now." Buffy focused on him, and Xander's guts twisted with the need to do something. He might be able to find the big bad. Maybe. If the guy was in this dimension. If they were right that some mastermind was behind the Slanom. If it wasn't just some demon's idea of a practical joke. Xander sighed. Oh, this was not going well.

"Wait," Xander straightened as an idea hit him. "You stay and research the Slanom and Spike and I can go find Riley," he offered.

"Bloody--- What!?" Spike demanded.

"You'll what?" Buffy asked at the same time.

"You won't go out with all of us, but you'll go half way around the world with just Spike?" Willow demanded. Giles offered a soft noise that might have been a British curse before wandering to the side of the room and staring out at the stars.

"Spike knows how the mojo thing works," Xander
defended himself and his idea, but the Willow pout didn't budge. "Besides, it's Idaho. How dangerous can Idaho be?"

"If something took out Riley and his team, you shouldn't be in the same state with it," Buffy said firmly. "We just need to hurry on the research front and then I can go find him. Or you could..." Buffy let her voice trail off, but Xander heard her frustration with him anyway. A little part of his brain told him to just try, to see if he could find the big bad if he wandered around looking. The hand around his waist anchored him to the reality that the odds were that it wouldn't end well. After all, pre-Cascade he seemed to use his skills to get himself in the most possible trouble at any given time, so the odds of someone killing or eating him were actually pretty good.

"I'll have Spike, and he knows more about the Shaman thing. And even if some demon did take out Riley's team, the demon wouldn't just assume that a vampire was out on the slay. Spike could totally bluff and play evil if the Idaho demons turned out to be extra demony, and you just can't pull that off, Buff," Xander pointed out. If he wanted Spike to do this, a little buttering up might be in order. "Besides, there isn't a bigger big bad than Spike." From the suspicious look Spike gave him, Xander didn't
think he'd fooled the vamp.

"Can't bloody believe I'm sayin' this since I'd personally eat the bugger before crossing the street ta save his life, but Xand's right. You do the bit for God and country here, and Xander and I'll bring Captain Cardboard back."

"Spike." Buffy stopped. She closed her eyes for a second as though gathering her thoughts. "Spike, let's talk outside," she said as she headed for the kitchen. "Just us, okay?" Buffy asked over her shoulder as Spike started pulling Xander with him.

"Hey, no problem. You guys go do the talking thing, and I'll try and find some food that doesn't taste like charcoal," Xander said as he stepped away from Spike. For a second, Spike hesitated.

"Be right back," he said, and then he strode toward the kitchen. Xander heard the back door to the gardens slam loudly.

"Oh yeah, this day is off to a great start," Xander said sarcastically.

"I know it seems like we're big with the picking, but
Xander, we just want to help. This isn't healthy. I ordered a few books from Amazon-dot-com, and Stockholm is really normal. Or, it isn't normal since it's a mental disorder, but it's not rare. And I don't know why you would suddenly turn to Spike, but the whole tying up is totally about power."

Xander opened his mouth to point out that tying up was less about power than just serious freaking sexy, but Giles beat him to the punch.

"Good lord. Willow, as much as I support your general position on the inherent dangers of Spike and Xander being in a relationship, please stop suggesting that a little bondage is a sign of the apocolypse."

"Giles!" Willow said, her mouth forming a shocked o.

"Do grow up," Giles snapped in return before he turned and headed for the hall. Oh yeah, this day was getting better and better all the time, Xander mused as he edged backwards toward the door to the library, sliding the pocket door closed on the sight of Willow standing in the middle of the empty dining room with a table full of mangled food-like substances. Blinking his Shamanic vision into place, Xander quickly found the traces of
Spike's dual cord as he slipped out into the muggy night air and headed for the back yard for a little research of his own.

Part Fourteen

Xander waited in the shadow of the house, watching the glowing end of Spike's cigarette. He could only see Buffy's outline—a lighter gray against the dark gray English night. She shifted and played with something in her hands, a stake maybe. Oh yeah, she was stressed.

"Right then, out with it," Spike finally demanded, his cigarette making a bright arc as he tossed it at the fountain.

"Spike, look, I just don't think this is a good idea," Buffy said, her voice firm.
"And would that be the rescue mission or are you still off on me and Xand?"

"What?" Buffy demanded. "Hey, I'm supporto-gal. Look at how supportive I am with not dragging him away."

"Bloody hell, what is your problem?"

"No problems here. I am problem-free gal and supporto-gal."

"Then why can't you trust us to go after soldier boy? Not like I'm going to eat him what with the soul still attached, and Xander—the boy holds his own as long as you keep those Shaman powers in mind and remind him to focus on the real world, two things you lot obviously didn't do."

"I never said I didn't trust you to go." Buffy paused, "Okay, I sorta implied that, but you aren't big on the Riley love, and Xander's middle name is Lavelle, not competent-rescue guy."

Xander closed his eye as he fought back tears. Not manly, crying just because one of your best friends points out the truth, both with the Lavelle and the not competent parts.
"Bloody hell. You have a problem, just come out and say it. Xand is soddin' brilliant at the Shaman bit so if ya need someone tracked, he's the best one to send, at least when you let him concentrate and don't get him wound up so tight his spring is ready to snap. You go out there and you're one more bloody idiot wandering around Idaho."

"Okay, and now you're the one who sounds like problem-boy with me." The Buffy shadow moved so that her hands braced on her waist.

"I do have a soddin' problem with how you've been actin' since we got back from Cascade. You may not be as obvious as Red, but you've still got some stick up your arse."

"Oh, and I'm supposed to be thrilled with how you're acting?"

"Right—got to the problem then, haven't we? Boy told you that he picked me over you lot, and now, all of a sudden, you have time for him. That gets you back from Italy. I understand why Red is raisin' a fuss—after all, Xand was her best friend and her first crush, and she still
thinks of the boy as hers, but I don't—"

"See, that's the problem," Buffy nearly shouted, her voice growing shrill enough that a bird flapped out of the tree nearest the fountain, startled or just looking for a quieter place to rest. "Xander isn't hers or yours, and you talk about him like he's some little toy to pass back and forth. I'm all for supporting my friends' massive mistakes, and I can even wrap my brain around you being the one to do the tying instead of getting tied, but you talk about Xander like..." Buffy stopped.

For a long moment, the crickets chirping and the fountain gurgling and the splashing waves in the stone basin filled Xander's ears: ears which burned red at Buffy's description. "If I didn't still love ya, I'd knock you into next week for saying somethin' like that," Spike finally announced in a deadly soft voice. His bounce had disappeared so that his shadow stood as still as the statue of the fat cherubs that stood on either side of the arch leading to the garden path.

"Why? It's true," Buffy finally answered. She had angled her body, and Xander wondered if this was about to degenerate into an actual physical fight.
"I bloody love Xand, but he understands that means both a soul and a demon loves him. Won't deny what I am to you or to him, and that means I see the boy as mine. You don't want to get between me and mine," Spike warned her in that same strangely calm voice.

"Is that how it was with us? Are you going to hurt him one of these days the way you..." Buffy's words choked off, and Xander physically flinched away from that memory, the brick scratching at his face, but Spike didn't move.

"I soddin' belonged to you, only you didn't want that. So, we all just moved on. Stay out of my business with Xander, Slayer, or we will have a problem." Spike started to turn away, his yellow eyes flashing dimly in the night.

"Spike," Buffy called, her voice strangled with some emotion Xander couldn't identify. Spike froze.

The silence of the night drifted past the three of them—Buffy and Spike in the courtyard and Xander in his hiding place beside the house. Finally Spike answered. "Boy loves ya, I bloody love ya, but we won't stay here unless you lot get your heads screwed on straight. We'll go find Captain Cardboard, and when we come back, we'll either
get some respect or we'll pack our shite and leave."

"You'd take him away from the only family he has left?" Buffy asked.

"You'd push him away, and I won't have ya hurtin' my boy," Spike answered before he disappeared, vampire speed removing him from the courtyard in the blink of a human eye.

Xander watched as Buffy nearly collapsed onto the rim of the fountain, her head sunk into her hands as her shoulders shook with sobs. He wanted to comfort her; that was his job in the group, to put people back together. However, comforting her meant giving her hope that he would choose her over Spike, and he couldn't do it. He quietly backed up, winding his way through the bushes at the side of the house before he reached the workshop door.

Moving quietly and quickly, he made his way to the bedroom he shared with Spike. Putting on a happy mask, he pushed open the door. Inside, Spike sat on the end of the bed with an unlit cigarette between his fingers.

"Hey, Spike," Xander smiled.
"Right, you get an earful?" Spike asked, looking up with eyes that pinned Xander to the floor.

"I..." Xander snapped his mouth shut. Okay, spying or lying, which would get him in more trouble.

"Never wanted you to bloody hear that rot. You're not some bauble I keep on a string to brass off the slayer, and you're bloody brilliant in a fight. When we visited Peaches, he was practically oozing envy when ya bird-dogged those vampires. I meant what I said, you're the best person ta find Riley, not that finding Riley is particularly high on my priority list," Spike finished dryly.

"But Buffy just..." Xander lost his words again. Funny, he normally had lots of words, not generally the right ones, but at least lots of them.

Spike reached out and grabbed Xander's hand, pulling him down to the bed where Spike wrapped strong arms around him. Xander felt something tighten around his heart and he took a deep breath as the pain he'd denied blossomed in his heart. "She doesn't want to know who I am now," Xander admitted, struggling to control his breathing. "I mean, I get Willow. She's holding on to what
she has left, and yeah, I'm not really hers to hold onto, but that's Willow. I stopped her from ending the world because even evil, she wants to hold onto what she knows, and with Tara gone and Kennedy in the slightly psycho column and Buffy and Giles away, I'm about all she has left, but I thought Buffy... I didn't think she saw it like that," Xander finished quietly. It wasn't manly to cry. He wasn't going to cry. He was just going to shrivel up inside as he realized that none of them were ever going to accept him, not even Buffy.

"She can't face it, pet. She sees who ya are now, with all your pain and your strength, and she has to admit that she's a big part of it. Ya sacrificed a lot ta stay by her side," Spike used one finger to trace the edge of the eye patch, and Xander shivered. "She loves ya, and that's why she can't face seein' how different ya are from the boy she first knew. She doesn't want ta think how different ya are because of her."

"Hey, perfectly capable of getting hurt without her. Lots of people I grew up with ended up demon chow without ever knowing the slayer," Xander pointed out. Spike's hands slowly traveled his body, unfastening a button here and scraping a fingernail over bare flesh there.
"Didn't say she was right, only said she was fightin' her own guilt, right or wrong. And right now, she's not thinkin' clear because she feels guilty that she can't just up and run off to the soldier-boy. She's stuck here because of all the slayers, she's the one most likely to stop some plot to end the world. But I won't let her rip you apart while she works through her own guilt," Spike said absent-mindedly as he popped open the last button and slowly pushed off Xander's first shirt.

"Okay, that's sounding a little too insightful," Xander said suspiciously.

"Might have eavesdropped some on her therapy," Spike shrugged. "I was stuck in the building in the middle of the day waiting for her to finish, so it was that or a bloody gardening magazine. Don't go thinkin' this is your fault or even something you can control because Buffy's not brassed off about you, she's too busy seeing her own guilt in everything she looks at."

"Just like home," Xander snorted. Spike stopped and put a hand under Xander's jaw and made him look up.

"Meanin'?" Spike asked as he looked into Xander's eye.
"Nothing."

"Don't do that, pet. Don't bloody shut me out of your head," Spike said seriously. Hands that had been teasing stopped, and Xander looked up at the open expression in Spike's face.

"Mom and Dad," Xander admitted softly. "They were so busy fighting with each other and the bill collectors and finally with the lawyers that they never really noticed me. When I broke my arm in the library, they didn't notice for nearly a week." Xander shrugged and tried to back away, but Spike's fingers held him in place.

"Well, I bloody notice ya, pet. So, we find soldier-boy and then we make some decisions 'bout where we're goin' to make home."

"You'll make some decisions," Xander said quietly.

"Pet?" Spike asked.

"I can't leave them," Xander nearly whispered, hoping that Spike would understand what he meant.

"Not a problem. I'll make the decision for you. Ya don't
need to protect yourself, pet, I'll do that bit for ya." Spike loosened his fingers, and Xander ducked his head as he fought with his own guilt. "After all, you're mine, aren't you?" Spike asked as he unbuttoned the top snap on Xander's jeans.

Strong hands pulled Xander up onto the bed so that he lay on his back while Spike crouched over him. "Seem to remember someone givin' himself to me, and as the alpha vampire, I have ta take care of my clan," Spike pointed out as he reached a hand under Xander's undershirt and pinched a nipple. Xander bucked up, grabbing at Spike's shoulders only to find a knee at his hip forcing him back down to the bed. Looking up at Spike's amused yellow eyes, Xander realized that as much as he loved his girls, this was home. Then Spike leaned down to demand a rough kiss, and Xander let himself slip into a place where he no longer thought at all.

Traveling with a vampire made things more complicated, so even though Xander was all for leaving immediately, they couldn't actually go for two days: two days of awkward silences and even more awkward politeness that drove even Janie from the room. Yep, fun times. And
now that they were leaving, Xander was torn between wanting to make everything better, to give Willow and Buffy some lie that would make things easier, and just wanting to run as far away as he could. Since Giles and Spike hadn't brought the car up, he just stood staring at the night instead of doing either.

"Xander," Willow stopped, one hand clutching the door frame as Xander stood on the porch, his dufflebag at his feet.

"Hey, we're just going to find Riley, and be home in time for the big beheading of the big bad, assuming that this latest big bad has a head, which they don't all have," Xander shrugged and gave Willow a grin.

"Don't you go getting yourself in trouble, mister," Willow said as she blinked quickly, but she was still close to tears.

"No trouble for the Xand man," Xander promised as he held out his arms. Willow came forward and hugged him, hard. In that tenacious grip, Xander could feel her need to not let go. Even when Xander ended the hug, she held on for several seconds.
"If you need me, you know I'm always here for you. You don't ever have to do something you don't want to," she whispered softly.

Xander gently pushed away so that he could look right in her eyes. "I'm not going to do anything I don't want to. And I'm not out to get myself killed or hurt," he said seriously. Willow chewed on her lip without answering, but Xander could see she wasn't convinced. She was quiet, but not convinced. "And hey, someone has to go rescue the idiot soldiers. Who better than Spike because you know he's going to be rubbing it in the whole way back. If I were you, I would worry about Spike because Riley's going to be ready to slip holy water in the blood supply by the time Spike finishes with all the rubbing in."

"Oi, he does, and I'm not going to be held responsible for my actions," Spike's voice answered as he jumped up onto the porch. "Car's ready, pet."

"Hey, my chariot awaits," Xander joked as he backed off a step. The car came around the corner, Giles behind the wheel. "Say goodbye to the girls again, for me," Xander said awkwardly. He'd already said his own goodbyes to the baby slayers before they'd left for patrol, but awkwardness called for words, and they were the only
words Xander could come up with that wouldn't cause a new round of bickering.

"Bloody hell, move your arse or we'll still be here come sunup," Spike growled as he grabbed Xander's arm with one hand and the duffle with the other.

"Be careful," Buffy called from her place near the porch railing. "And find Riley, okay?" she added, uncertainty making her voice brittle.

Spike stopped, meaning Xander stopped. Xander took a last look at the English home. If something didn't change, he suspected that he wouldn't call this place home any more. Giles was standing by the car, waiting to drive them to the airport. Buffy stood watching them with an indifferent mask, but Xander could see the pain and fear lurking under the surface. Willow still stood near the open door, tears just starting to gather in her eyes.

"We'll find him, luv. Xander's good at what he does, and before you know it, we'll be dragging the stupid sod back here," Spike promised. "But if he tries slippin' holy water into the blood, I'm taking a few pints out of him," Spike threatened with a wry smile. A half-smile flashed across Buffy's face, followed by pain and then the mask slipped
back into place.

"Drive safe," Buffy finished before she turned and headed back into the house.

"Come on then." Spike pulled Xander toward the car, settling him into the front seat before Spike got in back.

"We're dangerously close to being late," Giles said as he slipped the car into gear.

"If ya let me drive, we'd be there in plenty of time," Spike suggested as the car started rolling down the drive.

"I'm not so senile as to forget the last time you drove. I believe you managed to destroy the car. And had I been human at the time, I might have suffered a rather severe case of whiplash."

"Oi, you weren't even in the car when I wrecked it," Spike objected. Xander stared silently out the window. Walking away from his girls felt wrong, but doing something to push Spike away felt wronger, and Xander knew that as long as they were around the girls, the girls were going to be big with the pushing Spike away.
"I have heard enough stories that I don't feel a need to experience your driving first hand," Giles answered as he pulled onto the main road and began driving exactly the speed limit.

"Right, the girls aren't here, so let's just lay things out on the table," Spike said in a suddenly serious tone of voice. "Xander bloody chose me, and I'm not plannin' on hurting him any time soon, so as far as I'm concerned, you lot need to pull your heads out of your collective arse and bloody butt out of our business."

Xander turned to look at Spike. He sat behind Giles, his arms crossed over his chest. Up front, Giles gripped the wheel tighter, his knuckles turning white.

"If we're being honest, I still believe your timing is rather suspicious. It is in a demon's nature to try and control power, and you believe Xander to be exceptionally powerful."

Xander flinched. Believe. Nice word for saying that Xander wasn't big with the power. Yep, Xander could feel the love in the car. Funny, he didn't actually want to be big with the power, but it'd be nice if Giles gave him credit for being able to be big with the power.
"I don't just believe he has power, I bloody well know it," Spike snarled. "You keep this up, this doubting and undermining, and you'll bloody well get demoted to seein' the boy on every other major holiday."

"You have no say over Xander's life."

"I have as much say as Xander chooses ta give me."

"Which is clearly too much say if you think you have any right to tell him where to go or with whom to associate."

"Whoa, hey, what happened to all that good old-fashioned English repression? You know, the stiff upper lip and being polite no matter what? Politeness and emotional repression would be good," Xander interrupted. Giles was gripping the wheel so hard that Xander half expected the man to run right off the road.

"Yes, well after what we have faced together, I feel quite close to all of you," Giles said softly. "I fear that your needs have led you somewhere dangerous, and while I understand that you are an adult and that you will make your own choices, I am clearly struggling to understand why you have chosen Spike. Of course, I have my own
dark past with Ethan, so I have no right to judge, but I would rather you not repeat the mistakes I've made in my life," Giles offered, his voice little more than a whisper, but the stranglehold on the steering wheel made Giles' emotions perfectly clear.

"I chose Spike because I like him," Xander said quietly. Giles glanced over before focusing on the winding road again. "He's funny and he gets my jokes and sometimes when I feel like crawling out of my own skin because I just can't... I don't know how to even handle what I'm trying to handle... he's there."

"And we haven't been," Giles finished.

"You've been there," Xander hurried to add even though Spike's snort from the back made his opinion pretty clear. "But being there and being there are not the same. I mean..." Xander scrambled for words. "Jim said something. He said that when he watched people die, some part of him got lost with them, and it's like that, and I don't know what to hold onto anymore and I'm just so alone, Giles. Spike is the first person who made me feel like I'm not alone."

Giles sighed, and Xander felt his own emotions struggle
to fly out of control. "I assure you, I do understand what you're feeling," Giles finally answered. "I have sent children into battle, and I have watched you and Willow suffer far more that I could have ever imagined. Had I known what the future held, I would never have allowed either of you to get involved with slaying."

"But ya did," Spike snapped from the backseat, ever of the nonhelpfulness.

"Yes, I did," Giles agreed. "So Xander, I can certainly understand your emotional difficulties, and I know Buffy has struggled with her own demons, both the type from hell and the mental ones which haunt her thoughts. But Spike is not the only solution."

"No, he's not," Xander agreed, and he had to ignore the shocked and hurt expression on Spike's face, "but he's the best solution. He understands the guilt and the fear, and he doesn't look at me like I'm the donut boy."

"I assure you, no one has thought of you like that for a very long time. I doubt anyone other than Cordelia ever considered you in such a light."

"No, you just thought I was the idiot who was so stupid
that he accidentally cast a love spell on the whole town, and Buffy thought I was so incompetent that she banned me from patrolling, and Willow thought I was so pathetic that she sent me to the other side of the world so that I wouldn't have to be humiliated by the whole getting turned down by Spike when I threw myself at him, which I was getting frighteningly close to doing before I went to Cascade. One night there was much drinking involved, and I got as far as the basement steps."

"I wouldn't have turned ya down, pet," Spike said from the back. The vampire leaned forward, a strong hand resting on Xander's arm.

"Yeah, but Giles is right about the demon and power, and if I'd actually shown up in your room, it wouldn’t have been the same as it is now, would it?" Xander suddenly asked. Giles thought he didn't see the truth, but Xander did. And Spike wasn't exactly trying to hide anything from him. Spike sucked air through his teeth for a second.

"You're right, pet. My soul liked you well enough, but the demon wouldn't have been satisfied with just you. I would have given you a right tumble, but I would've been in a bar finding someone else ta shag two days later."
"Yes, and this is supposed to reassure me?" Giles demanded darkly.

"Not so much. This is more you realizing that I do know why you're worried, only you don't need to worry because Spike's soul is big with the love and the faithfulness, and now that I do have power, his demon is big with the gloating and the faithfulness, and note the repetition of faithfulness because I don't have a lot of that... not since Anya. And if we're comparing reasons for not trusting each other, I'm going to add that before the chip and the soul, Spike scared the shit out of me and I was more 'whoo, stake Spike' than 'hey, let's be open-minded' boy about the whole thing. Hell, I wasn't a big fan even later when Spike was on our side, although I did try to be supportive of the Buffy and Spike thing, only it turned out to be the Buffybot and Spike thing, which is not really the point here. But I wouldn't have wanted him pre-soul and he wouldn't have wanted me pre-Shaman, and that seems fair."

"Oi, I would have wanted ya," Spike objected at the same time Giles offered his own, "My point exactly."

"And Spike has a history of loyalty and love's bitchiness,
which sounds strange when I say it that way, but you know what I mean, and I have a history of dumping the woman I love at the altar and driving her to demoniness, so maybe I'm not the one to worry about. Maybe I should be the one getting the shovel speech."

"Not your fault some demon went mucking with your memories," Spike hurried to say.

"And for now, I understand why Spike's devotion appeals to you," Giles said slowly. "However, I do have to wonder what will happen when his soul and his demon are no longer in agreement about the best course of action."

"Bloody hell, think I've shown time and time again that the soul makes the final call," Spike snapped.

"Yes, and if your soul is wavering?" Giles turned a corner a little too sharply and they were on a much busier road. "I can imagine a day when Xander is aging, and your soul is torn about what to do and your demon whispers that Shamanic powers survive a turning. What will you do then, Spike?" Giles demanded.

"I'm not going to soddin' turn him."
"Now? No, you aren't. But you cannot tell me that the danger doesn't exist. Given your history of possessiveness, and as Xander points out, faithfulness, you cannot expect me to believe that you will simply watch him die as all humans must."

"I'm so glad we're all being honest because the honesty and the love and the trust in the car is threatening to underwhelm me," Xander sighed. The car fell silent. Miles ticked away under the tires, and Spike's fingers tightened on Xander's arm.

"Xander, I am willing to accept that you and Spike have a relationship right now which is mutually beneficial and healthy."

"Bloody right it is," Spike quickly agreed. Giles turned in his seat long enough to give Spike a sharp look. "However," he said slowly and deliberately before he focused on traffic again, "I would like some assurances from both of you that you will contact me before you do anything drastic. Spike, while I would find it exceptionally difficult, I would stake any vampire wearing Xander's face, so turning him will not stave off death."

"Threaten him again, and I'll soddin' rip your intestines
out," Spike snarled, going into gameface, and Xander could only hope that no one was looking into their car. Yep, this was going oh so well. Why hadn't he wanted Buffy to drive them? Oh yeah, he wanted to avoid another dramatic scene. Well, that and he didn't want to get splattered across the pavement.

"I would give anything to protect Xander," Giles said calmly even though he had a fully functional and unchipped vampire growling an inch from his neck. "I simply suspect that your good intentions will not survive watching Xander age. So, I shall attempt to find a spell which would either slow the aging or permanently attach Xander's soul. I want your word that you will not attempt to turn Xander until you have given me a chance to protect him from what he could become."

Xander glanced back, and Spike had a thoughtful expression on his face. For the first time, Xander considered that Giles might be right. If he were bleeding to death, would Spike be able to just watch him die? And did Xander want a Xander-shaped vampire wandering around? Considering he didn't trust his own ability to control his power, he really wasn't trusting some newly-risen fledge.
"Deal, mate," Spike finally offered.

Giles sighed, but at least his hands loosened up on the wheel. "Should you decided to not come back with Riley, let me know, and I have need for good teams in any number of places. Demonic activity does seem to be on the rise."

Xander looked at Giles and realized that the older man was offering his tacit approval, his approval and a place to stay. "Thanks, Giles." Xander reached over and let his own hand rest on Giles' shoulder for a second. It was a step in the right direction. Now Xander just had to get Buffy and Willow onto his side. Hopefully the baby slayers would work on them while he and Spike were off in Idaho because Xander really didn't want to give up his friendships. He would to keep Spike, but he was big with the not wanting to.

Part Fifteen
"Spike?" Blair asked, standing in the open door to the loft in shock.

"Wot? You were expecting the Easter bunny?" Spike pushed past Blair into the loft.

"No," Blair said slowly, drawing the word out.

"Geez, rude much?" Xander complained from the door. "Hey, nice to see you, Blair. Mind if we come in?"

"Sure, come on in," Blair offered. "I thought you were back home."

Xander walked in, and Spike had already sprawled over the couch, his legs crossed with one boot resting on top of his other knee.

"Hey, Jim," Xander offered as the Sentinel came down the stairs from the loft. "We were back home, but things sorta happened."

"You needed to get out of Dodge?" Jim asked with a wry smile. "No problem, Sport."
"Oh man, they were freaking, weren't they? Man, I knew they would. People are just not into change, but give them some time," Blair hurried to add as he locked the door and came over to put a hand on Xander's arm. Then Spike was there standing threateningly close, and then Jim was pressing in, his arm going around Blair's waist, and all four of them were in the same two foot square of space. Suddenly coming here didn't seem like such a good idea.

"Hey, how are those Jags doing?" Xander asked with exaggerated brightness as he pushed Spike back. For a second, Spike resisted moving, and then he yielded. Xander pushed Spike back several steps and then he was getting pulled back toward the couch. Spike dropped, pulling Xander down so that their hips touched.

"Hey, no offense meant," Blair hurried to say, and Xander noticed that he put his back to Jim, holding the larger Sentinel back as the man glared at Spike.

"Just settin' some boundaries. I figure we've had enough of being around people who don't bloody know the word boundary," Spike commented calmly, but Jim still stood glaring down only now he reached out and grabbed Blair's neck, tucking his Shaman behind him.
"Go on then, pet," Spike said to Xander as he gave him a push with a knee. "Let's just get the bloody show on the road."

"Not much for small talk, are you?" Jim asked as he stood between the couch and the kitchen table. Blair went to sit on one of the chairs, and Jim reached out a hand and pulled Blair back to his side without taking his eyes off Spike.

Spike only stared without answering, and Xander shifted nervously on the couch. This had seemed like such a great idea in England. They needed help, Jim and Blair were right there... okay, not right there, but in the same country there. It had even sounded pretty practical on the plane ride over. Now... now it just seemed stupid. Jim and Blair had work that did not include work of the demony sort. In fact, Jim got cranky every time someone mentioned demons. Blair just got that curious expression... the one that made Xander nervous.

"We're just in the states to do, you know, work. Work is good. Anyway, this is obviously not a good time, so hey, nice to see you, and we'll just be..." Xander felt the babble pour out, helpless to stop it.
"Need your help," Spike interrupted him with sharp clipped words that he spit out unhappily. Xander watched while Jim's eyes went large and Blair, who had been subtly shifting to get past Jim, froze in place. Spike didn't elaborate, but strong fingers kneaded Xander's shoulder reassuringly. Xander took a deep breath. Right, these were their friends. Xander glanced up at Jim who had now narrowed his eyes as he glared at Spike. Okay, these were his friends who probably wished he'd picked someone other than Spike. Funny how all his friends felt that way. But somehow, Jim's open aggression seemed so much less aggressive than what they'd left back home.

"Major Finn, the guy who shared totally classified material when you chained me to the kitchen, um, yeah, he's kinda missing," Xander blurted in one long breath.

"Oh man, missing as in demons and vampires might have eaten him?" Blair asked. Jim's arm slipped around Blair's waist, and Jim pulled his guide to his body, not even trying for subtle.

"Um, maybe. Maybe he's just lost," Xander said. "He's in the wilds of Idaho, which I have to say I didn't know Idaho had any wilds, but there are some really isolated
areas out there. So I'm hoping for lost."

"Special forces... lost," Jim answered dubiously.

"And saying it like that, I'm thinking not that likely," Xander said. "But there's still trapped or injured and waiting it out, and I'd vote for those over dead."

Spike snorted. "Right, so like I said, need some help. Buffy's busy so we got stuck finding Captain Cardboard."

"Major," Xander corrected him. Spike looked over with one eyebrow up. "Not that it really matters since he's still lost. Or eaten. He might be eaten."

"And what might have done the eating?" Jim asked suspiciously.

"Probably Kith-harn from what we got from one of the soldier boys who sent him in. Not particularly dangerous, but tough and soldier boys found a nest," Spike shrugged as if it didn't matter to him that demons had eaten soldiers. Then again, it probably didn't actually matter to him. "Bloke called Carter called Buffy, told her about the report and about the fact that the army sent Captain Cardboard in, but no one came back out."
"So let the soldiers clean up the mess," Jim suggested dryly.

"They kinda did. We heard about it on the plane, the trapped gas in the mine? The big explosion out in the boonies? Yeah, that was right where the nest was supposed to be," Xander explained.

"Ten to one, the soldier boys blew up the Kith harn nest." Spike leaned back and sucked on his front teeth.

"Demons go boom," Xander nodded. "But what with the whole going boom thing, the army's going to call it all over even though Riley is still on the missing list. He knows his stuff, Jim. He wouldn't go down to a bunch of Kith-harn."

"Are you sure they didn't do a search before, you know, blowing up the countryside?" Blair asked with a slightly disgusted expression.

"If they did, they wouldn't have done a good one. These wankers will go through an area and take out the most obvious demons, but they miss more than they see. They aren't known for being especially good at their jobs."
"They aren't?" Xander asked as he turned to Spike. Spike just rolled his eyes.

"I'm not going ta get Buffy wound up about it, but it's not like they have a good reputation among demons. Human soldiers are trained to deal with humans, not demons. Angel and I had to go in and clean out some Grox'Lar the soldier boys walked right past and never saw. However, I can't see Captain Cardboard just laying down and dying for some Kith-harn, which means either his own people blew him up or..." Spike ended with a shrug.

"Oh man, they left him out there." Blair's breathless horror pretty much summed it up.

"Gits aren't good about taking care of their own. Push comes to bloody shove, and they're no better than most demons—they'll leave the sick and wounded behind and save their own arses." Spike agreed. "Personally, don't give a rat's arse about Riley, but Buffy wants him back, and the boy's right. Riley's a bloody wanker, but he wouldn't go down easy. I'd lay odds that he's holed up somewhere waitin' for his people ta come get him."

"Only they aren't coming," Jim said bitterly. The Sentinel
walked to a chair and sat down heavily. Immediately, Blair followed, sitting on the arm of the chair and putting a comforting hand on Jim's back.

"Bastards. Oh man, they are just—" Blair couldn't come up with a word and shivered with disgust to finish his thought.

"Soddin' right on that one," Spike agreed.

"I'd wish some horrible disease on them, but after having a few rounds with the magical syphilis, I just try to avoid disease references. And magic. Magic and me are definitely unmixy," Xander added. Bonding was good, and if they could bond over hating the army, he was all for it. Nothing like a common enemy to make people do the forgiving and forgetting thing. Of course, right now Jim and Blair just both stared at him in shock. "And that was too much on the share-scale, wasn't it?" Xander asked.

Blair smiled, the type of smile a person makes when they're trying really hard to not smile. "Hey, as long as you aren't sharing the magical syphilis."

Xander flushed as he remembered Blair's hands rubbing
over his body, thumbs pressing into his nipples before Blair reached down and sucked on the tight skin, and hey, mentioning syphilis to previous lovers, not of the good. "No way, we killed a couple of Indians, and it cleared right up... and that sounds really awful when I say it out loud. Did that sound awful?" Xander asked Blair.

"Slightly," Blair agreed.

"Ya killed an evil spirit tryin' ta work vengeance on the world. Not like you went out and slaughtered a few innocent squaws making their tortillas."

"Oh man, you have enough stereotypes in there to offend an entire tribe of Athabaskans," Blair cringed. "So, you two go and kill the demons and find Riley. What part do you need help with?" Blair asked. Jim continued to sit silently, his jaw popping and the vein along his neck doing a little pulsy thing that made Xander think of the Hulk right before he actually Hulked.

"Just the killing and the finding parts."

"Oi, I can kill 'em just fine as long as there are any left after the military morons blew up a big chunk of mountain. And you're going to find him, so it's not like
we need help with that bit. Ya just need to look for the most idealistic prat around and follow the thread. But I can't protect the boy during the day."

"Hey, I can protect myself, you know. I'm good with the running," Xander insisted as he crossed his arms.

"Wouldn't let Red or Buffy or even the soddin' knobhead wander the woods alone after the sun came up. Since I'll be stuck in a vamp-friendly tent ta avoid turnin' into dust and ash, I need someone to look after you."

"Jim and Blair are back up for us, us, you and me type us," Xander protested. "They are not babysitters since I can take care of myself. I have the manly screaming AND the running down," Xander objected. Spike looked at him blankly. "And hiding AND when pushed into a corner, I swing a deadly weed-eater," Xander pointed out. Spike rolled his eyes and then reached out and snagged Xander's neck. Xander didn't struggle against the pull that tucked him into Spike's side with most of his weight resting on Spike's chest. Even better, no one in the room tensed up or glared disapprovingly or made little grunting noises of unhappiness. Xander relaxed into the embrace. Maybe the girls just needed this latest apocalypse in England so they would focus on it and not
moaning over the wrongness that was Spike and Xander because as far as Xander was concerned, there was a real lack of wrongness.

"And you came to us because?" Jim asked.

Spike looked over at the sentinel, and the loft grew quiet. "Wouldn't trust just anyone ta protect the boy when I'm stuck in some bloody pup tent. Even fewer who I trust not to hurt him with their ideas 'bout who's right for the boy and the choices the boy's made." Spike's words hung on the air as Jim looked right at them. Xander bit his lip, uncomfortable with the silence but unwilling to break it as Jim and Spike considered each other solemnly. The air grew still as Xander waited for an answer.

"I happen to think you're an asshole," Jim commented.

"Ta, mate," Spike offered a two-fingered salute. "I can be when times call for it."

"Been accused of being one myself, and I can't say Naomi, Blair's mom, is still exactly thrilled with us being together, so I'm not likely to judge someone else's relationship," Jim finished. Xander watched as Jim scrubbed his hand over his face, his jaw still doing the
thobby thing. "So, Major Finn. If he's hurt or trapped, they'll leave him out there to rot," Jim said slowly.

"Or go nuts," Blair added as he twirled his finger around in the universal sign for loony. "I mean, solitary isolation is majorly bad for the psyche. Solitary confinement has been shown to contribute to aggressive behaviors, depression, anxiety, anger management, even psychosis. Not good. So not good."

"Why would they send him in alone?" Jim asked.

"Um," Xander flinched when he realized how the next bit sounded. "Okay, we're actually hoping to rescue a whole team, but I guess we're focusing on the Riley part since he's the one we know."

"Speak for yourself, pet. The rest can either tag along or fall in a ravine for all I care. I'm going out to find Finn, and I'm soddin' ashamed of doing that much."

"Okay, as a member of the soul-having club, that's sounding not so good," Xander complained softly. This was really not going to impress Jim or Blair what with the sounding slightly heartless and maybe a little soulless. Xander looked up through his lashes and Spike was
looking at him strangely.

"They bloody experimented on me, pet. They go out and kill anything from Kwaini to Bracchen to vampires without wondering who's evil and who's not. Soddin' hell, I doubt you or the fuzzy Shaman over there or a Sentinel would get a pass from the human-only brigade."

"Major Finn is like that?" Jim quickly asked with a frown.

"Not so much now," Xander hurried to say. "I mean, once upon a time, yeah. He was totally with the whole exterminate with extreme prejudice plan, but then he met Buffy and he figured out that not quite human didn't mean bad exactly."

"Yeah, found out he liked vampires a whole lot, didn't he?" Spike asked with a not-nice smirk.

"Okay, officially ancient history." Xander planted an elbow in Spike's side. "Riley's an okay guy. He rejoined the military because Buffy was having problems, and she made him feel big on the useless scale, and he's more of a save the world sort than a sit around and watch someone else save the world sort. So, yeah he's career military and military sometimes means stupid when it
comes to fighting demons, but he's a good guy. And he's out there waiting for backup that's probably not going to come, or at least I hope he is."

"How many were in his team when they went in?" Jim asked.

"Six, Riley plus five," Xander answered. He pulled a folded paper out of his jacket, information on each of the missing men. Other than Riley, Xander didn't know any of them, but they all deserved rescue.

"The government may still be looking. I can't say I particularly want to get mixed up in a government search," Jim said as he flipped through the pages. He stopped on one page, his jaw tightening.

"Not bloody arguin' with that," Spike said quickly. "If someone's still out there lookin', I'm happy to let them find the git, but you know as well as I do that Xander's the best bet for tracking someone in an area that large. And if the government planned on sendin' in the rescue, I doubt they would have blown up a big chunk of a mountain."

"If they're alive, something's keeping them from just
hiking out," Jim said. He held out one of the papers, one with a black man with large eyes. "Peterson. I ran into him in the Middle East. He's not one to give up easy. Whatever has killed or trapped him, I don't want Blair anywhere near it," Jim said seriously.

"Whoa, you so do not get to make that decision for me," Blair immediately objected, but Jim leveled a steel gaze at the man. "I am sorry I ever said the words Blessed Protector near you. You are not my guardian angel."

"No, but I'm your Sentinel," Jim countered. "And I'm not taking my Guide up against demons."

"Xander and Blair, their powers won't help 'em in a fight, so I wouldn't take them in if there was any danger."

"So, something took out or trapped six members of a highly elite secret force, but you're trying to tell me it's not a danger to Blair?" Jim asked incredulously.

Okay, Xander could admit that sounded a little fishy; however, Spike just flashed into gameface. "Kith-harn aren't a bloody danger, not to me."

"I don't walk into situations without more intel than 'they
aren't a danger'." Jim tossed the papers down on the coffee table and crossed his arms.

"You don't want to help, fine," Spike snapped out as he stood up, dragging Xander up with him.

"Hey, whoa, we never said we wouldn't help," Blair stepped between Spike and the door, his hands held up in surrender. "Jim's just a little overly cautious."

"Justifiably cautious," growled in response.

"A little information might help things, you know. We're still on the whole learning curve with demons, so you say demon, and we tend to think of those old lithographs of giant scaly-faced evil with the big horns." Blair used his fingers to outline horns coming out of his head.

"Those are Fyarl demons. Or maybe D'Hoffryn, D'Hoffryn is with the horns," Xander nodded. He stopped when he realized Jim and Blair were both looking at him with mild horror. "And you were totally exaggerating with the whole horned giant thing, weren't you?" Xander asked.

"You mean there are demons that look like that? Wow. I mean, I guess I should have guessed because all
mythology carries a seed of truth, but wow." Blair backed off a step, his face going a little pale.

Spike shrugged. "Adult Pa'tapparich ready to mate or Hacksaw or Froctor demons or a dozen other kinds come with horns and huge bodies. It's a popular feature," Spike added.

"And you want me to walk into battle with something that looks like that?" Jim asked darkly. Oh yeah, that wasn't Jim's friendliest expression.

"Bloody hell, if this were a tribe of Fyarl, I'd be going in with dozens of slayers at my back. They're Kith-harn," Spike rolled his eyes.

"Meaning?" Jim demanded as he stood up and stood next to Blair.

Xander jumped in. "They're slightly stronger than an average human, but mostly they count on surprise when they're hunting. They have bright red skin and lower teeth that look kinda like a boar with a serious bad overbite. I mean, they're a little freaky, but not a major hellmouth opening, taking out huge populations type of demon."
"They're not harmless, either," Spike quickly added as he gave Xander a look. "Won't lie. If there are enough of 'em, they can be buggers to kill. But one on one, a well-prepared human has a fair chance, and with your senses ta warn you ahead of time, you should have a better than fair chance of takin' on a good dozen of them."

"A dozen?" Jim crossed him arms and looked more than a little doubtful.

"Some demons, like vamps, aren't bothered by bullets. They sting like hell, but they don't do enough damage ta slow us down."

"But a gun will kill a Kith-harn," Jim guessed.

"Just as fast as a human," Spike agreed. "If they took out Riley and his team, it's because the soldier boys got too damn confident or because they were overwhelmed. We'll hear them comin' before they can overwhelm us, assuming that any survived having half the mountain blown up."

"Peterson was an arrogant son of a bitch when I met him." Jim turned to look at Blair, his uncertainty clear.
"Come on, Jim. They're alone out there," Blair urged him.

"Or they're dead," Jim countered. Blair just looked up without saying a word. "Fuck, or they're holed up hoping for rescue. Fine, we're going," Jim finally relented. Blair immediately gave Xander a big smile and a thumbs up. "But if one demon touches Blair, I'll shove a piece of wood down your throat," Jim threatened Spike.

"Like ta see you try, mate. I'd skin ya alive. And if you don't take care of Xander during the day, I suggest ya run and keep running because I'll show ya that skinning alive isn't just a saying."

Xander looked from one to the other, a little freaked with the mutual threats, but Blair rolled his eyes. "Shit. You two have way too much testosterone. Hey, I wonder if vampires have an endocrine system. You know, I have a friend who's a nurse, that could be a fascinating study."

"Oi!" Spike just about shouted. "And keep your Shaman off my bloody tail. I'm not into getting mojo'ed."

"You're on your own with him," Jim said with a wicked smile. The more time he's trying to test you, the less time
he has to test me." Jim turned to Blair. "I'll get the gear; you call Simon. Tell him we have some friends with an emergency," Jim said as he stood. Xander started breathing again without even noticing he'd stopped.

As Jim hurried upstairs and Blair got on the phone, Xander felt a little knot untie in his stomach. Okay, so now they had backup. Backup was good. Xander just hoped they'd get there in time to need backup.

**Part Sixteen**

"This is as close as I can get us," Jim said as he pushed open the truck door. The night was still dark, but he left the driver's side door open so the light spilled out into a circle. Xander could see the tree trunks all around the road which had turned into off-road a good mile back. The light didn't reach far, so the trees simply faded into the dark, giving Xander the impression of being surrounded by tree-giants.

"Thank god. I think my ass died somewhere back near the gas station with the fine selection of guns-as-art lithographs," Xander said as he stood. The minute the sun had set, Spike had come out from under the sun-proof tarp and pulled him into his lap, so Xander hadn't taken as much of a pounding as he could have, but he
still hurt. Spike's hands steadied him as he struggled to his feet and tried to get the circulation back.

"Sorry about that, Sport," Jim said as he came around to the back and dropped the tailgate. "You could ride up with us you know."

"Yeah? Well you could bloody ride back here for a spell," Spike snapped as he bounded up with way more grace than Xander could manage after a few hours of getting banged around in the back of a truck.

"It's my truck," Jim just about growled back. If Xander didn't know the Sentinel was human, he would have been checking for fangs after a growl like that.

"Man, check the testosterone at the door," Blair broke in. "Xander, could you throw that backpack down here, please."

"Um, which one?" Xander asked as he checked out the back of Jim's old truck. He'd been planning to hike in, find Riley, and hike out, but his idea of hiking included a couple of Twinkies and a bottle of water. He was fairly sure the others had packed everything including the kitchen sink into four enormous backpacks that looked
like something people climbing Mount Everest might carry. Big, huge Everest-climbing people, and Xander was pretty sure he didn't fit into that category.

"The school backpack. I need to grab a notebook out of there before we take off."

Xander found the only small bag in the back of the truck and tossed it out.

"You plannin' on stopping to take notes?" Spike demanded as he grabbed one of the hiking packs and threw it down at Jim with way more viciousness than really necessary; however, Jim quickly stepped back so that it thunked to the ground. Xander put an elbow in Spike's side, but Spike just grinned and snaked his own arm around Xander's waist, pulling him close.

"Very mature," Jim said sarcastically as he reached in and grabbed a second backpack for himself.

"Wot? Sometimes it's just hard to remember how weak you humans are," Spike offered with a shrug.

"Hey! Human here," Xander protested loudly.
"Yeah, but you've been off demon hunting about as long as you could walk, haven't ya? Besides, you're a Shaman."

"And Jim's a Sentinel," Blair pointed out as he jumped into the back of the truck.

"No bloody comparing them, mate. A Shaman has real power; a Sentinel's just one more human with better senses."

"And prophetic dreams and an ability to see ghosts and instincts that obviously tap a whole section of the brain that normally isn't accessible," Blair pointed out.

"He's still a human," Spike announced as he jumped from the truck, the largest backpack in hand.

"A group I'm proud to be in," Jim said without much emotion. "I'm rather enamored of humanity and humans."

Spike snorted. Oh yeah, this was going to be just so much fun. Xander zipped up his jacket. Despite the fact it was summer, it was chilly with the sun down.
"Right, well I'm not here for the fresh air, mate. Let's get this over with."

"Um, small problem Spike. I have extra Hellmouthy vision, not extra good vision, and it's a little dark out here," Xander pointed out, especially since the Spike voice seemed to be coming from the darkness. Two yellow eyes blinked into existence from the direction of Spike's voice. Xander jumped down from the back of the truck and took one of the two smaller packs and slung it over his shoulder, and suddenly he was sorry he had given up construction because he could use some construction muscles right about now.

"I won't let ya trip, pet. Just grab my arm and hold on until the moon comes up."

"I'll help Blair," Jim commented.

"Don't bloody care," Spike quickly answered. Xander had reached Spike's side, so he promptly put an elbow in his vampire's side again. It never worked to actually stop Spike from saying the rude, but Xander did keep hoping his vampire would get a clue.

"Oi, watch the goods, pet. It'd be a shame ta have to
spank you in front of your mates." Even without enough light to really see Spike's face, Xander could tell a smirk when he heard one. Xander lost all words, choking in shock and glad the darkness hid his blush. From the heat that suddenly gathered in his face, Xander was guessing he had a good lobster impression going.

"Breathe, Sport," Jim suggested. "So the map shows a deep ravine to the south. I'd like to head through it because going around will add a full day to the hike, but I don't know if you two can keep up on a rough hike."

"Oi! I can run bloody circles around you."

"Yeah, but I think he was going for being polite while still asking if I planned on passing out from fatigue," Xander guessed, which was fair with Jim being a Ranger, a big, seriously impressive Ranger and Xander being... not.

"He'll handle anything your fuzzy little mutt can handle," Spike snapped back.

"Blair has hiked some of the roughest terrain in the U.S. and South America."

"Hey! Hey, absolutely no turning on each other!" Blair's
voice interrupted just as Spike took a breath to really let Jim have it. Xander looked toward the truck where a Blair-sized shadow had stepped in front of the Jim-sized shadow. "I'm freaking about demons, about being in the woods with demons, about secret government projects and covert soldiers. So, can we please not add more to the potential weirdness of this moment with your testosterone poisoning?"

"Way too much with the freak-worthy," Xander quickly agreed. "But," Xander added as he opened his vision, "I can safely say we are not in imminent danger of being demon snacks."

"Are you sure?" Blair asked. Xander could feel the snarl reverberating through Spike's body.

"Big with the sure. I can kinda see life force now, which is handy for demonic hide and seek, and hopefully for hide and seek of the soldierly kind," Xander quickly added before Spike could say something totally and completely inappropriate, especially since he was a good 95 percent sure Blair had said that out of fear of the demony bad guys and not doubt of Shamanic powers. He blinked away the vision.
"Cool. Man, that is so much more awesome than my decidedly less obvious powers." Blair's voice had the sound of genuine admiration, and for a second, Xander wasn't sure what to say.

"Right then. Are we going or are we just going to pitch the tent here and wait for Captain Cardboard to wander by?" Spike interrupted. Without a word, Jim walked into the light spilling out of the truck's cab, and slammed the door. Immediately, the night was so dark that the circle of stars directly above them seemed impossibly large, at least to someone who had grown up in the smog of California. But then again, Xander remembered the stars looking that large in Africa... at least when he was out in the countryside and not in some dirty city with smoke clinging to the squat buildings and beggars brushing against his legs.

"South it is. If you guys are having trouble, just let me know," Jim suggested, the voice heading past then, and Xander thought he could see darker shadows in shadow walk in front.

"Stop annoying the vampire," Blair hissed and Spike started walking after the pair. Clinging to Spike's arm, Xander took the first steps into the dark just praying that
Spike had put his sense of humor away. He really didn't want to end up face-first in the mud. For a long time, they walked silently through the darkness. The moon peeked over the treetops when Blair finally broke the silence.

"Seeing life force... totally cool. When did that start happening?"

"Um..." Xander thought back. "I sort of started when you guys asked me to track specific people. Only the more I tried to explain to Spike what I was doing with my powers, the more things I started actually seeing. It was like I could see the Hellmouthy vibe I only felt with you guys, but then I started noticing that everyone had a vibe, but not everyone's vibe was Hellmouthy, which is probably because not everyone is big with the evil."

"And now you can see anyone's vibe?"

"Everyone has this soul cord that's wrapped inside and when they walk, it's like threads that drag behind them," Xander agreed. He blinked away the darkness and suddenly bright cords lit the night. Ahead, two cords twined: burgundy flashing with gold tangled with a greenish-tan. Christmas colors... sorta. They weren't
actually the really bright red and green of Christmas decorations, more the softer designer colors Willow brought home on strips of paper when her and the baby slayers had obsessed over repainting the whole house. "When Spike started asking me to talk about it, I guess I just started seeing more and more."

"Oh, wow. Xander, do you know what that means?"

"I'm thinking no," Xander answered. Spike's hand stopped him and then carefully led him around something. Xander's eyes had adjusted enough so that he could see a big mass that was either a hunched over bear or a broken tree stump.

"Man, it's called activity theory. Activity theory says that the human consciousness and human activity are related, so what you do affects how you think, and how you think affects what you do."

Spike snorted. "Sounds pretty obvious. If ya think soldiers are annoying gits, you snap their necks. If ya let yourself get twisted 'round some human finger, you go and rescue their sorry arses from the middle of nowhere."

"Well, yeah," Blair answered, sounding a little taken
aback by Spike's blunt comment. Xander already knew that Spike was doing this for Buffy and that part of him would rather eat Riley than rescue him, but Blair was obviously still figuring out just how much of a vampire Spike was. Blair took a deep breath. "But it's not just about how we think affecting our actions. Activity theory says it works both ways. In fact, Vygotsky called language one of the artifacts, one of the tools that we use to understand the world. As the language, the tool we use to understand the world, becomes more precise, our understanding becomes more accurate. So, Xander, by trying to describe what you see, you're teaching yourself to understand your powers."

"Wait," Spike said, sounding suddenly interested. "The more he talks about what he sees, the more power he has over it?"

"Basically, yeah," Blair agreed. "Ancient cultures always believed that naming something gave power over it. Some Native American tribes believed that you should never give you name to anyone who you couldn't trust to hold it sacred, and more than one religious group believes that to say God's name is a sin because it's an attempt to understand or take the power of God. Vygotsky really is a sort of modern variation on that, only
he believes that language is the tool you use to define your world, to understand whatever subject you're attempting to comprehend. It's called defining the praxis."

"Spike, don't get Blair started. Unless you want his two hour lecture on language and power, just nod and ignore him," Jim advised. From the grunt that followed, Blair's elbow found Jim's stomach.

"Oh man, you are totally missing the point here," Blair complained.

"Oi, don't bloody care to listen to some rot from you, but if it helps Xander get control of his powers, I bloody well want him describing them as much as he can. So, get on with it, pet," Spike ordered with a little squeeze on Xander's arm.

"Um, get on with what?" Xander asked.

"Like the little fuzzy Shaman said, get on with the talkin'."

"Uh..." Xander blanked as he realized he really didn't have anything to say. "Did you see the Jags' last game?" he improvised.
"Bloody—" Spike cut himself off. "Talk about the Shaman shite." Okay, that was Spike's cranky voice.

"Okay. Um, people have cords, and they kind of trail behind like long tails or like those dotted lines in comics that show you where someone has walked."

"So you can track?" Jim broke in. "How far behind a person does this line trail?"

"Yeah, and I'm not sure. Back in London, I tracked a demon across a couple of fields—" Xander could feel the vibration start as Spike's low-level growl reminded him just how cranky his vampire was about that particular side-trip. "And I'm not going to finish that story because I went out without anyone to really back me up seeing as how the girls don't really understand the Shaman stuff, and at the time they were still in the 'Xander's eye got mojoed' phase so they didn't think I even was a Shaman."

"Xander." Jim's voice came out calm, but Xander could still hear something lurking just under the calm. Suddenly Spike pulled him to a stop, and Xander could see the faint outline of Jim right in front of them. "You went out without backup?" he asked. Xander suddenly felt
exposed. He remembered the disappointment and anger on Spike's face, and now he could imagine a similar expression on Jim's, only with all the darkness, Jim and Spike could look at him like he was the biggest idiot in the world, and Xander really could see them at all.

"I thought I had backup. I mean, the girls have been backing me up for years... or I was backing them up since they sort of did more of the front-line fighting, but I had someone with me," Xander defended himself.

"The twits bloody lied to me to get me out of the way, and then they dragged his arse out after a demon they couldn't even identify, all to try and prove he was wrong about bein' a Shaman. Only, the boy proved them right and nearly got eaten in the process."

"Xander, are you okay?" Blair asked as he stepped forward and put a hand on the arm Spike wasn't holding.

"Hey, no problems. And there was absolutely no almost-eating. Some getting tossed around like a rag doll and heaving ground, yeah, but no almost-eating. Look, it was stupid, Spike was all big with the cranky, and I'm not doing that again."
"Sport," Jim sighed, and again with the emotion right under the surface.

"Okay, hey, I get it. I have the soldier memories, so I know all about not going into the field with a team if you don't know their abilities. I just had a moment of stupidity there," Xander held up his hands in surrender. "Geez, you guys are pushy."

"He's right," Blair agreed before he turned back to Jim. "Xander's an adult, so if he wants to make bad choices—"

"He's bloody well never going to again. He's not getting himself killed because those gits pulled some guilt trip," Spike interrupted, and then they were all hiking again. "Go on then, tell the fuzzy Shaman about what you see."

"The name is Blair." Ahead of them, Blair complained softly.

Feeling Spike's hand twitch on his arm, Xander suddenly understood Spike's obsession with insulting Blair. "Spike does that to Angel too, calling him Sweetcheeks and Peaches when Angel is this two or three hundred year old bad-ass, depending on whether you count his century in hell, so don't take the fuzzy, little thing too seriously
from him," Xander suggested.

"Just talk about the Shaman shite," Spike growled. Yep, he'd totally nailed his vampire, Xander realized.

"Okay, geez." Xander blinked into Shamanic vision, and the cords cast an odd glow over the world so that he could see the trees more clearly, only they were faded and almost wavy as the colors in the soul cords around him pulsed, casting ever-changing light against the shadows.

"I'm guessing Jim is the burgundy gold. The only other people I've seen who had gold in their soul cord are slayers, so hey, Willow's whole theory about Sentinels and Slayers being related might be right. Well, either that or the colors don't actually mean anything, I haven't actually figured that part out yet."

"Different people have different colors? Oh man, when we stop, we have to journal all this. Xander, have you written down any of your observations?"

"I'm not really big for taking notes. I almost failed history for that very reason. But Tara, this girl who used to help us and who was really good with magic, she could see
auras, and she said everyone's aura had a slightly different color, so it makes sense that the soul cords are colors. Spike is reddish too, almost the same burgundy color as Jim, but his cord is darker and it sometimes flashes with dark green, and when he gets angry, it turns black like other demons' cords. And Spike has a second cord, and it's more of a brown with bits of blue, which is his soul."

"Oh man. This is... this is wild. What about me?"

"You have this muted green cord with lots of tan in it."

"What do you have?" Blair asked, excited.

"I don't know. I can't see my own," Xander shrugged into the darkness.

"Whoa. How could the others just dismiss this? Man, lots of people claim to see auras, but this is so specific. There has to be a connection between the color and the meaning. It's all symbolic, and like Vygotsky said, language and symbols are just ways to define the world. What do you think Jim and Spike have in common?"

"Back up, Chief. I don't have anything in common with
him. As soon as possible, I hope to not even have a country in common with him," Jim immediately broke in. The moon was up far enough that Xander could see Jim turn his head to glare at Blair.

"They're both way overprotective," Xander quickly pointed out.

"Theory one... this red color is associated with being big, overbearing mother hens. It's a place to start," Blair said cheerfully.

"Bloody hell, you take that back," Spike demanded.

"Oh please. You're as bad as Jim. I bet you heat the chicken soup the second Xander gets the sniffles," Blair snorted.

"Have not."

"Either you're lying, which wouldn't be out of character for a demon, or Xander hasn't gotten the sniffles yet," Blair said confidently. Spike didn't have an answer for that one.

"Okay, Xander. Let's go through the other colors and see
if we can start figuring out what your brain is trying to tell you. I bet before we get back to Cascade, we can come up with a dozen tests to check out our hypotheses. Oh man, this is exciting. Naomi would be so stoked. Auras and Shaman are right up her alley. So, let's start with Willow. What colors do you see in her cord?"

Starting with Willow and moving through every one of the Slayers, Xander described all the soul-cords he'd seen. Long after the moon had risen and then sunk back down under the trees, he was explaining everything he knew about his vision while Blair let out a steady stream of "uh-huh's" and "oh man's."

Part Seventeen

Laying on a slab of rock so that his head was in the shade of a large tree and the rest of his body was in the sun, Xander watched Jim and Blair have an animated discussion with lots of finger poking and not-happy faces. He couldn't hear a
word. Even though Spike was in the sun-proof tent even farther away, he could probably catch every word of it. The problem was that Spike probably didn't care enough to eavesdrop and Xander was way too tired to actually get up, go to the tent and ask Spike to listen. Nope, call him Xand the noodle-legged man because his muscles had rolled up and gone home for the day. His hurts hurt.

Even worse, Xander suspected that the fight on the far side of the clearing had something to do with the mission, which Xander had dropped on their door, or the fact that Xander had picked a vampire who was going out of his way to prove his assholiness, emphasis on the ass and not the holiness.

Jim poked his finger into Blair's chest, and Blair threw his hands up in surrender and turned his back, flipping Jim the bird as he turned. For a second, Xander thought Jim was going to grab his guide, but then he just turned and stomped into the trees. Yep, good vibes all 'round.

"Hey, Xander," Blair called as he walked over and dropped down on the rock Xander had chosen. "Okay, so let's go over all the colors and make sure I have them recorded right," Blair said as he flipped open his notebook and balanced it on one knee.
"Are you and Jim okay?" Xander asked as he stared at the spot where Jim had disappeared into the trees.

"Totally. Man, he just gets his alpha going sometimes."

"He looked pissed."

"He can deny it all he wants, but he is a total mother hen. He doesn't want me near Spike, so I promised him that I would stay close the second the sun set and avoid your tent during the day. He'll calm down…. Eventually."

"I didn't mean for this to... you know," Xander waved a vague hand between Blair and the spot where Jim had disappeared into the woods.

"Hey, no problem. He just likes hearing himself yell sometimes. It doesn't mean anything." Blair looked over at him. "Really," he finally added. It didn't really ease Xander's guilt that much. "So, what's up with Spike. I mean, I assume he's not always so..."

"Assholy?" Xander supplied. That made Blair laugh. "Man, I was going to say defensive."
"No, asshole covers it better, and he is so going to spank me when I go in there," Xander said eyeing the tent.

"Hey, as long as you consent," Blair shrugged. Xander's brain stuttered for a second, not quite catching up to the lack of condemnation.

"I could veto a spanking... probably. The bad thing about vamp senses is that he knows when I don't actually mean what I'm saying but I'm saying it because I think I should."

"Oh man, I hear you. Some kinks are a little embarrassing, and having a partner who can sniff your interest is a little hard on the ego sometimes," Blair nodded. Xander didn't answer, and silence intruded between them. Blair eventually started writing in his notebook as Xander lay and stared up at the trees.

"Spike doesn't like that you're a Shaman," Xander offered softly. It felt weirdly backstabee to talk about Spike, but it wasn't like he was talking behind Spike's back because he was definitely sitting in the tent eavesdropping.

"I thought he was taking advantage of the fact, not that I have a problem with that. I'm down with being taken
"I get the feeling the Shaman stuff is bigger than I understand. I mean, Spike, he totally does the demeaning nicknames when he's uncomfortable, and I haven't seen him use so many insults since he got rid of the chip. I mean, chipped Spike was big with the insults... some of which didn't even make a whole lot of sense what with the weird British talk. But old Spike just ate people who wigged him out, and new Spike doesn't usually get wigged, well, except for Angel, but like I said, he uses every girly name in the book on Angel."

Blair nodded slowly. "The mutt comments are putting Jim a little on edge. He can claim that it doesn't bother him all he wants, but the fact is that he takes the role of protector pretty seriously. However, I can see Spike's point. Jim and I talked after you guys left last time, and there have been plenty of times when I talked my way out of something that really... it shouldn't have worked. Man, I so should have been dead a half-dozen times over, but I talked someone into waiting or just tying me up or hesitating for that second that it took Jim to get there."
Xander rolled to his side and looked at Blair in confusion. "Um, not connecting the dots here."

"I convinced international thieves I was a wheel man, the son of some die-hard rum-runner. I'm not sure, but if Spike's right, I'm willing to bet that I was using some of my mojo on them."

Xander waited for the punchline.

"They didn't want to get tricked, but if Spike's right, I can override a person's common sense. I can 'teach' them to believe things that are so not in their best interests, and yeah, I'm using that to help the police but..." Blair let his words trail off.

"Manipulativesville, here you come," Xander finished. "You're powerful in the ways of the force, Obi Wan."

"Totally. Man, a con man would be raking in the dough. So, I can see where Spike might be uncomfortable with me. But he gets cranky, and then Jim gets even more uncomfortable because talking fast is no match for superhuman strength and big damn teeth. And I don't mind telling you, I do not want to end up getting eaten like the grandmother in the fairy tale."
Immediately Xander started shaking his head. "Spike blusters, but he would never... okay, he totally would kill someone, but not without good reason. He has a soul, and unlike a lot of people I've met, he uses his. He'd never hurt you unless you were doing something that was huge with the wrong: turning to the dark side or something. Which makes him better than a lot of people I've seen."

"Jim's just going to have to figure that out on his own," Blair said softly. "Yeah, I could tell him to back off, but his instincts are screaming at him that Spike is a predator, so arguing with him right now is just going to put him more on edge."

"Um, I think I might have the answer for that one," Xander said.

"Hey, I'm open to any suggestions because he's driving me nuts, and Spike is not exactly on my Christmas list right now, either."

"I told you that Jim had gold in his thread and the only other gold I ever saw was Slayers. Well, Slayers have this Slayer-sense that goes off when vamps are around, and
it's not always the most accurate because when Buffy was new, her Slayer sense was all with the wacky because she invited a vampire into her room without ever having the senses go off, but as she got older, it turned pretty damn accurate."

Blair stared at him with wide eyes. "Oh man. If Sentinels are related to Slayers, they may have some instinctive antagonism against demons."

"And Buffy said that she gets the creeps around vampires, and we are so not going into why she's dated them anyway, but Jim might be getting the wiggins just because Spike is a vampire."

"Wow. Okay, I never thought I'd say this about vampires, but that makes a lot of sense. And if this is an instinct thing, Jim is so going to refuse to acknowledge it. Great." Blair slapped his notebook down on the rock and lay next to Xander. "Man, this sucks. They're going to kill each other, aren't they?"

"No killing. Absolutely no killing," Xander said, his guts tightening even though he knew Blair meant it as a joke.

"We just won't let them kill each other," Blair said with a
shrug.

Looking up at the clouds, Xander snorted. "Yeah, like I have any hope of stopping Spike from doing anything, not that the anything in question would be killing because Spike is not a killer, or at least not a murderer... not any more."

"I have total faith that you could stop him if you really wanted to."

"Not so much."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Xander. I mean, Spike is obviously not happy about tracking down these soldiers, and he's here. That says something."

"Yep, says he's still wrapped around Buffy's finger," Xander answered as he watched a cloud lion mutate into a ferris wheel. "Blair.. does it ever make you feel... I mean.... How do you and Jim decide who's going to make all the decisions?" he finally blurted.

"Whoa. Big question." Blair fell silent for several seconds, and Xander wished he could suck the words back in, but sadly, that was one Shamanic power he didn't have.
Xander suspected he would have preferred it.

"If you're asking about who's more up front and public about decisions, that'd be Jim. He's pretty much the stereotypical dominant alpha-male, especially when he gets around the guys at work," Blair started slowly. "But it's more complicated than that. If I really want something, I know I can nag him into it, and he does too. So when I privately tell him what I really want, he listens." Blair started laughing. "Okay, I nag so well that when I really get going, I pretty much get my way, but most of the time I just kinda go along since he makes decisions with me in mind. Man, I guess I'm saying that we agree on things, but from the outside, I think it would pretty much look like Jim's the boss. God, Naomi was all freaked about my aura getting overwhelmed by his, so yeah, Jim's the big, bad alpha male in our relationship."

"So, does that ever make you feel girly?" Xander asked, darting a look over to see how Blair was taking it. That would be the expression Spike always called gobsmacked.

"Girly? Xander, girls aren't... Who called you girly?" Blair finally demanded.
"Um, Buffy?" Xander admitted. "Okay, she didn't really call me a girl; she just said I was going all fifties housewife, and as a person with a working cock, that was a little... emasculating."

"Buffy the GIRL? The all powerful demon-slaying, kicking the ass of all evil GIRL?" Blair demanded as he sat up straight. He didn't even try to hide the laughter in his voice, and Xander wasn't sure if he should be offended or not.

"I don't take her too seriously since she's not exactly healthy-relationship girl," Xander quickly defended himself.

"And I think I can explain that," Blair interrupted.

"I just feel like maybe I shouldn't be okay with Spike getting big on the bossiness."

"Xander, does he listen when you talk to him?" Blair asked in a serious tone that had none of the dark laughter of a moment ago.

"Yeah," Xander had to admit that no one in his life had ever listened to him the way Spike did.
"Do you ever feel like his decisions are wrong? Do they make you uncomfortable?"

"Define uncomfortable," Xander uneasily.

"If Jim and I saw you two, would it feel bad?"

"No," Xander immediately answered. "He doesn't do anything I don't like doing, but—" Xander froze.

"You don't like Buffy and Willow being there to see it?" Blair asked gently.

"I don't like making them so unhappy. Buffy's actually doing... well, okay would be too strong a word and she says she reserves the right to freak on the whole Spike and Xander front but she's accepting this about as much as any of them. So, when she goes and tells me I'm wrong..." Xander stopped, unable to explain just how creepy that felt.

"Fuck, and that's the supportive friend?" Blair asked incredulously.

"Willow is less with the support and more with the
finding magical ways to make me stop... she doesn't want to know who I am now," Xander finished. He felt like he was betraying his girls to even say that much, but now that he was away from them, he could admit that they were lacking in the support department.

"Xander, you and Spike can always stay here in the States."

Xander snorted. "You don't know my friends, they would follow me to Cascade and then Jim would have to shoot them to get them to go away, and considering that Willow already did the ghost thing once... well, kinda twice if you count this four in one spell thing with the out of body experience, but anyway, I'm not so sure that shooting them would actually get rid of them."

"Xander, have you talked to Spike about this?" Blair asked.

"We start talking, only it usually ends with him sighing or sex. A lot of times it just ends with sex."

"Sounds like Jim. When all else fails, just do something to avoid talking at all," Blair huffed.
"We talk. We do lots of talking. We just don't really seem to solve much. Sometimes he even tries to get me to talk when I'm ready to roll over and do the sleep thing, so it feels like more talking is just more with the words and not with the solving anything."

"Man, I was wrong. You're Jim," Blair sighed.

"Hey, not with the muscles here. I think I'm pretty much dead after that hike, so comparing me to Jim is a big 'no'."

"I don't know. I can see a similarity or two: overdeveloped sense of personal responsibility, carrying the weight of the whole fucking world on your shoulders," Blair said quietly. "And for all your talking, it's not like you actually say much. As an expert in talking without revealing anything, I have to bow to your powers of non-communicative communication."

Xander pushed himself up and looked at Blair. "Why do I feel like I should be insulted?"

"Because I just told you a truth you didn't want to know. Come on, Xander. You came out here, and you weren't telling us anything about how much pressure the girls
were putting on you. Spike had to tell us that."

"I didn't want you to worry." Xander sat cross-legged and picked the hem of his jeans.

"Oh yeah, total Jim. You'll give yourself ulcers and convince yourself that you have to save the world single-handed before admitting that you're in over your head."

"Hey, this is me in over my head. I can't even see sunlight from how deep I am on the Shaman stuff," Xander protested. "And I'm not big on saving the world, more like provider of world-saving sugary snacks."

"Okay," Blair conceded, holding his hands up in surrender. "No more comparing, but Jim is like my touchstone here because I don't actually know that many people dealing with the trauma of saving the world on a regular basis. So, if this fits, consider it, and if it doesn't, tell me to mind my own business. But with Jim... whoa... he just totally shuts up the minute I get close to anything too real for him to handle. It's like he takes every shitty thing he's ever seen and locks it in this box labeled 'Do Not Disturb.' And trying to talk about one thing from that box just brings the whole world down. He doesn't deal with issues, he deals with whole emotional mountains at
once. But man, he doesn't want to deal with the mountain, so he just avoids until I'm ready to pull out my hair. I'm surprised I'm not as bald as he is." Blair laughed and tugged at a long curl, but Xander could almost taste a darker emotion lingering under the laughter.

"It's like... no matter how many times we work through some shit, he still keeps forgetting that I'm going to stand by him. And man, sometimes that just hurts. Sometimes I feel like there's something wrong with me, and I'm like this big pain in his ass and he'd rather have me go away."

"Blair," Xander breathed almost silently, feeling weirdly like he was overhearing something too private for his ears, which didn't make sense since Blair was talking to him.

"Hey, I know that's my hang-up. And Jim and I... we had some close calls because his emotional constipation and my neurotic ability to feel like I don't actually belong... they just about sent us our separate ways, but man, you can't let life do that do you. When I'm in my right mind, I know Jim loves me. But when you love someone and they won't talk to you, and I so don't mean sports scores or number of demons killed, or whatever words you use to not talk, but when they won't tell you something
important. Man, that sucks. Sucks big time. Huge time."
Blair stopped and sat staring out into the trees.

Xander had absolutely no response. He should. He had a
feeling he should have something to offer for the raw
emotional truth Blair had just given him, but nope...
nothing.

"Tell you what," Blair said as he pushed himself up from
the rock. "You decide how much of that to listen to and
how much is crap because I have got to get some sleep.
Jim can do the prowling bit, but after walking all night,
I'm ready to fall over." Blair headed for the tent on the
far side of the clearing from the vampire-safe structure in
the shade of the trees.

Sitting on the rock, Xander struggled to sort through his
thoughts. He so wasn't Jim. He wasn't even in the same
zip code as Jim. Jim actually accomplished things and
Xander... well, if he could figure this Shaman crap out,
Xander might learn to save a person or two. More than
that wasn't really on the agenda for the mostly-human
member of the Scooby gang.

With a sigh, Xander realized he should probably get some
sleep too. Unfortunately, he was sharing a tent with
Spike, so his chance for rest had probably gone down some with Spike eavesdropping on that conversation, but the tent had the sleeping bags, and Xander was just too damn sore to sleep on a rock. Bracing himself, Xander headed for the tent. Sleep today, find Riley tonight, and then... Xander blanked on the then. He could worry about then when then came. Right now he just wanted to sleep without thinking and without Blair's words bouncing around in his brain.

Part Eighteen

Xander navigated the extra flap at the front of the tent, crawling into the space without letting even the smallest trace of reflected sunlight in. The inside was a lot cooler and more comfortable than he expected.

"Good sleeping weather," he commented. Spike lay propped on one side of the tent, a flashlight illuminating a thick book and an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.
"You have a good talk then?" he asked. The casual tone made Xander pause. The atmosphere in the tent felt vaguely landminish.

"Sorta. It was kinda weird because the whole me being like Jim argument so missed the mark." Xander slid to his side and turned his back to Spike. He lay stiffly, waiting for Spike to pick up where Blair had left off. Instead, he could hear a page turning on the book. Slowly, the tension drained from him and he relaxed onto the sleeping bag and stared at the fabric of the tent. Counting time with the turning of the pages, Xander went from stressed through relaxed and straight to bored stupid.

He rolled to his back and considered Spike. "Do you think the tent is big enough for sex?" he asked. Spike graced him with a raised eyebrow.

"I mean, we have to sit still as long as the sun is up, and we can't actually sleep that long," Xander pointed out.

Spike looked at him for a long time before closing his book and dropping it between them. "You're a bloody idiot," Spike finally announced in the same tone he might
use to comment on the weather.

Xander opened his mouth but couldn't actually form words.

"Bloody hell, you think I'm wrapped around Buffy's finger? If she had her way, we'd be driving from one soddin' end of England ta the other trying to find whatever opened that portal. It'd be bloody pointless, but we'd be doin' it because the slayer never will be able to let someone else do her work, no matter how many slayers are running around the world. She's as bad as Peaches."

"But..." Xander stopped and eyed the tent flap and considered a quick escape stage left. "Maybe I should--"

"But nothing," Spike cut him off. "If I'm wrapped around anyone's finger, it's the git who suggested we come out here and get Captain Cardboard, and that sure as hell wasn't Buffy."

"Okay, I really should give you some space because that's your cranky voice." Xander scooted toward the front flap on the tent, but he found a vampire sitting on his legs faster than he could wiggle south. A strong hand grabbed..."
his wrist, putting it over his head and Xander found himself pressed to the ground with Spike over him.

"You're not goin' anywhere," Spike said, his voice tightly controlled. "I figure with the furry little Shaman's words bouncing around in there, you're about as open to this conversation as you're goin' to be. So you just sit still and listen to this. I'm not out in the middle of this fucking country for Buffy. I'm here because I needed to get ya away from that house before I ate one of those gits. Seems like I've said that before, but ya don't really seem to hear me. You're mine. And I'm not good with letting what's mine get hurt."

"Hey, no hurting. No hurting and no eating," Xander protested.

Spike looked down at him. "You think I don't remember? You think I don't know what it's like ta have them never see ya because they're so busy tryin' to see who they want you to be or who they remember you being?" he asked, his voice softer and more Gilesy than Spikey.

Xander blinked up and saw the raw anger and pain etched on Spike's face. He was used to Spike being scary and angry and annoyed, but he hadn't seen pain like this
since Buffy died.

"Spike," Xander said carefully.

"Nearly ate me alive, never being enough--holding her and never bein' allowed to hold on too long or too tight. And now, you've gone and promised ta let me hold as tight as I want, so I'm not bloody letting go, you got that?" Spike leaned down and flashed into game face.

His mouth dry, Xander nodded.

"Right then. And a couple other things. If ya vetoed a spanking, it'd stay vetoed. Angelus and Darla used to pull that crap where I didn't have a choice, and it didn't work very well for them seein' as how I stabbed both of them in the back at one time or another. So I'm not tradin' in the bottom spot for a nice view of abuse from the top."

"Got it," Xander agreed. Spike pushed himself up without getting off.

" Bloody daft. You know that, right? You're bloody daft if you didn't hear what Blair said out there."

"I heard," Xander offered in a small voice.
"You listen to the whole song and dance?"

Xander nodded. "It's stupid to call it girly and Buffy has issues and we can move here. Got it."

"And the part about how ya can't lock up the memories?"

Xander paused. Okay, that was the part he was really hoping they weren't going to talk about. Spike narrowed his eyes.

"Emotional constipation, and mountains and memory avalanches," Xander finally agreed.

"And your ability to talk without bloody saying anything, don't forget that," Spike sighed. "And what about the part where the miniature Shaman gets left wonderin' why he can't get the stupid git to talk."

Taking a deep breath, Xander nodded again, his voice not quite working. "Remembering."

"Well, ya have a small problem, pet. You go pushin' me away, and you'll make me cranky, but the demon won't
let me walk away pet. It'd just get messy--messy enough ta make Rupert take up the dark mojo again. So, unless you want to find out just how far away I can drag you, you'll bloody well stop shutting me out."

"Spike." Xander choked out the word.

"You're mine, pet. I'm not letting go, so unless you plan on laying there all night, I suggest ya find something to say."

Even without his Shamanic vision, Xander could see the desperate conflict between the soul and the demon. He opened his mouth, not even sure what to say.

"And if ya say anything about sports or some bloody demon, I'm gagging you," he warned darkly.

"I don't know why we're out here," Xander blurted before he could talk himself into not saying something stupid. Spike's eyebrows came down for a second as the vampire cocked his head to the side.

"Ya wanted to come to your bit for truth and justice and finding little lost puppies," Spike said slowly.
"Yeah, but you didn't, so shouldn't you have vetoed the whole going after Riley plan?"

"Did you want me to veto it?"

Xander thought about that one for a second. He didn't think about his own reasons anymore. He tried really, really hard not to think about his own reasons, and when he did, those thoughts went into the repress pile. But he was mantra man, and the mantra was to screw up and get over it. Only he couldn't quite figure out what to get over.

"Oi, say bloody something," Spike snapped.

"I don't know. I screwed up, but I don't know where and I'm not good with the getting over it." Xander let the words fall out even though they didn't make sense, not even to him. Spike sat up, releasing Xander's wrists even though he was still sitting on him.

"So, what does that have to do with comin' after Captain Cardboard?"

"I'm going to screw this up, Spike. You guys are all waiting for me to just see Riley's soul like some flare, and
I don't see anything."

"If ya don't, ya don't," Spike shrugged. "Git might be dead. Even the survivors sometimes don't survive."

Xander couldn't hold the sob back with that and now Spike really looked at him confused.

"I think I'm old enough to know that." Xander thought of Anya, of Joyce and graveyards that didn't exist anymore and dark legs sprawled under a hot African sun. "I know," he whispered.

"Bloody hell. Throw me a line, Xan. Let me know what you have rattling around in that brain that's makin' it so hard for you to hear anything else."

Xander couldn't help the half-laugh that escaped. "Hey, I was never good with the listening. I had a history teacher that kept calling home because I never was big with the listening, and my dad would give me this whole lecture, only the funny part was that I didn't really listen to his lecture."

"No!" Spike snarled. "Don't push me off into something different to keep me from seein' whatever you have in
that head of yours. You think I can't deal with your demons? I remember my hands snapping the necks of orphans because it made Dru laugh, and I've heard those same children condemn me, taunting my soul." Spike looked down at his own hands in loathing. "I would have ripped my own heart out to take away those memories, but I've learned to live with myself. So ya aren't going to scare me away. But if ya keep shutting me out, you'll soddin' piss me off. Do you hear me?"

"I..." Xander looked around, but the tent didn't have any distractions. "I can't do this," he whispered. "I can't make decisions. I can't deal with watching people die because I made some mistake. And I lied to myself and said I was going to be mantra man and give myself permission to just deal, but I can't. And now you're expecting me to be a Shaman, and what if I fuck this up as bad as I fucked up everything else?"

"What the bloody hell have you ever fucked up?"

"Only everything," Xander forced back a sob. "The whole fluky touching thing with Willow and the wedding that wasn't and the people who died in Africa and the kicking Buffy out and feel free to stop me any time because I could keep going for a while here."
"As soon as ya say something that you actually fucked up, I'll do that," Spike answered as he slid to the side so that he lay next to Xander, one leg casually thrown over Xander's body.

"Can we just drop this?" Xander almost begged. He let his hand reach over to trail over Spike's arm, tempting him. Sex would be good... very good. Xander gave Spike a crooked smile.

"Oi, I'll bring the fuzzy little Shaman in here if that's what it takes ta get you to open up, so don't even think of tryin' to manipulate your way out of this," Spike growled as he captured Xander's hand. But then he brought it to his lips and kissed it, which kinda negated the whole growl.

"Spike... I don't know what you want me to say. I told you what I'm thinking, and you don't believe me, so enough with the talking. We do other things better than we talk anyway."

"Pet," Spike said as he tucked Xander's hand between them without letting go. "I do believe that you're tellin' yourself that you're to blame for all that rot. The only
thing is that ya aren't. You left Anya to save her, so you can blame the bloke with the memory tricks for that one. Teenage hormones and Willow carry as much blame as you do for that kiss, not that it really matters at this point, and as for Buffy..." Spike sighed and Xander took the time to study the stitching on the inside of the tent. Pretty stitches. Grey against grey all lined up like good little soldiers.

"Pet, I was angry about you lot kicking Buffy out, but even I know she was losing it. She expected potentials to act like slayers when they didn't have the instincts or the same strength. Mind, it would have been nice if you'd waited to talk to me. I have four times more experience than any of you lot when it comes to strategy and fighting, and dividing yourself right before battle was bloody stupid."

"Yep, that's me, stupid man," Xander nodded as he started counting stitches.

"Done a stupid thing or two m'self. Doesn't make me stupid, and it doesn't make you stupid. I'm a little more worried about why you're trying so hard to be the old Xander that ya aren't acting like Xander at all."
"Hey, I'm very Xanderish."

"Are not."

"Am too. Total with the Xander."

"If ya acted any less like Xander, I'd start looking for pods."

"Bad jokes, language capable of shocking an English teacher into a coma from twenty yards. See me be Xanderish?"

Spike released Xander's hand and reached up to lay his palm against Xander's cheek, forcing him to look over at the vampire.

"The Xander I know has seen a lot of shite. He ended up in the middle of a bloody civil war over in Africa and watched his whole town sink into a hole. The Xander I know carries the weight of all that, but I'm not seein' that part of him."

"Spike," Xander choked out.

"I'm a bloody caretaker, Xan. Always have been. Took
care of my mum and then Dru, and I tried takin' care of Buffy for all the good it did me. Whatever shite you got in there, I'll take care of you too, but ya can't keep pushing me away."

"I don't want to do the pushing," Xander said, curling his fingers around Spike's shirt.

"And ya won't succeed. I already told ya that I won't let ya go... can't let you go."

"Spike, I just feel like I'm going to screw this up. Anya loved me, and I destroyed her, and Cordy and Willow and..." Xander couldn't quite finish. The silence settled heavily on them.

"Who, pet?"

"I was just supposed to go check on a slayer, and I had the creeps. I asked Aziza to come with me. I wouldn't have just left her." Xander's memories provided an image of her laughing, her dark skin soaking up the yellow from her headscarf as they walked under the hot sun. The image mutated into those legs that had become the home of flies and death. "And even that isn't as bad as what I did to the potentials. I sent them out to fight
knowing they were going to die. I sent them into that. I talked them into that."

"Oh pet," Spike said. Xander didn't say anything more, but Spike's arms wrapped around Xander, pulling him close, and Xander felt very unmanly tears start. He reached up to wipe them away, but Spike just held him tighter, tight enough that Xander couldn't reach up. Xander could only hold on to Spike's waist and lose himself in all the guilt and grief he'd buried so deep he didn't even know it was there until it rose like a floodwave.

"Ya went into the fight with 'em, pet. You never sent them anywhere that you didn't go," Spike soothed. Xander struggled to catch his breath, but something kept knocking it out of him again so that he gasped and struggled for air.

"They were kids," he finally choked out.

"So were you."

"I just want to be the Zeppo again. I don't want to make decisions where someone counts on me. I can't do it." Xander could feel the pressure build in his chest, his
stomach threatening the heaves.

"You're fine," Spike soothed, tightening his arms until Xander could barely even breathe, his mouth gasping for air that had become too thick for his lungs. "Shhhh."

"I saved the school. I killed a zombie that was going to blow them all up and I never told them because I was so proud that I wasn't the Zeppo. No matter what they saw, I knew I wasn't the Zeppo. But I don't want that. I don't want to be the one who matters. I so don't want to be the one who sees." Xander felt the guilt and the weakness crawling over his skin like spiders, but Spike's hands soothed them away with small strokes and gentle circles until finally, Xander fell asleep, still crying.

Part Nineteen

"Evening, Sport," Jim offered as soon as Xander crawled out of the tent. Xander could feel his face warm with a blush. "You and Spike tear down the tent while I make sure the fire's out."

Spike had gotten up before Xander and now he made an unhappy noise. "Oi, don't take orders from a soldier
"And I'm not a soldier anymore," Jim answered levelly. "But if you'd rather play with the fire, you're more than welcome, Mr. Flammable. I can help Xander with the tent."

"No bloody chance of that, mate," Spike snarked, but Xander could feel the shift, the way the two men poked at each other without actually feeling each other out for possible destruction and mayhem. Two lanterns threw an uneven circle of light around the camp, but even in the weak light, Xander could see a definite lack of glaring and posturing and other signs of impending badness between Jim and Spike.

Rubbing his eyes, Xander aimed for the tree earlier designated as the official latrine. On his way back, he stopped when Blair offered him a trail bar. "Did I miss something?" he whispered as he watched Spike take down the tent a whole lot faster than he put it up. Then again, Xander had tried to help with the putting up, and Spike was definitely faster without the extra unhelpful type help. "I mean, there's a definitely lack of the open hostilities, which, hey, I'm all for, but it's hitting the weird meter."
"Either Jim decided to ignore his instincts, which is entirely possible because this is Jim," Blair started with a not-happy glare his partner's way. "Or, he was listening in on your conversation this morning."

"Great," Xander said dryly.

"Hey, Xander," Blair said as he quickly stopped packing to come over and crouch in front of Xander. "Jim understands."

Xander looked over to where Jim was stirring dirt into the dying embers of the fire he'd used to boil water. Yeah, Jim would understand the not wanting to send kids into battle--he'd had that discussion with Jim already. But Jim wouldn't ever cry in someone's arms and beg them to take control. Jim wasn't weak. As though the Sentinel could hear Xander's thoughts, he looked up.

"Hey, Sport. The water's safe, so drink up before we get hiking," he called, holding up a canteen.

Xander could feel his blush return.

"Xander?" Jim asked as he stood up. Spike just calmly
rolled the tent.


"Hey, Sport, are you okay?" Jim asked quietly. Xander looked over to Spike for help, but again the annoying one just packed the tent without even a hint of rushing to Xander's rescue.

"Fine."

"Oi, your heart's goin' so fast you sound like you're about to have a heart attack," Spike said from the other side of camp.

"Xander?" Blair asked, immediately concerned. And great, now all three were looking at him.

"Hey, I'm fine. Big with the fine. And if my heart is doing inappropriate jiggy things, it's just a little embarrassment which would be ever so much of the better if everyone wasn't staring at me," Xander pointed out.

"What the bloody hell have you got to be embarrassed about?" Spike demanded. When Jim gave the vampire a vicious glare, Xander had to choke back a very unmanly
giggle which just might have led to even more unmanly type places.

"Xander, you don't have any reason to be embarrassed," Jim said quietly.

"Which is what I just said. Get out of the way, pillock," Spike snapped as he shoved Jim to one side. The Sentinel glared daggers, but Spike carelessly threw himself on the rock where Xander had sat yesterday, pulling Xander down next to him. "If ya want, I can always torture the Sentinel for you. Eavesdropping isn't normally on my list of torture-approved offenses, but I'm happy ta make an exception."

Xander opened his mouth in near-panic before he saw the twisted humor in Spike's expression. "Nice, give me a heart attack. Willow would so refuse to make you any more cookies if you killed the slightly hysterical, slightly nutso best friend," Xander huffed.

"Xander, we talked about this before, and you haven't done anything to be ashamed of," Jim said quietly, ignoring Spike as he walked around on Xander's free side. "War is ugly and surviving war means dealing with everything you didn't deal with on the battlefield."
"Dealing," Xander snorted.

"Oi, you're no more daft that the slayer."

"Which, hello, going to a therapist, which is slightly more daft than not going to a therapist and slightly less daft than the people with the white jackets."

"Xander," Blair broke in this time with a voice that sounded borderline incredulous. "Xander, you can't think that some therapy makes you crazy."


"Sport, you haven't done anything I didn't do after Columbia, after Grenada, after Peru." Jim spoke the names softly, almost reverently even though his face had an expression that came closer to disgust.

"Yeah, I did," Xander argued. Suddenly he couldn't sit with all the sympathetic faces looking at him. Shoving at Spike's hands, he exploded up and got half way across camp before he turned toward them. "I gave up. You heard me!"
Xander watched while Blair and Jim exchanged looks, Jim shrugging as if he had no idea. Only Spike came after him, moving slowly as though stalking prey, and Xander backed away.

"Pet, tell me what they heard last night," Spike said in his softest soothe-the-crazy voice.

"I'm a man."

"I noticed. Didn't think you were a bird."

"I shouldn't just give up. I shouldn't just--" Xander stopped and turned his back on them all. Almost immediately, Spike's arms were wrapped around him, pulling him close.

"Oh Sport," Jim breathed. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"You wouldn't have just given up," Xander sighed, closing his eyes.

"Oh man, what the hell happened last night?" Blair whispered.
"Xander," Jim said in a firmer voice. "You didn't do anything I wouldn't have done."

"You wouldn't have given up. You wouldn't have handed your life over to someone else because you weren't strong enough to put one foot in front of the other!" Xander could feel the growl start in Spike.

"Yes, I would have!" Jim shouted before Spike had the chance to explode. Xander's eyes popped open without his permission. "I quit the Rangers. That was my career, and I walked away because I couldn't handle what I'd seen. I couldn't handle knowing that men... that boys... died because I ordered them to."

"Whoa, hey..." Blair started to say something, but fell silent even though Jim kept his eyes focused on Xander. Instead, Blair just moved silently closer until he could touch Jim's arm.

"If Blair had been there, I would have handed him control and maybe then I wouldn't have spent the next three years doing the best impression of an asshole I could manage. Maybe I wouldn't have been fucking my partner's girl when he was alone on some road with a
gun to his head." Jim spit the words, and Xander backed away from the fury. Spike's arms pulled him deeper into the embrace while Blair slowly slid an arm around Jim's waist. In return, Jim pulled his partner into a one-armed hug. "Xander, you didn't do anything wrong... not back then and not last night. And if you trust that bleached moron, then trust him." Jim seemed to run out of energy and he turned his back and headed for the latrine tree where the battery operated lantern swung gently from a broken branch. Blair moved with him, the two bodies leaning into each other.

"That could have gone better," Xander whispered to the air.

"Oi, seemed like it went pretty well. Hopefully if enough of us say the same bloody thing, you'll get it through that skull of yours. Some days I think the nasties shoved you head-first into the headstones one time too many. Then again, you might not have survived if ya hadn't been so hard-headed," Spike answered before he put his chin on Xander's shoulder. "But right now, we have a wanker to find, so finish getting the tent packed. I'm going to nose around a bit and see if there's anything more interesting than a squirrel around here."
"Demons?" Xander asked as he quickly scanned the dark trees.

"I'm hopin' for something of the four-legged and red-blooded variety," Spike answered with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Ew." Xander made a face as he realized what Spike meant. "Just don't ever let Willow find out you ate Bambi's mother."

"Git." Spike rolled his eyes before strolling into the woods with his coat billowing after.

Xander was still, well Blair would call it 'processing,' as they walked the dark trail up the mountain two hours later. Xander thought he might actually qualify as obsessing. His head kept saying things like no one could walk through the hell that was Sunnydale without needing therapy while his heart just sort of froze up like a transmission with no transmission fluid, and after doing that to Uncle Rory's car once, Xander knew that wasn't good. And unfortunately, that wasn't the only not-good on the horizon.

"Anything yet, Sport?" Jim called from ahead.
"The same weird frayed stuff," Xander answered. "Weird frayed puke-yellow stuff," he corrected himself as he glanced at the dull threads that were disintegrating, like soggy noodles. Yep, no dinner for the Xan man tonight. Heck, he might not ever be able to face spaghetti again because these thread pieces were vibing weirdly. It was like being able to see fingernails down a chalkboard. Spike's arm tightened around him.

"Ya alright?"

"Alright in that something really bad is about to happen way," Xander answered as he ducked to avoid a hanging thread that no one else could see. Shivering at the near touch, he blinked away his Shamanic vision.

"Soddin' unnatural… fighting out here. Bloody demons should stay to the sewers and such," Spike complained bitterly, and given his tone Xander wasn't even pointing out the irony of the whole unnatural comment given they were in the middle of nature.

"Spike, you think one of us should do some scouting ahead?" Jim's voice came from fairly close, but with the whole mountain between them and the moon, Xander
couldn't see a whole lot. He could, however, feel Spike bouncing on his toes in indecision.

"Right, I'll go," Spike offered after a brief silence.

"I could—"

"You could get your head snapped off seein' as how you don't even know what you're looking out for," Spike growled at Jim. From the way Jim didn't even growl back, Xander was guessing he had already come to that conclusion on his own. "Just keep this one safe, yeah?"

Even though Spike phrased it as a simple question, it still sounded mighty threat-like to Xander's ears. Before he had a chance to point out that threatening the friends was not a good way to keep friends, Spike was gone into the night. A warm hand reached out and curled around his arm.

"Come on, Sport. Those of us with human muscles need to rest them. I'll keep an ear out if you keep your Shamanic vision open and warn us about any demons."

Xander could just imagine Jim's cringe at using that word, but he blinked away the real world. With the darkness around them, the vision was like a Light Bright with every
thread glowing against the dark.

"Anything new?" Blair asked as steady hands guided Xander to a fallen log.

"Just the same slimy yellow bits and pieces."

"Yellow. You said that Willow flashed yellow once. When?" Blair asked.

"Okay, I know you haven't really known me for a long time, but I am not memory boy," Xander scoffed.

"Sport, don't go there or I will have to tell Spike that you're verbally ripping on yourself again," Jim threatened.

"You wouldn't." Xander looked up toward the bit of darkness where Jim's voice came from and watched the gold and deep red cord throb gently, casting an eerie glow over the night. Spike would not be amused with more Xander-bashing, not even by Xander himself.

"Oh man, he so totally would. Sometimes Jim is a little too honest, if you know what I mean," Blair moved closer, the soft green of his own cord merged with Jim's
and suddenly Xander was looking at the two men in a weak yellow light.

"Okay, that's freaky," Xander said as he looked up at the men. Blair sat on the fallen trunk, leaning against Jim's leg with Jim's arms thrown around Blair's shoulders. Xander could tell that Blair was still staring into the dark, but Jim looked down at him with a concerned expression.

"So, did you suddenly pick up the Sentinel vision upgrade for the Shamanic powers?" Jim asked.

"What?" Blair asked, his blind eyes turning toward Jim. "What's up?"

"Your glow and Jim's glow are kinda glowy together."

"He can see us," Jim clarified.

"Whoa... really? Cool. Oh man, your powers are like amazing!"

Xander thought about that for a second. "If Spike's right, your powers are amazing," Xander corrected him. "Trado Shaman can teach people to use their abilities, and before I met you, all I had was a weird vibing that I
thought everyone had. So, I'm thinking the upgrades are because of you." In the dull light from the cords, Xander could see a ghostly Blair shaking his head in denial.

"No way, man. This is all you."

"Blair, how many of your students fail?" Xander suddenly asked. The question made Blair look at him with confusion, even if Blair couldn't actually see him.

"A few every semester."

Okay, that wasn't the answer Xander expected.

"Why the question about work, Sport?" Jim asked.

"I just thought Blair wouldn't have anyone fail. I mean, he's a teaching Shaman, so he should be able to teach anyone anything. He could probably make me understand Calculus if Spike is right, and that is way more amazing than colored threads."

Jim thought for a second. "Chief, the students who fail, do they actually come to your lectures?"

"Sure... I think," Blair certainty vanished. "Okay, last
semester that Rodee idiot who tried to bribe me and John Miral both failed. I know Rodee only showed up for test days..." Blair paused. "Okay, I think Miral missed most of the semester. He was in the last few classes, but I don't remember him being there for the first part of the semester."

"Ventriss?" Jim asked, a name that obviously meant something to Blair because the man glared murder up.

"I know he never came to class."

"Xander might be right then. God knows the chancellor would love any excuse to fire you, but your students do out-perform anyone else's. You told me that Professor Balachan preferred students from your courses for his second year field work."

"Oh man, that's like... I don't know."

Xander chuckled as he remembered his own doubts about the upgrade from standard human. He bit back an urge to go all Spiderman with the great responsibilities speech, but that would be a little too Andrew. "Get used to it," he said instead. "Now you're stuck having some weird power like the rest of us. Even Spike has the
demon and the soul which definitely qualifies as weirdness... or maybe not weirdness in the general sense since lots of demons, like Clem, do have souls, but having a vampire demon and a soul... okay, that's weird."

"Clem?" Blair immediately asked. Yep, Xander knew an attempt to change the topic when he heard one.

"Floppy-earred demon. He's actually a pretty good guy if you don't think about what he does to kittens."

"Kittens?" This time Blair's voice went up nearly an octave.

"He plays poker with them... or eats them. It's kinda gross, but as the one sleeping with someone who ate Bambi's mother a couple of hours ago, I am not commenting on anyone else's eating habits. But we saw him in LA, and he was definitely in the soul-crowd. Most demons have this nearly black cord, but Clem's was pink."

Jim sat down next to Blair with a sigh, and Blair patted his partner's leg. Xander wondered if Blair was silently offering some sort of sympathy for Jim having to put up with another demon conversation or whether they just
normally touched this much.

"Okay, so let's talk color. You said Jim and Spike were both dark red. We could hypothesize that could mean protective or maybe big-bad alpha males."

"Angel wasn't red," Xander said. "He's alpha, but his soul was..." Xander struggled for the words to describe the threads he'd seen clinging to the demon. "His soul was almost shredded, torn into threads and clinging to the demon cord, and there was red in there, but there was lots more blue and yellow."

"Okay, yellow. So now we have a flash of yellow in Willow's cord and yellow in Angel's."

"And you're never going near this Angel," Jim broke in. "I don't care if the last anthropological convention in the universe is in LA, that city is officially off limits. Xander said that soul is the only thing that keeps him from turning into one of the most dangerous demons on the planet, so if his soul is shredded..." Jim's voice came as a growl, and a faint ripple of yellow highlighted his burgundy, brightening it for a moment.

"Yellow!" Xander nearly shouted.
"What?" Blair yelped as Jim stood with his hand on his gun. "Where?" Jim demanded darkly as he scanned the trees that Xander couldn't see.

"No," Xander hurried to explain before Jim shot an innocent rock. "Jim, you just did a flare thingy with yellow. Okay, there wasn't a lot of yellow, but there was enough to make everything sort of brighten there for a second."

Jim turned and glared at Xander before he slowly sat, instincts obviously still on high-alert.

"Sorry," Xander offered.

"Oh man, okay so now we're collecting evidence. Xander, this is important: when did Willow have her flash of yellow?"

"When we were hunting the pig demon that turned out to be a blowing up volcanoes and destroying cities demon."

"When it attacked?" Blair asked excitedly.
"No, before that, before we even found anything."

"Oh man." Blair sagged as though gravely disappointed before he tried another question. "What were you talking about?"

"Okay, I am really not memory man, so no way am I going to remember that." Xander rolled his eyes. He couldn't even remember the stuff he tried to remember, like the name of the blowing up volcanoes and destroying cities demon, so random memories were not hitting the long-term storage.

"Come on. You were walking through the field..."

Xander sighed and struggled to find the right memory. Jim gave a faint, strangled chuckle, and Xander could interpret that pretty easily... better that Blair did this to Xander than to Jim. "We were going to look for the pig demon."

"Yeah?" Blair encouraged quietly.

"Nope. Not remembering. I have a memory like a sponge, only it drips things out as fast as it soaks them up."
"Maybe you should lie back, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths."

"No way, Junior. The early warning system is not closing his eyes," Jim immediately interrupted. "So, whatever theory you have bouncing around in your head, it can wait until Spike gets back. We don't even know if demons have body odor for me to smell, and we already damn sure know they don't all have heartbeats for me to hear, so we need Xander."

Xander felt an unhappy jolt as he realized they were all depending on him. Gritting his teeth against the familiar fear, he nodded his agreement. "Yeah, big with the bad idea. Me and closing my eyes leads to sleeping, which most of my high school teachers would be happy to tell you."

"So don't close your eyes, but Xander, you know the answer. Come on. You're walking across the field. Where's Buffy?"

Xander sighed as he looked over at Blair's intense expression. "Jim, I'm feeling the sympathy here. He's this pushy with the senses, isn't he?"
Jim laughed. "Yep, he is," he answered good-naturedly as he ruffled Blair's hair, sending Blair's hands flying madly around his head to try and defend his head.

"Damn it," Blair cursed before he poked at Jim hard enough to make the Sentinel grab his wrist. Xander wondered what it would have been like to be part of that... if Spike hadn't wanted him. He suspected that he would have always felt outside because he just wouldn't have fit between them.

"Okay, Buffy was right next to me because I'd almost fallen on my face, and Willow was a couple of feet to the side, and I started looking around and I noticed that Willow was normally this orangy-brown but she went all flarey yellow."

"No one said anything first?" Blair asked. He and Jim had obviously come to a truce because they sat side by side, Blair leaning into Jim and Jim's arm around Blair's waist.

"Um, no. I mean, I was muttering, but nothing with the saying."

"Muttering what?"
Xander struggled to remember. "I had nearly fallen and I said something to myself about it being a stupid idea, going out without Spike, because he was so going to kill me. And metaphorically, I was so right on that count."

"Sport, trust me, you don’t know how to mutter. You tend to just complain in a slightly lower tone," Jim said with amusement.

"Yeah, yeah, says the all-hearing Sentinel. Not even Slayers have bionic hearing."

"Oh man, Jim's right. A ninety-year-old man with otosclerosis could hear you mutter, and I so totally think I get it. It's obvious with the cultural associations with yellow, but I wanted to make sure because the brain... man... it's totally uncharted territory. I mean, eighty percent of research subjects with synesthesia report that a natural E on the piano sounds like the color yellow, so there's obviously some sort of symbolic language that goes beyond the obvious, so I don't want to just assume the obvious."

"Whoa, Chief, how about assuming that we have no idea what you're talking about?" Jim interrupted.
"Yellow. Man, if you call someone yellow, what are you saying?" Blair asked triumphantly.

"Fear," Xander said quietly. "All the yellow... all those threads hanging and thrown around." Xander bit his lip as he considered that.

"It makes sense. You said the colors are stable but not solid and that Spike's anger turns his cord darker, so it's reasonable to assume that you perceive some sort of emotion attached to the underlying soul. Man, maybe the soul is emotion. This is... whoa. Just whoa."

"Yeah, okay," Xander said slowly.

"Sport, what's wrong?" Jim moved so that he was sitting between Blair and Xander, so now he looked weirdly backlit by the glow of the cords. Xander swallowed heavily.

"If yellow is fear, then all that yellow out there—"

Xander didn't finish it, but Jim's eyes snapped to the trail, the trail where he couldn't see the cords draped over the trees like some demented elf had TP'ed the trees with snot.
"Something out here was afraid," Jim said as he stood, his hand going back to his gun.

"Which, hey, I'm okay with the fear part, but the fact that the cords are draped over things... Jim, something, a lot of somethings, got thrown around like rag dolls so that their soul cords ended up getting caught on things. Some of the cords are caught on branches two stories up."

"Shit," Jim growled softly, his free hand going down to rest on Blair's shoulder.

"And the somethings that got thrown around are so very, very dead. Those cords are rotting." Xander could feel his stomach twist as the weird vibage suddenly looked more like the scene of a massacre, and Xander had preferred random vibes of the creepy kind.

Jim went utterly still, at least he did right after he actually pulled his weapon from his shoulder holster.

"Jim?" Blair asked quietly. "If a bunch of people died, where are the bodies?"

"Okay, this is where the creepy horror movie music
starts, isn't it?" Xander asked.

"No. This is where we find what we're looking for and get the hell off this mountain," Jim said darkly. "I hate this demon shit. Seriously hate it."

"Oh man, I'm so with you there," Blair agreed. Xander just swallowed the bile that threatened to make him vomit as he considered the scene of the crime.

Part Twenty

"Demon," Xander whispered as he saw a faint glimmer weaving through the trees.

"Where?" Jim asked, crouching even lower as he inched forward.

Xander pointed. "But it might be Spike, which would still make it a demon, but a demon you really shouldn't shoot. He gets cranky when people shoot him."
Jim didn't answer as he kept his handgun trained at the spot Xander had pointed to. Next to him, his backpack lay on the ground, the zipper open and a wide range of weapons waiting.

"What has all your knickers in a twist then?" Spike voice came from the dark. Jim sat up and turned his gun toward the ground as Blair leaned against his back wearily.

"Spike. Thank god," Xander said as he got up to head for his vampire. He got three steps before his foot caught on something and he went flying forward. Before he could hit the ground, his flailing arms grabbed something smooth and cool and he was enveloped in the smell of leather right before he and Spike crashed to the ground.

"What the bloody hell are you doing wandering around in the dark?"

"Hey, I am perfectly capable of walking a few feet," Xander complained loudly as he untangled himself from Spike and Spike's coat. He was so busy with the untangling part that he didn't even catch the total stupidity of what he'd said until Spike snorted. "Okay, so
obviously not so good with the walking a few feet, but..." Xander stopped before he admitted that he just hadn't wanted to wait an extra five seconds to touch Spike. Instead he focused on why he'd wanted to reach Spike's side. "You're pretty sure that whatever Blair helps me figure out about my powers is right, right?" he asked as he got to his feet. Spike's arm slipped around his waist.

"Yeah, not a hundred percent sure seeing as how Shaman are still human and can fuck up as fast as anyone."

"Oh yeah, so very true," Blair said barely above a whisper.

Xander ignored him. "People died here, possibly a lot of people. Messily." Xander looked at the frayed and rotting yellow hanging from the trees. "Weirdly, but dead and lots of dead."

"What's with the hue and cry bit? Who died? Where?" Spike asked. Xander could barely see Spike, but his face suddenly grew new shadows, so Xander knew he'd slipped into gameface.

"The threads are rotting because whoever they were
attached to is dead, and they're yellow, so I'm thinking human... well, it could be demons, which would be less disturbing, but it's probably people since Angel is the only demon I know with yellow in him. Blair helped me figure out that yellow is fear, and these guys who died were big with the fear." Xander felt the babble boil over. Okay, dead people, no enemy to focus on, a forest that looked like the Manson crime scene... yep, he was entitled to one serious freak-out.

"Yellow's fear. Bloody hell, what do you mean callin' Angel a coward?" Spike suddenly changed the topic.

For a second, Xander looked at Spike, not really following the new direction, but Spike leaned closer, an unhappy expression on his face. "Hey, I never said Angel was a coward! A bad dresser, yes, and yes, I do see the irony in me insulting someone else's wardrobe, but the man is a walking cliché. But he's got one-fourth of the Scourge of Europe in there."

"Oi, what am I? Did my own time scarin' the locals."

"Yeah, but you don't have the Scourge of Europe in there. You ARE the Scourge of Europe, which should actually be more disturbing, but it isn't. You did shitty
things. Now you don't. And do you realize that with Cordy and Anya and you I have a real pattern going. However, all of you do the reformed evil thing well. But Angel... he isn't the Scourge, he's got that bastard locked up inside."

"Yeah, only he makes one mistake, and the git isn't locked up inside anymore," Spike admitted.

"Nope, he's free to rape and pillage all of Angel's nearest and dearest, although may I just add that killing Willow's fish was the biggest loser move ever."

"I might have mentioned that to him myself once or twice. But pet, you're sure these are human cords, or what's left of them?"

"Nope. I'm feeling big with the not-sureness, but it feels right. I wish it didn't. I wish someone would tell me that I was imagining things and set me down in the corner with a cookie."

"Sport, we all wish that some days," Jim said in a weary voice. Xander glanced over in the silence that followed.

"Oh man, totally," Blair agreed.
"Right then. I guess we just have to test this theory of yours. Where are these threads of yours?" Spike's brisk tone destroyed the melancholy that had started to settle on them.

"Okay, this is the really disturbing thing. A lot of them are dangling from the trees, like the people went flying over them or got tossed over them, and those thoughts are equally disturbing."

"Hey," Blair interrupted. "I am going with the lack of bodies as the disturbing part of this. If this was the scene of a massacre, where are the bodies?"

"Massacre?" Spike asked, and again with the looking around. Xander realized he was just a little freaked at how seriously everyone else was taking his warnings.

"Maybe not." Xander fidgeted. "I mean, the cord bits are everywhere, but if someone took a guy and played volleyball over the tops of the trees with him, that could have draped soul cord everywhere, and when he died, those bits would just sort of... hang."

"And that's what you're seeing?" Spike let go of Xander
and took a step so that he stood just in front of him.

"I think so, but I'm not taking bets. Nope, no bets for me because I'm faking it here, Spike. But the weird rotting cords and the extra Hellmouthy vibe... yeah, someone died. Either lots of someones died or one particular someone got tossed back and forth above the trees enough to qualify as serious-ass torture."

"Okay, I am officially happy to have my power and not yours," Blair said softly, a seriously icked-out tone in his voice.

"Oi, an animus Shaman is a good deal higher on the totem pole than a trado Shaman. Animus are one of the most powerful Shaman out there, and considerin' that Shaman tend to be a good sight more powerful than just witches, that's sayin' a lot."

"Hey, whoa, no offense," Blair hurried to offer as Spike sounded more than a little cranky. Yep, Xander loved Spike, but it sure didn't change the fact that he was one demon who was more than a little into showing off his power... and his Shaman.

"I'm with Blair. I would much rather be with the teaching
than seeing this stuff. It's creepy, seeing this stuff when you guys can't. Besides, he so has the cooler spirit animal. I still can't believe I got a kôdkod," Xander complained.

"I think they're cute, Sport," Jim commented with just a little laughter in his voice. Xander glared in his general direction since the Sentinel would be able to see him.

"Point me in the direction of a chunk of this yellow shite, and let's see if we can't figure out if it was a human or a demon that died," Spike nearly growled.

"Okay, that way," Xander said as he pointed at a chunk of gooey, glowy, puke-yellow dangling in the air.

"Not exactly helpful, pet. Stand under it or something so I can see exactly what you're pointing at."

"Oh no, no way. I stand under that, and it's going to fall right on me." Xander actually started backing away from the disgusting blob in question before he thought better of it and stood still. If he fell on his ass walking forwards, he so should not risk walking backwards in the dark.

"Yeah, except for the part where it can't actually touch
you," Spike pointed out with just a touch of sarcasm.

"No fair using logic on me. Spike, this stuff is big with the creepy."

"Xander, I want bloody off this mountain. If that means figuring out what the soddin' hell went on up here so that Buffy doesn't think we skipped out on her and so that you don't do a guilt trip, we'll do it. That means I'm climbing a soddin' tree in the middle of fucking nowhere and you're standing under the blob pointing at it." Spike grabbed Xander's arm, pulling him forward and then following as Xander slowly walked toward the slime in question.

"Geez. Cranky much?" Xander muttered.

"Bloody hell. Just point."

Xander poked his finger into the air straight up. "I'm right under it, so if I get slimed, I'm blaming you. I'm guessing two or two and a half stories up."

"There's no slime!" Spike snorted as he let Xander go.

"Says the guy who can't see the slime," Xander muttered.
He just got another snort in return.

Xander could hear the tree shaking, pine needles rustling madly as Spike clambered up the tree with demonic speed. Xander watched the red glow of his cord weave and rise. "You're about at the right height now. Um, you need to come that way about two feet."

"Now?" Spike called down.

"Yeah, you're sitting in the middle of slime central."

"Slime that doesn't smell, feel slimy or leave bloody awful stains on anything. Might bit better than the slime we normally deal with."

"Do you deal with a lot of slime?" Blair asked from somewhere near Xander's right shoulder, Xander looked over toward the soft green glow. Jim with his burgundy was standing farther back.

"Way more slime than you want to know about. Slime and chunks."

"Bloody hell," Spike interrupted them. "Something went crashing through up here. There's broken branches, and I
can smell whatever came crashing through."

"What does it smell like?" Jim called up.

"Fear. Human fear." When Spike's glow suddenly dropped to the ground, Xander jumped. "I know that smell well enough." Spike finished as he walked to Xander and slipped an arm around him. Funny, Xander didn't remember that Spike used to do so many demony things. Yeah, he killed demons with demonic speed, but he didn't remember ever seeing Spike casually take a two story drop in front of the Scoobies.

"Okay, and we're back to my question. If someone died, where's the evidence?" Blair asked.

"Seems like they didn't bleed much, and what trail they did leave is a bit over our heads."

"They? You're sure it's a they and not a he?" Xander asked Spike, and that fingernails down the chalkboard creepiness was about to make his skin crawl off. Xander pulled away from the slimed tree, Spike following without letting go.

"Pine scent masks most of it, but I can smell at least a
couple people up there," Spike agreed.

"Cue creepy music." Xander shivered.

"There has to be some sort of evidence. Bodies don't just disappear," Jim insisted.

"Oh man, or they do. Did something eat them?"

"Okay, you didn't have to say that," Xander complained to Blair. "Really, honestly, there is no need to point out that we may be on an isolated mountain with a people-munching demon."

"Evisceration leaves a bloody mess, figuratively and literally. I'd have smelled that. There are a couple of demons that eat people whole," Spike mused.

"Okay, that is more than I wanted to know," Blair said in a slightly nauseous tone of voice, which he totally deserved since he was the one who brought up people-eating demons in the first place.

"Evisceration's nothing," Xander said. Yep, if he was going to be creeped out, he was taking them down with him. "There are big pus-filled demons that smell like rot
and baby demons that crawl in brains and these really creepy wormy things that jump from person to person during sex like a seriously overgrown venereal disease, and compared to those things, magical syphilis is... okay, it sucks, but it doesn't suck as bad and venereal worm-like infestations."

"I hate this demon shit," Jim growled. He moved close enough to Blair that the souls again merged and Xander could see him wrap his arms around Blair's waist from behind, a look of concern on his face. "Okay, you said a couple of demons would eat without leaving a trace. What are we looking at?" Jim's arms tightened around Blair.

"Oi, that's just it. Doesn't make sense. Two of the breeds couldn't be here. The oxygen would kill 'em."

"Which means there has to be at least one oxygen-breathing suspect," Jim said with a grim confidence.

"Well, yeah. But if a YeeYue demon were around, wouldn't be anything we could do about it. Hell, a whole army of Slayers wouldn't so much as put a dent in one of those buggers."
"Okay, this is me officially freaking. Do you really think there's a YeeYue on the mountain?" Xander turned to Spike with a sort of sinking feeling of impending doom. If an army of slayers couldn't deal, they were so lunchmeat.

"Bloody hell, no," Spike laughed. "They hate this dimension. Too much pollution, and the food tastes like shite. You lot eat too much junk food and preservatives for their refined palate."

"Oh man, next time you want to go for Wonderburgers, I'm getting a double. Extra fries. So getting extra fries."

"So, you're saying that two of the possible suspects physically can't exist here and the third wouldn't bother?" Jim asked, ignoring Blair's whispered words.

"I think that's exactly what I just said."

"Which leaves us nowhere."

"Don't know about that," Spike said slowly. "Made it up to the blast site where the soldier boys took out the Kithharn nest. Thing was facing the west." Spike stopped and let the silence fill the darkness, only the silence wasn't so
silent and Xander had to keep telling himself that the rustling of pine limbs was wind and not human bodies being flung through the air. He leaned back into Spike.

"Okay, I'm sure that makes sense to someone, but not me," Jim finally said.

"Kith-harn are clan demons. Have long traditions, not particularly useful ones, but they'd give up their tusks before they'd give up tradition."

"And tradition says to not have the settlement face west," Blair suddenly blurted. "Oh man, I'm right aren't I?"

"Exactly. They see it as bad luck. Whatever the soldier-boys blew up, it wasn't Kith-harn."

"But the guy Buffy talked to..." Xander said, suddenly confused by the whole conversation.

"He lied, Sport. The military does that." Jim sounded ever so not happy. "So, so we head for the truck or take one last try to find Major Riley and his division first?"

Xander could just imagine which option Spike wanted. He
chewed his lip and waited for Spike to give his opinion.

"Xander?" Spike eventually asked into the darkness.

"Um, hey, whatever you think is best."

"Oi, what I think is best is taking you home and keeping you locked in a basement where the nasties can't take nightly turns trying to eat you. However, I don't think that's particularly healthy. So, what do you want?"

"Spike." Jim snapped the word out.

"Oi, boy knows I'm a demon, and a possessive one at that. But he also knows I'll bloody listen to him, so keep your nose out of my business, Sentinel." The way Spike said it, he made 'Sentinel' sound like a bad word. Blair put a hand on Jim's arm, and Xander could see Jim back down from the response he clearly wanted to shout back.

"So, spit it out, pet. What do you want?"

Xander hesitated for a second because he was so going to regret this. "Okay, I really think we should take a shot at finding Riley. I don't know, but I just can't believe he'd
survive all that shit with the Initiative and Maggie Walsh just to get blown up by his own government doing some sort of coverup."

"Sport, that might be wishful thinking," Jim said quietly, as though he hadn't just gotten into it with Spike over Spike wanting to go home.

"You survived," Blair said quickly, and Xander was happy to have at least some back-up on the potentially fatal and really stupid plan to keep going.

"I was lucky, Chief. I was lucky and my senses gave me an edge both with getting accepted by the tribe and staying alive. There's no tribe up here to take in the survivors."

"Assumin' there are any, but that's just it: we're assuming. So, Xander and I are going to do a fast loop of the blast, see if we can't pick up the trail. We'll leave our gear here and you can set up a secure camp."

"But Spike, the tent," Xander argued. "If we get stuck out there, I don't want you doing a flambé impression."

"Bloody hell, vampires walked the earth before sunproof tents and sewers, pet. Worst case, I'll have to dig into the
earth, and if that happens, I'm going to be dirty and mad as hell until we get back to civilization. But I'd rather risk that then take this slow and guarantee us two more nights on the mountain. Without weight, we can cover the distance faster. If you see his soul cord, fine. If not, I'm voting for getting the hell off this mountain."

"Out of this state," Jim added softly. "Are you sure splitting up is the best tactic?"

"Hell no. Just better than anything else I can come up with. You still have the radio?"

"Yeah." Jim poked his thumb back toward their packs. Spike had slipped his own radio into one of the pockets of his coat before they'd started, so he nodded.

"Look, we're going to get off the trail. Even if I can't see this stuff Xander sees, I don't want to be too near it," Jim said as he looked around at the trees.

"Probably smart. Head back down the trail about an hour or so. That way we can get back to the truck first thing in the morning, one way or the other."

Jim nodded without answering.
"Right. We'll do a fast loop and hopefully meet you back here long before sunup."

Blair had gone to the packs, taking Xander's visible light with him, so he didn't realize what Blair was doing until he pressed a canteen into Xander's hand.

"Spike." Jim's voice came out of the darkness now.

"Yeah?"

"Just, don't get killed," the Sentinel ordered him.

"Not a problem, mate. I'll be causing trouble centuries after you're in your grave." With that, Spike tugged on Xander's waist and the two of them started up the trail. Slipping the canteen strap over his shoulder, Xander just prayed that they didn't solve the mystery of dead bodies flying through the air because right now, he desperately just didn't want to know.
"Anything yet?" Spike asked without slowing down at all. Xander panted as he half ran behind Spike. The only way he was even keeping up was that Spike was dragging him along for the ride.

"Yeah, a charliehorse in my leg. Can we maybe slow down before I fall on my face? Falling bad. Letting the human breathe good."

"Oi. Just want out of here." It wasn't an apology, but the fact that Spike slowed down suggested that he really was sorry.

"Yep, I get that, but I assume you want me still on the side of the breathing. Giles would be cranky if I showed up not breathing," Xander said as he took a deep breath and tried to catch up with his body's need for oxygen. The climb up the mountain at breakneck speed had left him a little winded and a lot exhausted.

"If you weren't breathin', I wouldn't let the wanker
anywhere near you," Spike pointed out, and it took Xander a second to process that. It might have been the lack of oxygen to the brain.

"Okay, that falls somewhere between being sweet and incredibly disturbing. What has you all twitchy?"

"Not twitchy," Spike complained in his best put-upon voice.

"Says the twitchy one."

"Bloody hell. You've been hanging out with Blair too much. You're getting as mouthy as him." Spike's complaints did nothing to hide the fact that he had definitely not answered the question.

"Yeah, well, I'm right. So start with the 'splainy because I'm getting more creeped out here, which seems wrong because we left those weird threads behind, so I was hoping to reduce the overall level of creepiness," Xander argued. Spike was always honest, sometimes even when he shouldn't be because honesty can be rude, so the whole hiding things was setting off the creep-meter big time.
"Yeah, that's not all we left behind."

"Okay, see, things like that just make me jumpier."

"Every bloody bird in the trees, every squirrel, every soddin' bug is gone." Spike said the words quietly, but his hand tightened on Xander's arm.

"Okay, I'm really hoping that's your very disturbing sense of humor showing up, like the way you laughed at Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Seriously hoping," Xander hoped, but at this point he wasn't really expecting.

"I'm not bloody joking," Spike snapped. Xander followed in silence for a moment, considering the dark shadows around him and trying to imagine that all the life, all the bugs and birds and bats were just gone. His imagination wasn't that good.

"Any bodies?" he asked hopefully, not really sure if he wanted to find out they were walking by piles of animal corpses or if he wanted to hear that more bodies had just vanished... or been eaten. Eating was becoming more of a possibility, but if something ate that much, shouldn't it poop? Maybe they were about to find a mountain of demon poop. Xander could imagine Buffy's response to
that possibility.

"No. Not bodies, just every livin' thing gone."

"Why did you have to tell me that?"

"Because you bloody asked," Spike snapped. "Now can we go back? I'm soddin' well ready to get off this mountain."

Xander stopped, dragging Spike to a stop with him since the vampire wouldn't let go of him. He looked firmly toward the reddish glow that was Spike and did his best to imitate Willow's resolve face. "Nope. Na-uh, not happening, not until we get to that ridge and can see over. If Riley's out here, we need to find him even if it's creepier than... okay, I've done horrifying and terrifying, but I actually think this tops the scale on creepy."

Spike sighed, and for a half second, Xander thought they were going to turn around and go back, as though talking about the possibility made it more reasonable somehow. "Somethin' sure isn't right which is why we're getting to that ridge, peeking over and getting the bloody hell out of here."
Spike started up the trail again without a word, and Xander followed with a small smile. Yep, his vampire loved him enough to care about what Xander wanted, and that shouldn't be quite so warm-and-fuzzy feeling, but it definitely was.

"Spike?" Xander said after several minutes of hiking up the trail, the smell of smoke starting to tickle his nose.

"Wot?"

"Thanks," Xander said softly.

"For what?" Spike sounded genuinely confused, and Xander struggled to find a way to explain it. Buffy and Willow and Spike, they all loved him. They all wanted to take care of him. But only Spike really trusted Xander to know the right thing for himself. Yeah, he certainly enjoyed giving Xander shit about the string of demon girlfriends and his ability to chase after the bad guys armed with nothing more useful than a rock, but Spike never sent him away or lied about there being a bad guy or exchanged those funny looks that made it clear that the girls didn't really trust his judgment.

"For not dragging me away by my ear," Xander finally
answered quietly.

"Don't think I'm not considerin' it."

"Yep, I know you're big with considering because I'm considering running like a rabbit with my tail between my legs, and I think I just lost the metaphor somewhere in the middle, but you get my point."

"Just keep in mind that I reserve the right ta drag you out of any situation that's too dangerous."

Xander couldn't help it; even with all the weirdness and even though Spike was being serious, Xander started laughing.

"Loon," Spike complained softly without slowing down.

"Chasing around a dead mountain for a soldier-boy who might be dead with a big bad who seems to eat anything moving, bones and all. That doesn't qualify as too dangerous, but why do I have the feeling that you would so not let me go on a weekend retreat with Willow?"

"Bloody right that's on the too dangerous list," Spike snidely agreed after a moment of silence. "There's tryin'
to do the right thing, and then there's just stupid."

"Says the guy with up-close and personal relationship with self-immolation."

"Yeah, well..." Spike fell silent, and Xander really didn't have anything to say after that either. Yep, they were both self-preservation-impaired when it came right down to it. The reference to Spike's second death kinda killed the conversation, though, so Xander concentrated on keeping up with Spike who was still walking fast, even if he wasn't going as fast as before.

They had climbed for another half-hour or so, enough that Xander could now smell the smoke from the "accidental explosion" which had really been a military bombing. Xander just really hoped that there weren't any campers out here at the time, but then again, if there had been campers, the local big bad had probably eaten them. Eaten and potentially pooped. Spike stopped and Xander focused on breathing for a second.

"The ridge is about five feet ahead. The other side is a bit steep, so don't move forward without me ahead of you," he said. Xander nodded, knowing that Spike could see him. A nearly full moon was shining through the clouds,
and even Xander could make out the shadowy forms of trees and rocks by now. Spike moved slowly forward until the blackness ahead of him turned into a view of stars and the shadowy form of the mountain slope falling away on the far side of the ridge.

"Right then, if ya don't see sign of Captain Cardboard, we're out of here."

Xander scanned the area and could see the faint thread of someone who had passed through a while back. "Spike, I'm seeing yellow."

"Sodding.... That's it, we're out of here."

"Whoa, hey, not that kind of yellow," Xander yelped as Spike yanked him away from the ridge. "There's a cord all pulsy with blue and yellow."

"You're sure? You're sure someone's alive and ya aren't seein' more of that dead shite?" Spike didn't sound happy at all, but at least he'd stopped trying to drag Xander off the mountain.

"Um, that or I'm having new and wacky fun with the powers."
"Bloody hell," Spike sighed before he turned and started back toward the ridge. "When this shite is over, we're setting up camp in Cascade for a while, pet," he calmly announced as he went over the ridge and started down the slope without letting go of Xander's arm. Spike made it look so easy that Xander was fooled into thinking that the slope was solid rock. Instead, he found himself sliding in loose shale, struggling to stay on his feet, and succeeding only because Spike kept a firm hold on his arm.

"Surf's up, dude," Xander joked at the bottom, but his heart pounded in his ears and he had to lean against a rock to get his breath back. That was a little too exciting, if you could really call sliding down a rockslide in the middle of the night exciting. Maybe terrifying was a better word. Xander had images of losing his balance and breaking random bones on a nasty fall. "Thanks for the catch," Xander finally said. Spike was standing a little off.

"Wouldn't let you fall."

"Nope, you wouldn't, and my unbroken bones thank you again," Xander agreed.
"Right then, which way?" Spike asked. Xander pointed in the direction of the cord he'd seen, and Spike again took him by the arm, leading him through the rocky debris and around burnt skeletons of trees lit by the moonlight.

"Hey, wait, we're moving to Cascade?" Xander asked several minutes later. "I thought that you thought that I was spending too much time with Blair."

"You are. But if being around the fuzzy little Shaman is going to turn new powers on, then he'll bloody well help you figure out how to use them," Spike just about snarled.

"Hey, I'm all for party crashing, despite a bad experience with frat boys and a bra, but don't you think we'd better talk to Jim and Blair before just setting up camp in their city?"

"Oi, first off, they don't own the whole bloody city."

"An argument which might make sense if I hadn't seen you run demons out of London claiming the whole city for yourself," Xander pointed out with a wry laugh. Spike and territorial were pretty much next to each other in the dictionary, and after living with Jim and Blair for a
while, Xander knew full well that Jim's name was right there with them. "And what's second off?"

"Already talked to Jim when you were sleepin' like the dead. The git likes you, and after we had a little discussion about who does and who does not have permission to touch you, we both agreed that you needed to work with Blair for a while."

"You threatened Jim," Xander accused him.

"Soddin' right I did." Spike sounded all defensive now, but Xander smiled.

"Thank you."

"For threatening Jim?" Spike had gone from defensive to confused in record time, and Xander smiled wider at the sudden shift.

"No, for knowing that this Shaman stuff is really freaking me out. It's not all wacky fun with string, and I just... I don't know." Xander shrugged.

"When I agreed ta take care of you, I meant it. You're mine, and if you need something I can't give ya, then I'll
make sure I find someone who can. Blair can teach you just as well as that wanker Rupert picked out."

"Yep, better than."

They had reached another rough section which was obviously closer to the center of the blast, and the conversation ended as Spike helped Xander climb over the charred remains of fallen trees and loose boulders which littered the slope. A few times, Xander had to point in a new direction as the yellow/blue cord threaded through the landscape, weaving wildly at one point as though the owner had been drunk and stumbling through the scorched landscape.

Even in the moonlight the place looked horrible, so Xander really didn't want to see it in all it's sunny glory. Hopefully by morning they would be back to camp with Jim and Blair and the next day they could get to the truck. Yep, retreat was sounding mighty good. Retreat and then call Giles and recommend that they find a demon who ate not just people but everything whole and didn't leave bodies. And after that, Faith and a dozen slayers could come kick ass. Faith would enjoy the challenge. They came around another outcrop of rock, and Xander stopped.
"Either my powers are abandoning ship, which I really hope is not like rats abandoning a sinking ship, or the soul cord vanishes into solid rock."

"There's a cave," Spike said, his voice tight and clipped.

"Or that. You know, the Shamanic vision is cool, but night vision is much cooler," Xander tried joking. It didn't really cut any of the sudden tension or make Spike loosen the now-painful grip on Xander's arm. "Ow," Xander whispered, and immediately the grip loosened.

"You stay behind me. We don't know what's in there."

"We know it's afraid. Afraid should mean good guy since whatever killed all the critters would definitely not be feeling fear. Besides, this is a person, no demons on the radar, so it should be okay," Xander argued.

"We can talk about your lack of logic later, pet. Right now just bloody stay behind me," Spike ordered in a voice that didn't invite argument.

"Right, staying behind," Xander agreed softly as Spike walked toward the cliff face. At the last possible
moment, he turned and slid into a narrow crack in the rock. Xander followed, suddenly glad to have Spike between him and the unknown. Of course, with all the animals gone, there shouldn't be any spiders or bats. Xander had a sudden urge to ask Spike, just to be sure, but the vampire was moving silently forward, and Xander could only see their feet as the soul cord they followed glowed softly. Yep, not the time for stupid questions. Definitely not the time. Xander held his breath and watched the yellow/blue cord beneath their feet as he followed Spike into the darkness.

**Part Twenty-Two**

"Stop, or I will fire," a rough voice from the dark ordered.

"Oi, you fire, and I'll tie your bloody intestines into a knot around your neck," Spike snarled, but Xander just shouted one word. "Riley!"

"Xander? Spike?" Yep, that was Riley; that was a confused Riley.

"Score one for the home team. Spike, we found Riley!"

"Think I noticed, pet," Spike said without much
enthusiasm, but at least he was once again walking forward into the dark. "So, what happened to your leg?" Spike asked.

"It's broken," Riley said curtly. Xander waited for some sort of explanation, but nada.

"Your leg is broken?" he finally asked in the silence. "Okay, this is going to make the fast retreat sorta awkward." And again with the silence. Funny, Xander didn't remember this much silence with Riley and Spike, there was more of the random insults and sniping and death threats, but those were downright fun compared to the silence. It was like putting freaky icing on the freaky cake, which was not actually anything like cake. Xander opened his mouth to say something else, and Spike's hand found his arm and squeezed lightly. Okay, that would be the close the mouth signal.

"I assume Buffy sent you," Riley eventually offered.

"Assumed right," Spike answered, but Xander could tell he was distracted.

"Spike?" Xander whispered softly.
"I sure as hell wouldn't come after your sorry arse. As far as I'm concerned, you got yourself into this, and you can get yourself out." And now Spike was definitely back on the hate Riley train. Xander wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but at least it was familiar.

"I don't know why Buffy won't believe me when I tell her you haven't changed," Riley grunted the last word, and Xander realized that the Spike soul cord had kinda scrunched down, so either Spike had shrunk or he was kneeling next to Riley. Xander was hoping for kneeling.

"This is going to hurt," Spike said without sounding all that sympathetic and Riley gave another pained grunt.

"This whole soul business is just a scam, isn't it?" Riley demanded, his words coming between heavy breaths.

"You ungrateful git. I move ya without tightening the brace and the broken end of that bone could hit a vein, but if you want to take the risk, I'm more than happy ta haul you back as a lifeless body."

"Hey, hey, creepiness still abounds here," Xander hurried to interrupt the fight. "Riley, are you going to be okay and could you please let Spike do whatever he has to do?"
I'd like to get off the mountain now, and share stories of mutual hatred later." Both Riley and Spike were silent for a second and then Xander heard a rustling of fabric and something dragging before Riley grunted again.

"Xander, why are you here?" Riley asked after a couple of seconds of more heavy breathing.

"I'm part of the rescue team," Xander said with just a little hurt in the voice. Okay, so he wasn't the rescuing part of the rescue team, but he was teamlike and even if Riley didn't know it, he could do the search part of search and rescue.

"Xander, I didn't mean it like that. I mean, why are you up here with just Spike? He obviously doesn't have the chip anymore."

"No, I don't," Spike agreed with a little more enthusiasm than strictly necessary. "And Xander's a lot more useful up here than you are, wanker. He found you, so show some gratitude."

"I am grateful to Xander."

It was funny. If Xander were in a cave with a broken leg
and a vampire who wanted to eat him, he'd be too busy being terrified and in pain to do the snarking, but Riley obviously had the whole soldier multi-tasking thing down because he could be in pain and get pissy with Spike at the same time.

"When I find whatever did all the killin', I'm throwing your kicking and screaming body at it," Spike muttered. "This is going to hurt like a bitch, so try not ta piss yourself and scream like baby when I lift ya," he suggested. Xander winced at just hearing the tone, but Riley didn't answer. "Pet, back up some, yeah?" Spike asked, and Xander used his hands to feel his way back toward the entrance to the small cave.

"Mother of--" Riley cut himself off with a sharp gasp and then Spike and Riley were moving closer and Xander backed out into the night where the stars gave him some light. Spike and Riley's soul cords lay side by side, Riley's hovering slightly above since he was getting carried, but the two cords--Riley's blue still streaked with yellow and Spike's burgundy and midnight blue double helix--pushed against each other. It was like watching two magnets push apart because everywhere that Riley's soul would surge forward, Spike's would recoil only to pulse brighter at some other point of contact so that Riley's
cord retreated.

"Pet, call Jim and let him know we had a bit of bad luck and found the wanker," Spike suggested as he put Riley on the ground. Xander stood behind Spike, and the vampire pushed the radio into his hand.

"Jim, right."

"Jim?" Riley asked.

"Big, scary ex-Ranger type," Xander explained as he clicked the radio. "Jim? Jim? Earth to Jim because we're needing some help here."

"Ya have to let go of the button, pet." Spike even managed to say it without making Xander feel more than a little stupid.

"I knew that. The freaky and weird going on just distracted me," he defended himself as he let go of the button.

"... on, Sport, over," Jim's voice immediately came through.
Xander pressed the button. "Sorry about that. Brain fart," Xander said. "We found Riley, but he has a broken leg and the mountain has become one serious no-mans or bugs-land, over."


"Um, the situation is creepy, Riley is the only survivor so far. Riley, is there anyone else who survived?" Xander asked the bluish coil on the ground. Yellow still pulsed around the edges of the cord.

"No one we want to find," Riley answered.

"Okay, I'm assuming you heard that, Jim, and now you know why it's big with the creepy. And speaking of creepy, not only are there no demons up here, but Spike says there's pretty much nothing alive at all, not a single bug left in the trees, over."

The radio was silent for several seconds, and Xander could just imagine the conversation Jim and Blair were having. Xander was willing to bet a year's salary it included things like 'go to the truck' and 'no' and 'then
stay behind me' and 'bite me.'

"We're bringing the portable stretcher up, do you need anything else, over," Jim's voice finally came over the radio.

"Spike?" Xander asked as he pressed the button so Jim could hear them.

"Just tell 'em to get their arses up here as fast as they can. I still want off this soddin' mountain by tomorrow," Spike said. "The area below that ridge is dangerous enough for me, so tell 'em to wait at the ridge, and we'll bring soldier-boy that far on our own."

"Over," Xander added, assuming that Jim would get all that.

"We're on our way, out." Jim didn't sound happy, but Xander knew that the man would come.

"We need to get out of here," Riley hissed the words, and Xander could see Spike start pacing, the dark outline of his body barely visible in the dark, but his soul glowing and leaving a trail behind that shimmered in the faint light of a moon that was barely peeking over the trees.
"Tell us somethin' we don't already know," Spike growled.

For a second, the mountain was quiet. Now that Xander had a chance to really think about it, the quiet should have been a tip off because the one time Tony Harris had a 24-hour case of fatherhood, he'd taken Xander camping for the day, and Xander hadn't slept at all. The woods had been full of noises that had left an 8-year-old Xander shaking with fear. But now, Xander would so prefer bears to whatever was out there. The silence went on just a little too long for Spike.

"That wasn't rhetorical. It's time you tell us what the bloody hell you prats have been doing up here," Spike snapped.

"It's classified," Riley spat. Xander caught on to the whole classified meaning that the government had something to hide a half second behind Spike because Spike covered the distance between him and Riley and had hauled the injured man off the ground before Xander could say anything.

"Hey, no killing the rescuee! That is so in the hero
"He's hidin' something. So, he's either going to tell me what he knows, or I'm going to rip his bollocks off and then deliver him to Buffy. She likes emasculatin' men, so she might see it as an improvement."

"You son of a--"

"Whoa!" Xander shouted over both of them. "Okay, we are way past the bounds of fair fighting here. Spike, there will be no ripping off of body parts. Riley, I really want to avoid getting eaten, so start with the talking."

"You heard him. Talk." Spike's words had an extra side of sneer, and for a second, Xander thought Riley was going to tell Spike where to put some piece of his anatomy.

"Fine, I'll tell you what I know, but we need to get moving now, before Sungsen comes back, so unless your Jim shows up here in the next two minutes, we need to get moving."

"Sungsen? Is that a demon?" Xander asked.

"Not one I've ever heard of," Spike answered as he put
Riley down on a rock. He stepped up next to Xander and slipped an arm around his waist. "So the question is what you soldier-boys have been stirring up this time."

"Sungsen's not a demon, or at least he wasn't," Riley said, and either anger or pain made his voice strain. "Lieutenant Zhi Sungsen, language specialist, was one of the members of charlie company."

"What the bloody hell have you lot been up to?" Spike nearly whispered and that was so bad because when Spike got too angry to even yell, things, or people, got with the breaking.

"That's a long story, so I'm willing to ignore the fact that you're a heartless monster who should be staked if you'll help me get off this mountain and warn someone that the attempt at containment failed. Sungsen's still out there, somewhere."

"And cue the creepy music," Xander muttered. "But this is still not big with the explaining. I'm kinda wondering where the people are and where the bugs are and what Sungsen is."

"We can talk about it later." Riley started to push himself
up with a series of heavy grunts. For a second, Spike just stood next to Xander, even when Xander poked him in the side, and then with an exaggerated sigh, Spike stepped forward and helped Riley.

"You bloody owe me."

"You help me off the mountain, and I'll give you information. It sounds like an even trade to me," Riley argued.

"Wasn't talking to you, wanker. The boy owes me because I'm soddin' carrying you off this mountain to make him happy."

"And I will repay with interest, scout's honor, and unlike some people of the less-than-honest variety, I actually was a scout," Xander said, happy to pay any price to just get moving now. "Moving would be good," he said when Spike just stood. The moon was a little higher so Xander could see a faint image of Riley draped over Spike's shoulder.

"Pet, you see anythin' out there?" Spike asked quietly.

"Um, no." Xander did a full circle, studying the black
Xander would have answered, but he was a little too busy with the freaking, and Spike was walking so fast that Xander had to blink away his Shamanic vision and keep his eyes on the dimly lit trail to just keep up. Trotting the whole way, Spike made his way up to the loose shale slope, stopping only when Riley started making the unmistakable sounds of someone ready to barf all over his rescuer. Then Spike unceremoniously dropped the man on the ground.

"Spike!" Xander hissed, but yellow eyes turned to glare at him. Yeah, Xander could feel the guilt for not doing what Spike wanted, but right now, what Spike wanted was on the slightly sadistic side because Riley was hurting. Yeah, Riley had done his bit to hurt Spike, but that was back when Riley had been younger and stupider and more with the idealism than the thinking. Xander hurried to Riley's side, getting there just in time to have the soldier roll in the opposite direction and vomit something that splashed against the rocks. Panting, he dry-heaved for a few seconds before he rolled back toward Xander.
"Did you hear that?" Riley gasped.

"Hear what? I didn't hear anything. Nope, not hearing."

Spike ignored the question, but he pulled a chemical light out of his pocket, shaking the plastic before he snapped the inner chamber to let the two chemicals mix. The green light bathed the mountainside, now Xander could really see Spike in all his vamped out glory and Riley whose face was twisted in pain and whose leg was bound up like a mummy. Two branches kept it straight while strips of fabric and a jacket and some rope tied it all together.

"Okay, ow," Xander said softly as he touched Riley's hip. Riley's hand reached out and caught his hand, squeezing as the man closed his eyes and trembled. Xander was just impressed he wasn't with the passing out. Xander would have been passing out... or begging Spike to hit him hard enough to make him pass out.

"Stay here," Spike said before he stalked to the edge of the green island of light.

"No problem," Xander quickly agreed. "This is me so
staying here." Spike paced a little farther out, and Riley jumped like a snake had bit him, only Xander had it on good authority there were no snakes around anymore.

"Riley?"

"I'm just not feeling well," Riley said, still sounding nauseous and smelling a little like a sour wash cloth.

"Okay, I know Spike's not good with the asking questions without sounding like he's somehow accusing you, probably because he probably does think you had something to do with this, but Riley, what happened?" Xander asked softly.

Riley took a shaky breath and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Our unit had divided with one half doing a local job while I took four specialists to Truro in Canada where some demon had started eating the locals."

"Okay, not seeing the point yet, but okay."

"When we got back," Riley said with a glare even though he still held Xander's hand in a tight grip, "we were told Sungsen had been infected or something by some demon they'd been hunting down here. The demon had been
targeting an immigrant community, so the guys took Sungsen with them to translate."

"Okay, still not point boy."

"The higher-ups said that his infection could be an advantage, a lucky circumstance."

"And right now I am more with that point than I want to be," Xander said, suddenly disgusted with his government all over again. "They are idiots, you work for idiots, you know this, right?"

"I know," Riley said tightly. "We were sent on a training mission to determine how much Sungsen had been changed, but I insisted on bringing live ammunition and I insisted on having a fail-safe plan."

"Your fail safe is blowing up a mountain? I would call that overkill, but I'm guessing it wasn't kill-enough considering how twitchy Spike is right now."

"I've seen Sungsen since the blast," Riley agreed. "He's playing with me."

Xander looked at Riley's leg and at the pain-filled
expression on his face. "And this is so not the family fun night type of game, either," he said softly.

Riley gave a bark of laughter. "No. It's not. I broke the leg when Sungsen ripped Lieutenant Carlson out of my grip. He lifted her thirty feet into the air, and I held on until she got about eight feet up, but then she pushed me off her to keep me from dying with her when he threw her at the mountain."

"Threw?" Xander could feel the giant stone that was his stomach sink a little lower. "Define threw her at the mountain," Xander demanded even though a little part of him so did not want to know. Huge with the not wanting to know, in fact.

"He grabs people with his mind--telekinesis."

"And your bosses couldn't figure out this was bad? Do you people drink stupid water?" Xander demanded. He didn't realize he was shouting until Riley flinched.

"Probably not pet, the stupidity's natural," Spike commented as he reappeared at the edge of the slope. "Jim and Blair are here, but I don't want them tryin' to come over that ridge. Goin' to be fun enough trying to
get you two over it."

"As long as no one picks me up with the power of his mind and throws me over it, I'm happy," Xander said softly. Letting go of Riley, he stood up, and for a second, Riley held onto him, his hand tightening until Xander flinched. Spike stepped forward with a growl, and immediately Riley let go and blinked as he looked at his own hand as though trying to figure out why it had done that. Yep, they were all losing it, Xander decided.

"You first, pet," Spike said.

"But Riley's hurt."

"Don't give a shite about that berk. I want you safe and sound over that ridge, and you're going first."

"Xander, go," Riley added weakly.

"He doesn't need your permission," Spike growled, and yep, this was familiar territory what with the mutual hatred. "Come on, then, pet." Spike held out his hand, and Xander took it. Spike just about had to drag Xander up the slope because the rock just slid out from under his feet, but eventually, Xander got close enough to the top
to grab a line of shale that didn't give way under him.

"Give me your hand," Jim said. Xander did and with Spike's arm around his waist and Jim pulling his wrist, Xander got up and over the ridge.

"I'm going back for Captain Cardboard," Spike said, his voice making it very clear just how much he hated himself for being the one to rescue the soldier.

"Xander, are you okay?" Blair called from a little farther down the trail.

"Peachy," Xander answered.

"He's fine," Jim then answered for him. With a clatter of rock, Spike was gone, and Jim's hand guided him down the steep bit of trail to where Blair stood. "Spike said you might have a few answers," Jim commented.

"Oh yeah, and you so aren't going to like them," Xander agreed. "Okay, you remember how I told you about those idiots making Adam and all hell breaking loose?" Xander started. "Well, it's kinda like that only this time we have a linguist named Sungsen..." Xander repeated the story Riley had told him, wondering briefly about the
odds of Spike just dropping the soldier down that slope because going along with the whole Sungsen plan was just stupid. Riley knew better. The army knew better. And considering how many people knew better, why did they keep trying this same shit?

Part Twenty-Three

Xander watched as Spike grunted his way over the top of the ridge, Jim's flashlight showing the scene and Xander was so not thinking Blair Witch Project, not even with them having their very own Blair who was softly muttering curses, and Xander was so not surprised at the cursing part. Spike almost tossed Riley over the ridge, the soldier's wrapped leg sticking out awkwardly.

"Fuck," Riley hissed, and for a second, all Xander could do was think about the fact that he'd never heard Riley swear before... at least not that word.
"You're bloody heavy, so you should be thankin' me for not dropping your arse on the other side," Spike growled as he sort of hopped over Riley's body and headed down the slope. Xander's brain suddenly engaged and he started up the slope,ducking under Spike's arm and landing on his knees next to Riley.

"Shit. Are you okay?" Xander asked as he put a hand on the bundled leg and tried to decide if it was still straight, which was hard because right now the leg just looked lumpy, and Xander was seriously hoping that was just the stuff used to tie it up.

"Oh man. You are just... no words, man. No words," Blair backed him up as he came up next to Xander, bending over Riley's body. "Hey, Blair Sandburg. So, you're Riley. Xander's got some good things to say about you."

Riley just kinda blinked up.

"Okay, before we try to move you, did cranky-pants break anything new?" Blair asked. Spike made a sound that was something like a growl or possibly a snort, but Xander tried to ignore the cranky-pants in question.

"Back off, Sandburg. Let me in." Jim's voice was distant
and cold, kinda like the first time Xander had met him, back when Jim had chained him to the kitchen, but at least he wasn't pulling out the handcuffs. Jim handed his flashlight to Blair and then his hands made a cursory check of Riley's elbows and neck and unbroken leg. "Anything besides the leg hurt, soldier?" Jim asked.

"No, sir," Riley quickly answered, but that wasn't necessarily a good tone of voice.

Xander blinked to pull on his Shamanic vision, and the yellow streaks of fear and pain had been replaced with little sparks of red that danced in this soul cord, which Xander wouldn't have really thought weird because for all he knew, sparks of red were normal for being hunted by a big-ass scary linguist on a mountaintop. Only Jim was sparking red and Blair wasn't and Spike... well Spike's demon was pretty much freaking out, and Xander really did think it was unfair that the vampire could look so cool even during freakage. Xander so needed to learn that skill. But no red sparkage for Spike.

"Right then, if he still has all his bits attached, we need to get off this mountain." Spike didn't move any closer, but Jim nodded by the light of the flashlight.
"If we can get to the campsite tonight, we can make it to the truck tomorrow."

"Still not bloody soon enough. I don't much care for the thought of some wanker yanking me off the ground without giving me a chance ta fight back."

"Not helping with the impending freakage," Xander muttered, but everyone seemed to hear him anyway. For a second, the forest was eerily silent.

"We get back to camp, and we'll be fine. Blair and I set up a few surprises on the perimeter," Jim said, and Xander could hear the self-satisfied surety in that tone. Whatever the guys had done, Jim expected it to work. The problem was that Jim didn't know the kind of creepy crawlies Xander did. Jim's idea of surprises probably included guns and explosives and all kinds of things that didn't actually work on supernatural creepy crawlies nearly as well as on a good old fashioned serial killer or dictator. Nope, Xander was not on the hopeful side there. And Spike's silence was not bringing the hope either.

"We'll be fine," Blair added softly. Unlike Jim, he wasn't sounding smug.
"Can you handle being carried?" Jim asked Riley, his voice once again slightly cold as he talked to the other soldier. Before Riley could answer, Jim stood and physically stepped back.

"Yes, sir," Riley answered quickly.

"Blair, you and Xander carry," Jim said.

"Totally. Leave the two warriors free to shoot the serial killer," Blair muttered as he headed a bit down the slope. Even without looking, Xander could hear him setting up the stretcher.

"So, you're the Jim who's helping Spike and Xander," Riley said carefully. "You're a soldier." Xander blinked his Shamanic vision away and just looked at the scene. Jim's body had gone stiff.

"I'm the person hauling you off this mountain when your people left you to die," Jim said darkly before he went off to join Spike. Oh yeah, this was just one big love in, Xander thought as he went back to Riley's side. The man had seen his friends die, been thrown around, broken, and battered, and he really didn't deserve the Jim and
Spike intimidation-for-fun show.

"Hey," Xander said as he sat down near Riley's head. Blair came dragging the stretcher over the rocks.

"Ignore him," Blair huffed as he set the stretcher next to Riley. "He woke up on the wrong side of his AK-47 this morning."

"And Spike always wakes up on the wrong side of his fangs when it comes to soldiers, although that metaphor sounded better before I said it." Xander shrugged as he helped position the stretcher as close to Riley as they could.

"I understand Spike, even if I don't know why Buffy insists on trusting him."

"Because she knows he's trustworthy," Xander pointed out. "Believe me, without massive amounts of trustworthiness, he so would have left you for the crazy linguist. You know, I keep thinking that... thinking that this is some linguist and not a demon, but it's not helping. The sense of impending doom is still impending."
"Think about me," Blair said with a huff. "I work at the university. Man, I know how pissy these linguists can be. Spill a little chai tea on one notebook and whoa... emotional meltdown in multiple languages."

"You aren't military," Riley said to Blair, who just laughed at the thought.

"No way. I mean, I've learned to respect society's protectors, but no fucking way. Ready?" Blair asked. Xander reached out and slipped his arms under Riley's legs while Blair grabbed his shoulders.

"Ready," Xander answered. With a one, two, three, they transferred Riley over to the stretcher without getting more than a grunt out of him.

Jim appeared out of the dark, offering to help get Riley off the steepest part of the slope, so Blair and Xander took the front of the stretcher while Jim handled the back until they reached the flat part of the path.

"Just... keep an eye open," Jim said quietly when he surrendered his end to Xander.

"Eye open in the open eye way or the seeing things that
no one else can see way?" Xander asked quietly.

"I keep hearing someone," Jim admitted.

"He's playing with us. Up on the mountain, he would stalk me, watch me when I crawled out of the cave for water." Riley said the words without emotion, but Xander could still hear the terror, probably because Xander himself was big with the freaking even with Spike and Jim, two of the scariest people Xander knew, playing guard.

"Sadistic tendencies," Blair mused. "He killed the others and now he's sorry because he can't play with them. Monumentally not good. Oh man, he's watching us, isn't he?"

"I'm feeling a little bug in a glassish, which is never of the good." Xander looked around but could only see dark, dark and more dark.

"Oi, get your arses moving or I'm takin' the boy and lettin' the rest of ya find your own way home," Spike yelled from farther down the trail.

"I have the truck keys," Jim countered, but he left, his
hand lingering for a second on Xander's arm before he headed forward.

"Not after I take them away from you," Spike pointed out.

"You can stop the asshole impression now," Jim just about growled.

"And why do I think it's not an impression?" Xander commented as he started down the trail. Spike got a little assholish when things were going totally wrong, and this came pretty close to the total end of totally wrong. He looked behind and shivered. It wasn't the unprotected back that was creeping him out as much as the fact that Spike and Jim wouldn't be up front and leaving their back undefended unless they knew the something to defend against was up front. Oh yeah, sometimes Xander wished his brain would turn off before making these horribly right connections. Right bad. Right very bad.

The hike down the trail left Xander's shoulders aching and his hands cramped as he held the stretcher's handles despite the sweat. Ahead of him, Blair seemed to just plod along, his head down as he followed the trail in moonlight, even ignoring it when Spike had suddenly
doubled back and sprinted past them to growl at the darkness behind them.

Xander wanted to crack some joke or maybe just scream at the darkness, but he focused everything on getting down the trail to the campsite before dawn. By the time he carefully put Riley down in the middle of the camp Jim and Blair had set up earlier, Xander could feel every muscle in his body. His forearms burned, and he just sat right there on the ground next to Riley. Blair dropped down beside him. He'd grabbed a camp lantern, and now he flicked it on for the non-Sentinel members of the group who really did appreciate something stronger than moonlight.

"My hurts hurt," Xander complained softly.

"Xander, are you okay?" Riley asked, and a hand reached out to touch Xander's back.

"Oh man. Xander. You should have said something." Blair reached out and took one of Xander's hands, holding it palm up and bringing it closer to the lantern. A blister had split, and the runny stuff inside had leaked out to make a clean streak on his grimy palm. The flopping edges of the blister didn't do much to hide the red skin
"Okay, ow," Xander said as he considered the damage. "You know, that didn't hurt until you made me look at it." Turning an accusatory glare toward Blair, Xander didn't notice when Spike dropped down in front of him.

"Bloody hell! Why the fucking hell didn't you say something?" Spike snarled. Xander could feel a little jump of fear, and then Riley's hand was on his shirt, pulling him back away from Spike, and Xander didn't even have time to open his mouth.

"Leave him alone. He's hurting!"

Riley had a lot more upper body strength than Xander expected because he'd been pulled over Riley's body, his back sliding across Riley's stomach until he landed on the far side, his legs still draped over the soldier.

"Keep your bloody hands off him," Spike vamped out, his hands reaching out to grab Riley by the throat, and Riley pulled a knife from his belt.

"HEY!!! Whoa, slow down!" Blair shouted.
"No killing. Absolutely no with the killing," Xander seconded that as he threw himself across Riley, pinning the knife hand while making it really hard for Spike to get to the soldier's neck.

"Xander!" both men yelled unhappily.

"Soldier, Stand Down!" Jim's voice bellowed over it all. Xander could feel Riley tense under him for a second, and bloodshed was a definite possibility. Then Riley sagged. Xander slowly sat up, but Jim was there, taking the knife from Riley before he could do anything. Given the way Riley still glared at Spike, Xander thought it was probably a good idea.

"What happened?" Jim asked, and from the way he glared at Riley, no one had any doubt about just who he expected an answer from. Xander sat back, and immediately, Spike's arms were around his waist, pulling him into a tight embrace. Riley gave Spike one last murderous glare before he turned to Jim.

"Xander's injured, and this thing comes in screaming at him. I won't stand for abuse on my watch, physical or verbal." Riley spit the words at Jim, making it perfectly clear just who he thought was responsible for letting the
abuse go on.

"There's no abuse here. Spike was just being cranky," Xander defended his vampire.

"Cranky? I'm cranky?" Spike demanded incredulously. "You've bloody crippled yourself without ever openin' your gob, and I'm cranky? Pet, cranky doesn't even cover what I'm feelin' right now."

"Xander, are you okay?" Jim instantly asked.

"He's ripped the skin from his own hands carrying that ungrateful berk."

"Okay, we have someone out there trying to kill us, can we please try to not kill each other?" Xander asked as Riley propped himself up on one elbow clearly ready to have another round of taunt-the-vampire, which was big on the stupid scale considering he was injured.

"Xander, how bad are your hands?" Jim asked, glancing down.

With a shrug, Xander held his hands out toward the camplight. "I didn't even notice until Blair pointed it out.
Blisters... homicidal linguist with telekinetic powers...
Xander did a pantomime of balancing those two ideas for a second. "Okay, I was slightly more worried about the homicidal linguist."

"He's not carrying Major Moron tomorrow," Spike snapped, and the arms tightened around Xander's waist.

"He can't," Jim agreed quietly. "Blair and I will carry him."

"Aren't you going to do anything about—" Riley waved his hand in the direction of Spike and Xander.

"No," Jim said, the tone making it clear that he wasn't discussing this anymore. "Spike, it's almost dawn."

"Yeah, think I noticed," Spike agreed. "I'm not sleepin' in the tent, though. One flick of this wanker's mind, and I'll be drifting in the wind."

"Okay, not a good thought," Xander complained softly as he grabbed Spike's arms, holding on as if to reassure himself that Spike was very much undusty.

"I'll dig into the earth. I'll come back up at dawn." Spike reached up and rested his hand on Xander's cheek,
pulling his head around so that he could kiss him passionately. Xander answered hungrily, his cock starting to harden at the unexpected attention. Slowly, Spike pulled back. "And when we get off this soddin' mountain, you and I will talk about you taking care of yourself," Spike promised. Without another word, he stood and went to a flat spot near a dead tree. Xander couldn't see, but he could hear the shovel hitting the ground faster than any human could have managed.

"Let's doctor those hands," Blair said quietly, and Xander sat and let the other two wash and dress his hands, mummifying them with antiseptic and gauze as Spike continued to dig. By the time the first pink of sunrise highlighted the tops of the trees, the clearing had a Spike sized patch of ground and nothing else.

"We could leave now," Riley said quietly. He had laid on the stretcher silently during the first aid, and now he just stared up at the pre-dawn without looking at any of them.

"Oh man. He comes to get you, and you want to leave?" Blair was the first to find his voice, and he didn't even attempt to hide the disgust.
"Did you miss the way he talked to Xander? He's on some sort of power trip, ordering him around," Riley turned to look at the three of them.

"Soldier, you don't understand what you're talking about," Jim said, his voice still dark with anger, and he wasn't exactly warming up to Riley.

"I know that he doesn't have a right to talk to Xander like that. I've known Xander a lot longer than you guys, I'm thinking, and I know that Xander has no time for vampires. He hates them."

"I hated them," Xander corrected him. "The 'ed' on the end of hate means past tense, and my English teacher would be so proud."

"You wanted to stake him," Riley pointed out.

"Well, duh. Hello, me normal human, him vampire with superpowers. Fear and insecurity makes you want to do a lot of things that are probably pretty dumb when you stop and think about it." Xander stared at Riley, daring him to go farther down that path. While Xander didn't want to bring up the whole getting himself bitten past, he would. He wasn't going to let Riley act like he had the
moral high ground here.

"He's a vampire," Riley tried for a reasonable tone of voice.

"Yeah, and so is Angel and Harmony, and yeah, we don't have anything to do with Harmony because of the whole evil thing, but Spike and Angel are not evil. So, we don't judge the non-evil vampires with the evil ones."

"You don't?" Riley's voice dripped with disbelief. "You're the one who hated Angel."

"I'm the one who was scared shitless of Angel after I found out he was a vamp."

Jim broke in on the conversation. "I don't care what you have in your past, either one of you. Right now, we have one mission, and that is getting off this mountain. Nothing else matters, so if you aren't discussing ways to get us to safety, don't talk," he insisted. Riley wasn't going for it.

"But Spike..." Riley started to complain.

"He's a vampire," Jim interrupted, "and he's rude and he
has no respect for anyone or anything, with the exception of Xander."

"And Buffy," Xander added, but that didn't exactly improve Riley's expression. "And sometimes Giles and Willow, and, of course, Angel, but he doesn't actually admit to that one."

"Yes," Jim said with a pointed look in Xander's direction that clearly suggested less talk and more listen. "But the point is that he is doing the right thing even when he complains about it, and he is Xander's choice, so there must be something good under all the attitude."

"And you're going to just let him abuse Xander? We should get out of here." Oh yeah, Riley was like a dog with a bone: a big dog and a very big bone, only Jim was a bigger dog and he didn't really like Riley's bone.

"And I'm telling you again, I'm not leaving Spike," Jim almost growled. "Right now, I'm more likely to leave you."

"Whoa, Jim," Blair interrupted.

"He's a vampire, and I don't know what hold he has over
Xander, but he can't be trusted." Riley's hand reached for Xander, resting on Xander's knee, and that was slightly creepy.

"Hey, I get to decide who has what hold over me," Xander protested as he shoved Riley's hand off his leg. The strangest expression flitted across Riley's face for a second.

"He's dangerous," Riley appealed to Jim again.

"So am I," Jim said as he stood up and glowered down at the man. "Two man sentries, Xander you and Blair have the first three hours. Wake me up and Xander and I will take second shift. Blair, you and I will take third. And the next time Spike comes to me, I'm going to tell him where to shove his mission," Jim growled before he got up and headed for the tent.

"He's just worried," Blair said softly when Jim had gone.

"He's worried, you're troubled... me, I've skipped all that and gone straight to wigged out and spazzing."

"Xander," Riley said as he reached out to Xander again, but Xander had put up with enough creepy. Besides, if
Riley kept with the touching, he was going to have two broken wrists to match his leg. Xander scooted backwards.

"We'll be okay. Jim and Spike will stop whatever this guy has turned into." Blair said the words, but Xander wasn't sure even he believed them. However, there really wasn't anything any of them could do until darkness came again. Xander sure wasn't going to be sleeping, though. He had a better chance of spontaneously spouting calculus equations than closing his eyes. Taking a deep breath, Xander reminded himself that they just had to get to the truck and get far enough off the mountain to call Giles and get slayers up here to kill one Lieutenant Zhi Sungsen, language specialist.

Part Twenty-Four

"Xander," Riley said softly.

The sun had come up, and Xander's body had
started demanding sleep even though his brain kept sliding to thoughts of evil linguists. "Yeah?" Xander turned to Riley, happy for anything that would help keep him awake and distract him.

"Where's Buffy?"

Xander could hear the insecurity in that question. Why wasn't Riley important enough for Buffy to come after herself? Oh yeah, this relationship was healthy.

"There was this thing, and a demon, and potential world ending. You know those wacky demons... always with the world ending. There must be a real lack of hobbies in other dimensions. I bet a craft shop would do good, teach them a little crochet, maybe some jewelry making and pottery," Xander joked with a shrug.

For a second, Riley was quiet. "I can see Anya doing that," he finally answered.

"Oh, yeah. I think I would have been afraid to make the joke in front of her because she would have been down at the bank filling out loan paperwork."

"You look good Xander."
"Terror agrees with me," Xander shrugged again.

"What's going on with you and the vampire?" Riley's voice was neutral, but Xander could tell when they'd left the land of small talk for the land of big talk with a side of 'Xander, how could you?'

Blair looked up from his journal but didn't even offer to rescue Xander from yet another round of bashing Xander's decisions.

"Sex," Xander said, hoping the bluntness would at least shock Riley into silence. Instead he just looked pained.

"Xander, I understand the attraction. I do," Riley reached out again, resting his hand on Xander's ankle, the only part of Xander close enough to touch.

"Riley, no offense, but you're not really understanding much of anything."

"Yes, I do," Riley argued. "I went to those vamp houses for the danger, the feel of them feeding was... I couldn't stop. But I did stop, and I know you're just as strong. You need to walk away before you lose your soul to whatever
"Oh man, you and vampires?" Blair gasped. Riley turned his head to glare at Blair, but it lasted only a second before he sighed.

"Yeah. It's an incredible feeling, which is why I know better than anyone what Xander is fighting here."

"And yet, you don't," Xander interrupted. "Okay, I'll admit that the biting isn't bad, and for someone who has enforced a strict no-biting policy for much of my love life, or at least the no biting with fangs rule because there was biting with Anya, but okay, off track now," Xander stared at the injured soldier. The weird thing was that he knew, he absolutely knew, that Riley was just worried, but that didn't stop this from being a seriously freaky conversation.

"I don't understand this. I mean, Buffy didn't even tell me you were gay, not that there's anything wrong with being gay," Riley hurried to say.

"And I'm hoping you mean that in a 'nothing wrong with me being gay' way and not in a 'coming out yourself' way," Xander said as he considered the hand still holding
his ankle. Yep, freaky. Riley pulled back his hand as though burned, like the good little heterosexual male he was.

"I'm not hitting on you. Buffy and I are trying to work things out."

"And hitting on the best friend, not so much with the helping to work things out," Xander said from experience.

"I think I love Buffy," Riley said, and Xander flinched away from that lack of ringing endorsement. He didn't want Buffy hurt again, and this was looking hurty. And then Riley's hand was back on Xander's ankle. "But loving Buffy and not wanting to see you hurt, there's nothing wrong with me feeling both. Jim and Blair are obviously friends, so you can't believe that caring about someone else means you're gay."

At that, Blair started laughing. "Oh man, why is it that people refuse to see Jim as gay? I know it's not me because plenty of guys down at the station joke about my sex life, but not big, bad Jim. God forbid he's gay. Come on, butch guys can be gay, too."
"Wait, you mean..." Riley looked over at Blair.

"We're so doing it like bunnies," Blair laughed. "Well, not right now because of the whole serial killer situation, but once we catch this guy, we'll be right back to doing it like bunnies."

"I don't get it. Buffy sends four gay guys to rescue me?" Riley sounded so genuinely confused that it took a second for Xander to even process the totally offensive meaning in that.

"Hey!" Xander reached over and gave Riley's arm enough of a punch to sting. "She sent two badass warriors and two Shamen, so don't go dissing the rescue team." After it came out his mouth, Xander realized that Buffy had actually sent one warrior and one Shaman, but that made it sound like Riley was even lower on the priority totem pole, so Xander didn't correct himself.

"Shamen?" Riley pushed himself up onto both elbows and looked from one to the other.

"Twice the Shamanic power for the price of one," Xander agreed. "Blair's a trado Shaman, big with the teaching mojo, and I'm an animus Shaman. That's how we tracked
"Are you sure? Shamanic powers are hard to identify. The military—"

"Whoa, no offense, but I'd rather not have a discussion of the military, thank you," Blair cut him off. "The military and people who might be a little different don't mix well."

"You don't want the Army to try and take you," Riley said as he looked at Blair more closely. "You're afraid they'll want to experiment with your powers."

"Man, considering what the military has done in the past, yeah."

"It isn't like that—" Riley started, but Blair cut him off.

"Just stop. You're an idiot if you don't know what they're capable of. The Tuskegee syphilis experiment was just the start." Blair leaned forward. "I mean, have you ever heard of Harold Blauer? 1950's? His case is totally fucked up. The army gave him more and more mescaline just to see what would happen in case of chemical attack. They didn't even have evidence that any of the compounds
were being used in Korea, and they killed the guy and then paid his ex-wife $18,000 to apologize for it. As late as the seventies, the army was giving people radiation poisoning while lying and telling them it was cancer treatment, and in 1999, the Los Angeles V.A. hospital was shut down because they had so many violations of ethical standards. Man, they experimented on people who refused treatment, they lied, they told people they were getting one treatment and then gave them another. So, I’m not trusting the government. And if you do anything to turn the Army toward me or Jim, I will personally make you pay."

Xander stared at Blair. The gentle man who had held him and laughed at Xander's jokes had vanished under something cold and dangerous.

"I know something about unethical experiments and doctors who don't tell the subjects what's going on," Riley said carefully. "I don't plan on telling anyone that you or Xander are Shamen."

"Good." And with that, Blair blinked and the anger was gone. Xander stared at the man for a second before he turned his attention back to Riley.
"Xander, I would never turn you over to the Army."

"I was hoping. It wouldn't be a good way to impress Buffy," Xander joked.

"It has nothing to do with Buffy. Even if Sam and I were still married, I wouldn't turn you over to them, either of you," Riley said as he now glanced back toward Blair. "But Shamanic powers are difficult to identify or quantify. You've been fighting demons since you were fifteen; isn't it possible that you're just good at tracking?"

"I'm thinking no. First, I wasn't the tracker. I was the bait... the one who walked around blindly until a vampire found me and tried to throw me head-first into a gravestone."

"It wasn't that—"

"Oh, it totally was," Xander interrupted Riley's attempt to reassure him. "But that's okay. I've gotten over the whole Zeppo stage, and even Willow and Giles, who are so not in the 'support Xander's new powers' column, have admitted that I'm down with the Shamanism." Xander blinked and the world ghosted out so he could see the soul cords curled around him. Riley's was stretching,
reaching for Xander and the red sparks from earlier had brightened.

"Wow. Okay, the freak just continues," Xander whispered as he reached out. Riley's soul cord sank through his hand, but Xander could feel his bandaged fingers slide through something like loose jelly.

"Xander?" Blair's hand landed on his shoulder.

"Riley's cord. It's being weird."

"Define weird."

Xander stared at it.

"What are you two talking about? What cord?" Riley asked after a second.

"Your soul. Xander sees souls."

"Shit. That explains Spike. He wants the power, Xander. You deserve better than some asshole who just latches on to the nearest source of power." Riley's cord snapped out, an end breaking free and curling toward Xander. Xander scrambled backwards.
"Okay, that should not happen."

"What? Xander, what's happening?"

"Riley's cord, it's reaching out for me," Xander said, and then he backwards crab-crawled into something that turned out to be two legs. He looked up and Jim's cord distorted his face, only Jim's cord was definitely unJimlike.

"Chief, what's going on here?" he asked, and that was his cranky voice.

"Oh man, I have no idea. We were talking, only Xander says that Riley's cord is reaching for him."

"What are you doing?" Jim snarled, and for a half second, Xander expected to get yanked off the ground, but then Jim stormed past him and grabbed Riley's neck, pushing the man to the ground, and Riley's cord snapped back into place in his own body.

"Nothing," Riley rasped out, but Jim wasn't letting go.

"The longer I know you, the less I like you."
Xander held his breath as the two men faced off, Riley's hands clawing at Jim's arm, and now both their cords had nearly vanished under the red flares Xander had seen earlier.

"Jim?" Xander asked.

"Hey, let's all calm down," Blair suggested.

"You leave Xander alone. You don't comment on his powers, his choice of bed-mates, or his life. In fact, you don't even comment on the color of the sky to him, am I clear, soldier?"

"Very," Riley hissed.

Jim continued to kneel next to Riley, pinning him to the ground. "Chief, do you find it at all strange that Finn here would be the only member of his team to survive? Everyone else is dead, and yet the major here doesn't have more than a simple leg fracture."

For a second, the camp was deathly silent. "I don't think a broken leg is simple," Blair said slowly.
"I don't know. A soldier is trained to do all kinds of things, to endure all kinds of things to ensure that the mission goes as planned. What was your mission, soldier?"

"To assess Sungsen's skills. I told you already." Riley's words ended with a gurgling noise, and Xander could tell from the frantic punches Riley threw that Jim had cut off his air. But Riley was injured and tired and flat on his back, so his hits landed ineffectually on Jim's sides. Jim pinned one of Riley's hands to the ground before he let up with his other so that Xander could hear the pained gasp as Riley dragged air into his lungs.

"What else?"

For a second, Xander could only hear Riley's harsh breathing. "To contain him if necessary."

"And?" Jim demanded darkly. Xander flinched from the raw fury he could hear in that tone, the promise to hurt Riley and hurt him badly if Riley didn't talk.

"That's it. It was a training exercise." Riley's free hand dropped to his side, and Xander could see Jim's cord flash red so brightly that he flinched back and blinked away
the Shamanic vision altogether. Now he could clearly watch Jim pinning Riley to the ground, Blair standing to the side and looking just a little alarmed.

"You're holding something back, so let me make this clear," Jim said softly, only his soft was kinda scary in the way that the world ending was kinda bad. "You either tell me what you're hiding or when the sun goes down, the four of us are leaving and you can crawl out of here on your own."

Xander opened his mouth to protest, but sound wasn't coming out. Panic did that to him sometimes.

"Last chance, soldier. This is my mission, and my primary objective is getting Blair and Xander out of here alive, and you are quickly becoming a liability."

Riley's eyes darted over toward Xander and then looked up at the man who had him pinned to the ground.

"Ri, if there's something you're not saying, now would be a good time to say it. Great time. Perfect time." Xander bit his tongue as babble threatened to spill out.

"There was a second person infected." Riley's eyes were
focused off on the distance, but Jim stared down.

"Go on," he ordered.

"She didn't show the same symptoms Sungsen did, so they think she didn't get enough of the poison to change her."

"You think differently." Jim let go of Riley and sat back on his heels.

Riley lay there staring over at nothing and nodded. "I'm worried the poison might just take longer to change her." Riley bit his lip and then looked up at Jim. "She's in the middle of base... all those men and women, the advisors and civilian consultants and support staff... my ex-wife is there. If Susan Clark goes the way of Sungsen, she'll be in the middle of all those people."

"Shit." Jim scrubbed his hand over his face. "Why didn't you say something?"

"No offense, sir, but I don't know you. And I have no reason to trust Hostile 17 at all."

"Is there anything else you haven't told us?" Jim asked.
"No, sir."

"Great." Jim's voice dripped with sarcasm as he stood up. "So, we get back to civilization, and then you call your buddies and give them a warning."

"And expect them to do what?" Xander asked. "The military is long on stupid when it comes to handling the supernatural. This is Giles and slayer territory, so we need to call them with the 411—where the base is, how long ago she was infected, what the demon looked like who did the infecting."

"I can't compromise base security," Riley interrupted, and Jim was instantly back, a hand wrapped around Riley's throat as he knelt by the stretcher.

"You don't have a choice. Your people fucked this up, and if Xander tells you to give Giles the information, you will give him everything you know, everything you've heard, and everything you suspect, and you do it before you have a chance to get anyone else killed. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," Riley said, his voice tight.
Xander blinked into his Shamanic vision and studied the scene. Riley's cord had returned to blue, no red sparks and the yellow was only in thin streaks, and considering that Jim in scary-mode was pretty damn scary, Xander had expected more yellow. Jim's burgundy and gold cord still had the red sparks, though. Xander was so going to have to talk that through with Blair because whatever freakiness was going on with Riley was going on with Jim. Both men were totally being more assholy than usual, and yeah, maybe Riley had just gotten more assholy in general in the years since Xander had known him, but Xander didn't think so. Buffy didn't usually fall for guys who acted like morons. Well, there was the Immortal, but he had done a good job of pretending not to be a moronic asshole all the way up to the end there.

"Xander, why don't you head in for some sleep. Blair and I will take second watch."

"It hasn't been three hours," Xander protested. Considering that Jim was the one who would hear this guy coming and shoot at him, Jim needed the sleep way more than Xander.

"Trust me, Sport, I will not be sleeping. You go get some rest, and I'll wake you up when it's your turn to take
Blair's spot on watch."

Hesitating for just a second, Xander headed for the tent. Jim in alpha mode wasn't going to take no for an answer, not unless it was from Blair and not unless Blair really, really put in some effort. Xander had zero chance.

After he crawled into the tent, Xander blinked into his Shamanic vision and looked toward the place where Spike had dug into the earth. The tent fabric became sheer and even the rocks faded so that Xander could see the midnight and blue twist of Spike's soul curled under the ground. The black demon cord was still whipping wildly, and Xander could only imagine how pissed Spike was going to be at Riley when he came out of the ground. And that was American pissed as in wanting to rip off limbs, not British pissed with the drinking. Of course, if they had whiskey, Xander could probably talk Spike into getting British pissed which would definitely be of the good for Riley's health.

"Okay, so that was weird, but Riley's had a bad week, so cut him some slack," Xander told the ground. The black demon cord just whipped harder, which meant Spike was hearing him. It was weird, being able to tell Spike whatever he wanted without the vampire saying
anything back. Xander settled onto the sleeping bag as he considered what he wanted to say.

"I know that Riley is worried because he doesn't know you. I mean, you go all grrrr around him, which I get. Hey, if he had tortured me, I would not be out here saving him at all, so I'm big with the understanding. But he doesn't know the rest, so I can see where it would be freaky thinking of someone dating a vampire that was all grrrrrr. Maybe that's why Buffy has an easier time with us. She knows that you have stuff in there other than the vampire bits, not that I don't like the vampire bits, because Riley is right on that. The biting is totally and completely not horrible. Sometimes when you bite me, I can't figure out why we try to save people from the biting because biting good. Biting very good. Well, except when it leads to death, which it won't with you, so it's all good."

Xander rolled over and studied the sky. With the Shamanic vision on, he could see the sky through the tent, both looking like faded mirror images of themselves, one superimposed on the other. Xander kept hoping that if he practiced, he could use his Shamanic vision without just about blinding himself to the real world, but so far it wasn't happening. The clouds had
blurred away to gray and the trees were one big blob on either side of the tent, and the tent itself just made everything look like he was peering through a piece of cloth.

"Before. I didn't know how to be alive without hurting. I felt like every time I opened my mouth, I was going to start screaming and not stop until I just fell over dead. I'd lost so many people and somewhere in Africa, I realized that I couldn't meet a new person without wondering when they would die or imagining their body lying under the sun, rotting. That's when I came home. But I couldn't be that fucked up person at home because Willow needed me to be strong when she and Kennedy were having their meltdown and Buffy was finally happy. And then Kennedy was gone, and it seemed like everyone else had sort of shed all that horribleness from Sunnydale, and I didn't want to be the one who couldn't deal, so I just shut down.

"I planned out the jokes I could use because I had to be the joker, that's who I was. It was like I pretended to be the me at fifteen. And Spike, I just couldn't let go of the idea that I had to hold myself together, that I had to make myself be what I wanted to be, only I wasn't and I didn't. And that doesn't make sense even to me, but I
hope you get it. And then with the Shaman stuff, that scared the shit out of me because I knew I wasn't as good of a person as everyone thought I was. I couldn't let go and be the real me until I knew you were there to hold me together."

Xander took a deep breath and watched a dark shadow rise from the trees and then sink down again. "I guess what I'm saying is please don't break Riley into little tiny Riley pieces when you get up. He doesn't know any of this, and he really is trying to protect me, only he doesn't know me so it's all coming out kinda... okay, really creepy.

"But he'll figure out that we're good together. Jim and Blair get it, and I think Buffy is starting to get it even though she doesn't want to. And really, I can understand that because it would be like Anya sleeping with Willow, and I don't think I would really be okay with that just because of the creepy conversations they could have about me. And then Giles, he gets it. He just doesn't want to admit that he gets it, which is again fine because I don't want Giles spending a lot of time thinking about my sex life. When he offered me that list of places-- that was only slightly horrifying. He's like my father, and fathers and sex should never be in the same sentence. Or the
same paragraph. Possibly not the same book."

Xander sighed. "Okay, I've officially lost track of where I'm going, but don't kill Riley."

Watching the sky, Xander blinked at the dark shadow that rose from the trees again. When he sat up, the shadow sank. "Okay, that's weird." Xander pushed the sleeping bag away and crawled out of the tent, his eyes on the blurry sky and blurrier trees.

"Sport?" Jim called.

Xander didn't answer as he took a step forward. The trees made a jagged dark grayish-green blur, but a dark shadow moved among them. "Whoa, hey, no wandering away by yourself," Blair said as a hand took Xander's elbow.

"What are you seeing?" Jim asked from the other side.

"I don't exactly know, but I'm guessing it's not good," Xander said as he watched a black snake coil up, an arch visible just above the treeline, before it collapsed back down and nearly vanished into the trees. "A soul. A black soul like a demon soul," Xander breathed as the cord
rose again. Other demons were black, but black like Spike's which was a blue so dark it soaked up all the light. But this... this was a shining black, a glittering darkness that reflected the light. "A huge demon soul," Xander said as a coil rose again, like a python rippling through the trees.

"Blair, get the detonators and the M4 carbine. Xander, you stay right here and keep watching whatever you're watching," Jim said, his hand steady on Xander's arm.

"Jim," Xander said with just a little panic.

"It's okay, Sport. Whoever's out there, we're more than a match for him," Jim promised, but even Xander could hear the lie in his words.

Part Twenty-Five

"Sungsen won't move in right away. He likes to play with people first, cracking twigs, moving things just out of your line of sight, crap like that," Riley said, his eyes scanning the forest. With the sun fully up, Xander could see the dark circles under his eyes and the way his white knuckles clutched the sides of the stretcher. He hadn't even been able to
get up to pee, and Jim had held a container between his legs for him.

"Classic sadist," Blair muttered. "Oh man, what is it with people and power? Give them a little taste of it, and their life's dream goes from playing baseball to ruling the world. Man, people suck."

"Enough. Talk like this isn't helping." Jim didn't sound angry, but he didn't sound like he would put up with any more, either.

"We need to get off the mountain before he decides to stop playing." Riley insisted.

Jim had been checking the treeline, but now he gave Riley a narrow-eyed glare. "We wait for sunset."

"If your primary objective is Xander and Blair's safety—"

"If we are forced to evacuate we will..." Jim started.

"No and way. I'm not leaving Spike," Xander interrupted.

"If we have to, then we will. In an attack, he has a better chance without us to slow him down. This is not a
debate, Sport."

"But he's not buried deep..."

Jim reached out, resting a hand on Xander's shoulder. "We have no evidence that Sungsen can do anything until Spike comes up. Throwing a twig or even a body is one thing, but digging in the ground is very different. There are thousands or millions of pieces of dirt, so if he has to lift each one, he won't have time."

"And if he can scoop it all out at once?" Xander demanded.

"Which is why we will hold position as long as possible. But Xander, understand this: If I tell you to retreat, you will do it."

"Oh man, let's not worry about that until the time comes," Blair suggested. He came over and laid a hand on Xander's arm, his other hand still wrapped around a rifle that wasn't quite as large as the scary-looking one in Jim's hand. Even Riley had a sidearm lying next to his stretcher.

"This is a mistake," Riley said so softly it was little more
than a breath, but then he didn't know just how well Jim could hear him.

"Finn, do you or do you not understand mission protocol?" Jim snapped.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Then exhibit some self control, soldier." Jim turned to him with a much nicer tone of voice, "Xander, has the cord moved at all?"

"Oh, it's moving all over. It's flopping around like a snake on a hot pan, not that I ever did that as a kid, but you get where I'm going," Xander said as he watched the cord's movement.

"Sorry, Sport, but we need you to stay awake and keep an eye out. We'll wait here, try to hold off any attack until sunset, but we're going to need someone to let us know where he is."

"Okay, but that cord is flopping around so much, I'm not big with knowing where he is," Xander pointed out uncertainly.
"Just do your best. If he gets closer, it may be easier for you to pinpoint a location on him."

"And yet, that is not making me feel better." Xander muttered the words, but Jim's hand tightened reassuringly for a moment before he pulled Blair off to the side. For one second, Xander wished he could trade in Shamanic sight for super hearing because Xander was getting that feeling like people were talking about him... people were talking about him and how to make him leave Spike if push came to bloodshed. And even worse, with his Shamanic vision on, Xander couldn't tell exactly what they were doing. It looked like they were playing with their guns, and Xander bit down on the urge to make the obvious and inappropriate pun.

"Whoa, hey, hey, that... the cord's stretching out that way!" Xander poked in the direction where the cord reached off into the distance. The black stretched thinner and thinner until it seemed to disappear into a spot.

"It's Sungsen," Riley said darkly.

"It looks more like a bird," Jim countered sarcastically.

"Watch what's happening to the bird, sir."
"Okay, and for those of us who can't really see that well, which of you is going to give the play by play? 'Cause this not knowing is getting to be a little much," Xander complained

"It's a hawk," Jim immediately said. "It looks like it's caught in a net or... Damn!"

"Less damning, more describing! The cord's snapping back!"

"The bird was just yanked through the air. The thing left a trail of feathers behind," Jim said, and a hand found Xander's shoulder.

"The cord is pulling back into the trees," Xander added his bit, still not able to see a bird, but then he couldn't see a whole lot else, either.

"Some invisible force just slammed the bird into a tree."

"It's how he kills," Riley said darkly, and Xander flinched at the idea of having to watch people you knew die like that. Okay, he was forgiving Riley a lot of his freakiness.
"What the—" Jim's voice sounded so alarmed that Xander blinked out of his Shamanic sight.

"What? What? What the what?" Xander looked around wildly.

Jim was staring blankly ahead.

"Oh man, I'm with Xander, this not sharing is creeping me out. What did you see?" Blair demanded as he grabbed Jim's arm from behind.

"The bird, it vanished."

"No way, that's physically impossible. Maybe he threw it so fast it just seemed to vanish," Blair said, clearly confused.

"Sandburg, the bird just got sucked into nothing," Jim just about growled, his hands clutching his weapon.

Xander was already shaking his head. "Not nothing. I'm an idiot. God, all those years of research, and you'd think I could keep a fact in my head for longer than fifteen minutes," Xander complained.
"Sport?"

"Telekinesis," Xander said. "Shit. Andrew and I were having this whole fight about which power was more powerful, Jean Grey's telekinesis or Psylocke's psi-bolts. Well, it started as that and kinda turned into who had the better body, but seeing as how they're both cartoons and I'm now gay anyway, we can skip that part of the conversation," Xander hurried to say when Jim started turning the cranky look at him. "Giles said that telekinesis as a power is next to useless."

Xander struggled to explain what Giles had said, only he didn't remember most of the science stuff. He and Andrew had been a little too busy rolling their eyes at Giles' literal approach to comic book heroes. Xander pointed to one of the backpacks. "If it took me a hundred calories to walk over and pick up that bag, then to pick it up with telekinesis would take like a thousand. Giles said that mages had given themselves the power in the past and had to stop using it before they literally starved to death because they were burning up all their calories just trying to focus the power through their minds. Some of them even cooked their own brains."

"The mind isn't built to channel that much energy," Blair
quickly added. "Oh man, the law of entropy. The amount of energy that the body must waste trying to force energy through channels not built for it, oh man. Shit. He's eating. He somehow swallowed the bird whole, psychic ingestion or something."

"He what?" Riley demanded from the ground.

"He's eating. That's why he killed every living thing. Man, he can't feed his own need for energy, and the more he used his power, the more energy he needs." Blair ran both hands through his hair, shoving back from his face while his features contorted into something that looked pretty close to panic.

"Okay, that's gross." Xander swallowed and tried hard not to think about Riley's team. Obviously Riley's brain had gone to the same place because he had turned green.

"So, we aren't going to find bodies," Jim said grimly. "But this could be an advantage. If all the animals are gone, that means there isn't anything left for him up here. Starvation should weaken him."

"Um, not to point out the obvious or anything, but we're
Just saying it made Xander's stomach lurch, and he immediately switched into his Shamanic sight to check the black cord. It had quieted so that Xander could barely see it through the shadow forms of the trees.

"Nothing has changed. Whatever the reason, he didn't kill Finn and he hasn't killed us. If anything, this is good news," Jim said, and Xander felt that large hand on his arm. He only wished he could have cool arms wrapped around his waist holding him because he was ready to follow Blair to panicksville. Not that Blair was advertising his trip, but Xander could see his green cord nearly swallowed in yellow. Riley and Jim were both streaked with it, but Blair, oh yeah, Blair was on the train to hyperventilation. Jim reached over and pulled Blair to his side.

"I thought it was some sadistic game, but if he needs food, I don't know why he didn't kill me," Riley said as he pushed himself up on one elbow. "I am not holding anything back, sir. I honestly don't know."

Jim nodded slowly.

"Oh god. I hate to rain on the parade of suddenly getting alongness, but he's coming this way," Xander said,
watching as the snake rolled through the trees, bulging and twisting like a python that had eaten a horse and gotten it stuck half way down.

"Positions," Jim said as he reached down and grabbed one handle on Riley's stretcher. Pulling the injured man to a position behind one boulder, Jim waited until Blair had pulled Xander to a sheltered spot on the rock face before taking a position in front of them.

"Stay behind me," Jim said tersely.

"No problem, man," Blair agreed enthusiastically, but even with his Shamanic sight on, Xander could see Blair grip the gun.

"Sport, give me some directions here," Jim said. Xander slipped to Jim's side and pointed at a spot through the trees.

"Finn?" Jim called.

"On it," Riley answered. He lay on the ground with his head and arm aiming his weapon around the edge of the boulder, and that didn't look all that safe to Xander.
Jim went to one knee, pushing Xander farther back into the shadow of the rock they were using for cover. Xander held his breath until he could see little spots that danced around that black cord that slowly advanced on them. Then he forced himself to breathe, counting to five on each breath in. "Half a football field," Xander whispered into Jim's ear.

"Finn," Jim hissed.

"Fifty yards, copy that," Riley answered.

"He's stopped. Why did he stop?" Xander clutched the rock and found himself just wishing for an attack because then they could actually do something, or Jim and Riley and Blair could do something while he pointed, but it would be better than waiting.

"Where?" Jim asked.

"Twenty yards, behind that big tree," Xander pointed to a huge pine. Behind it, Xander could see that black soul cord twisting and writhing. And that was way too close to Spike's hiding place. Xander could feel his heart contract.

"Blair, number three," Jim said. Before Xander could
even ask what that meant, an explosion tore through the forest. A smaller tree behind the huge pine fell in slow motion and dirt rained down on the whole scene.

"The cord, it's gone," Xander said. The clearing was silent, dust slowly settling as they all waited and watched for long minutes. "Okay, if that's it, I’m calling this anticlimactic. Anticlimactic and good, but anticlimactic."

"Anticlimactic is always good, Sport. Chief, hold position. Finn, cover me."

"Copy that," Riley agreed, squirming a little but keeping his gun pointed at the large tree.

Slowly, Jim slipped out of the small niche in the rock and he slid forward. Xander had to force himself to breathe as Blair stepped in front of him. For someone who didn't like violence, Blair kept the gun pointed steadily at the pine, and the look on his face didn't leave Xander in any doubt about whether or not he'd shoot.

Jim had covered half the clearing when the cord snapped out toward him. "Jim, the cord!" Xander screamed. Jim didn't wait for the invisible cord to touch him, he dove to one side and came up firing on the spot Xander had
pointed out.

"He's going left! Left, his left, toward the rock face," Xander yelled, just about panicking when Jim's gun started tracking in the wrong direction. "More left! THERE!"

Jim opened fire again, but the cord didn't even pause.

"Xander, where is he?" Jim yelled.

"He's still moving. It didn't slow him down! Jim, the cord, it's coming for you!" Xander could feel Blair tense beside him.

"Where?" Riley yelled, and Xander stepped far enough out of the shadow of the rock to point. Blair stepped out of the shelter and opened fire, but the black cord kept sliding over the ground to Jim, who was now running toward the spot where Xander pointed. When the cord hit Jim, his body slammed to a stop, and it didn't take Sentinel hearing to catch Jim's pained wheeze.

"JIM!" Blair screamed and then he was out and running.

"He's okay! Jim's okay!" Xander yelled, praying that he
was interpreting the cords right. The gold in Jim's cord had flashed to life, growing until it became a glow, and the black thing slid around it, curling and pressing, but never actually touching Jim. Blair still ran to Jim's side, firing at the trees. The moment Blair brushed the black cord, Xander knew there was a problem. The thing uncurled from Jim and wrapped around Blair.

"Blair," Xander yelled as he came out from the shelter of the rock.

"Xander, get back," Riley shouted, but Xander could see the black slip into Blair's body and wrap around Blair's soul.

"NO!" Jim took one running step toward the trees, spraying the trees with bullets.

"Grab Blair! Jim, grab Blair! Get Blair!" Xander screamed. Jim hesitated a second and then reversed direction to grab Blair to his chest. His guide's feet had just left the ground, but now he slumped in Jim's arms as the gold of Jim's cord enveloped Blair's own soul, that odd blending Xander had seen earlier enveloping them both, but this time, instead of the two colors merging, Jim's gold dominated both their soul cords.
"Xander, get back," Riley yelled, and Xander turned to see Riley upright, using one of the stretcher poles as an awkward crutch as he stumbled forward. Xander looked back toward Jim and Blair, but the black cord had unfurled from them and was creeping over the ground toward Xander.

"Oh shit." Xander started tumbling backwards away from the cord, but when the cord was a good six feet away, Xander could feel something pulling on him, making his breath catch in his chest. Hands grabbed him, and Xander turned to see Riley grabbing him, Riley's own soul glowing gold. The black slid up Xander's body, only Riley's soul couldn't protect Xander the way Jim's had enveloped Blair. The black shied away from Riley but still curled firmly in Xander's chest, clutching Xander's soul so tightly that Xander could see the empty tunnel where his own soul would be if Xander could see it.

Xander reached down and clawed at the black cord strangling him with bandaged hands. He could feel it slide through his grip like freezing cold jelly.

"Jim! Help!" Riley yelled, and Xander felt himself lifted from the ground, Riley holding on to his waist, his broken
leg dragging over the ground as Xander was pulled toward the trees. Xander felt new hands on him, pulling his leg until he felt like it would come right out of its socket, but Xander kept moving toward the trees.

Gunfire crashed through the trees, and Xander was dimly aware of Blair firing the fully automatic weapon into the trees. The black cord tightened, and Xander gritted his teeth and ripped at it desperately. Little bits of black pulled away like the slimy skin bits of skin coming off a raw chicken breast. Xander clawed at the cord, his small success giving him hope even as all three of them were dragged to the trees.

The cord flayed under Xander's hands, and then the thing split, half crawling over the ground toward Blair.

"Jim! Get Blair!" Xander screamed. Looking down, he could see the pained expression in Jim's eyes. For a second, Jim clung to him. "Blair," Xander whispered, and then Blair screamed as the other half of the cord found him.

Making a pained cry, Jim let go and rolled away before he came up running for Blair. He threw himself onto his guide, and Xander ignored the scene, knowing that
whatever Jim had, it would protect Blair but not him. Xander clawed at the cord, feeling the pressure lighten as his feet finally touched ground again. Riley's hands pulled at him as Riley practically crawled up Xander's body, and Xander could smell blood.

Riley threw an arm around Xander's shoulder, and with his other hand, he pulled his handgun out of his waist. The black cord dragged Xander around a tree, his skin grating on the bark until he was finally dragged around to the far side and found himself face to face with a terrifyingly familiar face. Oh, he didn't know the Asian features, but the black eyes and deep veins were all too familiar.

"Why Major Finn," Sungsen said in an almost friendly tone. Riley brought his gun up and fired on Sungsen, point blank to the head. Sungsen smiled as the bullet entered and a red hole appeared in the middle of his forehead only to close over without a mark. The bullet came out the back and thunked into a tree.

"That is against regulations, Major."

"Lieutenant, you've been compromised," Riley said calmly. "You need to stand down, soldier."
Sungsen laughed. "No, I don't. I'm going to finish your friend, and then I'm going to find a better hunting ground."

Xander gasped. The cord widened and swallowed him so that he was in darkness everywhere and then it started tightening so that Xander couldn't pull in a breath. Reaching out blindly, Xander sank his hands into the slime, focusing on the feeling under his fingers. It slid out of his grip and black spots formed in his eyes. Ripping off the bandages, Xander reached out again, desperate, and felt his fingers close around something. With all his might, he tore at it, imagining himself pulling roots out of his backyard when his mom had wanted that garden.

Something gave an inch, and Xander jerked back, suddenly able to breathe. Even as he gasped for air, he pulled at the cord, and with a pop, another inch gave, and then another. Xander fell back, still holding the cord, and Riley fell to the ground with a pained grunt. Xander just couldn't worry about that now. Looking at Sungsen's confused expression, Xander set his feet and pulled with everything he had. His shoulders screamed in pain, and the soul cord ripped free from Sungsen as Xander went flying backwards.
Scrambling to his feet, Xander grabbed a tree branch to confront the weirdly empty Sungsen, but then Spike appeared behind the man, one side of his face burned black and one hand dangling uselessly. Before Xander could gather a single thought, Spike grabbed Sungsen from behind and drove his fangs deep into the man's neck.

Sungsen gave a strangled cry and then the sound of Spike feeding and Riley groaning settled into the shadows. Xander could only lay limply on the ground trying to figure out what in the hell had just happened, and what exactly they were going to do if soldier number two turned into one of these in the middle of a base full of people.

Part Twenty-Six
"Oh shit. Spike," Xander crawled forward when his vampire dropped to the ground right after Sungsen's body. "Holy crap. You're cooked. And the sun is still sunlike, and in the sky, and what are you doing up?" Xander could feel the panic bubbling just under the surface, and shade or no shade, he was definitely not okay with Spike being up. Xander looked up at the canopy, suddenly sure that something would magically whisk away all the leaves, and he would have to watch Spike disappear into a poof of dust, and oh god, how had Buffy done it? How had Buffy walked away and let Spike die on the hellmouth, and yep, there was anger right on the tail of fear.

"Xander!" Spike said loudly enough that Xander figured out two things. One, Spike had been calling him for a while and two, he was panicking. "Oi, breathe, pet."

"Breathe, I can breathe, lots of experience breathing," Xander muttered as he really did struggle with it. "I just can't believe you got burned so bad. Hugely bad. Horror movie special effects level badness."

"Pet, if you insist on runnin' toward trouble instead of the other way, someone has to save your arse."
"And my arse thanks you, but holy crap, Spike." Xander stopped a foot from Spike, trying very hard to ignore the dead body flopped on the ground and focus on the charred body in front of him. Spike's left side was burned, his skin black and cracked with a roadmap of pink showing through the jagged edges. His left hand was almost skeletal, and Xander was afraid to even reach out and touch him.

"Oi, been burned worse than this."

"When you went to hell, maybe. That's not really a comfort right now. I mean... shit." Xander reached out and let his hand rest on Spike's right arm, the one that didn't look like it'd been crispy fried.

"As long as I'm not dust, I'll heal. Can't say that about Sungsen. Wanker."

"Riley!" Xander yelped.

"Another wanker. The way he was talkin' to you—hey!" Spike made an indignant protest when Xander just about kicked him trying to scramble across the mat of fallen pine needles to Riley's side. The soldier was still moaning, curled on his side, and Xander gently rolled Riley over
onto his back.

"Oh man. That... that is not good," Blair voice said softly. Xander glanced up and Jim and Blair stood in the shadow of the large tree, both looking a little more worn and ragged than before.

"Blair, get the first aid kit and the rest of the stretcher. Xander, get those wrappings off his leg." Jim immediately moved forward and knelt down on the ground on the other side of Riley. Xander nodded and started working the bloody knots holding the rough splints to his mangled leg.

"Bloody hell, you're welcome for saving your sorry arses, too," Spike grumbled.

"I'll thank you when I know no one's about to die, Spike. Careful with that, Sport," Jim said, reaching out to grab Xander's hand where he was already working a knot. "That's the end of his bone," Jim said, pointing to a lump poking up at a very unnatural angle.

"Okay, I think I'm going to be sick now." Xander sat with his fingers already red from the blood that had seeped into Riley's pants. Xander realized that Riley had done
this to himself trying to save him, and that was way more responsibility than he wanted. He couldn't handle the guilt of being there when people died, so having people actually die for him was way more than he could handle. Xander could feel his hands start to tremble.

"Shove over, pet. I'll get them off."

"Your hand isn't going to work," Xander pointed out very reasonably as he went back to working on the knotted fabric, trembling fingers or no.

"And your hands are covered in blisters."

"Which is better than having all the skin burned off, so just back off." Xander didn't mean to be a snappish, but even he could tell he was being slightly on the totally unreasonable side.

"And how about you both stop?" Blair said loudly. Xander looked up to see Blair standing over them with a pair of blunt-nosed first aid scissors, the kind used to cut through clothing. "Both of you, move over." Xander moved closer to Spike to give Blair room to flop down on the ground. He handed the white box over to Jim before he started cutting at the pants and binding.
"Spike, are you going to be okay?" Blair asked softly as he worked.

"I'm dead, so I don't know why you lot get so worked up. As long as I'm not dust, I'll be fine. 'Course, I appreciate you askin', unlike some ungrateful gits."

Jim took a second away from administering some sort of drug to glare at Spike. "I'm just trying to ignore the stench of burnt corpse."

"And I'm just tryin' to ignore how ya left my boy to die."

Jim stiffened.

"Oh no. There was no leaving," Xander hurried to say.

"Ya have a short memory there, pet."

"And you weren't looking at what was really going on. Jim so would have come back just as soon as he got Blair, and then it would have been four against one. See? We were on the verge of all out victory because there was no leaving. The nearly going flambeau was totally not needed."
"Flambé," Blair offered.

"Flambé, flambeau, no flames at all. Flames plus vampires equals usually good, but not in the case of my vampire." Xander watched Blair peel back the fabric of Riley's pants, revealing a white bone poking through the skin.

"Oh god."

"Spike, can you set up the stretcher?" Blair asked quietly.

"Yeah, but only because the git was doin' his best to help Xander, even if his best turned out ta be damn near worthless," Spike pointed out before he stood up to retrieve the bits of stretcher Blair had brought and the pole Riley had used as a crutch.

"I'll help," Xander offered, but Blair's hand reached out and caught him, smearing Riley's blood on Xander's arm.

"Xander, I need you to sit here and talk to Riley. Remember how I explained the bit with dials to control pain?"
Glancing over at Jim to see if he was hurt, Xander nodded without really understanding the question.

"Okay, I need you to talk that through with Riley. Somewhere down there he can hear you, and these drugs can help stabilize him, but they can't stop the pain. Talk him through the dials."

"Wait a minute. Just... Riley?" Xander asked.

"Bloody hell. You sure?" Spike demanded as he slipped the pole back into the place.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Blair said. "Xander, he could see the bird as well as Jim. He could hear you whisper from twenty feet away, and then there's the fact that Sungsen couldn't touch two people, and only two people."

"The yellow," Xander breathed. "I saw yellow in his cord and I thought it was fear, but yellow is very gold-like and the yellow could have been gold, and I truly suck. Why didn't I notice this?"

"Xander, it's okay. You're still learning how to use your powers."
"Sport," Jim interrupted. "It doesn't matter when we figured this out. Right now, he just needs you to help him control the pain."

Nodding, Xander slid forward, but then Spike's hand was on his shoulder, holding him back. "If he's a soddin' Sentinel, then the fuzzy Shaman can talk him through whatever Sentinel shite he needs."

"No, I can't. Riley was reaching out for Xander, trying to make a connection with Xander, which means whatever instinctive part of him recognized a Shaman wants Xander."

"He bloody well can't have Xander. The boy's mine."

"Spike." Jim stood up. "I understand. I do," he hurried to say when Spike tried to interrupt. "Another Sentinel got near Blair not that long ago, and I felt exactly what you're feeling. And just as soon as Riley is in a hospital and we can call Buffy to get him another Shaman, I will help you tie his ass to a bed so you can get Xander safely to the next state... although really, I would prefer if you headed for the next country, no offense, Xander," Jim turned to Xander apologetically, but Xander got it. Jim and Spike were never going to be really okay with each other.
Bonding in the face of potential death, yeah, but they'd never sign up for a bowling league together. "But right now he's in so much pain that we don't have time for territorial games. If we don't all pull together, Riley is going to die."

"No skin off my nose, and even if it were, I wouldn't let the soldier boy anywhere near Xander, not knowing what he wants." Xander's eyes went wide as he thought about that. No and more no. If the Shaman-Sentinel thing included sex, he was so not signing up for that. He did not have sex with friend's boyfriends, and while he had made one or two inappropriate comments about Riley and sex and potential gay sex with Riley, he was so off the market now and Riley was so very straight.

Jim sighed. "Spike, he's not looking for anything but a person who can help him control the senses, and if I can't appeal to your honor by pointing out that Riley was willing to die to protect Xander, then I'm going to appeal to your selfishness. If he dies, Xander is going to live with the guilt of that."

"Big time guilt. Maybe not ripping all the skin off someone guilt, but I'd be close," Xander pointed out. Spike's hand tightened for a second before he finally let
"But I'm not okay with having sex with Riley, either," Xander said guiltily, and yeah, maybe a good man would sign up for the sex part to save a life, but Xander wasn't that good.

"Sport, a Guide is not sexual. Blair chose to have a relationship with me. It has nothing to do with him being my Guide, and Riley is not up for anything right now, but he needs your help to control his pain if he's going to survive."

Xander nodded. "Spike, I really need to do this." He turned to look at Spike pleadingly. For a second, the vampire seemed unaffected, and then he turned to Jim with a growl.

"Fine, but you and Blair are carrying him to the truck, Ellison."

"We can do that," Blair nodded.

"I mean right now," Spike went over and grabbed the stretcher. "I'll catch up and carry him the rest of the way once the sun goes down, but I'm not sittin' here and watchin' him bleed until then. So you get his sorry arse as far as you can, and I'll follow from the shade."
Jim stared at Spike for a second and then nodded. "There's no reason to stay together now. Xander, start talking Riley through the dials. Even if he doesn't seem to hear you, just keep talking to him. Blair, let's get him loaded and head for the truck."

"The explosives we planted," Blair suddenly blurted out.

"We don't have time to collect them. We'll set them off, and if it attracts someone's attention, all the better. A ranger could get a rescue helicopter out here faster than we could get Finn back to town and find a signal on the cell phones. Xander," Jim said, "start talking to him before we lose him."

"Talking, right." Xander shook himself out of his shock and took Riley's hand in his own. "Okay, Ri, here's how it works. You have to imagine your pain as a dial, and right now it's set way up high, like at a ten, and I know because that leg, that's not looking good, but you don't have to worry about that. You just have to grab that dial and start moving it down..." Xander kept talking to Riley, repeating everything Blair had ever taught him about being a Guide as Jim and Blair set up the stretcher and carefully transferred the still bleeding Riley over to it.
Seven hours later, Xander found himself trying to fend off a nurse's attention in the tiniest emergency room he'd ever seen, and Xander was a connoisseur of emergency rooms.

"If you would just let me check those scratches," she huffed as she gave Xander a glare that would make Spike proud. Either that, or he'd make her sorry she'd ever turned her over-mascara'ed glare toward Xander. But Spike was in the basement scrounging up whatever blood he could find while the medical staff took care of the rest of the wounded. Xander had an unkind moment where he really wished that Spike was up here so the nurse could turn her ice-cold stethoscope on him and then pass out from shock when she couldn't find a heartbeat.

"I'm fine," Xander objected again. "Maybe you could see if the doctor is done with Riley yet."

"He has a compound fracture and a good case of shock, Sport," Jim said from the far side of the room where he waited near the curtain for his turn. He didn't have nearly
as many bumps and bruises, but he'd taken a nasty cut to his cheek sometime during the fight. "They're going to be working on him for a while."

Xander turned his best puppy eye on the nurse anyway. She just raised her eyebrow, which made her look even more Spikelike... well, if Spike were old and wrinkled and a woman. But hey, she had the cranky part down perfect. She sighed.

"I've treated five year olds who were less obstreperous."

"And I'm sure I would be offended if I knew what that meant, but ignorance is bliss. Can't you just check and make sure he's still breathing? He wasn't breathing well. And Blair told you, he has allergies."

"If you take off the patch and let me treat all your scratches like a good little reprobate, I might check on your friend, but if you don't let me make sure you haven't injured your eye socket, I am going to put down in your file that you need every shot in our inventory before we let you out of here."

"Geez. Grouchy much?" Xander complained as he reached up. He hated taking the thing off, and even
though he knew Jim and Blair-- and he didn't actually care what Nurse Battleax thought-- he still hesitated before pulling off the patch.

"Stubborn much?" the nurse shot back as she leaned in. "You have some deep scratches. The enucleation of the eye leaves the remaining tissue vulnerable to infection, so I'll get you some antibiotics and a cream you can use on that."

"Thanks." Xander went to put the patch back on, but the nurse put her hand on his arm.

"And I'll get you a new patch. That one is worn and filthy. Are both of you as annoyingly obstinate as this one?" she asked as she turned to Jim and Blair.

"Oh man, you have no clue," Blair said softly.

"Well someone had better talk him into going to a surgeon soon. He doesn't even have an orbital implant yet. Postponing the reconstructive surgery is going to make it more difficult to get a natural-looking prosthetic."

"Hey, how about we not discuss private medical history
in front of random people I know but who you don't know from Adam," Xander complained. The nurse gave him a rather unsympathetic look.

"I'm going to find you a new patch." She pulled Xander's familiar patch right out of his hand and disappeared.

"I thought nurses were supposed to be helpful and motherly and offer people cookies or something," Xander sighed.

"I think that's when you donate blood, Sport. All the emergency room nurses I've known have been more efficient than motherly," Jim said. "While she's looking, I need you to tell me what happened with the cords, Xander."

Xander fought an urge to hide his missing eye, but Jim was just watching him calmly. Not even Willow and Buffy could fake the lack of disgust that well. "The black cord ..."

"That was Sungsen, right? Man, if there's Sungsen and some weird cord demon out there, I am so quitting the demon-hunting business."
"You're quitting it, anyway," Jim said firmly.

"No cord demon. That was Sungsen, or what used to be Sungsen because there wasn't any humanity left. And the whole reaching out for people with the cord was a new one." Xander shivered, not sure whether it was worse to see that cord reaching out or to be like the others who could feel it but couldn't see it coiling around them with raw chicken-slimy slickness.

"Not true. You said Riley's cord reached out for you, and I think it's safe to say that Riley was reacting to the proximity of a Shaman," Blair interrupted. "So some instinctive behaviors must translate into the cord. Have you ever seen anyone else's cord reach out?"

"And that's a huge no. Cords are supposed to just lay there, well, except for you and Jim," Xander said as he suddenly remembered something else.

"What about us?" Jim quickly asked.

"Your cords sort of lean toward each other, and your colors bleed into one another, and if I were a girl who watched those sappy movies that I will never admit to watching with Willow, I would use words like soulmates."
Jim didn't say anything, but he did drape an arm over Blair's shoulders. And if it weren't for the blood and the gash on his face, Xander might think that he had a sappy expression. But it was hard to call a bloody soldier sappy.

"What about your cord? Does it reach out for Riley or Spike?" Blair asked.

"Oi, you better be careful how ya answer that, pet. Eatin' Riley is still a possibility, at least until Buffy gets here."

"Buffy's coming?" Xander asked as Spike came in the room. Half his face was still pink like he'd been sitting too close to a space heater, but he actually looked better than Jim in the having gotten his ass kicked department. And at least Spike had gotten his ass kicked by the sun and not a linguist like the rest of them.

"Yeah, her and Red killed the beastie threatening to set up a new hellmouth, so they were already on their way before I called."

"Score two for the good guys," Xander smiled. Spike smiled back before coming over and cupping Xander's face, tilting it so that he could look at Xander's injuries.
"Still think you're a wanker for not watchin' out for him," Spike told Jim, but at least this time there wasn't the growling and posturing and toxic levels of pissiness.

"I did my best. I wasn't prepared for what we found."

"No bloody kidding. So, you were tellin' us what happened with the cords. Oh, and don't think I missed what that bird said about your eye, either," Spike warned with a serious expression. Xander rolled his good eye before catching Blair's amused expression.

"Mother hens. I'm telling you, these alpha males are all closet mother hens," Blair smiled. Spike didn't even disagree, although he did give Blair a nasty glare.

"Cords. Okay, I can do that. The black cord was definitely Sungsen, and his cord avoided Jim's and Riley's cords, so I'm guessing it was a Sentinel thing, only when Jim gets close to Blair, his soul cord sort of merges with Blair's which must have made Blair vaguely Sentinel-like."

"But Riley couldn't protect you," Spike added thoughtfully.
"It wasn't for lack of trying. He nearly died trying, and that would have been seriously bad in terms of costing way more money than I have in long-term therapy," Xander pointed out. "And Jim's cord couldn't really protect me, so Sungsen's freaky soul cord wrapped around me and dragged me into the trees, and oh my god, I pulled it out. Fuck." Xander could feel his heart pound until the sound of it filled his ears, and then strong hands were holding him just a little too tight for comfort.

"Calm down, pet. What did you pull out?"

Xander could feel hysterical laughter press against his guts, making him vaguely nauseous. "I pulled his soul out. I grabbed it and pulled it out of him. Oh my god."

"Bloody hell, that's why he went all quiet there at the end," Spike said softly.

"Oh man. That's like huge," Blair added.

Immediately, Spike's voice was all business. "'Course you did it. Soddin' had to considering that the wanker was tryin' to kill you."

"Sport, breathe," Jim suggested. Xander tried, he really
did, but the air went wooshing out as fast as it came in and the room got a little wavy.

Strong hands pushed his head between his knees as Spike's arms closed around him. And then Blair was there, kneeling in front of him. "Hey, it's okay, just count with me. In, two, three, four. Hold. Out, two, three, four. Hold." Blair rested his hands on Xander's legs, but when the room stopped wobbling and spinning, Xander leaned into Spike, hiding his face in the vampire's shoulder as he felt the waves of guilt and fear and horror spread through him.

"I ripped out his soul," he whispered.

"You saved the furry little Shaman and yourself, pet, and Major Moron would have bled to death out there." What with all the panicking, Xander really didn't have an answer for that.

"In battle, you use the weapons you have," Jim added. "Xander, I'm glad you killed him. Lethal force is never the first option, but it was him or us. Worst than that, it was him or possibly thousands of other people who would have died if he had reached a population center."
Xander shook his head. "I didn't kill him. Spike killed him. I ripped his soul out." Xander closed his eye and replayed those few seconds. The soul ripped free like a rotting root and Sungsen had stood there, his body empty as Spike grabbed him from behind and sank his teeth in. "Oh god. I ripped his soul out, and I think there's a special level of hell for that—a special, special level of hell lower than even the one with the child molesters and people who talk in the theater."

"Pet, look at me," Spike said, and again, that strong hand cradled his cheek, forcing him to turn and look up. "Pet, ya didn't do anything that I don't do when I kill someone. If you hadn't slowed him down, I might have gotten myself thrown out into the middle of that clearing where I would have been dust. But if I was faster than Sungsen, I would have ripped his soul out just as well as you did. The only difference is I would have done it by killing his body. I figure the Sentinel has killed a few souls in his time, too. So don't you go getting your knickers in a twist because it was down to either him or us, and I'm not sorry that wanker's dead. I'd kill him again if I could, only this time I'd do it a bit slower because he really got on my nerves there at the end."

"But his soul," Xander said helplessly. "Soul... ripping..."
ripping... soul. Those two things are two things that shouldn't be together, and yet I was with the soul ripping powers there."

"What ya did bloody saved us, and unless you suddenly wish that tosser had won, you soddin' well won't apologize for doin' what you had to do." The soft comfort in Spike's voice hardened, and when Xander opened his mouth to continue with the freaking, Spike looked at him coldly. Xander froze.

"You think about that. Ellison, have you ever killed?"

"More than I care to think about some mornings," Jim said quietly.

"You sorry you did?"

"Yeah, most of the time I am." Jim's soft answer made Spike turn and look at him sharply. Jim just shrugged. "It's a human thing. I'm sorry I ever had to take a life. But at the same time, I wouldn't change anything in my past, Xander. I'm sorry that this world makes us choose between protecting the people we love and a good night's sleep. I'm sorry that there are idiots who are so caught up in getting what they want that the rest of us
are forced to stop them any way we can. I'm sorry for having to kill. But I'm never sorry that I killed the specific people I killed. I made choices, and those choices protected my country and my friends. Your choice protected all of us in this room and Riley and thousands of potential victims." Jim stood silent, but Blair's arm slipped around his waist.

The exam room was silent. Xander clung to Spike, Jim leaned into Blair, and they were all still standing there when the nurse came back into the room, a new eye patch in one hand and a fist full of slick, colored brochures in the other.

"Your friend is doing fairly well. His vitals have improved, and they have the leg stabilized. They're evacuating him by helicopter to Kootenai Medical Center in Coeur d'Alene so surgeons can set the leg and fix the internal damage. People die falling off these mountains, so if you don't know what you're doing, find another hobby," she suggested as she shoved the eye patch and the brochures at Xander. "So, let me get a couple of stitches into you, and you can follow your friend up to Coeur d'Alene," she said as she turned to Jim. She either didn't notice or just didn't bother commenting on Spike's appearance or the awkward silence in the room.
"I don't need stitches," Jim objected.

"Oh no. No, this one has worn out my patience already," the woman said as she poked a thumb in Xander's direction. "I am not putting a band aid on a facial laceration, so you can sit down and let me do my job, or I will start getting creative with a needle and a set of completely unnecessary vaccinations."

"Then let's just get this over with," Jim said as he pushed back the dividing curtain and sat on the second bed. "We need to get to Coeur d'Alene."

"Oh yeah, Xander definitely needs to get to Coeur d'Alene," Blair agreed.

"Oi, you don't have to use that tone of voice," Spike complained. "We're only goin' there to wait for him to wake up and then tie him to the bed so the boy and I can leave the country, remember?"

The nurse sighed without pausing as she cleaned the cut on Jim's face. "You people have serious issues."

"Oh man, you have no clue. But I'm guessing we're going
to look good when Buffy and her crew shows up," Blair said to no one in particular. Looking through the eye replacement brochures the nurse had brought, Xander noticed that no one was disagreeing. Considering how badly everyone had taken the whole seeing souls thing, Xander wished he could just skip the whole ripping souls out revelation. Oh yeah, they had issues... issues and subscriptions to issues and whole, huge freaky archives of issues. And somehow, Xander didn't think it was going to get any better in Coeur d'Alene. He was almost hoping the Susan Clark lady went all demony just to avoid the issuage. Unfortunately, he just didn't think he would be that lucky.

Part Twenty-Seven

"Xander!" Willow shouted as she walked down the white hallway as fast as she could without getting accused of running in a hospital, which would be bad.
"Will." Xander stood and held his arms open as she threw herself in them.

"Spike called and he said there was a demon, and there wasn't supposed to be a demon, just Riley, lost, or not lost and dead, but no demon. And oh goddess, I'm such a bad friend what with the almost sending you to your own death, and I am so sorry."

Xander held Willow through the babble, resting his chin on her head as she clung to him.

"Xander, Spike," Buffy said as she finally caught up to Hurricane Willow. Spike stepped closer to Xander, resting his hand on the small of Xander's back.

"Buffy," he said calmly. He glanced down and then with a sigh offered a tired sounding, "Willow."

"Hey, we're good. Okay, Spike got a little crispy, and I know what cheese feels like getting dragged across a grater," Xander admitted as Buffy looked at his scratched face with a raised eyebrow, "but it's all good. There's breathing, and a pulse and all sorts of other good, not-dead things."
Willow leaned back without totally letting go of Xander and looked up at his face. Slowly, she brought her hand up to trace the red scratches that disappeared under his new patch.

"Ow worthy," she said softly.

"Yep," Xander agreed. "Ow worthy, but not even near the maimed or broken columns. I don't break easy."

"Nope, my Xander-shaped friend stays Xander-shaped even when lesser men would be stretched into taffy shapes," Willow said happily.

"Spike, I'm really sorry," Buffy said, and still she stood back a couple of feet. Xander knew that look, that was her guilty at not being able to fix things look. That was the look she had when she'd told Dawn about their mom being sick.

"Nothin' for you to be sorry about, luv."

"Okay, I trusted the government when they said kith-harn, and then I believed the whole dead in an explosion kith-harn story, and you would think that I would catch on to them being these slimy, lying, back-stabbing
bastards after getting screwed the first dozen times or so. I'm writing that in my address book. G for government, first name-bastards, address-slimysville, phone number-1-900-we-suck." Buffy grimaced. "I should have checked the story out before I sent you and Xander out there without any research or weapons."

"Hey, you had your own potential disaster brewing, and there should be a one disaster at a time rule," Xander pointed out. "It's bad enough with the lack of pension plans and 401(k)'s, but this hero gig should at least come with a promise that the disasters will be nicely spaced for easy stoppage."

"Like idiot fledges bein' too stupid to attack all at once?" Spike asked. Xander glanced over at the sharp edge in Spike's voice.

"Exactly!" Xander smiled at Spike as he let his hands fall away from Willow's back. "There are rules you know. The bad guys have to attack one at a time and reveal all plans right before going down to defeat. These modern villains are not living up to expectations."

Buffy smiled. "I'll be sure to let them know next time I'm kicking their asses."
"You do that. So, I hear all went well on your ass-kicking front." Xander focused on Buffy while Willow held on to him for just a couple of seconds longer than was really comfortable. Finally she let go and retreated back to Buffy's side.

"Yeah. It turns out we didn't need a sword of... uh... whatever. We just needed a bladed weapon that had been blessed, so we took good old Bessy down to Father Whelan, and he blessed it."

"And one of these days, Father Whelan is going to start asking why we keep asking him to bless water and now five-foot steel swords. I mean, I think we've officially hit his weird-o-meter," Xander warned.

Buffy nodded with a smile. "Oh, weird-o-meter hittage is confirmed. I think he lost his eyebrows they went up so far, but you have to love the superstitious Irish who still believe in things that go bump in the night just enough to go along with blessing weapons. And I had him bless your favorite stake while he was at it." Buffy pulled a dark, walnut stake out of her waistband and handed it over. Xander took the warm wood and ran a thumb over the shined surface. It was hard enough to get through even
leather, and it had saved his life more than once. He couldn't believe he'd left it behind.

"Thanks," he whispered. Xander felt Spike's arms slip around his waist, and both girls suddenly found the walls very interesting to stare at. Yep, well there went his hope that denying the problem would just make it go away.

"So, how's Riley?" Buffy asked.

"Bad enough that we've been sitting here so long my butt is officially the same shape as these lame chairs. And when I say lame, I mean both pathetic and lame as in not being able to walk because another hour of sitting, and Spike will be trying to find me a nice wheelchair." This time Xander had to force the joke and the smile, and Spike's arms tightened. Xander vaguely wondered if that was Spike's way of telling him to relax or just a show of support.

"Is he..." Buffy stopped, her face twisted with worry.

"He'll live," Spike quickly added. "The docs are just working on making sure he can walk again."

"Oh goddess." Willow's hands fluttered up to her mouth.
"I thought he just had a broken leg."

"Um, yeah on the broken leg, but then add in days of waiting for rescue and then walking on the broken leg to try and save me," Xander said, and that was his guilt showing up right on schedule. If Angel showed up, the combined guilt in the room would create a black hole of guiltiness sucking up all the guilt in the universe. Until they'd shown up at Kootenai Medical Center and had some doctor talk to them about the possibility for long-term disability or loss of the leg, Xander had put 'broken leg' into the no-big column of injuries. Now, not so much.

"Is Giles here yet?" Buffy asked.

"No, you expected him?" Spike's arms tightened as he leaned forward.

"He's bringing a healer," Willow whispered, glancing around the nearly empty waiting room as though she expected someone to pounce on her for using the 'H' word in the great temple to modern medical science.

"Haven't seen him. But don't think you're going to gang up on us like before. Three against two, four against two, the whole fucking world against us two, Xan and I are still
together," Spike warned. Buffy had been staring at the double doors that led into the operating rooms, but now she looked at Spike.

"Get over yourself. This thing with Xander... so not a good idea, but I'm not arranging my life around trying to make you see the bad-ideaness of it. I want Giles and the healer to hurry up so Riley has the best chance at recovering."

"We shouldn't fight here. We're all worked up with the danger and the lack of sleep and the flight attendant who wouldn't stop with the sexually inappropriate comments, so let's not fight. Okay?" Willow asked.

"Not fighting, just pointing out a few truths," Spike said with a shrug. "Since you lot are here, I'm takin' Xander back to our hotel before he sits in these chairs so long he can't walk. You can wait for news on Major Moron."

"Wait, will the doctors talk to us?" Willow asked.

"Don't know. They only talked to us because the furry little Shaman talked them into it, but seein' as how you lot doubt his powers, I suppose one of you can just as easily talk them into giving you the information."
"Spike, you don't have to be so pissy," Buffy said, her voice confused, but just sharp enough to make Xander flinch.

"Yeah, pet, I really do. You lot show up and within five minutes, the boy's smelling like despair and struggling to figure out what to say that won't piss you off."

Buffy and Willow both looked at Xander, and the blood rushed to his face so fast that Xander thought he might just spontaneously combust.

"Xander." Willow strangled his name.

"Hey, no despair here, except for the whole chairs deal which is more annoyance than despair." Xander gave the girls a goofy grin that froze when he spotted Spike's expression.

"Yeah, well I'm stuck in bum-fuck nowhere with a hotel room that's decorated with soddin' dried flowers. The fucking tub is shaped like a heart, and that's still lookin' like a better option than this fucking waiting room where I've been stuck for hours. So, you can have Riley-watch because the boy and I are due for some down time."
Spike started pushing Xander toward the hallway, and for a half second, Xander couldn't get his feet all going in the same direction as he stumbled forward. Spike's hands at his waist kept him steady as he got his feet untangled and started for the parking garage.

"Oh," Spike shouted over his shoulder. "It turns out Riley's a Sentinel, too. So good luck with that." Xander barely even caught the shock on the girls' faces before Spike just about shoved him through the doors into the main lobby. With the windows catching the early afternoon sun, they had to walk fast with Xander shading the bits of Spike that kept crossing into the pools of light that spilled onto the carpet.

"Um, it's still daylight," Xander pointed out.

"Yeah, and I'll be riding in the trunk. Bring the car as close to the door as you can, and then open the trunk."

"Wouldn't it be easier to wait for dark?" Xander asked as they almost dashed through a large sunlit area. A couple of nurses turned to look at them strangely.

"With my mood, no," Spike insisted. "And when you're heading to the hotel, you'd better stop and get some
food somewhere. If you don't, I'm tellin' Sandburg how you aren't eating, and sending him out for food."

"Hey, no way, he eats stuff that should be on the bottom of the ocean. I mean it, I've eaten bugs that were better than some of his weirdness," Xander looked at Spike, desperately wanting some sort of reassurance that this sudden change in temper wasn't his fault, but Spike just stared ahead and detoured around an old guy in a wheelchair.

"Then stop at McDonalds, but get yourself some food. You're soddin' hungry," Spike said, his voice curt and businesslike and oh so not Spike. Xander nodded and closed his mouth, not even sure what to say, and not wanting to say anything until they got back to the hotel where they'd checked in.

"Food, right," he agreed weakly.

He still hadn't figured out what had made Spike extra-special cranky as he parked near the side entrance to the hotel and got out with his bag of McDonalds. Swiping the card in the lock, he propped it open with the ashtray before he headed over to open the trunk. With the speed of... well, a vampire, Spike ran for the shade of the
hallway while Xander parked the car and headed for the hotel.

"Right, you get anything to eat or are you eatin' in the room?" Spike asked as he leaned against the hallway wall and waited.

"Um, I could eat in the room or not eat if you're going to yell at me. Eating and yelling are not good for human digestion," Xander pointed out as he shoved the ashtray back and let the door fall closed.

"I'm not going to yell at you," Spike said wearily. "Pet--"

"Hey, I'm not saying you don't have a right to yell. I mean, I can't figure out what I did, but that doesn't mean I didn't do it. I'm just saying that if I eat and then you yell, the chances of nasty bodily functions happening goes up kinda dramatically." Xander reached their room and slid the card through the lock. The green light flashed and he pushed his way in.

"Pet." Spike caught his arm and pulled him around so that Xander pressed up against his chest. "Not mad at you. I'm just worried. Ya sometimes get me so wound up, I snap at anyone who's near enough to snap at. I never
promised I was perfect."

"Not looking for perfect. I just don't want you mad at me," Xander admitted softly. The bands around his stomach--the ones that had made him gag at the smell of French fries--loosened up. Random snapping at people because you were in a bad mood—Xander understood that.

"Right then, let's get you fed." Spike moved them into the room and let the door fall closed behind them. They'd checked in without any luggage, but Jim and Blair had obviously made a trip to the local Walmart for them because there were several pairs of jeans and t-shirts stacked on the end of the bed.

"Can we start with the 'what's making you so cranky' part so I know whether I can eat without, you know, messy human stuff happening. Because I'm not fond of messy human stuff. Of course, I'm less okay with messy demon stuff, but you know." Xander shrugged as he headed over to the bed and sat, dropping his fast food bag on the nightstand.

Spike shrugged off his duster and tossed it at a chair. "Pet, what were you saying to me when I had dug myself
"Um. Don't kill Riley? And I really appreciate that you didn't kill him because the whole him making a play for me thing was big with the weirdness, and I'm really glad that it was Sentinel weirdness and not repressed sexual identity weirdness, but I was fairly sure you were going to kick his ass either way."

"I understand the wanker. Instincts sometimes tell ya to do things that ya don't mean to do. So, seein' as how he was just reacting to your powers and he did try to save you, I won't kill the git. However, I was more interested in what you said about yourself."

"I said stuff about myself?" Xander struggled to remember what he had said as he laid in the tent, but in his memory, he went from begging for Riley's life to seeing Sungsen's freaky demony cord. "Um, I didn't know there'd be a test on this, and I so didn't study."

"Pet, ya said you couldn't tell the others you were in pain because they had needs. Willow needed someone to lean on when the hell-bitch was making her life miserable. Buffy needed ya to be who you were at fifteen because she deserved a little happiness."
"Oh, that." Xander shrugged. "Okay, I remember that. Spike, there's nothing cranky-making in there."

Spike walked over and went to his knees in front of Xander, capturing Xander's face between his two strong hands. "Tell me how you're feelin', pet."

"Spike, what do you want me to say?" Xander could feel the bubble of panic rise in his chest, pushing out the air so he felt a little light headed.

"I want you to tell me how you're feeling."

Xander opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"You found out you have the power to rip souls out of bodies. Your best friend's boyfriend is fixated on you and obviously wants you as a Guide, your friends are not-so-secretly hoping your lover dumps you, which is never going to happen. Tell me how you feel."

Xander could feel his eye get hot, and he struggled against the tears that threatened to escape. "Okay, I'm a little freaked."

Xander shook his head.

"Pet?"

"I don't know."

"Least it's an honest answer."

Shoving at the hands that held him, Xander flopped back and scrambled over the bed to get away. "What? You thought I'd lie?" he snapped. Distract and redirect.

"To me, no." Spike calmly stood and came around the bed, and Xander found himself trapped, the mini-kitchen at his back and flanked by the bed on one side and the hideous, red, heart-shaped tub on the other.

"Okay, I'm done playing games, Spike. Say what you're going to say."

"Why the bloody hell did you lie to them?" Spike asked, crossing his arms and waiting as the silence settled over
the room. Xander froze.

"I didn't--"

"You're good? It was nothin' worse than getting dragged across a cheese grater? Ya don't break that easy?" Spike dropped each word into the silence, and Xander recognized every single one.

"I just... worrying them wouldn't help."

"Pet, not worrying them means they don't know what you're carrying. It's the same thing you've done from the beginning. It's like if you carry all this shite yourself then it can't touch anyone else, and you know that's pure bullshit because you've called Buffy on it often enough, but ya still rip yourself apart doin' it to yourself."

Xander shook his head. "It's not like that."

"Did ya tell them about how guilty you felt, going after Buffy when the hyena was in you?"

Xander blushed.

"Right, what about that zombie ya told me about savin'
the school from or the curse that drove you away from your wedding? You talk to people about those or just try ta carry all that yourself?"

Unable to stop a sob from escaping, Xander suddenly found himself crying. "I hate this. Damn it, don't make me do this," he whispered as he struggled against the pain that made breathing hard.

"Shhh." Strong arms caught him, and Xander mewled as he choked off his own sobs. "I have ta make you do this, just like I have ta make you get that eye taken care of and I have ta make you eat, you silly git. You'll take care of everyone but yourself. Don't care what Blair says about me bein' a mother hen, it's all rot. You're the mother hen, and you don't bloody well know how to let go of that. You'll bleed to death while tendin' someone else's scratches. I swear, I don't bloody well know how you survived on the Hellmouth unless being a Shaman somehow threw the odds in your favor."

"I don't want this power, and I'm scared that it's going to go away and then I won't have you," Xander blurted the words out, the truth of them making his heart ache. The ache turned into a throbbing pain in his chest as Spike's silence continued. Clinging to Spike, Xander tried to focus
on the fingers threading through his hair and not the quiet that threatened him, that whispered that Spike couldn't answer that because it was true.

"Fair enough, if that's what has ya wound up, let's talk about it," Spike said calmly as he worked fingers on the buttons of Xander's shirt. Xander tried to reach down and unbutton his own shirt, and Spike slapped his hands away just hard enough to smart. "First off, ya can't lose your power. A witch can have his power stripped or bound, but you're a Shaman. Magic is just part of you, so you'll have your power until the day you die, whether you want it or not."

"I don't. I really don't," Xander whispered as Spike pushed his shirt off, letting it fall to the ground. "But if I don't have it—"

"It's who you are, pet," Spike said gently, kissing the place where shoulder and neck met, and Xander shivered as his lust overtook his fears, beat them up, and shoved them right out of the brain, or shoved them to the side at least. "You're a Shaman, and you'll always be one."

"Shaman I could do. I like tracking," Xander said as he struggled to hold onto his thoughts with Spike softly
sucking the skin of his neck. "Tracking good. Sucking good. Kissing better."

Spike pulled back, a small smile on his lips as he gave Xander an almost chaste peck on the lips.

"That's a kiss? Um, Spike, did you get hit too hard in the head?"

"Just thought we'd finish here first," Spike offered as he moved in so that his lips were a centimeter from Xander's ear, tickling the little hairs inside and making Xander's cock harden in anticipation. "Ya had two fears, and you need to hear this, pet. You're mine. If ya took a hit that scrambled every bit of brains you have so ya couldn't figure out how to tie a shoe much less touch a soul, you'd still be mine. My demon will always see you as its most valued possession, and my soul will always love you."

"Spike," Xander breathed the word as soft as a prayer.

"If ya fucked up so bad you couldn't look in a mirror, I'd still love you. I'd still love you, and you still wouldn't have done anything near as awful as what I've done. If you cheated on me, I'd get soddin' drunk, chain ya to the bed
and make you listen to my worst poetry, and I'd still love you. If you went as bad as Willow and tried to end the world, I'd stand in front of you and make you take me first, but I'd still love you. Loyalty isn't one way, pet. It isn't somethin' you give away without ever expecting it back."

Xander shook his head at that, his lust and his fears and his hopes all tangling up until he couldn't find his own thoughts. "I know that," he finally said. "I know you're loyal, but I just--"

Xander chewed his lip. Okay, that was a slight piece of illogic there because he was going to say he was afraid of Spike leaving which didn't really fit with the knowing Spike was loyal. Pulling back slightly, Xander looked at Spike in confusion.

"Shhh, pet. Just listen." Spike's hands were on Xander's jeans, opening them so that Xander hissed at the brush of a knuckle across his erection. "I won't leave ya. Even if you found some never before seen way of mucking up your powers, I won't leave. Even if ya go off your rocker, I'm not going to leave you. The whole world could bloody end, and I'd find us another dimension so I didn't have to leave. You'll leave me one day, but I won't ever leave
"I wouldn't," Xander immediately protested, but Spike held a finger across his lips to quiet him.

"One day, you'll die on me Xander. I can't turn ya without destroying you, so it's going to happen. But until that day comes, I'm going to love you, even when you're eating stewed yams for dinner because you lost all your teeth."

"You'd stay through yams?" Xander asked with a strained smile. Spike reached up and stroked the side of his face with a knuckle.

"Yeah, even through the yams, pet. And the girls will be right there with ya, eatin' those stewed yams right next to ya. I figure I'll get you three adjoining rooms and hire some nurse to change their nappies while I'm takin' care of you."

"You do know this is slightly disturbing, right? I mean, feeling the love here, but ewww." Xander trembled when Spike slid to his knees and started working on Xander's boots, unlacing them slowly.

"I'm going to keep telling you that until you finally
believe it, not in your head but in your heart, pet. And then I'm going to go find your lackwit parents and..." Spike sighed. "Sometimes life was easier before the soul because I know what I want to do to them."

"Um, how did parents get into this? How did my parents get into this?" Xander asked as Spike pulled off his boots, and that was a thought that pushed him back from the edge of orgasm because parents and sex did not belong in the same brain at the same time.

"We learn to accept unconditional love from them, don't we? I always knew my mum loved me. She put me first in her world, only you've never had anyone put you first." Spike stood up and Xander watched that expressive face.

"I have you," Xander said. "I know sometimes my foot goes in my mouth and my brain doesn't always know everything it thinks it knows, but I know you love me. And when I'm not busy with the whole insecure bit, I totally know you put me first."

Spike nodded as he helped Xander out of his pants and then his underwear and led him to the tub. Sitting on the edge, Spike ran the water.
"Um, are you joining me?" Xander said hopefully, his cock starting to recover from the talk of parents.

"Yeah, in a bit," Spike said softly. "Still need to talk a bit. I'm not having a repeat of London. Can't put up with another round of the same shite, so we need to approach this a bit differently."

"Different as in?" Xander asked as he sank into the tub and let the hot water and steam soak away his pains.

"I'm a little older than you, and a little wiser," Spike started.

"Um, yeah and hell yeah," Xander agreed.

"And when I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it." Now Spike pinned Xander with a sharp look, and Xander could feel the edges of a trap ready to close on him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Spike was older. Spike was pretty smart, even if his plans of world-domination usually blew up in his face. Spike had pulled Buffy back from the edge of some really big badness, and Xander knew that without Spike, he'd be in his own
version of badness. And even if Spike denied it, Blair was right about him being a huge old mother hen. He opened his eyes and let out his breath. "Yeah, I'll do what you tell me," he said. His stomach did a little flop while his cock hardened.

"Right then. First order is you need to take care of yourself. I'll get your dinner." Spike grabbed the fast food bag and started unwrapping the burger, handing it over to Xander. "Second is that you're going to be honest with the girls tomorrow. They're loyal Xander. They aren't going to turn on you if you let them see that you're hurting and scared."

Xander closed his eyes and focused on breathing. The one bite of hamburger in his stomach turned to lead.

"Pet, you okay?"

"Um, terrified. Does terrified count as okay?" Xander asked as he opened his eyes.

"You're fine, pet."

"Okay, I can do this. I can be honest. Being honest will totally freak them out, but worst case scenario, they get
freaked out and leave." Xander looked up at Spike who was studying him. "I can handle them leaving because I'm thinking you won't even if they do, and I'm starting to think that you went looking for Riley to make me happy, not to make Buffy happy."

"You thought I was tryin' to make Buffy happy?" Spike looked absolutely flabbergasted, which was kinda a cute look on him.

"Well, duh. You still love her," Xander pointed out as he took another bite of hamburger. Spike reached out, and again with the soft stroking on the side of Xander's face. Xander stopped chewing so he could concentrate on the feel of that touch sending little shivers though his whole body. If the water weren't so hot, he'd be hard, but between the heat and the gentle stroking, Xander felt a little like a big, relaxed, blissed out cat getting petted.

"I'll always love her, but she's not mine, pet. Never was. You're mine, and you're the one who wanted to go after the great clod. I figured you wanted to prove yourself." Spike stopped stroking, and Xander quickly swallowed.

"I did. Very much with the proving because they were very much of the doubting."
"We talked about that, pet."

"Yep, Buffy, guilt, Willow, afraid of being alone, not liking change, therapy. I remember that talk," Xander agreed. "I just--"

"Can't quite get your brain to believe what it knows?" Spike asked.

Nodding, Xander took another bite of dinner. Damn, he really was hungry. "Understand this, Shaman of mine, I bloody love you. So, you stay in this tub, relax, eat, and I'll be back as soon as I finish talkin' to the fuzzy little Shaman."

"Blair?" Xander asked as he started standing up.

"No." Spike said, a hand pushing him back down. Then Spike reached over and turned the jets on, and Xander's heat addled brain melted even more as one found a sore muscle in his lower back. "You stay here. When I get back, I expect to find you blissed out and full. Got it?"

"Yes, mother hen," Xander agreed.
"Git."

"Cluck, cluck," Xander teased, using one arm to imitate a bird's wing as he took another bite of burger. Spike rolled his eyes and pushed the fries closer to the edge of the tub.

"Look like a bloody loon doin' that. Don't know why I always fall for the nutters." Spike got up, grabbed the keycard and headed out of room. Sighing as tense muscles finally loosened, Xander grabbed a handful of fries and just followed orders, nice clear orders where his brain didn't have to try to sort through things. Eat and bliss out. He could do that.

**Part Twenty-Eight**

"Pet?"

Xander rolled his head to the side and looked at Spike. Letting out a belch, he smiled.

"Lovely," Spike said as he rolled his eyes.

"Full and blissed out as ordered, master," Xander hummed. Spike sat on the edge of the tub and pulled his boots off as he studied Xander curiously.
"Like orders, do you?"

"Oh yeah. And the clearer the orders, the less likely I am to do something to completely fuck them up. Like it even better when you tie me up," Xander said, blushing and sincerely hoping this heat from the tub kept that from being obvious. His blush was obviously still catching up with his new revelations about being officially okay with being overpowered.

"Yeah? We back to you not trusting yourself again?" Spike asked curiously.

"Can't we just call it kinky? It sounds less screw loose in the headish when we just call it kinky."

"We can call it whatever ya like, luv."

"I call it kinky," Xander sighed as he sank back into the curve of the tub. He didn't even open his eyes when Spike slipped into the water, their legs tangling as Spike got himself settled and then pulled Xander into his arms.

"Thought ya'd be more worked up when I got back," Spike said, strong hands carding Xander's hair, and
Xander arched his neck into that touch.

"Came to a decision," Xander admitted.

"Oh?"

"You went over to talk to Blair, right?" Xander asked in a complete change of topics. He smiled as Spike paused for a second as though trying to figure out how that question fit into the puzzle that was Xander.

"Yeah, pet."

"And you'd tell me why if I asked, but if I don't ask, you don't really feel any need to check in with whatever plans you have running around in your head."

"You want to know what I talked to the furry Shaman about? It wasn't any great secret, pet. I just asked--"

"Nope," Xander said quickly. "Nope, not the point, and right now I'm trying to enjoy this sudden epiphany I've had so I really don't want to know if you did something that would make Jim pack up and leave tonight because I like having Jim and Blair around, and not in the naughty touching way because I get enough naughty touching at
home, thank you." Xander ran his fingers over Spike's leg and let his head fall back until it rested on Spike's shoulder.

"You keep showin' your neck like that and we won't be finishing this conversation."

Xander smiled at the sibilant sounds in Spike's voice. Even without opening his eyes, he knew that he'd vamped out. "That would be okay," he nodded, his fingers sliding to the inside of Spike's legs where he could feel the muscles cord under the skin.

"Yeah, after you tell me what crawled in your brain, pet."

"Okay, as someone who's had way too many things already crawl in my brain, that's a disturbo metaphor. But to answer your question, when you went over to talk to Blair, you so talked to Jim first, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Spike said slowly. "But that's not an answer, pet."

"And whatever you wanted from Blair, I bet you had a harder time talking Jim into it than Blair."

"Bloody hell, yes. All I wanted was a few hours of his
time, and the wanker acted like I was trying to put his Shaman into the middle of a fucking war. Not my fault this whole mission went tits over arse, and I'm the one bein' big enough to forgive him for leaving you alone with Sungsen."

"Exactly," Xander muttered as he snuggled into Spike's arms, his fingers creeping toward naughty touching.

"Ya lost me, pet." Spike still sounded confused.

"Blair's not girly or weak. I mean, if Blair and Jim were both pissed at you and each one was standing near an exit, and you had to get out of the room, which one would you take on?"

"Pet, you're scarin' the vampire, here. What do you have rattling around in that brain of yours?" Spike's use of the crazy-Dru voice made Xander smile.

"Come on, Spike, play along," Xander tilted his head so he could apply the puppy look. Spike held out for almost thirty seconds before he sighed.

"Fine, I'd take out the Sentinel."
"Exactly," Xander nodded happily. He was even happier when his own naughty touching was returned, Spike's hand caressing his balls gently.

"Hot tub cooked your brains," Spike said, but the tone was more indulgent than freaking over cooked brains. And cooked brains were totally worth freaking out about, even if they weren't yours, because Xander had seen how the English people would try to slip brains in on the plate with the scrambled eggs, and that was just all kinds of freak-worthy.

"Blair is still a scary guy."

"Oi, not scared," Spike immediate protested. "Just smart enough to know which fight to pick. Now, is there some reason we're talkin' about fightin' those two? They do something?"

"Hey, no, no doing! No doing anything and no fighting!" Xander said, a moment of panic flaring through his newfound calm because Spike in mother hen mode was totally more dangerous than a mother hen. Spike was more like the radioactive mother hen who ate Cleveland in the aftermath of nuclear war. "It's just that my heart has figured out what my head kept telling me, or what
Blair kept telling my head anyway," he hurried to explain.

"Which is?"

"Okay, Blair is all about being beta. I mean, Jim isn't all as grrr like you sometimes get, but he's growling just under the surface, and yeah, he trusts Blair to take care of himself, but when some suspect threatens Blair, I expect him to break out with the game face. Either that or he does this really quiet thing that creeps me out because it's like the calm before the homicidal storm. So being strong and being beta are two flavors that taste great together, and if the girls don't see that then they're having the problem because any not-strongness I have going on has nothing to do with the betaness I have going on."

"Your heart just figured that out, huh?" Spike asked, and now he just sounded amused. Xander reached down and stroked Spike's hardening cock.

"Yep. Heart dumb. Also, I want to point out the unfairness of this." Xander tightened his hand around Spike's cock, and the vampire hissed and vamped out again before his human features fell back in place.
"Oh?" he asked with a dangerous grin. "You think there's something unfair about this?" Spike's fingers closed around Xander's fist, forcing him to pump faster.

"Mmmm. Yeah, see the heat makes things go saggy on me, but you're not saggy, and it's kinda weird because I am all hot in more than just the hot tub way, but Xander Jr. is not joining the party. Since I've figured out it's okay for me to ask for help, do you think maybe you could do something about that?"

Spike slid out from under Xander, switching their positions so that Xander sat in the hot tub seat and Spike straddled him.

"Ya figured all that out when I went for a walk? Goin' to have to walk more," Spike mused, and then his lips were on Xander's demanding entrance, and Xander let himself yield to that need. Sharp teeth nipped his lower lip, and Xander bucked up and grabbed supernaturally strong arms.

"Goin' to have to take a lot more walks, pet," Spike murmured before he bent down and started sucking at Xander's neck.
"Bad plan. If you're walking, you aren't here doing this," Xander complained as he wrapped his legs around Spike's knees and pulled. A human would have tumbled into the water, but Spike just grinned down, his tongue touching his teeth in the sexiest expression ever in the history of sex.

"You tryin' ta do something, Xan?" he asked. He didn't budge an inch, and Xander pulled harder, succeeding only in making his ass slide off the seat of the hot tub as his own weight proved a whole lot easier to move than Spike. Since he still had his legs wrapped around Spike's knees in an attempt to pull the vampire down, Xander had to cling to Spike shoulders just to keep from going under. Spike just smiled like he was trying really hard not to laugh.

"Okay, that goes in the doesn't work column. Vamp strength plus slippery tub equals failure for the Xan man." Xander smiled up.

"Seems to me ya got just want you were looking for," Spike said, his smirk growing wider has he wrapped an arm around Xander's waist and stood, easily picking the man up.
"Okay, see, an insecure man would feel all girly about getting picked up. Me? I'm thinking woo hoo for vamp strength."

"I'll give you something to be grateful for, pet," Spike promised as he dropped them both on the bed. Spike's weight on him made Xander's air escape in an exaggerated sigh, and before he could catch his breath, Spike had flipped him.

"Beautiful," Spike breathed, and strong hands were kneading his ass and sending shivers up his back.

"No fair, I can't see you," Xander complained softly as he bunched up the sheets in his fists. A heavy body fell across his back.

"Too bloody bad," Spike whispered in his ear, the air tickling before Spike caught his earlobe between dull human teeth and nibbled.

"Oh fuck." Xander humped as Xander Jr became suddenly interested, but Spike's feet forced his legs apart so that Xander was sprawled obscenely across the bed. Squirming, Xander tried to work his hand under himself to grab his cock, but suddenly Spike caught his wrists,
pressing them to the mattress on either side of his hips as Spike's mouth moved to the back of Xander's neck: tasting, nipping, dragging a sharp tooth across the water-warmed skin.

Xander made an embarrassing noise that didn't even come close to human speech as Spike's tongue moved down his backbone. A little tiny part of Xander wanted to object that what was about to happen really wasn't all that hygienic, but the feel of a cool tongue tracing down his spine short circuited any thought not directly connected to his cock.

Running his tongue over Xander's hole, Spike purred, the vibration traveling right through the center of Xander, making every part of his body arch and ache as Xander squirmed. He struggled to pull his legs together and push up into that incredibly feeling, but Spike held him still as his tongue circled.

With a gasp, Xander bucked helplessly as Spike purred louder, the vibrations narrowing Xander's whole world down to that one point of contact. His whole body contracted and stiffened, needing more but unable to do anything but lie there. Even when Xander mewed his distress, his hot need, and yanked at his trapped hands,
Spike ignored him. Instead Spike drove his tongue farther in until Xander could only lie limp and tremble.

When Spike finally started working south again, worshipping the underside of Xander's balls and then his inner thigh, Xander couldn't register anything but the flickering touch of Spike's tongue across his skin and the way his skin prickled when Spike blew across the damp trail.

"Please," Xander begged.

"Want somethin', pet?" Spike asked right before a sharp fang trailed over Xander's inner thigh making every nerve scream with anticipation.

"Anything, please, just, please." Xander struggled to even find individual words in his brain, and his cock was definitely on the verge of breaking. Arching his back, Xander set a rhythm of small rocking motions with his hips that allowed him a pale mimic of thrusting, and the world whitened out again as anything north of his waist and south of his thighs just didn't matter. World ending, Shaman, friends... it all vanished under a pure heat.

Vaguely aware of Spike chuckling against his thighs, his
skin vibrating in sympathy as Spike leaned against his leg, Xander could only wait and slowly rock into the mattress as the lust deepened. The hands around his wrists tightened, and Xander threw his legs open even farther, bending his knees as he tried to get more leverage for his weak thrusts.

Xander could hear the pathetic whimpers slipping from his own throat as Spike sucked at one spot on his thigh long enough to make the heat center there. That one spot and his cock became Xander's whole world as he rocked and gasped and struggled against Spike's grip even knowing he could never break free.

The fang sliding into his flesh sent one flare of a prey's panic through Xander and then a feeling of euphoria settled over him as Xander turned pliant. Spike's hands finally released him, wandering over Xander's butt and hips, tracing patterns on his thighs and tickling his balls. But Xander lay limp and gasping, his cock achingly hard and throbbing while every other muscle had gone slack. Even his hips stilled as only the agonizingly slow mouth on his leg mattered.

Sprawled across the hotel bedspread, Xander could only wait as Spike leisurely finished, kissing the skin his fangs
had just pierced before Spike slipped a finger inside. Letting himself drift on the bliss, Xander just lay still as Spike added a second slick finger almost immediately. His cock still screamed to come, but Xander found that didn't matter compared to the aching throb in his leg and the soft, drifty feeling as Spike added a third finger before crawling up to kneel over Xander.

Spike's cock forced its way past the ring of muscle easily, slipping in so deep that Xander stopped breathing for a second, and then as Spike pulled out and thrust in, he found himself breathing to the rhythm of the fucking, grunting with each stroke as Spike drove in hard enough to make their flesh slap.

Xander could feel his lust grow, the need to come nearly overwhelming him as Spike growled his own orgasm even as he continued to thrust, every movement now slick as Spike came inside Xander. Nearly crying with a need that wasn't quite enough to send him over, Xander finally moved, clawing the cheap bedspread and squirming under Spike.

Sharp fingernails scored lightly down Xander's back. "So fucking beautiful. So fucking perfect, and all mine," Spike growled. Xander thrust down into the mattress once and
started coming. Holding his breath until spots danced in his eyes, Xander collapsed onto the bed, Spike softening but in him as he lay across Xander's back.

"Bloody warm along with beautiful and perfect," Spike muttered as he ran a hand up and down the back of Xander's arm.

"And yours," Xander murmured as he wondered if even vamp reflexes could get the sheet out from under them without requiring Xander to move. Xander was so not up for moving.

"Yeah, pet. All mine," Spike agreed as he kissed Xander's shoulder blade. "All this power running under your skin. All the strength to carry your pain and the girls' along with it. All this power, and the only thing you want to do with it is make everyone else happy. And now all that is mine because you know I'm even stronger. Bloody perfect, you are." Spike placed one last kiss on Xander's neck and then Xander did what all good manly men were supposed to do after mind-blowing sex... he let himself sink into sleep.
Part Twenty-Nine

Xander groaned as he felt Spike slide away from him, cool air seeping into the warm nest of covers where he'd been sleeping. He squirmed around, pulling the covers down as he stuck his head out and blinked. Spike, his naked butt pale in the dim light that seeped in around the curtains, yanked open the hotel room door.

"Wot?!"

For a second, it was silent.

"Okay, I've seen lots of manhood displays, and I realize phallic symbolism is pretty common, but this is the first time I seen someone actually, you know—"

"Oi, ya woke me up. I'm not getting bloody dressed just for you because the minute you're gone, I'm going back ta bed. We were up all night keeping watch over Major Moron until the others showed up."
"Which is why we're here."

And oh my god, that was Jim. Spike was flashing Blair and Jim, which shouldn't be more horrifying than flashing just one of them, but yet somehow was. Xander blushed for Spike, despite the fact the vampire didn't seem to mind.

"Someone in the front office is looking for us, giving some bullshit story about a family emergency. A girl who talks like Xander and an English guy," Jim finished.

"Oi, that's them. Give us a sec to get dressed. I'd answer the door starkers, but Xander would probably give birth to kittens or something."

"Hey, Hellmouth born here. We do not joke about birthing inhuman beings. It's up there with the ban on the 'w' word. And if Buffy and company are coming, I totally need to get dressed."

"Then hurry up, Sport. The front desk just gave us up."

"Shit." Xander bounced out of bed before Spike had even closed the door on Jim's and Blair's faces. "I am so not ready for this. I'm still freaking over the soul ripping, so
"We'll just take it as it comes, pet," Spike said calmly as he pulled on a pair of jeans. Glancing down, Xander spotted the bedspread.

"Okay, officially gross. This is why you are not supposed to touch hotel bedspreads because ewww! Eww and very not so subtle." Xander yanked the bedspread down and wadded it up at the foot of the bed to try and hide the evidence.

"We're not trying to hide, pet."

"Well... um... of course we aren't," Xander said, momentarily confused. "Okay, Spike, I know we're not with the hiding, but I have decades of old habits to break here. Me being gay hits the weird o'meter, so I just..."

"Bend over backwards trying ta not put your friends in a spot where they might have to see something they don't like?"

"Um, yeah. That." Xander bit his lip as Spike just considered him with one eyebrow raised. Then Spike shook his head.
"One step at a time, pet. We'll get there."

"I can do this. I can do the first step, which means you and I are together and I am a Shaman, which is two steps. I can do two steps."

"You're going to add talking to your friends in the altogether if you don't get your kit on," Spike pointed out calmly as he started pulling on his boots.

"Shit. Shit and shit," Xander muttered as he grabbed the clothes Jim and Blair had bought for them. The stack had ended up all over the floor so he had to sort through and find the stuff that fit him before he could start speed dressing. He had all but his shoes on when Spike stood up.

"Out of time, pet." Spike opened the door. Jim and Blair came in and immediately headed for a position near Xander, which was really kinda nice what with the feeling supported, but Xander hated that everyone seemed to think he needed support against his friends.

"Hey! Spike, you're awake, which is on the unexpected side," Buffy said cheerfully as she came through the door.
A whole crowd of people followed: Giles, Willow, some old dude, Riley.

"Riley," Xander said in surprise. "You're looking strangely unbroken. Why aren't you broken, not that there's anything wrong with you being unbroken. Unbroken good."

Before Riley could answer, Giles stepped forward. "I called in a healer. I haven't been able to identify a demonic power capable of creating this kind of change in a human being, so we needed Riley's assistance. We shall simply need to avoid any official notice for a few months or someone will certainly be asking how he healed so rapidly. That kind of attention can prove unhealthy, especially for someone in the service."

"No joke," Blair softly breathed.

"Jim, Blair—this is Buffy the slayer and Willow the witch and Giles the watcher guy and someone who I totally don't know, but I'm guessing he's with us because Giles gets that constipated expression if I say 'slayer' around someone who isn't in the know," Xander offered introductions. Spike had backed away from the door and now leaned on the wall, but his leaning was right
between Xander and the Scoobies, and with Jim and Blair beside him, Xander felt vaguely boxed in.

"Yeah," Buffy laughed, even if it was a strained laugh. "And then you tell everyone that I'm a slayer fan and convince them there's this really obscure hockey team, and it's not pretty. I love you Xander, but you and lying are not best buds."

"Nope, not really. I'm great with the just not saying anything, but lying leads to guilt which leads to nervousness, and that is the path to saying really stupid crap," Xander agreed.

"This is Bertrand Rousseau. I asked him to assist us on this," Giles said as he nodded to old dude. The guy looked like someone who should be hosting a public television special on Dickens or something equally boring that only Willow would watch. He had on a grey suit that matched his grey hair and his dark grey tie and his way too serious expression. Even his crisp French accent sounded grey.

"Ta," Spike offered without even an attempt to be polite.

"Hey, nice to meet you Bernie," Xander smiled. "So, this
is Blair and Jim, the special ops soldier guys we asked for backup, and I see your guilty face Willow Rosenberg, so stop with the guilty." When he had mentioned needing backup, Willow's face had scrunched into something really unpleasant.

"Ah yes, the... what did Rupert call him, the Sentinel?"

A silence fell on the small group. Jim stood up a little straighter and Spike stepped to the side so he was standing directly in front of Xander. All Xander could see was the back of Spike's head, but from the expression of panic on Bernie's face, the Frenchman was getting the extra-special homicidal glare. Buffy shifted closer to the guy and Giles pulled his glasses off and started polishing.

"Perhaps that was a regrettable way to phrase that," he started.

"Just a mite," Spike immediately agreed, but the French guy kept right on talking.

"Being a Shaman myself, I am aware of a certain aura around both you and Mr. Finn, so Rupert's indiscretion with your own powers is understandable. I certainly would have known you were not entirely human. And
you, Mr. Sandburg, are another Shaman I see."

Jim went from uncomfortable to just flat out pissed. Xander could see it in the way his arms tensed and the way he reached out and grabbed Blair's arm, dragging his Guide just a little closer.

"Are you one of those 'seeing the truth of things' Shaman?" Xander asked. Stupid question since it really didn't matter. He could be a magical fairy dust Shaman and the guys were still going to be pissed, but if they were talking, they weren't eviscerating.

"Conspic Shaman? No. No, I am a salus Shaman, the healer Rupert asked to tend your wounded." The guy looked at all the pissed off alpha-males for a second. "I could certainly heal that cut of yours Mr. Ellison," he offered uncertainly.

"I'm fine." Jim's growl didn't reassure Xander one bit, but Bernie seemed somehow more comfortable.

"Yes, I have no doubt you'd prefer to heal naturally. In fact, as I told Rupert, Mr. Finn would have no doubt preferred the same."
"I would have," Riley agreed softly. Buffy was holding his arm, and she looked up in sympathy.

"Atego are notorious for avoiding supernatural interventions and individuals. Which, of course, is the great irony since they all must work with a Shaman to access the full power of their gifts."

"Wait, Atego?" Blair asked.

"Before you go using new words, do you mind handing out a glossary for us not-researchy types?" Xander asked.

"I apologize for the unfamiliar term." The guy gave them a smile, and the yellow and uneven teeth so did not fit the GQ image. "Atego, from the Latin 'tego' meaning to shield or hide or protect. 'A' of course refers to the prefix for 'away from.' The Latin term is for an individual whose very nature both repels magical creatures and conceals magic within his possession."

"Am I the only one missing something?" Xander asked as he looked to the girls. If anyone would have his back in the clueless department, he could count on Buffy. She was already nodding.
"Oh, I was totally missing girl. They had to explain to me three times. See, these Atego are warriors, but apparently they're like the opposite of Slayers. According to book-boy here, I attract the forces of darkness."

"That's disturbing," Xander said. She just gave him her 'oh yeah' expression.

"Oi, it's also true. Every vampire knows a Slayer will practically call to your demon. It's an almost overpowering need to throw yourself against her and prove you have the bigger knackers," Spike said. He moved to lean against the wall again, and Xander could see the calculating expression as he studied Bernie.

"And as someone with no knackers, I'm happy to say you do have the bigger ones, but I still kicked your ass," Buffy smiled.

"Um, can we get back to the part where I'm confused, please?" Xander interrupted. Yeah, he knew that Spike was his in a way that Spike and Buffy had never fit. They'd never made their needs fit each other, but watching them do the pseudo-flirting was still a little stomach turning from his point of view.
"Not to interrupt, but perhaps I can be more concise," Bernie offered. "What you call Sentinels are what the demonic community refers to as Atego: warriors whose very nature repels magical creatures and who has senses equal to the demons he would fight. Typically the senses are seen as only a curious side effect. An Atego's ability to conceal magical artifacts and consciously resist magical interventions are typically seen as his most powerful attributes. Had Miss Summers not convinced Mr. Finn to cooperate, I could not have healed him because his considerable magical power would have simply rejected any changes I attempted to make in his body."

"Oh man," Blair breathed the words.

"I suspect with this many magic users here, our two Atego are feeling both uncomfortable and rather hostile toward most of the people in the room. It is instinctive. Just as magical creatures avoid Atego, Atego feel an innate antipathy toward those marked by supernatural powers."

"I dislike most of the people here for reasons that have nothing to do with instinct," Jim pointed out dryly.
"Yes, of that I have no doubt." Giles sounded tired. Ubber tired. Xander wondered when he had last slept, or when he'd last slept without having his face planted in some book he'd fallen asleep over. "I would ask that you restrain yourself with Riley, and Riley, I would ask that same restraint of you. I am aware of your background with the other Sentinel, Mr. Ellison, and I don't want a repeat of the attack which left her institutionalized."

Xander flinched as both Jim and Blair reacted to that. Blair took an angry step forward. "Oh man. Buddy, you are a fucking piece of work." Blair poked his finger in Giles' direction. "You don't know shit about what happened, and what Alex did.... Man, she did that to herself. You do not bring that up again, not unless you want to make a couple of enemies." Giles physically backed up a step. Buffy would have stepped forward, but weirdly, Riley held her back. For a second, Xander thought he might get to see a nerd on nerd smack down with Giles versus Blair, but then Jim reached out and pulled Blair back to his side.

"I'm not feeling any aggression toward Finn," Jim said with a dangerous quiet in his voice. He almost made it clear that there were lots of people in the room he did feel some aggression towards. They were Xander's
friends, but he could see where Jim was cranky. "Finn?" Jim asked as he glanced toward the other soldier.

"No sir, I'm not feeling particularly aggressive."

"Interesting," French guy said. He'd backed up all the way to the hotel door, where he stood between Willow and the only escape. Xander really couldn't blame the guy since it was definitely looking like they were approaching smack down territory, and the old French dude was no match for the number of alphas in the room, or betas either for that matter. He and Blair weren't exactly chopped liver... not that he would fight his friends. Xander stopped thinking before he got his brain in a knot.

"Interesting how?" Willow asked softly. She looked from French guy to Buffy and Riley who were standing closest to the bed and please don't let them pay too much attention to that bedspread.

"Atego are infamous for their territoriality and inability to work with others. To find two, unrelated Atego working together without animosity is... well, quite frankly unique."
"You're assuming I am planning on working with you from here out," Jim said darkly. "We have work on Monday."

"Right," Blair said sarcastically as he finally gave up on glaring at Giles. "We'll just wait until this woman eats the base and then starts munching on nearby towns."

"They've been handling this stuff for long enough that I think they can deal with it."

"And the fact that we're immune... that doesn't make us useful in this fight at all." Blair narrowed his eyes and glared at Jim. Xander knew if Jim just walked out and headed for his truck, Blair would follow. Instead the Sentinel sighed.

"Chief, I don't want you anywhere near if this goes wrong. I may be immune, but you aren't."

"I am when you're with me. And man, I plan to be glued to your side. Where you go, I go. Trust me, I do not plan on getting anywhere near Sungsen version 2.0." Blair nodded as though the issue were decided.

"You were immune from the attack? No one mentioned
that," Giles said. Xander noticed the man had retreated to stand near Buffy after Blair's verbal attack.

"Does that mean something?" Blair asked. Giles looked at Bertrand.

The man nodded slowly. "I'm sure it does. I have no idea what, but I trust that between us, Rupert and I can identify potential suspects given this new piece of evidence. Ategos' responses to various demons are well documented in the literature since so many do hire Atego to protect magical objects or to prevent places from being influenced magically or even to keep magical creatures from coming into an area."

"There's literature?" Blair asked, his enthusiasm washing away the last of his anger. "Wait, that means there are others! How many others? Are there any others around now?"

"Two in Russia, said to be brothers, one in Eastern Europe, another in Saudi Arabia, and I've heard rumors of a couple in South America, but South America is notoriously poorly connected to the demonic world as a whole."
"Oh man, we could meet the others. Do you have books I could borrow?"

Bernie was smiling, obviously relieved at the sudden drop in homicidal glaring in the room. "Of course."

"Hang on there, Chief. For all we know, this guy is feeding us a line."

"I assure you that Bertrand is reliable and one of the best in the business," Giles said in his best offended voice. Xander blinked away the room and studied the cords that flowed so thickly he could barely see where one stopped and the other started. Willow's soul still shimmered from one color to another, a tanish-orange being the most dominant. Giles, like Riley was blue, but Riley's was stained with gold and Giles' with black. Buffy stood out the most, a brilliant golden color. Bertrand was a lavender with bits of blue dancing in the cord. Nothing gave Xander the Hellmouthy vibe the way the yellow had in Angel or the black in the other demon's he'd seen.

Xander blinked away the cords and Jim was still standing with his arms crossed and a not-happy expression. "Jim, I'm not exactly good with this whole Shamanic sight thing, but I don't think he's doing anything big with the
bad. I mean, he could still be lying because I know there are things I lie about because I'm trying to be good, so he could be good lying, but I don't see any not-good lying."

"You can identify intentions within the soul? You are far more advanced with your powers than Rupert led me to believe." The guy turned to look at Giles with something that came close to reproval.

"Xander never told me he could access information like that," Giles said as he gave Xander that same look. Spike stood up straight, blocking the line of sight, and Xander touched his back in thanks. Giles was the only one who was kinda sorta on their side, and Xander could not handle Giles' attitude along with the girls. Of course, Buffy was actually strangely silent, and Willow was sticking to the tragic eyes, but hiding behind Spike was so much nicer than dealing with all the looks.

"Well, it does preclude the theory that Xander might be a conspic Shaman, not that I ever subscribed to that theory based on your descriptions. Peto Shaman and animus Shaman are the only types I know who can access information of that nature," Bernie said.

"Whoa. Okay, I thought we already knew Xander was an
animus Shaman?" Blair asked.

"Xander and Spike knew, or Spike knew because Xander was big with the not knowing, and just because Spike said he knew did not mean he knew," Willow said from her spot next to Bernie. She turned a glare toward him, and now he really looked uncomfortable as his hand actually reached out and rested on the doorknob. "And are you sure?" she demanded. "We thought it might have been some sort of trick because Xander was never Shamany before."

"Both animus and peto Shaman are higher-level Shaman. Their powers would not be evident without extensive training."

"Which he didn't have," Willow announced triumphantly. "There was no training, so there couldn't have been extensive training, which means something is not right in a big way." Looking around Spike's shoulder, Xander could see the resolve face. He could also see just how tense Spike had become.

"Bloody hell, ya sound like a broken record, Red. You need to find a new tune to sing," he snapped.
"While I think we can all agree that Xander has some sort of power, Willow is right that the circumstances are suspicious," Giles commented mildly.

"See?"

"Don't you start," Spike growled.

"I'm not with the starting. Giles started it. It is all suspicious like because three weeks is not enough time to develop your powers."

"It is when you're workin' with a trado Shaman. Seems like I've said that two or three hundred times now." Spike was nearly trembling now, and Xander didn't want to check with his Shamanic vision because he knew he'd see Spike's demon flailing against the soul. Spike's demon thought of the Scoobies as his, so the demon would want to put Willow back in place, which was probably not going to score points with anyone, and would definitely piss Willow off. Xander stepped to Spike's side, slipping his arm around Spike's waist and leaning into him. Spike took a deep breath and then the tension went out of him as he leaned back into Xander. The room fell silent, which was amazing given the number of people in it.
"A trado Shaman. Your specialty?" Bernie finally asked Blair.

"Oh, uh, yeah, I'm one of the best teachers on campus. If students show up for class, I can get them to understand the material, no problem."

"Yes, working with a trado Shaman is, no doubt, an advantage," Giles said. "However, as I understand it, Blair has no training and is very unlikely to be able to access his own powers, much less teach Xander to access his, which leaves serious questions as to the source of Xander's powers, especially if, as Bertrand has suggested, his powers are those of an upper-level Shaman." And there went the support from the Giles corner.

"No training? You have managed to access your powers with no training?" Bertrand looked stunned. "You are a remarkable young man, but I will admit this is a bit of a conundrum. According to everything I know about Shamanism, which is an extensive body of knowledge, upper level Shamen always require training."

"Go on then, Blair, tell him your trainin'," Spike said smugly. Xander looked at his vampire suspiciously because as far as he knew, Blair didn't have Shamanic
"Spike, I don't actually have—"

"Growin' up with your mum. I heard at least a dozen stories from Xan that seem to be about you training as a Shaman."

Blair looked at him confused for a second. "Oh, you mean the retreats," he finally offered.

"Retreats? What sort of retreats?" Giles took a step forward.

"Naomi was all into finding harmony with the world. Oh man, I learned to meditate when I was six. We did everything from protesting nuclear energy to having a moonlight drum dance in the giant redwoods. One time, she took me to this reservation in New Mexico and I did a spirit walk. That was right before I went to the university. I was only fifteen, about to turn sixteen, and mom wasn't sure about leaving me alone, so she told me that if I could complete the manhood ceremony I could go to Rainier."

"That would certainly appear to be Shamanic training,"
Bertrand said in a tone of voice that suggested he had settled that in his own mind. Blair had training; therefore, Blair could train Xander. Xander glanced toward Giles who at least looked confused, which was better than looking sure that Xander had lost his mind.

"And then my first Guide," Jim added, "he died in Blair's arms and passed the way of the Shaman to Blair."

"What type of Shaman was he?"

Jim shrugged. "He spoke Chopec, so I don't think it would translate, but he would often appear in my dreams and could interpret dreams. When the tribe's land was desecrated, he took the symbol on the equipment and did a spirit walk. He tracked the president of the company all the way to Cascade."

"Ah, a dormito Shaman. They are not nearly as rare as Xander's power, or your own, Blair, but they are upper-level, powerful beings. In my professional judgment, if Blair is being truthful, that would count as training," Bertand nodded.

"See?" Spike said smugly to Willow.
"Not good training," she said softly. "And just because Blair is trained, that doesn't mean he could train Xander in three weeks. I mean, if Xander is an animus—"

"I'm in hell," Buffy interrupted Willow's whine and Spike's growing growl. "I'm in hell and on the other side of the world from my therapist, and this is just not happening. Will, just think about it, okay?"

"Fine, thinking. Not happy, but thinking." Willow made a face at Buffy.

Spike turned on Bertand. "Look, as interesting as this rot is, I don't bloody care. Just tell this lot that Xander's an animus Shaman so they'll bloody drop this."

"Uh, being able to read intentions could be a peto Shaman, one who influences others desires and reads their intentions in order to influence them, or an animus Shaman, one who sees and can manipulate the soul and the soul's intentions. I cannot determine which power Xander possesses without further testing."

"Ya don't need any more testing," Spike said confidently. "Tell 'em, pet."
Xander felt cold panic wash through him. No no no. They were still on the Shamanic step. He couldn't deal with the soul-ripping step. Xander looked at Spike in panic.

"Go on," Spike urged him softly. Xander closed his eyes and reminded himself that Spike was older and he had given Spike the right to make decisions like when to stop hiding things.

"Perhaps Xander is not ready to share whatever it is you are asking him to share," Giles said.

Xander shook his head. "No, hey, I'm share boy." He took a deep breath. "Okay, this is the not-so-easy part to say."

"Xander?" Willow asked, and in that word, Xander could hear the love and the worry, and he wished he had a magic wand so he didn't have to say this next bit. The room was absolutely silent.

"I ripped Sungsen's soul out," Xander said softly.

"You what?"

"Xander!"
"Good Lord."

"How could you?"

Xander couldn't even listen fast enough to figure out who was saying what, but he was guessing Giles was the 'dear lord.'

"Enough, all of you!" Riley shouted over all of them. Leaving Buffy's side, Riley moved to stand next to Spike where he crossed his arms and glared at the Scooby half of the room. "Xander did what he had to! I shot Sungsen in the head, and the bullet didn't even slow him down. Spike drained him. So, if you want to yell at someone, yell at us. We actively tried to kill Sungsen. I knew the man. I had Thanksgiving dinner with him. I've met his parents, and I put a bullet in his brain. But you do not yell at Xander for this."

"Okay, that was freaky," Buffy said slowly. Xander noticed that Jim had moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Riley. Buffy looked from one to the other. "Riley, I'm all for you getting along with the friend group, you know what they say about getting with the friends and all, but you sticking up for Xander... a little pod-personish. You standing with Spike to stick up for
Xander... major pod-personish. You do remember you hate Spike, right?"

Riley sighed. "Yeah, I remember hating Spike. He's an arrogant, devious son of a bitch. But that doesn't mean I'm going to stand here and let you take cheap shots at Xander."

"Hey, no shooting," Willow protested. "We were not shooting, cheap or otherwise. We're just surprised."

Xander looked at the witch and bit his lip. "Surprised in the 'me doing something borderline horrifying' way or the 'me doing something borderline useful' way?" he asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Sport—" Jim started to say, but Spike cut him off.

"Yeah, I agree with what he's about to say." Spike poked a thumb in Jim's direction. "Look, the boy's powers have always been there, and they're not going away."

"We could try," Willow said, as her eyebrows furrowed in worry. "We could try to make them go away or bind them or something. I mean, soul ripping—not as creepy as skin ripping, but up there. Couldn't we try and bind
the powers or something?' Willow looked from Bertrand to Giles and back.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are," Jim growled, "but you are crossing the line with that comment." Jim crossed his arms and glared at Willow.

"Me?" she almost squeaked. "I'm not crossing line. This is me way inside the lines. Miles inside the lines."

"So, implying that Xander is somehow untrustworthy is just normal for you?"

"I never!" Willow objected loudly at the same time Spike offered his own, "Bloody hell, yes!"

"I wonder if my therapist takes collect calls," Buffy mused softly. She sat on the unmade bed.

"Did you hear what he called me? Not that he actually called me anything, but there was implying. There was a lot of implying going on!" Willow said as she turned to Buffy.

"Oi, I'm not implyin' anything. I'll come right out and tell you that ya need to back off before ya say anything else
as manipulative as that," Spike offered. "You'll do anything ta try and keep the boy, even if it means ripping him apart." Willow's eyes went large, and Xander could feel the need to reassure her, to take away the pain. Spike's arm tightened around his waist.

"Spike," Buffy warned.

"No. No, you don't tell me to back off when it comes to Xander."

"And the freaky just keeps on going," Buffy sighed.

"Whoa, hey, talk about the unpleasant implications! I think we all just need to take a step back and maybe reconsider the effect our words have on each other," Blair suggested.

"I'm for backing off," Xander quickly agreed. "All in favor of backing off before causing decades-long friendships to fall apart, raise your hands." Xander raised his hand and looked around the room. Spike was giving him that indulgent look that suggested he thought Xander was an idiot but loved him anyway. Xander smiled back before turning to catch a glimpse of Willow's tragic face.
"Xander?" she asked in a tiny voice. "Fall apart?"

"This is me raising my hand for not having the friendship fall apart." Xander wiggled the hand he had raised to make his point before he slowly lowered it. "But you can't keep saying words like freaky when it comes to me and Spike."

"Despite the fact—"

"Slayer," Spike growled when Buffy tried to rejoin the conversation.

"Buffy," Riley said firmly. "I'm with Xander on this one. Spike is an asshole, but he cares about Xander. Trust me on this."

"You listened," Blair said softly while Xander was still trying to process the utter wrongness of Riley sticking up for him and Spike. Apocalypses and flying pigs and the Abba comeback tour had to all be right outside the hotel window.

"When Xander was talking to Spike, yeah," Riley agreed. He turned to Xander. "I didn't know you were whispering. I didn't mean to eavesdrop."
"It's okay, soldier. When the senses first come on-line, it's hard to know when you're using them," Jim assured him, and Riley actually looked relieved.

"Oi, don't bloody tell him it's okay. It's me and the boy he was eavesdropping on," Spike snarled.

"Spike, it's okay." Xander turned and really looked at Spike.

"Pet?"

"Riley, tell them what you heard," Xander said, happy for a way to say some of this without saying it himself. Yeah, he could ask Spike to explain this bit, but if he did, the girls would listen and Giles would say that Spike was being too controlling and badness would happen. But maybe they would listen to Riley.

"Buffy," Riley stopped and looked over at Xander again. Xander nodded his permission. "Xander's been hurting for a long time, and Spike gives him a security he needs."

"We're secure. We're all about the being secure," Willow interrupted.
"Yes, well... if I could interject," Bertrand then interrupted Willow's interruption.

"No, you bloody can't. Have enough wankers talkin' about shite they don't understand."

"I was going to make an argument in your favor, I believe," the Frenchmen commented.

"Oh, well in that case, interject away, mate." Spike waved his hand to hurry the man up.

"I specialize in the more arcane aspects of the supernatural."

"There are parts that aren't arcane?" Jim asked dryly.

"Well... yes. Vampires are rather mundane," Bertrand said in a confused tone. He obviously missed Jim's lecture on how to defuse a homicidal domestic conflict with humor. Xander had heard him give that one to a uniform just after the guy had caught a frypan to the head, and Xander definitely thought they were probably pretty close to domestic violence here. Bertrand must have caught Spike's glare though because the man hurried to
correct himself.

"Minions that is, each master vampire is a subject worthy of study. And a master vampire with a soul definitely fits into the arcane."

"This is not about Spike, and the next person who implies that Spike or me and Spike are freaky is going to—okay, I won't do anything, but I'll be cranky," Xander took his turn glaring, and Bertrand actually turned a little pale.

"I assure you, I would never offend a master vampire or an animus Shaman. Both are quite powerful enough to deter a casual insult, especially if one is not particularly suicidal. My point is that I study the more arcane aspects of Shamanism and the demonic. It's one reason that Rupert contacted me when Mr. Harris' powers seemed to be exhibiting in an unusual manner. Higher level Shaman, like myself, tend to have some rather unusual instinctive behaviors, or unusual for humans rather. You have to understand that all magical powers have a demonic source, whether that power is still evil or has reverted back to its original neutral orientation."

"Oi, in English," Spike snapped.
"I rather thought he was speaking English," Giles commented as he took off his glasses and closed his eyes altogether. "I can't say I like what you're implying, Bertrand, but it is in English."

"Be that as it may, I am speaking the truth, Rupert."

"And would someone like to translate the English into something I can understand? Maybe some Californese?" Buffy asked. She pulled her legs under her and sat cross-legged on the bed.

"Shaman, rather like some clannish demons and even Atego, tend to form hierarchical relationships."

"Which is not with the Californese," Buffy said with a frown. "Willow? Translation please?"

"Oh goddess, you can't mean," Willow breathed. Xander might have felt sympathy if he'd had any idea what anyone meant. Willow and Giles certainly looked upset, though, and Spike was starting with his low growl, which meant Xander had so totally missed something, and he wasn't the only one.

"Is anyone listening to me? Confused slayer here," Buffy
complained.

"It's a natural side-effect of the powers channeled through the individual," Bernie insisted.

"Um... hello? Did I turn invisible? Still not getting it," Buffy said a little louder.

"Welcome to my world," Xander pointed out. Yeah, it wasn't fair to suggest they always talked over his head, but they did it lots... lots and lots.

"Your world kinda sucks," Buffy said.

"Yep," Xander nodded.

"Upper level Shaman, they're drawn to power exchanges. They want partners who will either take charge or allow them to be in charge," Blair said slowly, his face wide with shock. "And it's instinctive. An actual need?"

"Most people believe, yes. And if Mr. Harris has formed an attachment to William the Bloody, I doubt that anything short of being forcibly rejected would end the relationship. After all, the dominant member of the relationship is typically the one to set the limits, at least
when the relationship is instinctive. The instinctive behaviors of powerful creatures is not the same as the games humans sometimes play.

"Oh my god. You mean Xander is stuck to him?" Buffy demanded.

"Like a claim? Spike did something to trap Xander?" Up to now, Riley had been standing with Jim and Spike, but now he turned on Spike looking ready to take a punch, even if Spike could punch back, now.

"Oi, you pillock. Claims are fiction, made up by wankers who got their rocks off by getting bit and who didn't want to admit they wanted it." Spike gave Riley a nasty sneer. "The demon can't lay claim over a soul."

"And I would agree," Bertrand hurried to add. "There is no physical attachment, but leaving would entail a painful separation, psychologically, and would most likely result in some mental instability, at least in the short term. The submissive member who is rejected often has a period of depression, anxiety, sometimes even irrational or dangerous behavior."

"What if it's the dominant who is left?" Giles quickly
asked.

Bertrand shook his head. "Rupert, these are not the sort of power exchanges you and I dabbled in during our youth."

Xander immediately started choking on his own tongue. Giles glared at him while Buffy had a faintly disgusted look on her face.

"Okay, father figure, ew," she said softly.

"Um, seconding that," Willow agreed with an equally disturbed expression.

"Bloody hell," Giles swore, sounding faintly Spike like, and speaking of Spike, that was a seriously smug expression on his face. "I was young once, people. And I have certainly been forced to endure enough of your sordid relationships, so you can kindly deal with a few facts from my past with some discretion. Now, Bertrand, I am still not clear on what you mean, and I do not want to misunderstand this point."

"Rupert, for those who have demonic energies within ourselves, the power exchange is instinctive. If the
submissive attempted to leave, the dominant would simply find them and act to ensure they became more submissive and accepted the relationship."

"Okay, that's even more ew-worthy than Giles having kinky sex," Buffy said. "That sounds like abuse."

"I assure you, it is different for those who are, in part, demonic. You yourself must have felt the need to either have a partner who could best you or best your partner. I cannot believe that a slayer, with all her demonically-obtained power, does not see fighting as an integral part of the sexual act and her interpersonal relationships."

"Oi, she feels it alright," Spike said. "You can't deny that, luv."

"Okay, I'm not denying it, but it's still abusive. He's saying that if Xander wanted to leave, he couldn't. Color me unsupportive, but I'm not okay with that."

"Buff," Xander said, "That's not what he's saying."

"Um, I thought that's what he said. Did I miss something?" Buffy turned to Giles.
"No, you did not. That's exactly what he said."

"You are attempting to judge the actions on human standards." Bertrand shook his head with an expression of amusement.

"Man, it's not that the dominant would abuse the power, it's that the submissive needs to know he would come after him. The act of dominating would be welcomed," Blair said softly. "I'm the first to admit that I'm not the alpha dog here, but Jim is not into that kind of power play and control," Blair said, not sounding convinced at all.

"Then I would suggest Jim has never felt threatened that you might actually leave. If he did, I have no doubt he would act more aggressively. And your attempt to leave would actually be an attempt to get him to show a more dominant interest," Bertrand shrugged.

"Bertrand, you have to know what you are describing is abuse," Giles said slowly. "Forcing a submissive is against every rule of playing."

"For humans, absolutely," Bertrand nodded. "But in demonic circles, the submissives are either biologically
inferior such as a vampire's childer or a Vinji's clan-spawn, or they are just as powerful if not more powerful than their dominants.

"In the first case, the hierarchy is biological, and no different from a parent being the head of the household. In the second, the dominant provides a check against excess. Giles, you have met Amélie. She is quite the dominant, but her powers are actually weaker than my own. However, by choosing a dominant who is strong enough to stop me if I do overindulge the way you and Ethan did, I have protected myself. If Amélie were killed or if she simply tired of me and I went home to find my possessions sitting on the street, I can't predict my own reaction."

"So, I could go world-ending crazy?" Xander asked. Bertrand shrugged. "Okay, that's not good."

"Not an issue, pet, because you have me," Spike tightened his hold.

"Unless you were to get dusted," Giles said, but he still wasn't sounding happy.

"Ever the optimist, Rupert."
"I am simply pointing out the real dangers. You are not particularly careful with your own life."

"I'm a hundred and thirty bloody years old. I've taken care of my unlife just fine. Besides, if some nasty did get me, Xander has Jim and Blair, here."

"I wouldn't advise that," Bertrand shook his head. "Atego are certainly very solicitous with their Guides, but not with other magic users in their territory."

"I would never hurt Xander," Jim growled as he stepped toward the Frenchman. He backed up to the wall and took up position next to the door again.

"Xander has us!" Willow protested. "And this is freaky and slightly of the wrong, but we'll take care of Xander one way or another."

"I would suggest that a contingency plan would be advisable. You have no idea how powerful an animus Shaman could be. Given the correct motivation, Xander could kill every person in this room before any of us had an opportunity to fight back. If he feels he needs a powerful dominant to ensure his peace of mind, that
would be the best course of action. I myself would not feel safe without someone who would prevent me from repeating some of the excesses of my youth. That same trick we played with the headmaster at school, Rupert, that would no doubt result in the man's death if I were to repeat it today."

"So, Xander is right? He needs a more... permanent relationship?" Giles asked, and he was still a little with the seriously disturbed.

"Okay, how about everyone agree to not talk about Xander like Xander isn't here," Xander interrupted.

"Xander." Willow bit her lip and looked like she had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. She was arguably the most powerful witch in the world, and Xander still had trouble cutting off this need to shield her from anything that might make her feel bad. Yep, he was officially in need of therapy.

"Not with the guilty face, Willow," he said firmly. "I have no self-control with the guilty face, and if something really horrible were to happen to Spike, I don't think I should come back to you guys. In fact, maybe there should be some sort of paperwork so if Spike gets dead-
dead, I don't have a chance to try for the world-ending fun."

"Paperwork?" Bertrand sounded amused, and yeah, paperwork might not really help much if he started trying to raise a temple for world-ending fun.

"Yeah," he said firmly. "Like commitment papers or something. Something that says Jim has custody if I start going with the crazy plan. And I'm sure there are some sort of charms that would help, that would give Jim some sort of control if I caught the crazy bus, but Spike and Jim can talk about that when you guys aren't all here looking at me like I'm timebombish."

"Xander, don't you see? This is why I'm so big with the worry. You've only known Jim for weeks. I could figure out the number of days you've known him in my head. Days, Xander," Willow protested.

"Willow, I get that, but I'm happier with Jim and Blair than at home, and I'm happier with Spike than with Jim and Blair, and the happy curve is going up, you see."

"That is quite unusual. I would expect an Atego to drive you out of his territory," Bertrand mused.
"Yep, unusual. I'm good with the unusual. But Willow, I just don't think I can come back to London."

"Maybe we should step back to our own rooms and think things through before something gets said that can't be unsaid," Buffy suggested as she stood up, ready to leave.

"You'd pick Jim over me?" Willow had her little-girl voice going.

Xander paused and then took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Like that," Buffy sighed.

"Xander!" Willow hissed.

"Good lord, people, can we not –"

"But Giles, did you hear what he said? Years of being best friends, and he's picking Jim over me."

"I'm not picking Jim to be my next best friend, and you'll always be my best friend with the yellow crayon, but I'm not good for myself when I'm around you," Xander struggled to explain.
"You make it sound like you're a junkie and we're having pot parties or magic parties or parties of whatever it is you're trying to not be addicted to any more."

"Not bloody far from the truth," Spike muttered.

"Spike, not nice." Buffy crossed her arms and glared.

"Oi, never said I was nice, luv, especially not when you're hurtin' Xander."

"Hey, no hurting. Why does everybody act like we've done something horrible to Xander? We didn't make him live under the stairs or beat him or something. We love Xander." And that was Willow's angry voice coming out to play. Xander wasn't very fond of angry Willow.

"No, ya just ignored him," Spike shot back, obviously ignoring the signs of the coming Willow anger.

"Hey, no ignoring. We had dinner together every night. And I knew he was all depressed and needed a job and he couldn't do the slaying anymore, which is why I sent him to Cascade and all the cookies in the world won't make up for how sorry I am I did that."
"I'm not," Xander promised her. "Cascade is where I finally got myself together, Will."

"I don't like this version of together. This is the together that's not quite Xander shaped."

"Bloody hell. No, this is the Xander who's not fifteen years old and sniffing after your panties," Spike snorted.

"Um, sniffing was when I was seventeen."

"Not the point, pet."

"This is really getting a little personal," Bertrand said, holding one hand up as though he could just hold off the words that were now flying across the room. Xander had tried that, it didn't work. You still heard all the stuff you didn't want to hear. "Perhaps I should wait in the car." Before anyone could answer, Bertrand open the door and fled.

"Yes, do that, Bertrand," Giles said absent-mindedly as the door was already swinging shut.

"Spike, you are a... a giant pain in the ass," Willow said
with very unWillowish language.

"Oh yeah, like that scares me."

"Maybe it should." Willow's eyes started to darken.

"Hey! I have an idea. How about you listen to me?" Xander suggested brightly. Willow turned to him sadly.

"I've always listened to you. Jim and Spike and Blair have your head all turned around funny."

"Willow, wait a second," Blair interjected when the Willow eyes had frozen Xander's words. How could he tell her that she only listened to the parts that didn't matter?

"Willow, we spent a lot of time on the phone talking before you sent Xander over. Do you really think I would have let someone hurt him?" Blair asked.

"I don't know."

"You do know, Willow. Xander is different, but Buffy is too, isn't she?"
"Oh, do not go bringing me into this," Buffy said, both hands held palm up. "I am sitting on the sidelines girl. Maybe I should be sitting in the car with Bertrand girl."

"I'm right, aren't I?" Blair asked gently. "When you look at Buffy, do you ever worry that maybe things are different, too different?"

Willow chewed her lip and glanced around the room, her eyes locking on Buffy for a second before she answered. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh man, I get it. I mean, with me, it's my mom. I still think of her as this free-spirit hippy, and she called the other day, talking about this man she's thinking of settling down with, and I'm all like, no way, this will last a week, tops. But see, that's not fair because who my mom is now, that's not who she was five years ago or ten or twenty. People change."

"I'm not ten years old. I know that," Willow said with just a hint of that earlier anger.

"Yeah, but when you look at Buffy, you still get that bottom of your gut feeling like things are sliding out of control, don't you?" Willow's eyes darted to Buffy, but
she didn't answer.

"Wills?" Buffy asked quietly.

"I don't!" Willow snapped.

"And you thought you'd always have Xander, so that was okay with you. But now Xander is changing."

"Because of whatever you guys did. Even if it wasn't magic, you did something to turn him against me."

"Pet, wouldn't do that. You're his best friend, and ya always will be," Spike promised her. "I know what it's like to be alone, and I wouldn't do that to ya. We'll both be your friend, and you still have Buffy on the phone every time you pick it up, and I promise I'll never try ta keep Xander from you."

"Yeah, right, because you're all with the trustworthiness." Willow's words made Spike stand up a little straighter, and Xander could see how the barb sank home. Spike carried a demon, but that wasn't who he was anymore. He was trustworthy, only one of the people who knew him best, who lived with him and fought with him and trusted him with the baby Slayers
didn't think he was. Xander ached for Spike and pushed away the growing bubble of sympathy for Willow and her fears.

"Willow, Xander needs to change. The way he was before was tearing him apart," Blair took control of the conversation again.

"He was fine."

Blair turned and looked at Xander, waiting.

Xander took a deep breath. "I was trying to figure out how to make everyone think I was fine. I was falling apart, and I hurt all the time, and all I could think was that I couldn't let you know. You're the magically strong one and Buffy is with the power to fling cinderblocks, and I'm the emotionally strong one, the heart, the one who keeps all of you going, but if I'm falling apart, I can't do that. And if I can't do that, what am I supposed to do?"

Willow's eyes filled with tears.

"But Xander. We love you. I love you, you don't have to do anything," Buffy said when Willow couldn't find her voice.
"But I need to do **something** and I thought the something was protecting you guys in the only way I could. I tried to help Anya back to her humanity. I tried to help Buffy see that she needed Riley, and yeah, I failed a whole lot, but I always tried. I tried to be the one who always had a shoulder for you to cry on. And that means there are all these things I never told you because I didn't want to be the one who made things harder for you. I knew about Riley. I'd seen him when Spike and I were out on patrol, but I thought I could just talk to Riley before Buffy found out, and then Spike went and did his whole stab-stab in the back."

Xander looked at Riley, and the man was watching him with concern and something else that Xander couldn't even guess at. Riley nodded, accepting that Xander had wanted to help or maybe forgiving him for not stopping Spike's backstabbing.

"Not in the back, pet," Spike objected. "Major Moron knew I hated him, so if he handed me the perfect ammo, I was bloody well going to use it."

"Can we please stay on track?" Giles asked. He looked about ten years older than when he walked in the door.
"This conversation is beginning to make me dizzy. So, as I understand it, you have far more power than any of us have anticipated. You have learned to access a power that allows you to rip out souls. Your relationship with Spike is both sexual and magical in nature, and now you have a long-term history of trying to protect the rest of us by not telling the truth. Have I missed anything?"

Xander flinched at the tone, and Spike growled.

"Play nice or I'll toss your arse out, Watcher."

"Um, that would be it in one, G-man. I mean, you knew I was lying about the whole not remembering the hyena possession, and you knew what was going on in Africa, Giles. You told me what to watch out for. You had to know I had stuff rattling around in the brain."

"Xander, I realize that you have sometimes been in unsafe—"

"Unsafe?! Bloody hell, you sent him into the middle of a war zone, and then wondered why he was a few marbles short when he came home. Finn and Ellison, they've been in war, ask them."
"Riley?" Buffy turned to her boyfriend. He hesitated and then walked to her side, slipping an arm around her waist as he nodded slowly.

"If he were one of my men, I'd take him off the front line position and get him some help. He's showing classic signs: nightmares, avoidance, detachment. I was with him for one night out there, and I was ready to stake Spike because Xander seemed so emotionally damaged. But this isn't from Spike, is it?" Riley turned to Xander.

"Nope," Xander shook his head. "I stopped carving, I played video games all day. I didn't even get my eye fixed when I was supposed to, and now there's degeneration, so they say the prosthetic might not look right even if I get it."

"Xander." Willow said the word as if it pained her. Riley just nodded knowingly.

"Boy needs some place safe, some place where he doesn't feel like he has to carry the guilt or the secrets. That's why you aren't any soddin' good for him right now," Spike said.

"But I never asked him to—"
"Willow, Blair interrupted, "haven't you ever done something for someone because you thought you were doing the best thing for them, and then figured out that you were hurting them?"

A tear escaped as Willow nodded. "Yeah," she whispered.

"We both have," Buffy said firmly. She reached out and pulled Willow into a one-armed hug. "Been there and made the t-shirt territory. I think we gave them as Christmas gifts one year."

Xander looked at Buffy and saw that she finally got it. "Willow, Buffy, I know you love me, and I really love you guys, but I'm not good at being who I really am around you. I play this part and I don't know how to say when I'm hurt."

"And you can tell them?" Willow asked, her voice shaky as she looked at Jim and Blair, the outsiders, the interlopers who didn't even have as much right as Spike to be there. Xander could almost read her thoughts.

"He doesn't have to tell me. I've been in war, I know
what that pain looks like," Jim said calmly.

"He's been in the same war we have. We went through it together," Willow argued.

"Will, it's not the same, and I don't know why. I just—I never talked to Jim about it, but he got it. He saw what I was hiding, and that made me admit that it was there, and once I admitted how much pain I had in my heart, I couldn't just keep being in pain. Every breath hurt. I was so afraid of everything, of nothing. I didn't know how to do anything but keep playing goofy Xander. Hell, I even sat on the toilet and wondered if there was a way to get the job collecting Slayers on Mars because then I could feel all of this pain about being alone and abandoned instead of feeling this pain when I didn't understand it and couldn't get away from it. It was eating me."

Xander stopped as the tears threatened, and Spike pulled him in. Xander let his head rest on Spike's shoulder and strong fingers soothed his hair. "Shhh, pet."

"I don't want you in pain," Willow cried, the words broken by her own sobs.

"Willow, no one thinks you want to hurt Xander," Blair
assured her. "Maybe this is a guy thing. Maybe he just needs a male figure in his life, I don't know, but he can't heal when he's with you. If you want him to heal, you have to let him choose a life where he can. That doesn't mean he doesn't love you. He talks about you all the time."

"You mean the way I didn't see that he was like this, the way I didn't help him?" Xander flinched at the sound of Willow's uncontrolled sobs.

"About the way you two sat on the swings and talked about Jesse, about the way you got him through math and kept the secret about him sleeping outside on Christmas and bought him his first comic book with your birthday money," Blair said.

The sound of crying made it hard for Xander to catch his own breath and fight his own tears back. Spike's arms felt safe to cry in, but he had to say this. He took a deep breath and struggled to hold it until he could control his pain. Slowly, he turned to face Willow.

"I feel like I have to be the big brother you can come to and cry on, and right now, I'm more little brother than big brother material, and maybe after I get okay with
myself I can play big brother part time, but I just can't come back. I'm staying with Spike. Jim and Blair said we could come to Cascade for a while." Willow was crying on Buffy's shoulder, Riley reaching over to stroke her hair.

"Willow, I know this is a lot, but maybe think about this?" Blair asked. A red head nodded.

"Hey, I'll take you out for ice cream. There's nothing Rocky Road can't fix, right?" Buffy whispered as she hugged harder. Xander wanted to go over there and add his own arms to the hug, but he couldn't, not now.

"I assume you'll still be here at nightfall," Giles asked. Spike just nodded. Giles ushered the others out of the room, and the four of them were left standing in the emotional wreckage. Xander headed for the bed, sitting before his legs went out from under him.

"Well that went well," Blair said sarcastically. Jim put his finger to his lips to silence everyone. Spike came and sat next to Xander, pulling him in close.

"They're gone," Jim finally said as his shoulders drooped in relief.
"Um, I'm actually thinking it did go well. I was expecting screaming," Xander admitted.

"Well, that's what Blair was here for, wasn't it?" Spike commented as his fingers worked the soreness in Xander's neck.

"What's what Blair was here for?" Xander asked, and that only came out half making sense, but with Spike's hands doing that with his neck, he couldn't be held responsible for his word choice.

"Spike asked me to convince Willow to reconsider her position."

"You mojoed Willow?" Xander demanded. He looked from Jim to Blair to Spike, and oh yeah, there had been conspiracies there. "Okay, that's scary impressive," Xander had to admit.

"I didn't mojo her. I just helped her see where her own fears and insecurities were creating a major problem."

"Yeah, ya mojoed the witch," Spike said with a smirk.

"I don't know why you say it like I burned chicken
feathers and waved entrails at her." Blair rolled his eyes and looked to Jim for back up.

"Don't look at me, Chief. I’m with them, you mojoed her. Of course, I'm voting in favor of mojoing her. Xander, your friends need therapy."

"Um, kinda getting that."

"Yeah, well make sure they kinda don't show up in Cascade until they get it. Better yet, make sure they don't show up in Cascade."

"Right. No visiting Cascade unless they have a therapist in tow," Xander nodded. "Um, Spike?"

"Yeah, pet?"

"What about the demon?"

Spike shrugged. "I guess we'll figure that bit out later. Let Froggie do his research. I'm tired."

"Yeah, and Blair and I need to go get lunch. We have some talking of our own to do," Jim said as he reached out and pulled Blair to his side.
"Oh man, the funky levels just keep going up, don't they?" Blair laughed.

"Life in the Sandburg zone," Jim agreed. "We'll be ready by six if you want us along for the ride, but don't expect me to play nice with any of them," Jim warned.

"Bloody hell, no way I'd ask that of you. I'll make a deal with ya, though. You keep me from killin' Riley, and I'll stop you from killing Willow."

"I might take you up on that," Jim said as he pulled Blair toward the door. "You guys get some sleep," he suggested.

Xander nodded. He was caught between utter exhaustion and a brain that was still whirling on high gear. And his face hurt, it had that itchiness from crying and his empty eye ached.

"Come on, pet, to bed with you," Spike said when the door clicked shut behind Jim. Spike went over and switched the light off.

"I can't sleep right now," Xander admitted. As tired as he
was, he couldn't.

"No problem, pet. I just want someone warm to snuggle with," Spike soothed him as he pulled the covers up and urged Xander to lay down.

"Snuggle. I can snuggle," Xander said wearily as he let Spike arrange his limbs. Spike curled around him, one leg draped over his thighs, and Xander closed his eyes as he just snuggled with his vampire.

Part Thirty

"Jim, Blair, you two are going with, right?" Xander asked as he stood outside their hotel room. The sun had set and it was time to go deal with round two of the Scooby-drama, so he gave Jim his best pleading look. "I mean, you wouldn't make me and Spike walk into the lion's den alone, not that they're lions, and not that Spike would need help killing lions because he could, but..."
Xander stumbled to a verbal halt as Spike leaned against the wall in the hallway outside Jim and Blair's room and considered him with a raised eyebrow. Right, they'd talked about this. He couldn't keep hiding what he needed. Xander took a deep breath hoping that Jim would save him, but Jim just leaned against the open door to his hotel room and gave Xander pretty much the same look.

"Fine," Xander huffed. "Jim, I'm feeling a need to hide behind people who don't think I'm insane and girly, so--"

"Oi, you're not either one!" Spike snapped.

"Yes, I know this," Xander said with exaggerated calmness. "But face it: one exposure to the power of Blair is not going to erase all of the Xander is an insane girly-man thoughts from their brains."

"If that's what they have in their brains, Sport, it just proves how wrong they are."

"Totally," Blair agreed enthusiastically as he pushed past Jim into the hallway. "I mean, man, you threw yourself
into tracking down bad guys. I'm not ashamed to say Jim's job sometimes scared the shit out of me when I first started. I mean, wow, the adrenaline rushes were like... mindblowing," Blair shook his head at the memory. "But then you would wake up the next morning and realize you could have died... that you almost did die. Man, there were mornings that I was emotional toast. You didn't have those freaked out mornings after."

"Oh, I had them, only I had them back when I was sixteen and trying to put killing vampires between chasing girls and not failing my math class," Xander pointed out with a shrug.

"Xander," Jim put out his hand and let it rest on Xander's shoulder. Immediately Spike's arm was around Xander's waist, but at least the two alphas weren't playing tug of war. "I still think they're jerks, and that is not about my instincts--that's about years of working with people who are too good at playing blind when it suits their needs," Jim said quietly.

Xander shook his head. "You're making it sound like they're throwing me to the wolves and they're not."

"Sport, I understand that you guys were fighting when
you were too young to really know how to deal with the stress of what you were doing, but their coping strategy is to be willfully blind and hope they don't have to fix whatever problems come up."

"Too bloody right, including this one," Spike said before Xander could answer. "Thinks if he just ignores his own needs they'll magically disappear."

"Hey!" Xander protested. "This is me dealing. This is me asking Jim and Blair to come along for the fun with demons and even admitting that I'm big with the wanting to hide behind them, so consider me willfully unblind," Xander crossed his arms and glared at Jim and Spike. "Or willfully unblind in one eye, anyway," he shrugged.

"Which means you have one eye more than your friends," Jim said dryly. "We'll come, but any more of this instinct crap, and the French guy is out the nearest window," Jim stepped out into the hall and closed the hotel door behind him.

"Oh yeah," Blair quickly agreed. "I mean, he is making gross generalizations about our behavior without even knowing us. Totally stereotyping. Every researcher knows that generalized truths cannot be applied to specific
"We're not subjects," Jim almost growled, but he also draped an arm over Blair's shoulders.

"No way. I am not saying we are because that guy has serious issues. His theories totally don't match reality, and instead of questioning his paradigm, he just calls us weird. So totally not cool. I bet his sample size of Sentinels is tiny. He probably has as much statistical validity as Hwang Woo Suk's work."

"Um, who who what's work?" Xander asked as they followed Jim and Blair out to the parking lot. Jim had parked his truck next to Spike's blue rental car.

"The guy who faked the human embryo cloning. Science needs to be scientific. Bertrand is coming off like some of the know-it-all professors I work with at the University. I mean, he's as bad as Hwang faking his research." Blair sighed dramatically. "You had to have seen that on the news."

"Nope. I've gone from obsessively playing with Bart Simpson, and that so did not come out the way I meant it because I meant in the video game and not the
inappropriate playing with fictional children way, but I went from video games to pretty much non-stop sex with a vampire. Brain melting and leaking out body orifices type sex. Not much room for news," Xander said cheerfully. Jim glanced over with some weird expression, and Spike made one of his laughing coughs.

"Are you sure you're Xander Harris? You seem to make a lot more inappropriate comments than the guy I used to know," Jim said as he slipped his keys in the lock and opened the truck door.

"Oh, you haven't seen anything. My attempt to find out if Buffy was sleeping with Spike somehow convinced her I was gay because I made inappropriate comments about the evil one's body."

"Evil one?" Blair asked from the other side of the truck. Spike headed around to the far side of the car, so they were obviously doing separate vehicles.

"That was back in Spike's pre-souled days of evilness. Well, not evilness so much as threatening evilness without the actual delivery. Point being, inappropriateness is my thing. Inappropriateness and poking fun at the self. And you know, I don't think you
got the full Xander-experience when I stayed with you before. If Spike and I come and visit, you may see more of the real Xander Harris."

"Wouldn't mind seeing that, Sport," Jim said as he got in the truck. Xander got in with Spike and watched the town through the window as Spike drove way too fast to a much bigger hotel on the other side of town.

Jim and Blair took longer than Spike, probably because they were actually obeying the traffic laws where Spike drove the same in real life as he did in the Simpson's Road Rage, so Xander stood outside Giles' hotel and watched the clouds drift overhead as Spike smoked a cigarette and waited for the other two to catch up.

"Riley still wants me as a Guide," Xander commented to no one in particular, but Spike stopped breathing long enough to interrupt the pattern of puff-cloud puff-cloud.

"Yeah, noticed." Spike fell silent, even when Xander did his best job of waiting because waiting and him were even less friend-like than lying and him. The plumes of smoke returned.

Eventually Xander gave up on the whole waiting thing.
"And are you okay with that?"

"Not me he wants as a Guide, is it?"

"Um, but you're kinda the boss."

Spike stopped smoking and this time he dropped the cigarette and crushed it. "Pet, I'm always going to be the boss, we've discussed that. That doesn't mean that I'm tellin' you what to do. You start goin' off the deep end and raising hell temples, I'll bloody knock you unconscious and tie you to the bed. But tellin' you what to do with your life... that'd be the way I treated a minion, and you're not a minion, pet. You have your own life, so do you want to work with Major Moron?"

"With you calling him Major Moron and him with the staking comments, no, not really."

"Then don't," Spike shrugged, and Xander was fairly sure that he was misunderstanding intentionally.

"If you didn't call him Major Moron and if he didn't make with the stake comments, it'd be nice to work with Buffy and Riley together instead of all the separate stuff because I'd like less separate." Xander watched Spike's
face, but he couldn't see any emotion at all. "But I don't want to work with him if he's not with Buffy because me and the military is just not going to happen, and if you and him can't be less with the mutually offensive, I would rather not be in the same state as him."

Spike's face still didn't show any emotion as he gave one brief nod. Xander couldn't figure out if that was an 'I heard you' nod or an agreement nod and considering that Xander wasn't sure what he had even asked for, he really wasn't sure what Spike might have agreed to. But Jim's truck pulled in, and the time for talking was over. Spike didn't even wait for the other two before he headed for the elevator up to the top floor where Giles had grabbed the biggest room in the biggest hotel in town, which still probably wasn't going to be big enough, but at least everyone wouldn't be gathered around the bed where Spike and Xander had just had sex.

"Xander," Giles said with a smile at the door. "I am sorry about the difficulties yesterday. I have to admit that even I clearly did not understand the extent to which Willow's own difficulties were impacting you. I did suggest she see someone after that rather spectacular break up with Kennedy, but we talked this morning, and this time I think she finally understands that her behaviors are
making it more difficult for her to keep you as a friend."

"'Bout time someone pounded that through her head," Spike snorted as he pushed past, grabbing Xander's arm as he went so he dragged Xander past Giles and into the room.

"Um, yeah, hey no harm done," Xander answered, then he winced as Spike's hand tightened a little too much. "Where is Willow?" Looking around the room, Buffy and Riley were on one end of the couch in the living room area of the suite. Bernie was in the only armchair, and a number of empty dining room chairs had been pulled in from the small dining room area at the far end. That table was covered in stacks of books and the coffee table in the middle of the living room had more books, these lying open or with legal pads or sticky notes marking pages. No Willow. And research always meant Willow.

Buffy answered. "We were up all day getting here and then all night talking, and she talked herself out somewhere along the way, and she's still sleeping. I'm a huge fan of therapy, card carrying member of the therapy fan-club, and I know Willow needs to join that club, not just for magic stuff, but for friend stuff." Buffy took a breath. "But Xander, she loves you. I love you."
Giles loves you even though he's way too manly and English to ever say something like that. And none of us ever meant to make you feel like you couldn't tell us you were in pain."

Xander studied the carpet and shrugged.

"Boy shouldn't have had to tell you lot." Spike said the words softly, without any condemnation in his voice, but the room went silent. Xander had to choke back an urge to tell a joke and just get all the weirdness to go away. He was saved from his own bad humor by a knock at the door.

"Oh good lord," Giles said as he looked through the peephole.

"I think that's probably Jim and Blair and not the lord," Xander said with a smile. Giles gave him a dirty look before he opened the door to the two men.

"Mr. Ellison, Mr. Sandburg," Giles said in his ultrapolite voice, the one he used to use on Principal Snyder. "Riley is going with us since we are infiltrating his military base, so are you sure you should be here, Mr. Ellison?" Giles asked the question calmly, but Xander could see Jim's
jaw tighten, and Blair's hand came up to Jim's arm.

"Are you uninviting us?" Jim asked in the coldest voice Xander had heard from him yet.

"No, no, of course not," Giles stammered. "I am simply expressing a concern for the safety of the people in this room."

"And yet you're fine with a vampire--"

"Fine might be too strong a term," Giles said with a flat look towards Spike, but Jim kept on going.

"And a young woman whose good intentions have seriously damaged Xander..."

"Now hold on one minute." Giles stood up and took a step forward. "Whatever mistakes have been made, they are a matter between friends who have known each other for years. And while we all agree that Willow would benefit from some therapy, it is hardly your place to say so."

"Lots of therapy," Buffy agreed. "And she's going to get lots of therapy, but you are not exactly part of the friend
group here, and new friends are good, but old friends are
gold, or silver, I can't remember the poem right now, but
the point is that old friends do not get tossed out for new
friends." And with that, the tension in the room suddenly
went on overdrive, which was still better than the
weirdly 'let's put Xander on the spot' moment they'd had
just a second ago, but it still wasn't exactly fun.

"Hey, hey don't we have bad guys to fight? Fighting good
guys when there are bad guys to fight seems a little...
totally pointless," Xander argued as he looked from one
side to the other. Buffy had been sprawled on a low
couch, but she sat up and warily studied the two men.
Riley stood up, his eyes going from Buffy to Jim.

"Exactly, fighting each other would be pointless," Giles
agreed with a cold look at Jim.

"As I explained, the presence of so many magic users,
and particularly of another Atego, and one whose
existence required you to place your Guide in harm's
path with this Sungsen, well, fighting each other could
become unavoidable. The arousal of Atego instincts, or
Shaman instincts, is a complex subject, but fighting
would seem inevitable given the current dynamics,"
Bernie said. He was sitting in a square armchair and just
the way he sat and still managed to seem like he was looking down his nose was talent. Totally offensive talent, but talent. Xander had a quick fantasy of calling Bernie's own Domme, Amélie, just so he could see the man get bossed around, but then for all he knew, Amélie was even more with the looking down the nose than Bernie. And any more of that, and someone was going to get eaten or broken. Jim was staring blankly at the Frenchman.

"Finn, are you feeling any need to fight?" Jim asked without any emotion as he kept his gaze on Bertrand.

"Not particularly," Riley answered. "Feeling a need to introduce a few people to some manners, though." Instead of looking warily from Jim to Buffy, Riley was now glaring rather steadily at Bertrand.

"I can't fault you there."

"I don't think veiled threats are going to help this situation," Giles said in his best aggravated voice.

"I didn't think we were being veiled," Jim answered.

"Oi, if someone's going to get ta knock heads together, it
will bloody well be me!" Spike walked into the room, crossing between Jim and his cold stare down with Bertrand, although it wasn't much of a stare down what with Bernie studying the loopy pattern on the beige carpet. "Let's just get down to soddin' business. We get on the base, we find out if the bint is going Sungsen on us, and if she is, we take her out. After that, we can kill each other if we still feel like it," Spike shrugged as he took up the opposite end of the couch from Buffy.

Rather than have Riley sit right next to Spike, which might lead to badness, Xander followed and sat beside his vampire.

"Yes, that would be best," Bernie quickly answered. "This is a rather remarkable gathering, and while I am most pleased to be a part of such an unusual concentration of powers, it might be best to complete our business and separate before there is an incident."

"Incident," Spike snorted. Xander was with him on that. Incident sounded like too nice a word for the potential mayhem floating around the room. Finally moving his glare off Bertrand, Jim moved to a spot near the door where he stood leaning against the wall. Blair waited for a second and then sat in a dining room chair near him.
"Shamen are just as vulnerable to instinctive behaviors, I assure you," Bertrand said as he glanced at Jim before turning to Riley and Xander. "I imagine that our Shamen in this room are simply less susceptible to the urge for posturing since I am clearly the most experienced and competent one here. It establishes a natural hierarchy in which we can function."

Blair made a noise, but by the time Xander looked over, Jim had moved forward and rested a hand on Blair's shoulder. It kept the younger man quiet, but it didn't change the fact that Blair now had a death glare on his face that matched Jim's look from earlier, but now Jim was just looking down with a sort of fond amusement.

"Swallow something wrong there, Chief?"

"I'm fine," Blair snapped. Oh yeah, this was going well.

"So, what's the what with our fun and wacky people-eating creepy linguist?" Xander asked. Riley sat back down, and now the couch was really crowded with Riley's leg pressing up against Xander's. Spike's hand tightened on Xander's knee, but other than that, Spike ignored the soldier.
"We aren't yet sure," Giles said as he sat in one of the
dining room chairs that had been pulled up close to the
coffee table and its old books. Xander could see Blair's
eyes darting to the pile, which was funny because most
everyone else was trying to avoiding looking at the
potential source of their coming sleepless night. Buffy
looked like she wanted to slay the pile.

"Given that Xander had to remove the spirit from the
body before he could be killed, there is a chance we are
talking about Mazzikim," Bertrand said, and from the
pissy tone of voice, he'd said it before.

"I still feel the need for inappropriate joking and
deliberate mispronunciations when you say that," Buffy
said with a frown. "Why can't we ever find a good
demon... or at least a weak demon, I could do with a
weak demon."

"Gachnar," Xander said as he held up his hands to remind
Buffy of the six inch tall demon.

"Oh yeah, never mind, we do find pathetic demons, but I
want more patheticness."
"And why am I getting a feeling this is worse than just not being pathetic?" Xander turned to Spike, but the vampire had a thoughtful expression that made Xander worry even more.

"What exactly is a Mazzikim?" Jim asked.

"This is just speculation at this point," Giles said, and off came the glasses.

"Giles with the glasses off and Buffy feeling a need to play up the blonde. This is freaking me out. Come on, you guys just killed the thing that tried to blow up London, or it didn't actually blow up London, but from what Giles said, it could have almost blown up London based on the whole Pompeii story. We aren't due for more world-ending badness for at least three weeks. How bad could a Mazzikim be?" Xander looked around the room. Riley and Jim and Blair were looking concerned. Buffy and Giles were looking totally stressed, and Spike was doing the weird thoughtful thing. Oh so not good.

"They are one of the oldest demons, mentioned in parts of the Torah," Bertrand started.

"Yes, but the Torah references are hardly definitive. The
work of Everson in 1719 is far more important in this case," Giles immediately interrupted. "They are a breed of demon said to be able to fly through the air and spread their evil by swallowing whole anyone who stands against them."

"Anyone not a Sentinel," Blair pointed out. "Jim and Riley were definitely immune. And I went through this whole kabbalistic period, and I seem to remember that the soul of an evil man could become a Mazzikim."

"Which is why I brought up the Torah reference in the first place," Bertrand quickly added, and oh yeah, from the way Bernie and Giles were glaring, there were just too many smart people in one room. "The way that Sungsen changed could indicate his soul was corrupted."

"Which is rather like blaming the victim," Giles said, his voice getting that tight, strained tone that he usually got when he was trying not to yell. "There is no record of Mazzikim reproducing in such a manner. Everson identified their home dimension, and from the information he collected from two vampires who had visited that realm, they are sexually active..."

"Which does not preclude other forms of reproduction."
Really, Ripper, sometimes I think you have entirely too narrow a view on these things."

Xander froze. And yep, that was definitely Giles' Ripper glare. For a minute, the entire room went silent.

"So," Jim started. "It may or not be Mazzikim based on the description. If it is, what are we looking at?"

When no one answered, Blair started. "The Talmud calls them harmful spirits. God spoke them into existence on the eve of the Sabbath of creation. The Zohar suggests that they come from sex between humans and the demons who existed from the eve of creation or that the spirit of an evil man became a Mazzikim after he died. But in Jewish tradition, not all devils are necessarily evil, some do favors for people and believe in god, but they aren't humans. And Mazzikim was a way of naming a particularly evil spirit, as opposed to one who might do you a favor or play a trick on you to amuse themselves."

"Um, not to poke fun at the belief system, but Sungsen wasn't dead," Xander said.

"That we know of," Spike quickly added. "I'm dead, but I still get around pretty good. Could be this Sungsen had
already died and the Mazzikim took over."

"But that would mean Sungsen was an evil man. He wasn't," Riley objected. "I've worked with him for three years; he wasn't evil."

"Perhaps the reference to the evil of the man was a metaphor," Bertrand said soothingly. 

"And perhaps you are jumping to conclusions," Giles cut him off. "We have dozens of books to go through yet and—"

"And Atego are immune to how many?"

"We can't know because we stopped researching," Giles almost growled. 

"You called me in for my expertise, and I am telling you that while most demons avoid Atego, very few possess powers which are affected by them, and Nabatnikov classified them all in his book." Bernie thumped the thin, white book balanced on the arm of his chair. 

"And you cannot possibly expect me to take the word of a drunk."
"How dare you suggest I—"

"I was referring to Nabatnikov," Giles cut off Bernie's sudden show of anger.

"Oi, you two argue it out. I figure there has to be somethin' around here to fight, and if not, I could do with a bit of sparring with the Slayer. You comin'?" Spike asked Jim as he practically dragged Xander to his feet. Xander scrambled to get his feet under him before Spike reached the door. Jim and Blair immediately followed, but at the door, Spike stopped and turned. "Can't hardly spar with the Slayer if you stay here, luv. You coming?"

Riley had already stood up and now Buffy stood next to him with her confused look on.

"Okay. I can do that, can't I Giles, I mean, I'm not really one for the research and Willow should be up soon to help with the books."

"We have already found the demon, if Ripper were simply not so blessed stubborn," Bernie muttered, but everyone ignored him.
For a second Giles stared at her, and then he sighed. "Fine. Go find a quiet place to fight, and for the love of god, don't let Riley and Mr. Ellison kill each other. Or Riley and Spike, either, for that matter. We shall probably need them all later, and dead bodies are remarkably difficult to hide when one is not on a hellmouth."

"Woo hoo, sprung from class early," Buffy said cheerfully. "Not that I think of research as class or that I'm happy to abandon you to dusty books and weird verbal fights with the French guy," she quickly amended herself. Giles gave a dismissive wave of his hand, and she followed just as Spike headed out of the room and toward the elevators. Oh yeah, the vamp had something on his mind other than fighting, Xander realized pretty quickly. But then, from the serious expressions on everyone's face, everyone else figured that out too.

**Part Thirty-One**

No one said anything until they all ended up in the parking lot, Jim's hand possessively resting on Blair's shoulder, Riley standing near Buffy, and Spike's arm firmly around Xander's waist. Xander couldn't help but think of three fighters all standing in their own corners waiting for the fight to start, not that Xander wanted to fight. Xander was totally
against fighting anyone here, so the analogy wasn't really a good one, but it still stuck in his head.

"Am I the only one assuming that we aren't going to spar?" Buffy asked as she leaned against the metal pole with the handicapped parking sign. "That sounded faintly codewordish, but I don't remember having a codeword."

Jim was more direct. "What's going on?"

Spike let go of Xander long enough to fish a cigarette out of his duster, but he didn't light it. He just twirled it in his fingers. "Froggie's right. It makes sense for this to be a Mazzikim. Angel and me ran into one back in our Scourge of Europe days. That one didn't kill his victims by smashing them into things though. He liked to hear the screams when he looked at someone and they'd start shrinking in on themselves like a giant hand was crushing them. I remember this one woman, her bones breaking as she was slowly crushed and the life pulled out of her. What was left wasn't even dust, it was this oily blob of thick.... Bollocks, I don't know what the hell it was. Angelus took one look at the Mazzikim, and moved the whole family three countries over. Haven't thought about them for a century, though. Rare buggers, at least in this dimension."
"As methods of killing go," Buffy said with a disgusted expression, "that one's right up there on the yuck o'meter."

"Oh man, no joke." Blair looked a little green. "I remember when he had me. It was like he was squeezing. I couldn't breathe, but then Jim came."

"His gold cord, it pushed Sungsen's black cord away," Xander agreed. "The black cord had stretched out like a giant python that had swallowed something, only the something was you, and it was squeezing in around you."

Spike nodded. "Mazzikim kill by sending out an astral projection and swallowing the person whole in that form. This one was new at it, though, was killing people before he ate 'em."

"You mean I wasn't seeing his soul?" Xander looked at Spike. "That was looking soul-like. Well, sorta soul-like anyway. It was freaky, but it had the black cord thing going for it which seems like a demon soul to me."

"An astral projection is a soul, it's just someone who can send his consciousness, his soul, out of his body and into
the world," Blair quickly mused. "It makes sense for an astral projection to look like a soul."

"If you believe in astral projections," Jim added skeptically. "But then I've started believing in a lot of things I didn't used to believe in."

"Does that mean the Mazzikim killed Sungsen, that we just killed the demon who took over his body?" Riley asked.

"You didn't kill anything. You just wasted a bullet on a tree. The boy and I killed the git," Spike corrected him. Riley narrowed his eyes, but Buffy's hand on his arm stopped him from snapping back.

"Okay, if you're so sure, let's go talk to Giles. We tell Giles that we know it's a Messy Kim, we get Willow, we go demon hunting, well assuming that Susan Clark is a demon. Riley said she didn't show the same changes Sungsen did, so maybe the demon didn't get to her."

Spike was already shaking his head. "Not goin' to happen, luv. Mazzikim devour a person whole, eat his energy, so Red will look like a giant buffet of power. That's why the git went for the two Shamen. They looked like bloody
four-course dinners compared to the rest of us, and when it comes to raw power, Willow still has more than both of them put together."

"Okay, that's disturbo," Xander complained. "Why do demons always eat people? What's with that?"

"People taste good," Spike shrugged.

"And that would be even more distrubo," Buffy sighed. "Okay, as much as I love seeing new people creeped out by your annoying honesty, I still don't see why we aren't telling Giles. If Willow has to sit this one out, she'll be upset, but she'll understand. And if she doesn't understand, she can take it up with her new therapist... just as soon as we find her a therapist."

"Giles won't listen for the same reason Willow wouldn't listen."

"Giles needs therapy?" Buffy asked uncertainly, but then Xander wasn't following this conversation very well either, so he couldn't blame her for the lack of understanding.

"What you said upstairs, you were right. Giles loves you
lot. He left Sunnydale because he realized that he had to let you stand on your own two feet. Only, he seems to be limiting that sort of respect to you, luv. If he respected Xander as much, he'd be willing to admit the truth."

"Okay, you've lost me," Blair stopped Spike. "Why doesn't Giles want to admit this is a Mazzikim?"

"If he does, then he has to admit that Xander is the only one who can kill it, and he doesn't want to put Xander on the front line," Spike answered.

"What?" Xander squeaked. He was the back up. He was the carrying-the-first-aid-kit boy. And yeah, he was happy to play a more active role, but he was not the center of the plan. That was Buffy or Willow, Willow could do center, and Buffy was all center girl. He might have said some of that out loud because Spike was looking at him like he had slipped off the sane wagon.

"No help for it, pet. The only way to kill a Mazzikim is to take out the astral form the demon uses and then destroy the body before it can recover. If the soldier-bint has turned into one, the rest of us could send every weapon we have through her without even phasing her. Bloody hell, we could nuke the woman without her
getting so much as a broken nail. If she's turned into a Mazzikim, you have to go in there first and take out her astral form."

Xander stared at Spike, his brain still stuck on the word first. He had to go in first? No way. He was not first material. Panic was slowly building.

"Pet, I'll be right there with you." The back of Spike's hand brushed over Xander's cheek and then slipped around to the back of his neck—strong fingers holding him steady. Xander started breathing again. Of course Spike would be there. He'd be there with bells on if it made Xander happier, not that Xander had ever understood that expression.

Riley stepped forward. "Xander's not a trained soldier. He barely understands his own powers; you can't expect him to walk in there with the intention of taking a human life."

Xander opened his mouth, but Spike put a hand on his arm, stopping him, before he turned to face off with Riley. "That's not your call, mate. Xander's mine, so you don't get any say in this."
"Xander's not yours—he doesn't belong to anyone. And if you think I’m going to let you put him on the front line when he's still trying to deal with his issues, you've got another think coming." Riley clenched his teeth and looked faintly Jim-like in his anger.

"What I think is that an animus Shaman is the best way to kill a Mazzikim," Spike said as he stepped forward. "We don't have Xander, and we have to put Willow on that front line to do a spell to try and take out the Mazzikim's astral form before he can eat her, and that's a whole fucking lot more dangerous." Spike pushed Xander slightly to the side and stepped forward with all his body language screaming for a fight. "I also think Xander's strong enough to do whatever has to be done and I think you need to get your fat arse out of our business."

Riley took another step forward.

"Soldier, stand down," Jim ordered.

"You can't be siding with him." Riley sounded angry enough to take a punch any second, but Jim stepped in front of him.

"I personally wouldn't mind if the sun magically appeared
and turned him to dust," Jim agreed, and Riley glared past Jim's shoulder to where Spike now watched with yellow eyes. "However, he is Xander's choice, and he seems to have the best intel on this situation, so you will stand down before I make you."

"Hey, that is sounding suspiciously threat-like. I don't like people threatening my friends," Buffy now got into it.

"This doesn't concern you," Jim said, not taking his eyes off Riley. Giving up on glaring at Spike, Riley turned his attention to Jim, staring back at the older man for a second before his gaze slid away.

"If this concerns Riley, it concerns me," Buffy insisted as she stepped to Riley's side and crossed her arms angrily.

"You know," Xander said quietly, "does it occur to anyone else that the whole instinctive fighting thing might actually have something to it?"

Blair tugged at Jim, pulling him back away from Buffy. "Oh man, something certainly seems to be making everyone cranky. I mean, we're all on the same side here. Let's just take the aggression down a notch. Too many alphas in one room is never pretty, but man, you guys
are really taking it a little far."

"Says the Shaman who was ready to slug Bernie up there," Jim said, amusement in his voice, and Xander noticed Riley's body immediately relaxed.

"Well, yeah," Blair agreed, "but that's because the man is an idiot. If he thinks I feel some sort of deference to him, he can kiss my ass. However, I was just going to tell him to take his pompous French accent and idiotic theories and shove them where the sun don't shine. I wasn't planning on threatening people."

"Hey, I'm not being threatening. I'm just making some things clear, like how I don't like my friends threatened," Buffy said as she turned her glare to Blair. Jim physically stepped in front of his Guide.

"Enough, Buffy," Spike said as he stepped forward, and this whole thing was turning into this weird game of shifting positions because now Riley took a step to the side so he was almost but not quite between Spike and Xander, and Xander shifted to move closer to Spike, which just happened to put him closer to Riley. "This isn't about Ellison or the fuzzy little Shaman. He was just trying to keep your boy from saying something he might
"I wouldn't regret anything I said to you," Riley said as he scowled at Spike.

"Way, way, way too many alphas," Blair sighed softly.

"Right, we all agree we have to get this settled before we go after another demon, yes?" Spike asked, but he kept his eyes locked on Riley, who didn't look ready to back down at all. In fact, the soldier's hands closed into fists, and Xander could just imagine how much he wanted to go for a stake.

"Man, if you have a way to keep alphas from acting all alpha, I can get you on the short list for the Nobel Prize," Blair snorted.

"No offense, mate, but you really aren't part of this," Spike said as he glanced over toward Blair. Jim's eyebrows rose.

"You asked us to come," Jim pointed out.

"Yeah, and we'll bloody well need the help if we have to go after a Mazzikim, but right now, Buffy and Major
Moron and I need to work a few things out."

"So you want us to get lost?" Jim asked. "I have no problem with that. I wouldn't mind waiting for you back in Cascade, in fact."

"Jim?" Xander asked, suddenly worried that Jim really might head for home.

Jim sighed before he stepped closer and let his hand rest on Xander's shoulder. "Don't worry, Sport. I agreed to help, and Blair's right. If being a Sentinel provides some sort of protection, you're going to need the help. So, I'm not leaving. I'm just being a cranky old son of a bitch who feels like telling everyone around him just how cranky he's getting."

"No joke. He gets into these total curmudgeon moods sometimes," Blair agreed. Jim shot him a look.

"I saw a gun store on Main Street. Blair and I can head over there for an hour or two. Give us a call on my cell when you have this thing worked out or when one of these two blockheads is dead."

"Gun store?" Blair demanded as he completely ignored
the someone being dead comment. "Oh man, you cannot drag me through one of those things."

"I sure can," Jim said amicably as he draped an arm around Blair's shoulders and steered him toward the truck. "Even if you spout every peacenik saying your mother ever shoved in your brain. I was a good sport with that damn candle and crystal place, so you can stand around while I find a few toys."

"Oh man, whatever you guys are going to do, do it fast and save me from shopping for guns... please?" Blair asked as Jim herded him toward the truck. Xander smiled at the antics, watching them as he found himself wishing he was in the truck between them. But being there would mean giving up Spike, and Xander wasn't willing to give up Spike, not even to avoid all the conflict.

Buffy sighed as the blue truck pulled out of the parking lot, the brake lights bouncing on the rut in the road. "I know we need them, and I even know they're good guys, but I just know I'm really happy to see the back of them leaving. I'm sorry, Xander, but do you not get that slight feeling of creep when Jim's around?"

"My guess is he doesn't," Spike commented. "There's a
quiet spot south of the hospital, a nice abandoned business, follow us there."

When Xander opened his mouth to ask what was going on, Spike just hurried him toward the car, leaving Buffy and Riley to either follow or not. For a second, the two just stood under the yellow light of the hotel's lamp staring. Spike unlocked the car and slid in.

"They following?" Spike asked as he backed out of his space.

"They're talking," Xander said as he twisted in his seat to watch them. "What are we doing, Spike?"

"Settling things," Spike answered, not that it was really an answer. An answer would provide actual answers, not leave Xander even more confused.

"Settling what things?"

"Settling this shite between me and soldier boy," Spike answered cryptically. "Spent some time talkin' to Blair the other night, and the fuzzy little Shaman has quite a few insights. Is it true that when you showed up in Cascade, Jim physically attacked you and then chained
you to a wall in his kitchen?"

"I wouldn't say attacked," Xander said slowly, suddenly very concerned about Jim's health.

"Physically touched you, forced you do what he wanted?" Spike asked. Xander had been watching out the back window as Buffy and Riley finally got into a white SUV and started following, but now he turned to study Spike's profile.

"I refuse to answer based on the fact that the answer may tend to get someone eaten," Xander answered slowly. Yeah, he knew that not answering actually was an answer, but maybe if he didn't actually say it, Spike wouldn't actually beat the crud out of Jim. "But there was no one hurt in any way, shape, or form."

"Sentinel told me he shoved you face first into a door, frisked you, handcuffed you, manhandled you to the couch, and then chained you to the kitchen." Strangely, Spike didn't seem angry as he described Xander's first day in Cascade. "The part that Jim seemed to think was a little weird was that you took it so well."

"Um, maybe?"
Spike glanced over. "I'm not going to eat the wanker. I don't like the wanker and he doesn't like me, but I'm not going to do anything about that. We tolerate each other well enough for your sake."

"And I'm grateful. Confused, but grateful. Does this have anything to do with Riley and Buffy following us, or are we randomly wandering from one topic to another? Normally, I’m all for random and unpredictable topic changes, but I'm kinda wondering what we're doing and why we're doing it and why we're taking Buffy and Riley to an abandoned building to do it."

"You want to work with Riley."

"That's a big maybe, but there are a lot of if's in there. And the biggest one is whether Riley is going to be permanently in Buffy's life. I mean, Riley's a nice guy and all, but it's more that doing something good for Riley would make Buffy happy and maybe pull us back together. But if he's going to go the way of Kennedy, then doing something nice for him wouldn't exactly make Buffy long-term happy."

"Right, so this is about Buffy?" Spike dodged around an
old woman in a gold Plymouth.

Xander struggled to organize his thoughts. "Okay, I feel a pull to help Riley, but pull I could ignore. But then I think that if Riley is with Buffy then working with Riley would mean working with Buffy, only that doesn't logically make sense because I know Buffy is off in Rome. And her being off in Rome with Andrew... okay, I'll admit that Willow isn't the only one who misses the three Musketeers and curling up watching stupid movies together. I think I'm getting lost in my own argument," Xander sighed.

"So, you're feeling a pull to help Riley, but ya really want to work with Riley because it would get you your little group back, or part of it anyway."

"That's suddenly not sounding healthy in the mentally stable sort of way. Okay, why are we all picking on Willow when I'm basically doing the same thing?"

"We aren't bloody picking on Red, we're just pointing out some truths. And you wanting to keep the people you love together is not the same soddin' thing as trying to force people to never change or tryin' to deny them what they need. If anything, you seem to be sayin' you want
Buffy to make a commitment to Riley, to have a life. And you want to be part of that new life she's making for herself."

Xander nodded. "Yeah, that feels right, not that I'm good with explaining what I feel right now. I mean, there's nothing wrong with Riley because he picked Buffy over the Initiative, and that was unexpectedly moral. But unexpectedly moral really isn't enough to make me want to work with him because when he really starts using his senses, with the spikes and the zones, he is not going to be a happy camper. I just... if Riley is part of Buffy's new life, I want Buffy to have her new life and her old life all together."

"The boy who stood by her against Angelus together with the wanker who betrayed her at a suck house," Spike nodded as though he were saying something wise.

"Hey! If this is you settling your past with Riley, that's pretty damn unsettly. He had given up his life for her, and she couldn't let him in. He didn't have anything, and if he does have demon bits like Bertrand said, that must have been pretty sucky. So this is me being understanding because that would have driven me... okay it wouldn't have sent me to a suckhouse, but it
definitely would have driven me to a bottle, and we all have our own addiction. Our group is just full of addictions, so Riley would fit right in. If Buffy wants him to fit in. And if Buffy wants him to fit in, working with him would just be sort of fitty, right?"

Spike sighed. "I suppose it would, pet. And I know you want your group together about as much as Willow does, which is why I'm tryin' to not eat the wanker. He wants you as a Guide, and he's ripping himself apart because of it."

"Did I miss something? There was a real lack of ripping from where I was sitting."

Spike glanced over. "He's tryin' to respect your opinions and your ideas and protect you, but your opinions and ideas are leading you to me, and to protect you, he thinks he has to get you away from me. He's ripping himself apart fairly well. Might be amused by it if the circumstances were different." Spike sounded almost wistful.

"Wait. That's why you're leading Riley to a deserted and isolated spot? Okay, if it weren't for Buffy in the car, this would worry me even more, but even with Buffy coming,
"Pet." Spike stopped at a red light. Reaching over, he let a finger trace down Xander's cheek. "If you're wondering how serious those two are, Buffy and Riley have been working together for several months now. She's only been in Italy every couple of weeks because she's been meeting up with Riley and his team. That's why the military was willing to tell her about the Kith-harn."

"Um, newsflash, there weren't any Kith-harn, and she hasn't been in Rome? Why didn't she tell us? Okay, more confused, not less confused, which is not really the point of answers. Answers should lead to less confusion," Xander protested.

"If Buffy didn't know someone on base, she wouldn't have even gotten Riley's location. She might not have had the clearance to find out about them bollocksing up one more experiment, but they told her more than they would have told any civilian who just randomly called."

"I thought they called her."

Spike looked over for a second, and Xander could see the exasperation. "Pet, why would they call a girl Riley was
supposedly seeing every once in a while? Major Moron's parents are next of kin."

"Okay, I officially think I've been clueless," Xander admitted as he thought back and tried to figure out how he had missed so much. "So, Buffy and Riley are more than just trying to work it out?"

Spike nodded. "They're thinking of making things more permanent, but they've been holding off, trying to figure out how they fit into each other's lives. Government's been payin' Buffy as a civilian consultant on some of Riley's jobs. On others, she just meets up with him."

"Holy double-identities Batman," Xander breathed. Twisting around, he checked out the car behind them and tried to figure out when he had lost track of Buffy so much that she could do something like this without him noticing. Nice, he was all blame-boy because they didn't see him falling apart, and he didn't even notice Buffy was putting it all together and making a life. Hypocrite, thy name is Xander.

"Wait, why do you know?"

"She had to tell me so I could cover for her when I went
to Rome to clean up whatever nasties Andrew needed cleaned up because she wasn't there. Besides, after I eavesdropped on her therapy, I might have blackmailed her just a bit."

"You blackmailed Buffy? You blackmailed Buffy and it worked?"

"Oi, you make it sound like my plans never work."

Xander didn't answer and Spike gave an exaggerated sigh. "It's not like she didn't want to tell anyone. She probably would have told you and Willow if you lot had asked."

"Only, Willow and I were too caught up to ever ask. Not making me feel better, Spike."

"She knew you were struggling after Africa. She didn't know how to help other than to ban you from patrol so you wouldn't keep getting yourself nearly killed, but she knew you were hurting. And Willow had that bloody awful breakup and re-breakup and grand finale breakup with Kennedy." Spike shuddered.

"Yeah, that was not pretty," Xander agreed as he thought
of screaming matches and bonfires. "But I'm still officially nominating myself for worst best friend ever."

"All of you were doing the best you knew how," Spike said without condemning Xander, and right now Xander was realizing that Willow was probably not the only one in need of therapy. How could he have never asked Buffy how her life was going? But looking back over their phone and vid conversations, he never had. Guilt crept out from a corner in his mind and shook its furry head at him.

"The Slayer's makin' a life, and if you want to be part of that life with Riley and Buffy, I've got to get a couple of things settled," Spike's voice interrupted the silence.

"Settled as in major arterial bleeding settled?" Xander asked with just a touch of worry. "No one's going to feel settled if you break the bones Bernie just fixed."

"Trust me, yeah?" Spike asked. The light turned green, and Spike turned back toward the road.

"With my life," Xander agreed. He didn't say the other half he was thinking, the half that said that as much as he trusted Spike with his life, he wasn't sure he trusted
Spike with Riley's life. Glancing back toward the white SUV driven by the soldier, Xander felt more than a little worried about the scheme running around in Spike's head because Spike's plans had a very bad habit of going kerflewy.

"Okay, Spike, we're here. I don't know why we're here, but we are," Buffy said as she slammed the SUV's door closed. Riley walked around to her side of the SUV and slipped an arm around her before they both walked toward the back of the empty building. The windows had been boarded up, and with the lights from the car and the SUV, it had a weird Mad Max vibe going.

"I can tell you why Jim's okay with Riley and Xander when Froggie says he shouldn't be, but information costs, pet," Spike said to Buffy as he stepped forward. With the car
headlights still on, he cast a long shadow that reached across the whole lot and crept up the side of the building.

"Costs? Spike, what's going on? What do you want?" Buffy had dropped the ditzy act as she stepped in front of Riley.

"Don't want anything, luv, but if you want information, that means you have to be willing to face truths you don't want to."

"Like?" she asked cautiously.

"Like facing your own nature, facing the things you've done."

"Enough with the games, Spike. If you have information, let's hear it," Riley cut him off.

"Not talkin' to you," Spike said with a sneer in Riley's direction. Riley pulled a stake out of his pocket, and looked like he was about to attack, but Buffy held her hand up to stop him.

"I've been all about facing the things I've done, you know
that Spike. And you've been there for me when I've done it, so I'm wondering where this is suddenly coming from." Buffy suddenly sounded a lot less Buffyish and more like her mother with a seriousness Xander wasn't used to hearing from her.

Xander stepped forward as he studied this Buffy-woman he almost knew. "Spike is the one you turned to when all this stuff was happening, the stuff with you, and you and Riley, and you working for the government. You and Spike are really close."

"We're friends. We're just friends," she said as she looked over at Riley.

"When I wasn't being friend-like," Xander said softly.

"I never said that!" Buffy took several steps toward him, but then stopped with a confused look on her face when Spike stepped between them to stop her.

"Just listen, don't try ta go making the bad shite vanish, pet," Spike told her. She frowned, but she didn't say anything as she looked back at Xander.

"I know you never said it, Buff. I said it. I was a bad
friend."

"You were hurting," Buffy said softly without actually disagreeing with him. "I got that. Been there, played the sad music at three in the morning. I always knew you were my friend."

Xander closed the last couple of feet between him and Spike so that he stood next to his vampire and studied Buffy. He might be completely screwing Spike's whole plan up since he was not in on the whole plan, but there were a few things he needed to know.

"Are you going to keep working for the government?" he asked as he looked from Buffy to Riley. She looked back toward Riley, but he crossed his arms and didn't give an answer.

"We do a lot of good work. And yeah, sometimes they're assholes, but they're assholes back in Washington, and since I'm a private citizen, I can pretty much ignore them and make nice later, after it's too late to do anything about me changing the plan mid-mission," Buffy explained. "And I would have told you guys only you were having so much trouble, and coming in excited about how well things were going felt wrong. Hugely
wrong. I mean, when Riley came in with this perfect life and I was working at Doublemeat, that felt like the worst point in my life."

"It wasn't perfect," Riley interrupted.

"Um, know that now, but my point is that I never wanted Xander and Willow to feel that way."

"I get it," Xander nodded. "I really do. But Riley, if you're a Sentinel, they're going to start thinking about those senses of yours and what you could do and whoever you have as a Guide is going to end up in the middle of that, and I really would like to work with you, but I won't walk into that kind of mess. And even if I were stupid enough to walk into that kind of mess, because trust me, I've done things that were a lot stupider than that, Spike wouldn't let me."

"Wait, you mean there's a chance Spike would let you work with him if he's not military?" Buffy interrupted. "Why have I spent the last two days talking myself blue in the face about why Riley has to pick someone else? Xander, if you would work with him, it'd be perfect. You already know about the bumping in the night and the slayness, and Blair taught you all about being a Guide."
Even if we picked someone else, they'd be working off the reports you wrote while you were with Blair. But now we have the closest thing we can get to an expert without turning to Blair and Jim because those two are not on my Christmas card list. This is perfect."

"Not if Major Moron stays in the army, it isn't," Spike snapped. "And I haven't heard him say he's leaving, and I'm not putting Xander in the middle of that bucket of shite."

"Riley?" Buffy asked.

Riley looked thoughtful for a second. "Yeah, I'm okay with quitting. I would still want to work with the Department of Defense, but when I reenlisted, I insisted on an exit clause. Leaving me to die on that mountain is enough to justify me using it. They won't even go looking for any other reasons. I could work off private contracts with you."

"Are you sure?" Buffy turned and went to his side, her hand resting on his arm, and Xander blinked into his vision. The gold from Buffy's cord was brighter than the streaks of gold in Riley's blue, but where their cords touched, his gold streaks flared, and Buffy's soul cord
arched toward Riley. Xander blinked the vision away.

"I'm sure," Riley answered. "We'll still fight. And honestly, I wasn't looking forward to going back. My whole team is gone, Echo and Papa companies. Of all the men and women I worked with and trained in the last three years, Susan Clark and Raymond Jimenez are the only ones left, and that's because Clark might be turning into a demon and Jimenez's wife is having a hard pregnancy so he's on leave. Well, Sam's still around, but that relationship is damaged beyond repair, and has been for a while. If I'm going into the field, I'd rather have you at my back." Riley smiled at Buffy, and Xander rested his hand on Spike's back. What must Spike feel knowing that the woman he had given up his demonic existence for, who he had died for and gotten a soul for, had picked Riley over him? Xander glanced over, but Spike's face was impassive.

"Which brings us to the next point, and the bit that ya probably don't want to hear. The boy and I come as a pair. You want Xander, you're going to have to deal with me bein' there every step of the way. And right now, you go putting your hand on him to center yourself, and I'm going to break every bone in it," Spike said while still having the weirdly impassive face. Xander would be less
freaked if Spike looked angry, but he just looked like he was casually commenting on the weather.

"Okay, wait. You tell us you'll let Xander work with Riley and then you threaten to break his hand? This isn't making sense in a big way, Spike." Buffy put her hands on her hips and Riley brought his stake up a few inches. Xander opened his mouth to try and say something soothing, not that he actually knew what to say, but Spike's arm reached out and pushed him back.

"Ya never wanted to face the one truth that Riley gets to deal with now. You have instincts and feelings that come straight from the demon bits in you, from the heart of that demon that was used to create the first Slayer. And now soldier boy knows he has his own demon bits pushing and pulling at him. So, are you going to do what you've always done, just ignore it?" Spike asked. Xander looked from Buffy to Spike, feeling the moment pivot like on a teeter-totter, or maybe on one of those dreidels Willow would bring over at Hanukkah. And the minute it stopped spinning fast enough, the thing would just fall over, and Xander felt like this whole moment was ready to fall over. Riley must have felt it too because he took a step forward, and then Spike was there in front of Xander, pushing him back. Taking the hint, Xander
backed up to their car and stood silently staring at the others.

"I'm not a demon," Riley gnashed his teeth.

"Buffy, we talked about most everything except us, what we were together," Spike said as he completely ignored Riley. The soldier raised his stake and took a step forward, but Buffy neatly sidestepped into his path.

"What you were was an attempted rapist, or are you all going to try and erase that from your memories?" Riley demanded as he looked from Spike to Buffy to Xander, and this was one time when Xander would rather have been left out.

"Not denying what I did. I didn't want to lose Buffy, I didn't want to get bloody tossed aside again, and I did try to rape her that day. I would have if she hadn't been faster than I expected. I would have raped her and taken her to bed and woke up the next morning expecting her to be happy about it," Spike admitted. Riley looked ready to attack, but Buffy just looked thoughtful.

"I wouldn't have been, you know," Buffy said, her voice strangely without emotion.
"Yeah, know that now, don't I? Now I have the demon and the soul all mixed up in here together, so I know I wouldn't have kept you happy that way."

"Is that what you did to Xander? Did you wait until he was alone and afraid and force your way into his life?" Riley demanded, his voice low and threatening, and for the first time, Xander considered that maybe he should be worried for Spike and not just worried about what crazy game Spike was playing.

"Hey, no forcing. There was no forcing, and I was happier with Jim and Blair than I had been for a long time, so it's not like he waited until I was desperate or anything," Xander hurried to tell them.

"Spike," Buffy stepped close and looked up at the vampire's face. "This is old territory. Why are you bringing this up now?"

"If you three were just demons, I wouldn't," Spike backed up a step and pulled out a cigarette. The lot was quiet as he lit it and pulled a deep drag, making the tip glow brightly. "If you were demons, we'd just fight and get it over with. But ya aren't though. You're humans with
human souls and just a touch of demon in you, so this shite needs to be said."

"I'm not a demon," Riley immediately snapped.

"Yeah?" Spike looked almost amused as he considered Riley up and down. "So, if Maggie could have gotten her hands on, say Jim, she wouldn't have given him a nice number and tested those senses? She wouldn't have categorized which demons tried to avoid him... or you? She wouldn't have shoved him in a little white cell with food that dropped from the ceiling?"

Riley looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"All these abilities--Red's witchcraft, Xander's powers, your Slayer strength, Riley's senses--they all come from some demon bits you carry around in you. And Bernie's right about one thing, demons respect hierarchies. Jim doesn't need to fight Riley or Xander because he's already bested both of them. He's put his hands on them and put them flat on their backs, so now they know where they stand with him. And now that he's set himself up as the alpha, he can have them around and even care about them without feeling like they're pushing in on his territory because they all know it's his
"Jim attacked you? When you were injured?" Buffy turned on Riley, the calm of a second ago gone as her back went stiff.

"I was out of control, grabbing for Xander and... it's okay," Riley finished weakly.

"It's more than okay, ya git. Don't you get it? You submitted to Jim and after that, you two could work together. Ya turned all 'sir' this and 'sir' that with him."

Riley turned to Spike and narrowed his eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

"Okay, Spike," Buffy quickly interrupted. "I'm not liking where this conversation is going. You wanted to talk about that day between us, so let's talk about it. If you had raped me, I would have staked you, and I would have hated you forever. You thought you could get me back by treating me like Dru, but I'm not a demon. And if you think Riley is just going to start liking you because you beat the snot out of him, you haven't learned much from your soul."
Xander gasped as he finally caught the drift of the conversation. Okay, this was officially weird. But Spike was shaking his head. "Not saying he would, luv. And I know how wrong I was about that day. I've apologized enough for it."

"I thought you had, but if you're still talking about dominance and submission like this, you obviously haven't understood why you needed to apologize," Buffy said. Xander noticed her hand had wandered dangerously near her waistband, and things were looking entirely too serious. Unfortunately, he couldn't come up with a single joke. Hell, he didn't think he could say a single word because his throat was so tight breathing hurt.

Spike didn't answer right away as he smoked his cigarette. When he turned around, putting his back to Riley and Buffy, Xander was even more confused... confused and just a little freaked.

"I don't think Riley is ever going to like me, and the two of us fighting it out won't change that. But," Spike turned around, "if we don't fight it out and decide who's on the top of this ladder, we won't ever be able to stand each other. So what I'm saying is that we have to sort this out
now, or Xander and I will deal with Clark without you and then we'll have to go our separate ways."

"You're trying to blackmail us?" Buffy asked, her voice getting sharp. "Riley needs a Guide, so you're going to try and blackmail us?"

"No," Spike shook his head. "I'm tellin' you a truth you don't want to hear. Without the soul, I couldn't understand how important it was to like someone. If I'd raped you, you never would have liked me again, and that would have kept you from turning to me even if I had won that fight. But you need to admit something, too. You couldn't come to me without wanting to put me below you. You'd beat the shite out of me before we shagged, and then you'd leave bloody trails down my back as foreplay."

Xander could see Buffy blush by the light from the car. Riley looked over toward her, obviously uncomfortable, and Xander didn't blame him. He really didn't want to be here to relive the Spike and Buffy show, either.

"That's why I had to cut it off. It wasn't right, what I was doing to you," she said softly.
"Didn't hear me complainin'."

"You should have been."

"I was pure demon back then, luv. I didn't understand why you had a problem with it because I thought it was as good as things got, at least until you'd go denying me in front of the others."

"But it wasn't right. You shouldn't have been okay with me treating you like that," Buffy sounded like she was begging now.

"I was," Spike shrugged.

"Okay, we're going in circles," Buffy huffed as she turned and started for the SUV.

"You cut it off because you liked what we were doing. You asked Glinda if you were a demon because you could feel that power, you could feel things slipping into place and you felt right every time you held me down and took what you wanted. Having the power settled between us, it made you comfortable in a way you never were with the others."
Buffy stopped. Xander watched her and he watched Riley who was now splitting his attention between Buffy and Spike.

When she didn't answer, Spike just kept right on going. "I had to learn to live with my soul, and I can't ever apologize enough for what I tried to do. It was wrong in more ways that I could understand at the time. But it's time for you to face up to what you have rattling around in your head. Now that we know Riley's got demon bits, you two can't ever make it work without dealing with those demonic feelings, and I can't let Riley get anywhere near Xander if he won't admit to what he's feeling and find some way to work with me. We're a package deal, Xander and me."

"And you think this means we have to fight?" Buffy asked without turning around.

"You and me?" Spike huffed a quick laugh. "Luv, you've already shown my demon he's one step below you on this hierarchy. That's why if you tell me the wanker isn't fighting, I won't push it. But I won't let soldier boy get anywhere near Xander, either. Things are too unsettled between your soldier and me, and I won't put Xander in the middle of that fight. I sure as hell won't let him go up
against some nasty with Riley, not the way things are now."

"Don't you think you should be talking to me about this?" Riley asked as he stepped forward.

"No, I don't," Spike answered quickly. "I can tell just from the way you to stand, from the way you look to her. You two have already worked it out. You probably spar, and she knocks you flat on your arse every fucking time. You already know she's dominant, and then she goes on those missions and when you feel the need to follow orders, she makes her own calls, so your demon bits, they see her as your commander, the one who makes the final decision in the field. Even now, she's thinking about how you never get upset about her taking charge and her kicking your ass. She's finally realizing that she needs to have that power settled just as much as you do. So, I figure she's going to make this decision for you."

Riley cast a thoughtful look at Buffy, and Xander held his breath. Buffy didn't say anything at all. Shaking his head, Riley turned his attention back to Spike. "I have news Spike, I'm never going to think of you as anything other than the nasty little slime that slid in under the door when no one was looking."
Spike snorted. "Never said it'd change the way we think of each other. I'm just saying that a good fight will let us work together without killin' each other."

"So, I kick your ass, and I can have Xander?" Riley asked.

"Hey!" Xander protested. He was not the girl getting won in a duel. No fucking way. Spike turned and shot him a nasty look, and Xander shut up. Right, trust Spike. But if Spike lost him to Riley, he was kicking Spike's undead ass.

"Xander's not a toy to win or lose. Xander bloody well stays in my bed until either him or me decide otherwise, and that's never bloody going to happen," Spike snarled. "But whether you win or get your arse handed to you, it'll be settled between us and we can work together without wanting to rip each other's throats out."

"So, I win, and you're still there, you're still Xander's lover, but you'll do what I say?" Riley asked, moving slowly forward with more grace than Xander had ever seen him use. Spike shifted his position, moving into a fighting stance.

"To a point. Think of it as rank." Spike pursed his lips.
"Right now, you feel a need to obey Jim as though he were your commander. If he ordered you to do something totally barmy, you'd probably tell him to go fuck himself. But as long as the orders are within reason, you're going to back him... well, at least until Buffy tells you to do something different, and even then, it'd be uncomfortable for you."

Spike cocked his head at Riley who was now slowly nodding. "He's right. That is how I feel about Ellison," he said to Buffy.

"So, you want to fight?" she asked. Riley gave a short nod.

"Yeah, but when I kick your arse, that same feeling you have toward Ellison, you'll feel that for me. Even if you don't like me, you're not going to go gettin' in my face and contradicting my orders unless you have a bloody good reason," Spike warned.

"You couldn't take me down in your dreams," Riley almost growled.

"You think you can take me?" Spike asked, his head cocking farther to the side.
"I've killed hundreds no different from you," Riley brought his stake up.

"Hey, we aren't talking about killing each other. Killing bad," Xander protested.

"I'm with Xander on the 'killing bad' front," Buffy quickly added. "If you two want to play the whole whose balls are bigger game, you have at it, but I will kick the ass of anyone who does any killing. Hell, I'll kick the ass of anyone who goes and gets dead, and considering how often we come back from the dead around here, do not consider that a humorous attempt to lighten the mood," Buffy warned. Riley gave a small nod as Buffy came over to stand near Xander. She gave him a small smile.

"Xand, are you really okay with them doing the stupid boy thing?" she asked as she made a gesture toward the two men who now circled cautiously.

"I thought it was a stupid demon thing," Xander answered absentmindedly.

"Boys, demons, pretty much the same thing," Buffy shrugged, but Xander could see the way she pressed her
lips together and the frown as she watched Spike and Riley circle each other. Xander put his back to the side of the car and crossed his arms as he watched Riley dart forward, but he couldn't match Spike's speed. Spike danced backwards with a laugh. Worried that Riley might be feeling a little more murderous than he should be, Xander blinked into Shamanic vision. What he saw surprised him so much he might have fallen on his ass if he hadn't been leaning on the car. The red sparks he'd seen between Jim and Riley were there, only they were so bright Xander felt like he was watching a fourth of July show. Seriously wow.

"Got to do better than that, soldier boy," Spike taunted. Riley didn't answer. He focused on watching Spike, his feet shifting as Spike darted in and out without making contact.

"Are we fighting or dancing?" Riley finally asked with a sneer.

"You're not pretty enough to dance with." Spike darted in again, and this time, he landed a hit. But Riley had seen it coming, so the punch caught his arm and he pushed it away without it doing any real damage. Red sparks flew like when a new log was thrown onto a blazing fire.
Before Spike could retreat, Riley stabbed forward with the stake, and Xander could feel his stomach turn to lead. Wood. Vampire. Not good. However Spike twisted and slipped away with a laugh.

"No wonder Buffy kicks your sorry arse. Slow as my mother at seventy." Spike gave a wicked smile as he darted in and landed a light hit on Riley's shoulder.

Riley answered with a charge. Spike twirled away, but this time Riley did a weird crouch-kick thing, forcing Spike to leap up to avoid having a leg taken out, and Riley surged forward. Xander could see the point of the stake sink into Spike's stomach as Riley's soul cord flashed brilliant red. Xander lurched blindly forward. Buffy's hand caught him, pulling him back to the car.

"Let them," she said, her voice strained.

Xander blinked away the Shamanic vision and hugged his own waist to keep from reaching out for Spike, but the vampire had already pulled back, his fingers red from where he had grabbed his bleeding stomach.

"Not as cocky now," Riley said, but Xander couldn't help noticing that Riley had lost his stake somewhere along
the way. He was now stakeless and Spike was pissed... pissed and bleeding. No wonder Buffy was gripping her own hands so hard that she probably would have broken Xander if she'd been holding onto him.

"I'm not the one who lost his weapon," Spike pointed out as he went back to circling. He attacked again, and Xander could tell he meant business this time. Riley punched right at the wound, and it hit so hard that Xander could hear the fist squelch in the torn flesh, but that didn't stop Spike. He grabbed Riley's fist and yanked the soldier hard enough to the side that Riley lost his balance and fell to one knee.

Immediately, Spike was behind him, one hand on Riley's neck, and a boot on the back of Riley's knee. Riley wasn't going anywhere unless he planned to crawl. Riley punched out with one fist, landing a weak hit on Spike's leg, but then Spike pressed down so hard on Riley's neck that the soldier had to put both hands on the ground or end up with his nose flat to the pavement.

"Could hurt you. Could hurt you bad from right here and neither one of them could move fast enough to stop me," Spike said. This time Xander had to hold out his hand to keep Buffy back.
"Do it. Prove to them once and for all that you're nothing but a monster," Riley said in a strained voice.

"If I were a monster, I would. I would kill you and never understand why the Slayer or my boy cared. I snapped the necks of orphans without thinking about it, and it wasn't important because they didn't belong to anyone. It didn't fucking matter. I bloody well understand how you can look at me and see the monster, but if you want to work with Xander, you need to see something else, soldier boy. I'm not killing you because I have a soul."

"You keep talking about this soul of yours, but it doesn't seem to slow you down that much," Riley grunted.

Spike jerked him up to his feet, and Riley twisted around to take another punch. Easily catching the hand, Spike wrenched it up behind Riley's back and then got an arm around his throat. Since Riley was taller than Spike, it left Riley awkwardly bending backwards, but Xander didn't think Spike really cared about Riley's comfort.

"You have no idea how much the soul slows me down, boy. You remember that guilt when you figured out what Maggie had done? You remember waking up in a cold
sweat as you realized that you helped her put Adam together?"

"How could—" Riley stopped.

"Doesn't take a genius to figure that out," Spike snorted. "Well imagine doing that and things a thousand times worse and then waking up one day and figuring out what you'd done. I was a monster. When you knew me before, I was a monster still. I didn't have the soul, so I cared about what was mine and nothing else. Human life meant nothing to me, and Buffy meant something only because I thought I belonged to her. But I've got a soul now, so I'm no more monster than you are. We both have souls and we both have demonic powers that whisper thoughts in our ears. My demon sees that boy as his and he'll rip your arm off and shove it down your throat if you do something to hurt him. My soul loves him, would do anything for him. And my soul is going to let my demon rip your arm off if you do anything to hurt him. So, are we settled now? Are you feeling things between us?" Spike asked.

"I'm feeling you threatening to break my arm," Riley answered. Spike eased off, eventually releasing Riley's arm, but he kept one hand on Riley's shoulder, and the
other on the arm he had just stopped twisting. Xander could see strong fingers digging into Riley's flesh, forcing him to stand still.

"Time for some honesty, mate. You feel it, don't you?" Spike asked. Riley remained silent. Xander blinked into Shamanic vision. The red sparks had dulled to faint embers in Riley's cord, embers that highlighted the gold threads. It was like Christmas.

"He's still fighting," Xander said. He could see Spike glance over, but the black demon cord whipping out blurred Spike's features. Moving so fast that Xander couldn't even track the motion, Spike vamped out and sunk his teeth into Riley's neck. Riley gasped and lurched, but he couldn't break Spike's hold as Spike drank far more noisily than usual. Buffy took one step forward and stopped even though Xander was way too shocked to try and stop her. Xander could see the red embers blaze and then slowly die as Riley's eyes drifted shut in ecstasy. Oh god, that was so not nice to do. Xander blinked away the cords and glanced over where Buffy watched with a look of horror and possibly despair.

Spike stopped. He raised his head, mouth red with blood, and Riley's eyes snapped open.
"You done fighting now?" Spike asked, but his eyes went to Xander. Xander could only nod silently.

"Don't ever do that again," Riley said quietly, but he stood in Spike's grip without fighting.

"Don't plan to," Spike agreed amicably. "I don't bloody need to dominate you, Finn. But you need to remember to mind your manners around me or I will remind you."

Spike let Riley go, and the soldier stumbled forward. Immediately Buffy was at his side, her arm around his waist.

"Is this over? Are you two okay now?" Buffy asked. Xander edged around the couple, circling widely before coming to Spike's side.

"I know I'm feeling a lot less homicidal toward him," Spike shrugged. "Can even handle Xander working with him, if that's what Xander wants. And I promise to stop calling him Major Moron. After all, now that I've put him under me in our little clan, I want to make sure others see him as strong, right?" Spike turned to Xander, and Xander remembered Giles' old books, the ones that said
only strong vampires got claimed that way in a clan because the stronger the submissive vampires were, the stronger the dominant had to be.

"Are you feelin' less pissy?" Spike asked Riley curiously. Xander slipped his arm around Spike's waist, ignoring the sticky feeling of Spike's blood soaking into his shirt.

"I feel... different," Riley admitted, his hand pressed to his neck where a faint trickle of blood escaped between his fingers.

"Right then, if we can work together for the next day or so, you and I can talk about you having Xander as a Guide."

"Next day or so? I thought—" Riley stopped and frowned. He looked over toward Xander.

Xander took a deep breath and backed up Spike's play. "Um, Riley, you just stuck a stake in my lover, and while I'm all okay with the weird dominance thing because I get it... I get it in the whole I feel it way, but still. You stuck a stake in him. I'm not feeling really happy with you right now."
"Xander." Riley stopped. "I am sorry. I put you in a position where you had to pick between helping me and being with the person you care about. I shouldn't have done that."

"Can I take that as a promise you won't stake Spike again?" Xander asked.

"He didn't bloody stake me," Spike complained. "I let him get that hit in. Didn't want him feeling too pathetic when I kicked his arse."

"Yeah, right," Xander said without even pretending to believe. Buffy smiled and even Riley managed to look a little less grim.

"I promise," Riley agreed.

"And you have to take care of this shite with the military. My guess is that they've gotten those hospital records by now, so they know you aren't dead. You need to tell them to take their job and shove it. The faster you do that, the faster you and Buffy can start building the kind of life I won't mind bein' involved with and having Xander involved with," Spike said firmly.
Buffy just nodded.

"You're okay with me and Buffy?" Riley asked, clearly shocked. Xander was a little shocked himself.

Spike just shrugged. "For a soldier boy, you aren't bad. 'Course you're a mindless pillock for ever going to a suckhouse, but you're not the first or the last in this group to get hooked on somethin' destructive. And the fact is that I bollocked up what the Slayer and I could have had back before I even understood it. I'd rather have her happy than alone. Besides, I'd rather have someone who wants me, not some substitute for my poncy sire or a punching bag to take her frustrations out on." Spike's arm tightened around Xander's waist, and Xander leaned into that strength. Spike would rather have him. Xander couldn't believe how good it felt to hear that. Spike's hand came up and brushed Xander's hair back from his face, and Xander smiled at that small affectionate touch.

Riley didn't answer. His mouth came open and then closed silently.

"This would be a good place for you to say something nice," Xander pointed out as he turned back to face
them. "You know, in the spirit of working together and giving up on the secret plans to kill each other when no one is looking."

"I have one question," Riley said slowly. "Why Xander?"

Spike didn't answer right away. "Ask Xander. He's already asked the same question, so he knows the answer, and it's good enough for him."

Xander opened his mouth, but Riley held up a hand red with both Spike's blood and his own. "No, don't answer that. I didn't have a right to ask that question because I can think of any number of reasons someone would choose you, including your loyalty. And you're old enough to know who's best for you." The night fell silent as they stood and considered each other. Buffy's hand rested on Riley's chest and she looked up at him. Spike was right; Buffy had the power there. She needed that, and Angel could never give it to her. The Immortal really had been the worst possible choice if she wanted the control, but Riley fit by her side. Maybe that's why Xander wanted to work with Riley, maybe that's why he argued for her to forgive him years back. Maybe even then he could see how their souls just fit each other.
"Riley?" Buffy asked, her tone asking everything she didn't say.

He nodded. "Yeah, it's okay now. Spike's right. It's more settled now. I still don't like him, but I'm not feeling the need to pull Xander away from him."

"So, Bernie's right about the hierarchies and the demon bits," Xander said, not entirely happy about the arrogant asshole being right about anything.

"Seems like," Riley agreed.

"Wait, you mean I would have had a better love life if I'd just started kicking my partner's asses during sparring a whole lot sooner? Okay, that's weird. Good to know, but weird." Buffy joked. "My therapist is going to be working overtime. Of course, if I send the rest of you guys to her the way I should, she may not have time for me at all."

"That would be funny if it weren't true," Xander nodded. "I'm sorry I was so caught up in my own weirdness that I stopped being a friend, and I'm really sorry I was hiding everything like you couldn't handle it. You would have been handling-it girl."
"I have way too many of my own issues to ever carry a grudge, Xand. We've been friends forever, and we always will be. We just need to get a group rate on therapy," Buffy nodded. "A bulk group rate. Maybe we should just hire a private therapist."

"A demonic one," Riley added. "I can't believe the French idiot was right and I have demonic instincts. The universe has a nasty sense of humor."

"Yeah, mate, it does. Look what it did when it shoved a soul up Angelus' arse. Now that was a cosmic joke if I've ever seen one. So, let's call Jim and Blair and figure out how we're going to go after this Clark woman before she starts snacking on the population."

"Xander, I'm still worried that this is going to be hard for you," Riley said, but this time his voice had the worry without the aggression.

"You're worried about me? I'm cornering the market on worry here," Xander admitted. "I'm the one who may have to do the soul-ripping, and I reserve the right to have a complete freak out afterwards, but Spike is right. If I don't do this, people could die which could lead to even bigger freak outs. And if Willow does this, she could
get eaten which--again--huge freak out plus a bonus with a Mazzikim who has way too much power."

"The least of all possible evils?" Riley asked quietly. "I just worry because I've worked with Shamen. We had two of the best with us in South America, in the jungle. They went dark, and what was left of them when they were through... it wasn't all that different from what happened to my guys out there with Sungsen, only they consumed themselves. You're a good man, and I don't want that happening to you."

"That's why I have Spike," Xander answered. If Riley was being honest, he deserved at least as much honesty back. "I'm not saying I’m not going to be totally weirded out, because I am. Just... have the therapist on standby, okay?" Xander joked as he leaned into Spike. Yeah, the therapist seemed to have become the joke of the day, but he knew who he would really turn to if he had to rip out someone else's soul or astral projection or whatever.

"Multiple therapists and chocolate," Buffy nodded. "And time alone with Spike to heal, even if we have to take Willow and Giles on safari with us."

"I know a nice isolated part of China," Riley offered.
They'd be miles away from the nearest phone, even."

"Right, plan made. It's time to take care of business," Spike said, his voice suddenly all official-sounding. "You fix up soldier-boys wounds, and I'm going to go get a refill on AB negative." Spike nudged Xander toward the car and Xander went. Mazzikim or not, he felt better than he had for a while. The Musketeers might not all be back together again, but at least they were moving in the right direction, and that hadn't been true in quite a while.

Part Thirty-Three

"I hope you don't think we're shopping for you two again," Jim said after taking one look into the room. Xander and Spike had both draped their bloody shirts on the side of the heart shaped tub, and Spike was using a washcloth to wipe away the last of the blood Riley had spilled when he'd staked him in the stomach. Leaving the door open,
Xander went to the pile of clothes and grabbed a clean shirt.

"Not soddin' likely. The last set you picked up for us doesn't fit," Spike snorted. "Can't even see my very fine arse in jeans this loose."

"Oh man, I think people are going to be a little more distracted by the bloodstains. What did you guys do?" Blair asked as he stared at the dark brown stains starting at Spike's waistband and then sort of dribbling down his whole leg. In the hall, a kid stopped and stared through the open door, and Jim pushed it shut without looking while Blair closed in on Spike, a look of horror on his face as he saw just how much blood had dribbled. Xander could hear the kid in the hall yell for his parents. Great.

"Got a few things settled with Riley," Spike shrugged, completely ignoring the fact he had just traumatized some random rugrat who probably now thought there was an ax murderer running around. If any human had bled that much, it would have been hospital-time for sure if not morgue time.

"Is this the sort of settling that's going to require me to read you your Miranda rights?" Jim asked. But Xander
figured Jim wasn't that cranky because he wasn't hauling Blair back out of the way.

"Riley looks a lot better than him," Xander offered.

Immediately Spike growled. "Riley ended up on his knees at my feet. I bloody fed off him, so he doesn't soddin' look better."

"Hey!" Xander defended himself with his hands up. "I just said he looked better meaning he had less with the blood loss or at least less with the major abdominal injuries. I didn't say he won. He so did not win. He's big old losing boy," Xander hurried to agree as he moved to Spike's side.

"Soddin' right."

Spike went back to cleaning the blood, and Xander hopped up to sit on the counter. It was stupid having the counter in the bedroom, but then the tub was in the bedroom too. The bathroom wasn't really a bathroom in this place, it was just a toilet room, which was weird.

"So, Riley challenged you to a fight?" Jim asked. "He's okay though?"
"Okay as he ever was. Still think he can be a wanker sometimes," Spike snorted and threw the washcloth down. "I give up. Never getting these things clean." Without warning, he unbuttoned his jeans and shoved them off, flashing Jim and Blair with naked vampire bits. Very nice naked vampire bits. Spike flashed Xander a grin when he noticed just where Xander was looking.

"Whoa, hey, how about we come back later?" Blair turned around to avoid seeing Spike naked… again… but Jim just leaned against the dresser and watched without blinking. Jim must be a scary good poker player.

Xander tried for normal as he focused on Jim. Focusing on other stuff would lead to embarrassment, especially when two people in the room would smell other stuff. "Spike told Riley and Buffy that there was a chance I could work with Riley as long as Riley wasn't doing the military thing anymore because me and the military… so not good. And then there's the fact that me and Spike are a package deal and Spike and the military is even less with the good than me and the military."

"So, what's he going to do?" Jim asked as Spike grabbed another pair of jeans from the pile of new clothes that
had ended up dumped in one corner.

"Git's going independent contractor," Spike said as he pulled them on and then frowned as he pulled at the seam. "These are soddin' ridiculous. You're a Sentinel, shouldn't you be able to judge sizes better than this?" he complained.

"I'm not your personal shopper," Jim shot right back. "And Riley's going to be a mercenary?"

"Wow, he kinda is," Xander said with a bit of wonder. "I never thought of it as being a mercenary, but he's working for the government getting hired to do jobs privately, so he is. And if I'm working with him, I'm a mercenary too, and that is way cooler than being a carpenter. Or a crazy guy with one eye. Most of Africa pretty much just called me the crazy guy with one eye."

"Sport, that's a dangerous line of work."

"Buffy's already been contracting with them for demon hunting. Riley's just joining her in the private sector," Spike said as he finished pulling at his jeans and grabbed a shirt.
"So, I'm going to be demon hunting with Riley and Spike and Buffy which is strangely no different from most of the year after I graduated, only I'll be getting paid and getting medical benefits instead of living in my parents' basement. At least I assume I'll be getting medical benefits."

"If not you can borrow one of Spike's credit cards. I put a couple of purchases on the card you lent me, so at the end of this, you can either have the weapons or I'll pay you back," Jim commented.

"Watcher pays the bill, so it's not like I care," Spike snorted. "You buy somethin' special for our trip onto the base?"

"Oh man, I do not even want to think about what he bought in that store. I mean, yeah, the projectile gun isn't lethal, but that's almost worse because it means he'll actually use it. Man, if we get caught, we are so toast." Blair sighed dramatically. "My mom will be so proud of me, getting arrested for breaking into a military base and causing havoc. Well, until she finds out about the being armed part."

"You need to have some sort of weapon," Jim said
calmly. "We aren't going through this again, Chief."

"Yeah, yeah, got it. But if I have to actually tazer anyone, retaliation is in your future. You are going to be eating vegetarian lasagna and tofu for a month. I hope you know that."

"Understood, Chief. You know I'll try to keep you out of the middle."

"Yeah, I know, and you know I trust you, and I so totally know that we don't have a choice because if the military sits on their collective hands while this woman turns into another Sungsen, we're all screwed. So I'm with you; I just don't have to like it."

Spike leaned against the wall. "Mate, they should be a lot more scared of your mouth than any gun Ellison might have bought you. It's a sight more dangerous than a few volts of electricity."

The easy atmosphere thinned a bit as Jim frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just a little surprised at how thick Blair laid on the mojo. All they're talkin' about is how they need therapy
and Willow needs therapy and they should get group therapy rates. Even this one." Spike poked his thumb in Xander's direction before he headed over to the bed, sitting and putting on socks and boots. Xander looked from Spike to Blair and back. Shit. Quick self-check. Self-hatred about needing therapy--gone. Denial over the ways he'd screwed up his relationships--gone. Weird girly-man insecurities at the thought of therapy--gone, gone, and so totally gone. Xander blinked in surprise.

"I noticed that," Blair said quietly. "I was hoping I was totally overreacting and you guys wouldn't say anything."

Spike snorted. "Not like. But it's about bloody time someone's talking about it. I appreciate you doin' that mate."

"As one of the mojo'ed, at least I think I was one of the mojo'ed, I have to second that. We were all doing the denial thing a little too long," Xander agreed. "Although it is freaky to think that my new-found mental health is actually shoved in there."

"Oi, you and Buffy are the two who were dealing with all this before Blair went and did his trick. It's not like you were still in denial."
"No, but it sure is easier to say it now. I so need therapy. See? I could not have said that before, at least not without blushing about being a girly-man."

"Shit. Xander. I didn't mean to do something to you," Blair said apologetically.

"I'm saying thank you for the head shrinking, or at least the neurosis shrinking," Xander shrugged.

"This is why I bloody well leave the room when you get going," Spike huffed. "It's probably why the Frenchie left. Pissin' off upper level Shaman isn't smart. 'Course I didn't expect this much mojo from you, but I'm calling it a bonus."

"Oh man. I screwed with people's heads. Fuck. I am so totally messing with my own karma." Blair ran his hands through his hair and looked around with just a slight case of total panic.

"Calm down, Chief," Jim soothed him while giving Spike a cold stare. Spike didn't even flinch.

"Man, what if I do it to someone else? What if I have
done it to other people? I mean, I totally pushed you to let me come and stay with you, maybe I mojo'ed you." Blair looked up at Jim with an expression of despair, and Xander felt his own guts knot in sympathy. If he thought for one second Spike's love wasn't real, that he had used his powers to make Spike think he'd fallen in love, he would so totally be throwing himself under a train... either that or he'd be totally and permanently disappearing into Simpsons' Road Rage.

"Chief, you didn't do anything to me. I liked you long before that damn warehouse blew up. I was considering calling the health department and having the building condemned just to make you move in with me, so I don't think you mojo'ed me."

"Shit. No way. I had to talk you into it. Oh man, I have mojo'ed you and done something screwy to your memories, haven't I?" Blair started pacing, and Xander slid down from the counter, not sure what to do but definitely feeling the need to do something.

"Chief, you had to talk me into it because you wanted to bring the damn monkey."

"Barbary ape." Blair didn't stop as he almost bounced off
the wall and paced at a new trajectory.

"Whatever. The point is that you didn't talk me into letting you stay. Will you just calm down?" Jim reinforced his words by reaching out and snagging Blair's arm as he made a pass, pulling the man into an embrace. Blair squirmed for a second, and Xander could see Jim's arms tighten.

"Ellison's right, mate. Shaman can't mojo on their dominants, not without permission. It's just one of those things, and if Bernie's right, no one can muck with a Sentinel without him letting it happen," Spike shrugged.

"And don't you start with that French guy's bullshit," Jim warned. Spike tied his boot and stood up before he faced Jim and crossed his arms.

"You know a lot about Cascade and Sentinels and criminals," Spike started slowly, "He might be full of shite with this Atego bit, but I've been around demons and Shamen for about a hundred years longer than you've been alive," Spike said. "The Frenchman's an idiot, but he's right about demons living in clans. Every demon or half-demon or demon-touched person I know finds themselves some sort of hierarchy. Take the hierarchy
away, and those feelings just start gettin' out of control."

Jim stared at Spike for the longest time, his large hands gently touching Blair—a shoulder, his hair, an arm. "You believe that?" he finally asked.

Spike nodded. "It's why Riley and I had to fight. We had to know who had the bigger curlies so we could settle down and make peace. It's why if that one's going to be a Guide, he's going to have to have his own faceoff with the soldier, and I can't get in the middle."

"Wait, what?" Xander yelped. "Hey, I never signed up for a faceoff. I'm religiously opposed to faceoffs. Blair, quick, give me the name of a religion that doesn't believe in faceoffs so I can convert."

"Shakers?" Blair offered.

"See, I'm a Shaker. I so can't faceoff," Xander said desperately.

"You also can't have sex or take shortcuts when walking from one place to another," Blair added, and Xander could hear just a little humor in there.
Xander looked over in horror. "No sex? At all? With anyone?" Blair shook his head as he struggled against a smile. "Okay, that religion officially sucks. But Spike, I'm not feeling any need at all to fight Riley, and if this is about instincts, my instincts are to avoid fighting with people trained to kill with their bare hands."

"He wouldn't hurt you, pet. I'd rip his arm off if he did," Spike pointed out as he came to Xander and wrapped arms around him. Xander put his own hands over Spike's which were over his stomach, and he took several deep breaths.

"If Xander doesn't want to fight—" Jim stopped, and Xander looked up to realize that Spike had gone into gameface. "It isn't my business to get involved. You know, if you come to Cascade, you're going to have to develop a few manners," Jim said calmly.

"Yeah, know that," Spike answered. "Might not be able to do that though. If Xander becomes Riley's Guide, Buffy's going to want to stay close."

Jim narrowed his eyes at that. "I don't want her in my town."
"Yeah, figured that too," Spike agreed. "We might bring Riley for a visit, but I think any long term stays might turn nasty."

"Whoa, wait a minute. How did you know Jim was going to react that way about Buffy? Man, he only told me about an hour ago that her whole blonde act made him want to rip her hair off and shove it down her throat."

Jim's hand stopped its restless touches up and down Blair's arm. "Nice job keeping that quiet, Chief."

Spike just laughed. "I might be worried if I thought you could take her, but I can't and you sure as hell can't," Spike shrugged. "She's gone toe to toe with Hellgods and nasties that crawled out of your nightmares. She's alive, and they're dead. And you're right that the stupid bit is an act, no more real than when the boy makes fun of himself. It's like bloody camouflage, and if you don't look close enough, you'll never even notice the danger under the bad jokes and mangled attempts at the English language, leastwise, not until you're dead. I've seen plenty fall for it. Hell, when I first showed up in Sunnyhell, I fell for it."

"You're still not answering my question," Blair pointed
Spike's fingers started circling on Xander's stomach, tracing gentle tracks that made Xander shiver. "Ya won't like it."

"I don't like most of what you say," Jim pointed out.

"True enough. But unlike some others, you aren't stupid enough to call it wrong just because you don't like it. The fact is the Froggie's right. The first time you really met Blair, you slammed him up against a wall. The minute he let you slam him into the wall, your dominance was set. You did the same to Xander here, only you picked a door instead of a wall to slam him against. Riley you just slammed into the ground, but I assume you see a pattern here. Only Buffy, you don't have the chance to try her, either because you don't want to hit a girl, which in her case is just bloody stupid, or because you can instinctively feel the danger. She sets off your need to fight, but you just can't bloody win that fight if you start it. So, your little pattern of slamming anyone supernatural into the nearest flat surface is gettin' frustrated."

"I haven't slammed you into anything," Jim pointed out.
"Not because you don't want to."

Jim didn't answer that. Xander looked up with more than a little worry, but Jim just continued to lean against the dresser, Blair pulled close. And Spike's hand still traced small circles across Xander's stomach so that Xander had the urge to close his eyes and just curl up.

Spike gave a dark laugh when Jim didn't answer at all. "I feel the same need to see who would win if we threw down. You wouldn't go down as easy as Riley. My guess is you know a dirty trick or two that would give me a run, yeah?" Spike asked.

"I probably do. And my guess is you're stronger than anyone I've tried to take hand to hand."

"No question on that, mate. But the problem is that if we do that, we're going to have trouble separating. You're like Xand here, strong enough that if I dominated you, I wouldn't let go easy. My demon would want you right there under me. Same as the demon wants Xander right there all the time. Riley, he's not a bad fighter, but he's not like you. He doesn't have control over the senses. Hell, he isn't even bloody using them. And I haven't
heard him or Buffy say one word about any spirit dreams, so either he doesn't have a handle on this Sentinel-shite yet, or he isn't half the Sentinel you are. You, and the fuzzy Shaman too for that matter, ya smell of power, real power. But my soul won't let me do what my demon's thinking, so it's better if we just avoid having that confrontation."

"You're assuming you'd win," Jim said as he pulled Blair closer.

"Same as you are," Spike answered.

"I still don't like that you're assuming instincts rule me."

Spike shook his head. "Not assuming that at all, mate. If anything, I'm assuming the opposite. Instincts would have us at each other's throats. I'm trusting you to control that instinct, just like I'm trusting you to not give in to your instinct to keep Xander and Riley close. Your Sentinel instincts may think they're yours because they submitted to you, but you're a whole lot more than your instincts, so you'll let them walk away."

Jim and Spike studied each other for several silent minutes.
"So, these demonic rules. I can't mojo Jim?" Blair finally asked in the silence. The question broke the somber mood and Spike let Xander go and gave him a swat.

"Get your shoes, pet. Need to go shopping for some jeans that fit. And no, you can't mojo Jim, not without his direct permission."

"Okay," Xander said as he shoved his feet in his shoes without untying them. "I'm almost caught up with this, but why aren't I feeling a need to fight Riley? Honestly not feeling the need to fight here."

Spike leaned against the counter and just looked thoughtful for a second. "If we were fighting vampires right now, and I was off in the corner kicking demon arse and Buffy had gotten pulled to the side so it was just you and Riley.... If he tells you to take out the demon on the left when the wanker to the right looks more dangerous, what do you do?"

"Okay, that's just stupid. Come on, be honest Spike. If it were down to me and Riley, and we were talking a battle situation, who would you trust more?"
"I'd trust you to make the right choice, pet," Spike said seriously.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Okay, that's kinda scary. I mean, you can trust my judgment at the video store, but if we're talking fighting, I would so say trust Riley first. He says take out the demon on the left, and I take out the demon on the left or at least try to. I might get my ass kicked. In case you haven't noticed, the shiny new powers are not improving my fighting skills, and I wasn't exactly great to start with."

"Ya held your own on a hellmouth when most people ended up dead. You're a better fighter than you give yourself credit for, but ya have to learn to deal with the new powers in the field, pet. Still, if you trust Riley's judgment over your own, you have your answer."

"I have an answer? Okay, I might have come up with an answer but I obviously totally missed it while coming up with it, which is kinda sad."

Blair nodded knowingly. "You already see Riley as dominant."

"So, that means..." Xander let his voice trail off.
"If Riley sees you as submissive, you'll just start working together," Spike shrugged. "If he isn't sure, he'll probably slam you into the nearest door."

"Wait, you mean I'm all ready to be Riley's buttmonkey?"

Spike growled and then he was right there, two inches from Xander's face, and the tender hand cupping Xander's cheek totally didn't match the look of fury in Spike's face. "He'll respect you or I'll pull his soddin' guts out and wrap them around his throat. It's not about anyone being a buttmonkey. It's about knowing where to turn when things go all pear shaped. The world of demons is about fighting, protecting your territory, and ya have to know where you can turn in all that. You turn to those ya see as dominant. Ya count on those who've submitted to ya to not let some wanker stick a stake in your back. Ya spend all your time provin' your worth so those above you know you're valuable at their back."

Xander froze for a second, the deepest part of his brain still on deer-in-the-headlights mode from Spike's anger, and the rest of him struggling to figure out what that really meant. "But that would mean I'm all pro-Riley."
Spike cocked his head. "And?"

"Riley's the one who took Buffy away, and he's always saying things he really shouldn't about you. And he was in the Initiative and he hurt Buffy. I mean, Willow and I stayed up all night coming up with names to call him after the whole suckhouse disaster. I have a list. Okay, so the list sank with Sunnydale, but Willow and I were all listlike about reasons to not like Riley. Well, Riley and Sam. Sam was definitely on the list of notlikeage."

Spike blinked and backed up a step. "Bloody hell. Demon bits and souls just don't fit neatly into one mind."

"Says the guy with a full demon and a soul both crammed in there, and you do pretty good. Of course, you aren't nearly as skilled at self-deception and denial like the rest of us," Xander admitted with a wry look. Spike shook his head and gave him a small smile.

"If Riley weren't competent, I wouldn't have bloody fought him. I would have grabbed you and taken a hike until he did something stupid enough for me to push him right out of the group. Hell, Buffy wouldn't have taken him back if he were a total git. So, if you feel safe turnin' to him if everyone else is busy, I don't have a problem
with that. I knew if I fought him and pulled us closer to
the rest of your little gang that you'd have to either
dominate him or submit to him. I won't have you playing
these denial games with your instincts, not if you're
going to fight beside us."

"And you're okay with me being the submittly one
because me being under you means I'm supposed to be
all strong. I could try to win a fight with him. I think I'd
get my ass kicked, but I'd try if you wanted to teach me a
dirty trick or two. Maybe Jim could help with the human-
appropriate dirty fighting." Xander looked over and Jim
was watching with undisguised curiosity.

"Submitting doesn't make you any less strong, pet.
You've got enough power running under your skin to
scare the pants off Bertrand and any other wanker who
understands what it mean to have your power." Spike
ran a finger down Xander's arm and he shivered.

"And you'll be okay with this? You're okay with me
submitting even if that means he slams me up against a
door? I'm not really up for a ringside seat for you pulling
off Riley's arm and beating him to death with it."

"Pet, I'm not going to step in any more than Buffy did. As
long as he's not hurting you, he needs to get the rules straight in his own head as much as you do. If you weren't sure about Riley's place, if you didn't know if he would be dominant or submissive to you, you'd be a wreck right now. You'd probably get jealous and cranky and be a pain in the arse to be around. If he's not sure how he fits into your life, he's probably giving Buffy that kind of grief right now. He'll be over there wondering if he did the right thing letting you walk away and beating himself up for every time he might have done something to piss you off. Hell, he's probably feeling jealous and wondering what you and Buffy got up to back in high school."

"Buffy got up to nothing as my something got up every night thinking about her in that cheerleading outfit," Xander huffed. "There's nothing to be jealous of."

"Man, jealousy is a feeling, not something that you can justify," Blair said. "Spike, I have a question."

"What's that, mate?" Spike asked when Blair hesitated.

"When you say that you and Jim can't fight, I don't get it. Xander submitted to Jim, and I'm starting to think he might have submitted to me."
Spike interrupted with a loud snort. "Just figuring that out now, are you?"

Blair glared, but he ignored the jab. "But he's leaving. Bertrand said the submissive can't leave, not when it's instinctive."

Spike sighed and Xander caught the furtive look in his direction.

"Hey, we're all about honesty now, remember?" Xander prompted.

Spike's hand closed around Xander's arm and pulled him close. "Bertrand's still an idiot. There are human feelings in there just as much as instincts. I'm guessing those human bits left him squirmin' to get away even when his instincts pulled him to stay with you. That night when I showed up in Cascade, I was bloody furious because I could feel him wanting you two, but he wasn't sayin' the right things if he was truly committed to you. I pushed hard that night, pushed a little harder than I should have maybe, but I knew I was close to losing him. Boy didn't have a chance once I really turned on the charm, especially when I played on that need of his to belong."
So, are you ready to tell us what kept you from being
happy with them?" Spike asked.
Xander glanced over. "Yeah. I was feeling kinda thirdwheelish. Like I would never really fit because you two fit
so well already."
Spike nodded. "Thought so. Demon instincts are all well
and good, but none of us is pure demon. Hell, not even a
soulless vampire is all demon. I bloody hated that you
were pullin' at him because I like the bugger. Watchin'
Xander drive Peaches up a wall is a treat. And when I
came back with the soul, Xander was the one I could
trust to always tell me the truth. So, my human bits were
as 'bout as attached as my demon."
"So, he did choose you," Jim nodded. "If anything ever
happens, Sport, and I don't want it to, but if it does, you
have a home with us, too. You weren't the third wheel."
"Totally not. I mean, the conventional idea of love as only
being between two people is totally arbitrary. Three can
love just as well as two," Blair agreed. He looked at Spike
with a sly expression. "So, when you say you and Jim
can't fight, it's not just about the power, is it?"


"Drop it, Junior," Jim warned as he reached up and ruffled Blair hair. "Some things are better left unsaid."

"Um, if we're all good now..." Xander stopped and chewed his lip as he considered the next bit. This was big. This was going to be so big and messy. Spike looked at him with an eyebrow up. "Um, maybe we could pick up Willow before we go shopping. I mean, it's always been Willow and Giles and Buffy versus you and me, but this time we'll have Willow outnumbered, and if Willow is as Blair-mojoed as everyone else..."

"You want to try and bring her back into the fold," Spike finished.

"Spike, you said it. You said that having the demon bits means needing a place to belong, and we've always been Willow's place to belong, well, not we as much as me, but if she's feeling alone, can you really blame her for being big with the freaky?"

"Yes," Spike quickly answered, but then his expression softened. "Fine," he grumped. "I always did have a soft spot for Red. Call over and see if she wants to come, but if Rupert invites himself, I'm bloody staying here. You can get me some soddin' jeans that fit."
"One more to go," Xander said happily as he headed for the phone.

Jim made a weird noise. "I can't believe he's that happy with a potentially cannibalistic demon still out there to be dealt with."

"Boy is entertaining," Spike agreed. Xander flipped them both off over his shoulder as he dialed the phone. Apocalypses and demons came and went, the Scoobies, including Spike and Riley, were way more important that any hell spawned nuisance. The Scoobies were forever.

**Part Thirty-Four**

"Pet, I have something I need to do," Spike commented as he came around to Xander's side of the car.

"Um, yeah, shop for jeans. Remember?" Xander gave Spike his best duh look as Jim pulled into the parking lot in his truck. Xander was tempted to make a comment about alpha males and driving and how little sense it actually made to take both the car and the truck when they were all going to the same mall, but somehow he didn't think Jim would ride in the backseat, and sitting in
the back of the truck just wasn't comfortable... or legal.

"Just remembered something else," Spike said as he slipped an arm around Xander's waist and started pulling him toward the hotel where Willow and the others were staying.

"Something?" Xander asked. He waited, but Spike just lifted an eyebrow and stared back silently.

"You're not going to tell me unless I ask, are you?"

"Nope," Spike answered with a snarky smile. "Are you going to ask, pet?"

Xander considered that for a second. Sometimes not knowing was just better on the potential ulcers. "Nope," Xander answered.

"Right then, you toddle off to the mall with those two and get me some jeans. And bloody well get me the right size," Spike frowned as Jim and Blair walked up to them.

"Tight enough to work as birth control, check," Xander nodded. "Well, that is if you still had any little swimmers because being dead is not really good for fertility. Not
that it stopped Angel, which is more disturbing than I really care to think about, but then being gay, whether your swimmers swim or whether they don't because you're dead or because you wear your pants too tight, totally irrelevant," Xander said knowingly. Blair struggled to not laugh, and Jim and Spike just looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "It is," Xander defended himself. "I'm sure not doing the pregnant thing."

"Just get me something that isn't going to slide off in the middle of a fight," Spike growled. The front door of the hotel swung open and there was Willow. Her hair was just long enough to brush against her shoulders, and she had this uncertain look on her face, and all of a sudden all Xander could see was Willow during senior year agonizing over where to go to college. She'd given up her chance to have something better when she'd thrown away fat envelopes from Harvard or Yale or whatever that big school was... the one that wouldn't let Xander wash their floors. And now, her life was them. Xander smiled at her, and the uncertain look cracked into a smile that quickly vanished again.

"You want us to play escort then?" Jim asked. Xander glanced over and that was not a friendly look on Jim's face as he studied Willow.
"Maybe me and Willow should do the whole shopping thing alone. I mean, I'm used to girls and shopping, but you don't know what it's like to be in the middle of a girl power-shopping moment." Xander said the words, but he didn't feel them. Alone with Willow just felt wrong, but he didn't want to look like someone who was afraid to be in the same room with his best friend. He wasn't. No fear. Just... just really, really big uncomfortableness.

"I thought we were going so you could get clothes for yourself and Spike," Blair said as he not-so-subtly elbowed Jim. At least that meant that Jim was glaring at Blair instead of Willow, which Xander completely appreciated.

"No soddin' way are you going to the mall alone with her," Spike hissed.

"If I'm with her, there's no alone," Xander said with a false brightness that totally didn't match his stomach creepiness, but Spike just crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes, and that was his 'not budging' expression.

"If you want to talk to her alone, you can do it in the hotel room with me outside the door. If you want to talk
to her at the mall, you can bloody well go with Jim and Blair."

"It's not that I don't want you guys along," Xander glanced back toward the two men. "I actually do want you there, totally want you there, completely and... you get my point. I just don't want this to be the great staredown. Me and conflict are not best buds and the whole point of this is to try and stop the conflict, not to drag two more people into the drama. Because I am dramaed out at this point."

"We won't make more drama, Xander, I promise," Blair said as he gave Jim one seriously nasty look that promised many months of vegetarian lasagna if the Sentinel didn't agree to that condition. Jim rolled his eyes.

"It's your life and your friendship, Sport. I don't like the woman, but I don't have to live in the same house with her."

"Right then, that's sorted," Spike said as he reached out. Xander found himself leaning toward Spike, as a strong arm slipped around his back and a naughty hand slid down between his legs. When he opened his mouth to
protest or possibly beg for more, Spike leaned in and kissed him breathless before pulling back with a wicked leer on his face. "I'm off and you lot can take the car." Spike tossed the keys to Jim without even looking. Then he was off in a swirl of leather. He passed Willow without saying a word, and she seemed to shrink in on herself a little more.

"Xander?" she asked uncertainly as she took a step closer. Xander plastered a smile on his face.

"Will! Your shopping escort awaits, mi'lady... at least if you don't mind actually shopping for boy stuff too because Spike and I left all our stuff behind when we ran for our lives. You know me, I'll wear anything, but Spike is not okay with many things, including the things Jim and Blair picked up for us."

"We didn't have to pick up anything," Jim said.

"And thank you for the shopping because Spike probably would have just gone to Penny's naked the next morning. He's not really one for social appropriateness." Xander rolled his eyes as he turned to follow Jim and Blair to the car.
Blair laughed as they headed back toward the car Spike had rented. "Man, I so noticed. You have a very high tolerance for socially inappropriate behavior."

"He has a high level of social inappropriateness himself," Jim pointed out as they got to the car.

"Hey! I resemble that remark," Xander said with mock indignation.

Willow watched, her gaze going from one of them to another, all the confidence and strength he'd come to expect from her missing, and he felt his own insecurities rise to the surface. She followed Blair to the passenger side of the car, sliding in the back without a word, and Xander just wanted to make a joke and fix it. His Willow wasn't this uncertain any more. She hadn't been since high school. His Willow slapped Kennedy right across the face in the middle of Thanksgiving dinner and followed it up with a food fight that was still legendary in the annals of Slayer history. For a month after, they'd smell stale mashed potatoes every time they turned on the central heat until finally Xander had taken apart half the ductwork to clean out the bits of food. His Willow didn't chew her lip and sit watching like she couldn't figure out the rules to the game.
The silence in the car was oppressive, the town lights blurring past the side windows.

"There's a mall up here," Blair said, his words clumsy.

Willow nodded. Xander stared out the window.

"I'll give you one hour. I'm not spending all night in a mall," Jim complained.

"Oh man, you are just being cranky. We'll find you a Wonderburger, and you'll be fine," Blair promised.

"That's bribing a police officer, Chief."

"Yeah, yeah. But when it comes to heart-clogging food, you, my man, are so totally bribeable."

"Something you have learned only after years of needing to bribe me. If you're offering Wonderburgers, there's something at that mall that's going to annoy me, isn't there?"

"Hey, you took me gun shopping."
"Chief?"

"You bought me a gun. Yeah, it's a tazer gun, but my karma is still recovering."

"Unless I slept through my philosophy class in college, karma doesn't recover, Junior, and without firing it, your karma doesn't change. So, you want to tell me what exactly you're hiding?"

Xander tuned out and only half listened as Jim and Blair had a sniping argument about some bookstore Blair wanted to visit. He got the impression that Jim probably didn't actually care, but since the good-natured fight filled the car and pushed away the weird lack of talkage between him and Willow, Xander was all for it.

Willow gave up studying the two men in front, with a fair number of glances toward him, in favor of staring out the window. With a sigh, Xander turned to his own window at a total loss about how to fix this. Maybe he should have waited until Spike could come because Xander was just starting to figure out that Spike was a whole lot smarter about people and relationships that anyone gave him credit for. Too late now.
Jim complained the entire drive but, when they got to the mall, he parked at the entrance closest to the bookstore. Silently, Xander followed Jim and Blair into the bookstore, walking next to Willow and still feeling about a million miles away from her. Inside, Blair darted for one section, Jim trailing and complaining the whole way, with him and Willow doing pod person impressions behind him.

Willow picked up a thin paperback with a smiling woman on the front.

"That book any good?" Xander asked.

She looked at him for a second. "I don't know. I haven't read it."

"Oh. Yeah." Okay, that wasn't awkward, not at all. Shit.

"Hey, have you seen Fabulae Mirabiles? This book is a blast," Blair said as he came around a shelf. "Man, I was never a big fan of Latin, but the fairy tales in here are a lot of fun. It's a great way to learn the grammar, and I bet you have to teach Latin to a whole lot of people. You should think about getting some," he said as he pushed a book into Willow's hands.
"We use Wheelock's Latin, and yeah, trying to teach 15 year olds to read Latin isn't always with the fun," Willow admitted. "We have to teach a bunch of other languages, too. You know," she looked around before whispering, "demonic ones."

"Oh man, I have to teach anthropology to eighteen year olds, and there are days I'm surprised I don't pull out so much of my own hair that I end up looking like Jim."

"Funny, Squirt, very funny," Jim commented as he leaned against the end of the shelf and watched the nearly empty store. "You'd have to grow a couple inches to look like me."

Willow's forehead wrinkled before she turned to Xander. "Maybe we should get your things. It's late, well it's not late for us because nightowls here, but the mall has to be closing soon."

"There's a Dillard's next door," Jim offered when Xander couldn't figure out what to say. Should he agree with her or encourage her to keep with the almost-friendly talking with Blair or offer to buy her the book she had just put down?
"Dillard's ahoy," Xander joked, and even he knew it didn't even rise to the level of pathetic. Willow gave him a weak smile and then they all wandered out toward Dillard's. Somehow Blair ended up walking next to Willow with him and Jim trailing. When a large hand rested on his back, Xander took a deep breath and smiled at the quiet support.

"You teach anthropology?" Willow asked, and that was even stupider than Xander's Dillard's ahoy joke because Willow and Blair had done the email thing way before Xander had ever met the guys. Blair didn't even bat an eye. Earlier, Xander had thought Jim had a poker face, but seeing this, he was pretty sure that Blair's poker face was even better.

"Teach and study it," Blair answered cheerfully. "I'm supposed to be finishing my dissertation, but this whole trip has seriously screwed with that plan. Do you realize I have to give up my whole dissertation? I mean, this totally sucks. Three years of work," Blair made a kerflewy noise and threw his hands up. They walked into the men's section at Dillard's and Xander started grabbing jeans.
"What? Why?" Willow suddenly sounded all concerned, and considering how she felt about education, he wasn't surprised that the idea of having to give up on a degree would catch her interest. "I mean, just do a quick search and replace with Atego for Sentinel, and you actually have more research now. I mean, if you're having trouble with the books because some of the demonic books are really kinda confusing, I have a lot of experience. I could help."

Xander actually missed a step and almost went down. He might have gone down, but Jim's hand grabbed him and hauled him back up, Jim's other hand snagging the jeans he was holding from him and dropping them in the basket. She thought Blair needed help? Xander glanced over, but Jim had his poker face on... well except for those little tiny lines around his eyes. Oh yeah, Blair definitely had the better poker face because he was just shrugging at Willow.

"I totally appreciate the offer, but the book Giles lent me looked like most of the anthropology books I've read. A ritual is pretty much a ritual. Well, except for the part where a demon ritual is a little more likely to summon the powers of hell. That's a little mindblowing. But in terms of the archaic language and bombastic authors
who think they know everything? Oh man, that's old territory for me. Totally."

"Oh." Willow didn't say anything else. Xander watched as Willow turned and shot him a worried look. And here was awkward silence right on cue. For a few minutes, Xander picked out shirts that had a chance of not getting shredded by Spike on first sight. He stuck to solid colors, although he couldn't resist the deep orange with the red buttons. He might have to hide that one from Spike. For Spike, he picked all black and blood red, though.

"But a dissertation is big, right?" Xander finally asked. Blair nodded. "Then why do you have to give it up? That's like dropping out a week before graduation, and yeah, I totally considered doing that at one point, but not even my levels of school-hateage would let me do something that stupid. It's just one more paper. And I get that a dissertation is a research paper on steroids with even more potential for kicking your ass, but dropping out now isn't big with the making sense."

Blair snorted in laughter. "Research paper on steroids threatening to kick my ass. Oh man, I have never heard a better description of a dissertation. But face it. The university is already so not happy about my use of
historical documents when I'm basically trying to work with Biological Anthropology and the ways senses have developed. Jim isn't my only subject. I mean, yeah, he's my only Sentinel... well except for..." Blair glanced back and froze mid sentence, and when Xander looked over at Jim, he could see why. That was not a happy face.

"Anyway," Blair said dramatically. "I have hundreds of documented cases of people with heightened senses, like food tasters and perfume sniffers. So, I'm working with this from a Darwinian point of view. Evolutionary ecology and the development of senses in contemporary and historical humans, evolutionary psychology, that kind of stuff. So let me tell you, my dissertation committee would so not be amused by demons. So not amused."

"Like they're amused with you right now?" Jim asked. "Three years of stalling and you still haven't turned in your first chapter."

"Yeah. I'm so running out of idiosyncratic credit with them. Totally. And now? Oh man, I can't write a dissertation ignoring all the information out there. It'd be like academic fraud. But I can't include the information because they would put me on the short bus to the nut house."
"That's not a long drive," Jim joked softly, but Blair turned and gave him a vicious glare. "Come on, Chief, you can't believe I'm going to be upset about this. You know I support your research, but..."

"But you'd rather I burned it all," Blair said seriously. Jim didn't answer, but Xander could see the answer in the man's serious expression. "Not happening," Blair said firmly. "That research could help other people who are out there and who don't understand what's wrong with them."

Jim still didn't say anything.

"But I can't actually publish now anyway, so I think this just officially became a moot point," he sighed. "Time for some serious tapdancing."

"But if you publish, can you still work with Jim?" Xander asked. "I thought you doing your dissertation was like your secret identity, you know, starving student living with and researching the big, buff detective."

Jim started coughing, and Blair laughed so hard that two women shopping for men's underwear stopped to look
at them. Willow blushed, but Xander wasn't sure whether his only slightly inappropriate words or the staring made her do it.

"Buff?" Jim asked with an amused grin.

"I might have noticed. Hey, gay now. I get to notice stuff like that," Xander shrugged as he pushed the cart to the counter. Thank god Willow was still focusing on the guys and not the jewelry counter because they still had a shot at making this a 'grab and pay' guy's shopping trip. If she caught sight of the amethyst necklaces, they were so going to be stuck here until closing.

"Oh goddess," Willow breathed before she bit her lip.

"Are you invoking a particular goddess or just commenting on the fact Xander is eying my partner, and really, I'm feeling hurt here. I mean, we're the ones who slept together, shouldn't you be eying me?" Blair asked as he crossed his arms and went for an expression of exaggerated offense. He kind of ruined it because he kept twitching into a smile.

"You slept together?" Willow almost yelped, and the clerk who had been taking the clothes Xander piled on
the counter froze, her hand mid-air as she went to pick up a blue button-up shirt.

"Let's have this conversation back at the hotel or possibly just without shouting," Jim suggested. He gave the clerk a long look and the woman shook her head and went back into motion, scanning the items faster than Xander had ever seen a clerk scan. He sighed. It wasn't so nice to have people go all weird just because you announced you were gay. Xander looked over at Willow as he suddenly realized something else. It wasn't so nice to have people go all weird just because he was a Shaman either. And Willow was with the weirdness. Okay, Riley had been with the weirdness, too... and Giles. But that wasn't the same. Xander didn't share a history of stealing Barbies and sharing yellow crayons with Giles and Riley.

The clerk finished and asked for an obscene amount of money just about the time Xander realized that Spike had the credit card. Jim handed over a card with the name William Masters on it. Jim ended up with the big bags of jeans; Blair and Xander ended up with shirts, and Willow followed them out of the store, her face still red.

"I'm sorry," she whispered out in the nearly empty mall, her hands held up near her mouth, which was always a
good hint that Willow was approaching total freak out.

"Hey, I'm gay, you're gay, Spike's gay. We just need to gay up Riley and Buffy, and we can have a complete set. I even have it on good authority that Angel does the gay thing every once in a while. We could have a gay superheroes league, and I don't care how many Italian women Andrew hangs out with, he is so totally in it, well in the gay way anyway. I don't think he qualifies for superhero status. Although considering how the normal ones in our group end up being witches or Shamen or green energy balls, we should keep an eye on him."

"Xander!" Willow hissed, her eyes going wide as she looked from him to Jim. Jim herded them into a seating area, and one glare sent the two teenagers who had been hanging around the potted palm tree off to find a safer place to hang out.

"What?" Xander asked as he dropped onto the world's hardest couch and put the bags down. He thought they were heading home, but if Jim wanted them to stop, Xander would stop. The nice thing about not being alpha was not having to worry about the weirdness alphas sometimes did. Blair sat next to him watching Jim and Willow curiously.
"Xander!" she repeated in an even more indignant tone, her eyes zipping from him to Jim and back to him. Obviously Jim was immune to Willow looks because he dropped into the nearest chair and stretched his legs out.

"What?!" Xander asked.

"Ixnay on the eengray," Willow hissed.

Jim looked up and raised an eyebrow. Willow blushed again.

"Willow, they're friends," Xander said calmly. Okay, so blurting about mystical balls of green energy wasn't the smartest, but Jim and Blair were friends and he hadn't exactly handed out Dawn's dorm room address. At least not lately, and that guy a year back had a damn good story, so Xander refused to feel guilty for that one.

"Um, not to question the friend-status, but Xander...." Willow crossed her arms and that was definitely a questioning the friend-status glare.

"Hey, I get it," Blair said as he held up his hands. "I understand that we don't know each other that well. I
mean, yeah, you and I've been emailing for a while, but it's not like you really know me. But Willow, first of all, Xander's comment didn't actually make sense, so if you hadn't said anything, I would have dismissed it as more of his weirdness, and two, he didn't actually tell us anything."

"That's because there is so not anything to tell," Willow said quickly. "No telling. Nothing at all to tell, so of course no telling." Willow's hands fluttered, a gesture that Xander hadn't seen from her... in ages.

"So, we've established there's nothing to tell and that Blair is capable of understanding Mr. Giles' books. We also have a potential killer to catch," Jim said quietly, his eyes scanning the few shoppers that wandered from store to store. "So, Sport, I assume that you had a reason for wanting to have this conversation, and I assume that there's a reason for having it in public."

"What?" Xander asked, his own voice squeaking just a little. "Hey, I am agendaless here. You stopped, you sat; I'm just going along."

"So, you just wanted Blair and me to come along while you bought Spike some pants?" Jim turned to Xander
with an expression that made all Xander's denials stick in his throat.

"Xander? You wanted them to come? I thought they just sorta..." Willow waved her hand and Xander could fill in the rest. Willow thought they had invited themselves. Willow thought he hadn't been fast enough or smart enough to figure out a way to keep them from coming.

"I kinda did," he admitted with a sigh. "Willow, I love you and I want us to be okay, but you're bordering on scary these days."

"Me? I'm not scary. I'm so not doing the scary thing because I know the scary thing and this is not it," Willow protested.

Xander pushed aside a need to smooth this all over with a joke as he glanced over at Jim and then Blair and absolutely no help was coming from that direction. "Willow, this is me feeling kinda girly even as I say this—"

Willow reached over and punched him in the arm. "Hey, no gender stereotypes, mister."

"Hey! I got that from you. In fact you and Buffy were the
ones who made the girly implications," Xander said as he looked up. Jim was now leaning forward in his chair.

"That's different," Willow said weakly, but from the look on her face, not even she believed that. Xander couldn't just sit anymore; he got up and moved to the spot between the chair and the couch, near the garbage can with the sparkly quartz top that was supposed to make it look like it wasn't a garbage can. It didn't work.

"Willow, you're doing the scary thing because you aren't even looking at me, at what this is doing to me."

"Yes, I am. This is me trying to fix things because I can see how much this is hurting you, and I don't want you hurt. Xander, let's talk about this back home."

Xander wasn't sure if she meant back at the hotel where she had Buffy and Giles to back her up, not that Xander thought Buffy would back her up, but then Buffy might. He shook his head as he realized he wasn't really sure where he stood with anyone right now, anyone except Spike. Spike he could trust—Spike and Jim and Blair. Well, he could totally trust Willow in some ways, like in the way that she always loved him, but he couldn't trust her to do the right thing. And suddenly the whole mess
with Tara and the altering of memories came to mind. Yeah, Willow was just Willow. He took a deep breath as he prepared to wade into the mess again.

"You can't fix things, Willow. And when you try, it's not pretty, and that's the part where the scary comes in," he said with more honesty than he really liked to use.

"Xander, that's... not nice," Willow said, her voice dropping into an offended whisper. "You make it sound like I mess stuff up."

"Tara." Xander said the name firmly, knowing that it would stab Willow where she was most vulnerable, but he had to get her to see. Immediately, her eyes started filling with tears, and Xander crossed his arms over his stomach. An apology struggled to come out his mouth, even though what he was implying was true, and they both knew it. When he didn't take the word back, Willow's eyes grew harder and the tears vanished.

"We've both made mistakes. You walked away and left Anya at the altar, so you don't have room to talk." Willow crossed her own arms.

Xander nodded in agreement. "You're right. I thought I
was weak, that I would turn out just like my father. I have serious issues, but that doesn't change the fact that you do, too. I can't fix your life because I'm just now starting to figure out how to live my own, but you keep thinking you can fix me. You can't."

"Because of Tara? Xander, that doesn't make sense." Willow shook her head.

"Because of Tara, because of the clothing fluke, because of you being so sure that you could put Angel's soul back in that you wanted Buffy to stall."

"I was right," Willow cried. "I was right and you told her to send him to hell."

"I told her to kick his ass!"

"Same thing. Big with the sameness."

"But you didn't know you could do it. You didn't know, and you still tried making the big call, and people could have died."

"So instead Angel died! Well, he didn't actually die, but that's not my point. You don't get to tell me that I'm
wrong on all this stuff. You don't exactly do things right! Anya and the altar and sleeping with Faith and then thinking it meant something when she was just using you and you didn't even know it. You picked Miss Serial Killer over me. And then there's Cordelia and the mummy girl and how many others?"

"At least I never tried to end the world," Xander shot back. The second the words tumbled out of his mouth he regretted them. Willow went still, her eyes staring at him like she had never seen him before. "Willow—" he whispered helplessly.

"No. If you don't want—" she stopped, her eyes still empty. An old man wandered into the seating area and sat in the chair opposite Jim. He sat there for a second before looking around. Xander watched his face grow more confused and then alarmed as he stood back up and shuffled off pretty quickly for someone who used a walker.

"I love you, Willow," Xander said more calmly once they had some privacy again.

"Is that why you asked a Shaman to do the whammy on me? Is that why you wanted him here tonight? Did you
figure since I had messed up and used a memory spell on you that you had a right to try and tell me what to do?"

"I never—" Xander started to protest because he really hadn't set that up.

"And now I keep thinking that I need therapy and every time I think that, I wonder how much of that is me and how much of that is someone else's magic affecting me because I'm not stupid and being not with the stupid, I know that Blair did the Shaman thing on me and everyone else in that room because now everyone is all therapy this and therapy that and not that there's anything wrong with therapy, but knowing that someone else has been in my head—" Willow stopped to breathe, and it turned into a near sob that stopped her from saying anything else.

"Willow." Xander took a step toward her, wanting to hold her and promise her that it would be alright. Instead she turned on Blair, anger etched into her face.

"You did this. He was fine before he went to you," she said, her voice low and dark. Before she could even finish talking, Jim was there, standing inches in front of her, his body between her and Blair. And Blair was on his feet.
"He didn't do anything. I was dying by inches," Xander argued, but Willow was shaking her head, her eyes growing dark. Xander could see Jim's back tense, and he knew he was seconds away from seeing either Jim knock Willow unconscious or Willow gut Jim. He stepped to Jim's side.

"Stop it," he hissed. Willow backed up a step and looked at him, the darkness in her eyes almost obliterating the white. "You sent me there because you could see me dying. I had seen too much death. I'd been too helpless, too afraid for too long. I couldn't find myself, and I was so busy hiding my pain from you and trying to protect you and Buffy from all this..." Xander lost his words, wallowing in silence as she stared at him with black eyes that hid her pain. It was too familiar.

"I can fix this," Willow said, and from her they were the most terrifying words in the world. She looked over toward Blair and Jim moved, lunging forward. His body was flung to the side without Willow even whispering a word.

"You don't want to do this. Oh man, you so totally don't want to do this. Willow, listen to me, you know I never
did anything to hurt you or Xander," Blair said as he backed up, his hands held up in surrender. Xander could faintly hear yelling in the background. Blinking into his vision, Xander could see Willow's cord flashing a dozen colors, a mustard yellow streaked with black almost swallowing the orange of her normal cord, and a weird iridescent gold swirling and twisting inside the cord. It swelled, and Xander threw himself forward.

His hands sank into her cord like into rotting fruit, and Xander froze, terrified of accidentally ripping it out. Gentling his hold, he just tried to keep it from bucking out of his control. Willow chanted in Latin, and Blair's voice babbled in the background, but Xander focused on the cord squirming and bucking and tangling around his wrists like an angry yellow snake.

A new loop launched into the air and Xander didn't have any hands left to try and hold it. He closed his eyes and started praying for all he was worth as he pulled carefully, trying to bring the loop back just by holding the bit of cord in his hands. Xander could feel the cord beneath him tighten and shudder. Opening his eyes, Xander stumbled to his knees at the sight of an iridescent blue cord winding around both him and Willow. For a second, he panicked, his eyes trying to trace the cord
back to its owner, only to end up staring at his own chest.

Then Willow fell to her knees next to him, her body now struggling the way her cord had just seconds before. His own blue cord wrapped around her, pulling her cord close to her own body, and for a second, a red flare nearly blinded him, and in that second, Xander understood that Willow could kill him in a heartbeat. The raw power in that cord slid across his skin like ice, but he held on, shaking one hand loose from the soul cord so he could hold Willow's arm and pull her close. They both fell to the floor, and Xander watched the black in Willow's eyes slowly fade as she stared into his face. The red in her cord faded away, and her own orange slowly bled through the other colors until her cord shrank to normal size. Xander blinked away his Shamanic vision and saw her stricken expression for one second before she threw herself into his arms and started crying.

Part Thirty-Five
Xander held Willow, rocking her as she sobbed into his chest. The sound of running feet made him look up, and security guards, nightsticks pulled out, ran down the escalator. Yeah, because little sticks would have done them a whole lot of good if Willow had been doing her scary-Willow impression. Looking over, Jim was up and looking furious. Blair was moving to intercept the guards.

"Everything's fine," Blair assured them, and Jim pulled his identification out of his pocket, but he didn't offer it as he stood back and watched Blair. The taller guard, the one with the long face that reminded Xander of a picture of Jack Sprat in a book he had as a kid, frowned at Blair.

"We got a report of an attack."

"Oh man, no attack. Willow has epilepsy. She just had a spell, but it's passed now. It's all good."

The guard looked suspiciously from one to the other, but Xander just sat on the ground, stroking Willow's hair and letting the others deal with this. "We got a report of someone being attacked," he repeated, sounding more than a little grouchy at not being able to use his
nightstick on someone.

"I'm Jim Ellison from Cascade. I'm the one who got knocked down," Jim said as he stepped forward and opened his badge. "Willow caught me before she went down," he said, not exactly lying. "I'm fine."

"She knocked you down?" the young guard asked. Xander could understand their disbelief because Jim looked a little big to be knocked down by the heap of crying girl in Xander's lap.

"Totally unsurprising," Blair nodded knowingly. "Epileptics are incredibly strong during a seizure. Their muscles contract without control. I mean, we can contract a muscle, but if it hurts, we relax it even if we don't want to. An epileptic can't relax a muscle. So when they hit, man, it's like getting hit with a hammer. And because they aren't doing it consciously, epileptics won't pull their punches. So, look out. Actually, most of the time, it's the epileptics who need to look out because they will hit walls, chairs, the floor. I mean, it's scary how much damage they'll do to themselves. It's not unusual for them to break their own bones during a seizure."

The older guard circled the area, obviously looking for
some victim other than Jim, even though Jim had a nice sized red mark on the side of his face that definitely made it look more plausible that he'd gotten knocked around. Checking out the area, Xander could see a potted palm lying on its side. Ow. Jim and the palm had obviously had an up-close moment when he went flying, not that Xander had really been paying attention to that half of the fight. In his arms, Willow's sobs slowly started calming.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she said, loud enough that the older guard came back toward them.

"Hey, not your fault," Xander soothed her. Jim gave him a nasty look, but if they were going with Blair's story, it so wasn't her fault, and Xander just wanted to comfort her right now.

"I hit him. I'm so sorry," Willow moaned as she clutched Xander's shirt and buried her face in it.

"It's okay. No one's hurt, and like we always say, any day that ends without a trip to the emergency room is a day in the win column," Xander muttered as he held her close. The awkwardness of earlier was gone as Xander finally realized that this was what Willow needed. She
was carrying all the burdens of the school and teaching the young slayers and training them and keeping them from getting killed, and everyone had let her carry all that without thinking about what it was doing to her, and yeah, Buffy and Giles had come home during the whole Kennedy disaster, but when the screaming and throwing and setting fire parts were over, they were gone and Willow was back to running the whole thing. Spike was there most of the time, but even Xander had left her, disappearing into his video games when she needed him. Yeah, Willow was way off the deep end and drowning when it came to control, but they were all letting her drown.

"Do we need an ambulance?" the guard asked as he slipped his nightstick back into place.

"Nothing a hospital can do will help. Epilepsy isn't something you can fix," Jim said in a casual voice as though this happened all the time. "Can you handle her, Sport, or do you want me to carry her?" Xander looked up from the floor and Jim was gathering shopping bags, handing some over to Blair. His tight jaw didn't really match the rest of the calm look he had going, though. Jim carrying Willow was not really sounding like such a good idea because unless Xander missed his guess, Jim would
like to drop Willow in quicksand right about now.

"I can handle her," Xander quickly said. "Hey, up and at 'em," he encouraged Willow as he stood and half supported, half carried her toward the door. Behind them, Blair was still saying something to the security guards, but Xander just focused on getting to the exit without any more disasters. Disasters bad. Disasters so totally bad.

By the time they reached the car, Blair had rejoined them, and Jim and Blair shoved the bags in the trunk while Xander helped Willow into the car. She was still curled up on herself, occasionally muttering apologies.

"Okay, Sport, do you want to explain what happened in there?" Jim demanded as he slammed the front door closed. He turned in his seat to glare at Willow and Xander got the definite impression none of them were going anywhere until he came up with an explanation.

"Oh man, before you explain anything, just let me say thank you because I get the feeling I was about to become a Sandburg pancake," Blair said as he grimaced.

Willow chewed her lip and pulled her feet up onto the
backseat of the car, wrapping her arms around her knees. Xander had no idea how Jim could keep glaring when Willow was so obviously miserable.

"Right now, I want an explanation, and I want one that convinces me she isn't still a danger to me and Blair," Jim demanded. Xander reached out and caught Willow's hand, holding it as he stared back at Jim.

"She's not a danger, and growling at her isn't doing anyone any good."

"It's making me feel better," Jim answered tersely. "What she did in there is called assaulting a police officer."

"Goddess, I’m sorry," Willow said again. "I was just... he did his Shaman thing and I was angry and I thought you'd done something to Xander." She started to cry softly.

"Whoa, hey, let's all calm down," Blair suggested, and he reached over and rested his hand on Jim's arm. "Willow, I never tried to hurt you or Xander."

Willow nodded without saying anything.

"Xander," Jim interjected, "I'm still waiting for an
explanation that isn't going to lead to her in handcuffs."

"No, no handcuffs!" Xander said when Willow gave a
gasp. "She's not a danger because I stopped her, or I
didn't stop her as much as she stopped herself when she
realized I wasn't going to stop trying to stop her, so it's
kinda the same thing."

"Okay, can you take that again from the beginning?" Blair
asked. "I think I missed the whole explanation part of
that explanation."

Xander took a deep breath. "Willow started to use her
magic."

"Yeah, I got that part," Jim offered. "It felt like I got hit
with a wrecking ball."

"I'm really sorry. I didn't— I thought—" Willow stopped
again, and Xander pulled her into a one-armed hug.

"Xander, what did you do when she started using magic?
I was talking as fast as I could, but I don't think I did
anything to stop Willow, so I'm still wondering why I’m
not a Sandburg pancake."
"I grabbed her soul," Xander admitted, shivering as he remembered the feel of her soul in his hands. "And I was holding her for a second, and then her soul started squirming and a big loop slipped free."

Xander stopped as he tried to figure out how he could explain the next part. Blair prompted him, "Was that before or after you fell?"

"Um, before. I fell when I saw my own soul cord, which is freaky. I've never been able to see my own cord. It's like a sci fi rule that you can't see your own freakiness, like when a vampire can't see himself in a mirror, but obviously the rule broke down because when Willow started sliding away from me, I could see my own cord, and it wrapped around her soul cord, and that somehow kept her magic in her."

"I could feel you pressing my magic back," Willow nodded. "And I was angry because I thought Blair had done something to you, the way he made me think I need therapy. I thought if I just killed Blair, things would go back to normal."

"Oh man, that's..." Blair stopped.
"Let me make one thing clear," Jim jumped in, his voice cold and flat. "If you ever do anything to even make me think you're using magic on either of us, I will put a bullet in your brain." Willow's head snapped up, and even Xander focused on the Sentinel, chilled at the danger he could hear in that voice.

"Jim, man, come on," Blair urged.

"Stow it, Chief. She's no different from any other killer, and if she takes another shot at you, I'll stop her however I need to."

"I—I wouldn't."

"I'm not convinced." Jim still stared at her.

"Xander would have died for you," she whispered. "I wouldn't ever hurt you, you know that, right?" she asked as she suddenly turned to Xander.

"I know you wouldn't want to hurt me, but Willow, you're trying to fix things— only you're not good with the fixing." He could see her open her mouth to argue. "You aren't, and I'm not either. Face it, we suck with the fixing, Willow. Spike said that when Cordelia disappeared, Angel
used some magic thingy to see where her soul was to see if she needed help, and she was in heaven. Of course, she was bored in heaven, but that's not the point. The point is that we didn't even think of a magic thingy before we brought Buffy back from the dead. And then we left her in the grave. And the clothing fluke, I was fluking right there next to you. And we kicked Buffy out over the whole vineyard thing, but she was right, big with the right, and we were trying to... I don't even know what stupidity possessed the two of us that day, but both of us, we suck at fixing things, major suckage, black hole levels of suckage."

"Sport, I need you to explain to me right now what stopped Willow and what is keeping her from trying that stunt again." Xander looked up and Jim was not looking any happier.

"My soul was trapping hers. If she wanted to go after Blair, she had to go through me," Xander said quietly. "And I didn't stop her because I could feel her power. She has way more than I do, and she could have ripped right through me to get Blair."

"I wouldn't have," Willow said quickly. "You were willing to sacrifice yourself for Blair, and that kind of loyalty..."
dark magic isn't good at inspiring that sort of loyalty. Blair couldn't have made you."

"Which means you just now figured out that Xander told you the truth the whole time," Jim summarized. "You could have saved everyone a whole lot of grief by just believing him in the first place. Isn't he supposed to be your friend?"

"He is my friend," Willow objected.

Jim snorted. "Maybe he won't say it, but I will. You're manipulative and ten times more controlling than I've ever seen Spike. If you really were his friend, you would have believed him."

"Hey!" Xander protested loudly.

"Oh man, this is probably not the place for this conversation. Actually, I'm not sure there is a good place for this conversation," Blair muttered softly.

"Look, I'm not into games," Jim said firmly, still glaring at Willow, "So let me make a few things clear. Xander is a man who can make his own decisions, and you trying to use guilt or manipulate him out of caring for Spike is a lot
more morally questionable than any dominance games the two of them choose to play."

Willow blushed. "At least I don't treat Xander like he's inferior."

"I think the train to logicsville went off its rails," Xander quickly said. "There's no inferior. If anything, Spike is all 'woo hoo' for powerful Shamen and let me show you off. Nope, no inferior."

"But Bertrand said..."

"Give me a break," Blair snorted. "Dominance and submission is so not about inferiority, so if that's where you have a malfunction in your thinking, get over it. I'm the first to admit that I play beta to Jim, but that does not make me inferior. I don't think Jim is better than me. I'm just pretty sure he's more aggressive and direct."

Willow blinked at him, frowning for a second before she answered. "How do I know you aren't using your powers to make me think that? Because I walked in on them, and Spike was doing bad things."

"Bad things?" Jim looked at Willow like she had just
turned purple or something, but then it was a pretty stupid thing for a grown woman to say. She blushed.

"It wasn't just sex," she quickly defended herself and her definition of 'bad.' "Spike had him tied up." Willow turned her appeal on Xander. "He tied you up; there was tying going on."

Now it was Xander's turn to blush. "And I was okay, Will. I mean, I don't ask about your sex life, so can we please not talk about mine?"

"And being dominant is totally not the same thing as bondage," Blair nodded. "I mean, just because one partner is the epitome of alpha male does not mean he doesn't enjoy getting tied up with ropes and letting someone else take control for a little bit."

Xander blushed even darker at that thought. Okay, he wasn't sure if that was TMI or just seriously freaky or maybe hot. It might be hot. Seriously hot. And seriously freaky in that Jim wasn't even blushing or twitching and Blair had just pretty much said Jim liked to get tied up, which should be blush-worthy.

"Look, Xander still thinks of you as a friend, despite the
fact I haven't seen any reason for him to think that. So let's just call a truce," Jim suggested. "We don't talk to each other until we get back to the hotel. Deal?"

Willow nodded.

"And and once we get there, I don't want you anywhere near me or Blair again, or you will not like the consequences. Are we clear?" This time Jim didn't even pretend to ask her opinion on the offer. For a second, Jim sat in the front seat, staring at her. "Chief, you're driving, I'm riding shotgun," he announced. He waited until Blair got out of the car and then slid across the seat, still watching Willow. Xander had the distinct impression that Jim really would have been happier riding shotgun with a shotgun, but Willow sat silent the entire time as Blair drove back to the hotel.

As Blair pulled up in front of the hotel, Xander could see Spike leaning against one of the pillars that held up the covered drive in front. Blair parked the car and got out without a word. Jim paused for a second, still staring at Willow before he opened his door.

"I meant what I said. I don't ever want to see you again," Jim repeated. "Sport, we'll be back at our hotel."
"Got it," Xander nodded. Jim was out, his arm around Blair as they headed for the truck before Xander could open his door. Spike wandered over before crushing his cigarette under his boot.

"Right then, you get that sorted, did you?"

"You left us alone on purpose," Xander suddenly realized as he walked over and poked at Spike's stomach. Spike caught his wrist and pulled Xander in close, wrapping an arm around him, and Xander leaned into his strength.

"Told ya, pet, I can't get involved with you sorting yourself out," he admitted. Willow was standing by the open car door still looking a little lost.

"Red, you okay?" Spike asked. She looked up with swollen eyes, but didn't answer. Spike frowned and then gently pushed past Xander. "Red, ya need to understand something. When it was you and me before, I didn't get in your face because I didn't think a pissing contest would do anyone any good."

She looked up at him with a small frown, but she didn't answer.
"Only now, Xander and Riley and even Buffy need there to be a clear structure, and if ya want to stay part of this family, you have to live in that structure."

"So, you're moving in and making yourself the big head dead guy? Way to take advantage of the situation," she said with more than a little sarcasm, and that was closer to the Willow who had gone toe to toe with Kennedy.

Spike moved fast, pinning her to the car with a hand at her neck, and Willow's mouth opened in surprise.

"Not takin' advantage of anything, luv, and I'm not the head of our little hierarchy, Buffy is. You remember her, she's the one who made the right calls, time after time, even when you lot turned your backs on her. She's moving back to London, so you'll play nice and stop all this shite."

"Buffy's moving back?" Willow asked, her voice now more hopeful than resentful and Spike slowly let her go.

"Yeah, and consider me her lieutenant. You do anything to make Xander uncomfortable, you cast one spell on anyone in the group, you try gettin' any of the younger
slayers to think badly of me or Riley or Xander or Buffy, and you won't like what happens, luv."

Willow crossed her arms. "Threats? Buffy's not going to be good with the threats, Spike. She's a big no on threatening the friends."

"It's not a threat, Willow," Buffy said softly. Xander spun and found Buffy and Riley standing on the other side of the car.

"Buffy?" Willow asked. Buffy pressed her lips together, a frown dancing across her face before she got her own version of the resolve face.

"I spent a lot of time getting my own head together," she said slowly. "And maybe my therapist would call this codependent, but someone's made me realize that we need each other. Willow, we all came into our powers together, the three of us. I learned to be a Slayer with my Slayerettes backing me up. You learned to be a witch at my side. Xander was doing his Shaman thing even when we were just calling him a demon magnet. Our powers developed together, and things haven't been okay since we really split up. Well, I've been okay," Buffy amended that. "I've actually been doing good on the job front and..."
the Riley front and therapy front, and I thought you needed therapy way before Blair said anything, so don't give me that look." Buffy sighed. "Look, as good as the Riley and work bits have been, the doing good just isn't all that good without you two. I keep going to my therapist trying to figure out what's missing from my life and why I can't enjoy all the good, and it's because I'm missing you guys. And Willow, you're doing good with the running of things, but you aren't doing good in the actual doing of good."

"I'm all kinds of good," Willow argued.

Buffy shook her head. "Willow, you've turned your life into paying the gas bill and the electric bill and figuring out which slayer is supposed to be training where." Buffy shook her head. "I should have hired someone for that, but you were there, and I just didn't think about what this was doing to you." Buffy looked like she was near tears, and Riley slipped an arm around her without saying anything.

"Oh goddess, don't. I volunteered, and I love the research and late nights when Giles is home and we're trying to find the demon of the week, and that computer security network I just set up, that was good," Willow
hurried to explain.

"Is this the life you saw for yourself back in high school?" Buffy asked. "I mean, you haven't had time to take those university classes you wanted or even take a night off. It's time for us to take care of each other again, and this is me not taking no for an answer. Willow, I love you and it's time for me to make sure you aren't ripping yourself to pieces trying to cover my back with the London house, so I'm coming home. Well," she looked up, "Riley and I are coming home."

Xander could see the relief in Willow's smile.

"But," Buffy warned, and Willow's smile faded. "Consider this an intervention. I'm not really happy with this hierarchy crap because it means that I basically ruined big parts of my own life because I had my head up my own ass and didn't recognize it. So, this is me officially declaring that my head and my ass have parted ways and I won't have you making decisions that should be mine. I'll listen to your input, but you don't get to make the decisions."

"So, you're back to declaring yourself a dictator?" Willow asked harshly, and Xander saw Buffy flinch.
"Will," Xander stepped in. "She shouldn't have to. The whole point is that we back her. This isn't her playing enforcer. This is us backing her because face it, she's way better at the decision stuff than we are. Her and Spike can make the big decisions like whether to bring people back from the dead or whether to end the world, and we back them."

"Like good little sheep?"

"We're better at following, Will. Suckage, remember? And I'll admit that the Shaman powers stuff gives me the wiggins. I don't have your power, but I have way more than I'm really comfortable with and lots of power plus judgment that sucks monkey balls is so totally not a good combination. I'd feel a whole lot better if Spike and Buffy were there to keep me from falling into any stupid. If they weren't here, I would go to Jim and Blair because it's about trusting someone. It's not about love because I love you, but you're about as trustworthy as me when it comes to decisions, which is not of the good. I mean, you tried to kill Blair."

"She what?" Buffy demanded.
"What the bloody hell did you do?" Spike demanded, and Willow was pinned to the car again, this time with Spike in full game face, and even knowing that Spike wouldn't actually hurt her, Xander could feel the panic clawing his gut.

"I thought he had done something to Xander," Willow cried.

"Blair's fine," Xander hurried to say as he rested a hand on Spike's back. "She went all dark eyed and I could see her soul getting all bloated with magic, and you're right about the magic letting demonic power in her because there was black in the soul which makes sense with the black in her eyes and the eyes being the windows to the soul—"

"Xander, what happened?" Buffy cut him off.

"I can see my own soul cord now, which is cool, but freaky," Xander said with a weak smile, but Buffy didn't look amused and Spike still had Willow pinned, her hands grabbing at his arm.

"My soul wrapped around hers and wouldn't let her do any magic, but I only managed to do that after she'd
knocked Jim into a potted palm. And what with the cut on his face from Sungsen and now the scrapes and bruises from the tree he crashed into when Willow flung him, he's looking a little rough."

"Bloody hell."

"Spike," Buffy said warningly. "Willow, I'm totally riding on the 'Blair and Jim being annoying' bus, I'm right up front with the driver, but they're definitely not on the kill list."

Willow nodded her head. "I know. Xander was willing to sacrifice himself for Blair. Dark magic couldn't force that willingness and Xander wouldn't do that for a bad guy. I know that. I'm sorry." Spike let go of her and took a step back, his arm going around Xander's waist while Willow hugged herself.

"If they're on their way back to Cascade, you're bloody right you'll be sorry because we need them if we're going up against a Mazzikim," Spike growled. "Those are nasty buggers, and Jim and Riley are our best chance. And since soldier boy here isn't even using his Sentinel senses yet, that makes Jim our best chance."
"They're waiting at the hotel," Xander offered. "They kinda don't want to see Willow again, though, or at least Jim doesn't. There were threats, vague threats that included arrests and handcuffs, and at one point bullets and brains."

"Willow, I'm not trying to be a dictator," Buffy said as she came around the car. "I love you guys, and I'm trying to keep us from self destructing. It's not like I care what you do most of the time, but if you start ending the world or killing random people or if there are disasters in general going on, I'm with Xander, your judgment is not always the best. I mean, you didn't want to exorcise an evil spirit that was trying to kill people because he was a Native American."

"He had a right to be angry," Willow said quietly.

"Angry, yes," Buffy nodded. "Homicidal, no. And he wrecked my perfect holiday dinner, and that's just unforgivable."

Willow looked at her for a second, and then Xander could feel something shifting. Buffy reached out, and Willow moved in to hug her, their arms going around each other. Xander moved in and added his own arms around both
of them.

"So, we're okay?" Xander asked.

Willow nodded.

"And no more with the trying to get your way?" Buffy asked. "I'm not going to like it, but if you keep playing games, I'm going to make you go away, and that sounded vaguely mobish when really I just meant I'll make you go live in France with Bertrand or something."

Willow didn't answer right away, and Xander could feel Buffy pull back from the hug. He let go of the girls, and Spike's arms came around his waist.

"Red, no one's going to make you go away as long as you play nice," he said quietly. Willow looked over at him for a second and then nodded.

"No more games," she agreed.

"And here's the part where we see if you mean that," Spike said as he considered her. "We're going after Susan Clark, and you're staying here, luv."
"What?" Willow demanded. "You can't leave me behind."

"We're not leaving you behind," Buffy said. "We're having you be the tactical reserve. You need to stay here with Giles and hopefully we'll send word back that she's either not infected or she's dead. I'm hoping for not infected," Buffy said as she looked toward Riley.

"She's a good woman. She doesn't deserve to die as a demon, but if she is turning, she'd be the first to choose death over endangering others," Riley answered.

"But, why can't I come?" Willow demanded.

"This is one of those world-ending decisions, Will. I can't have you with us this time, and I would like to think that you trust me enough to just take my word on that." Buffy crossed her arms and looked at Willow with an expression that again reminded Xander of Joyce. Buffy wasn't hard and sarcastic the way she had been at the end there at Sunnydale, but that was definitely a 'do not argue with me' expression.

Willow shifted from one foot from another, glancing over toward him, but Xander leaned back into Spike's arms and watched without trying to help her. A little part of
him wanted to explain, to talk to her about power-eating demons and vulnerabilities and the way that the Mazzikim could eat her while she was trying to set up her spell while he could do the soul ripping part no prep required. Of course, a smaller part wanted her to come so he wouldn't have to do the ripping, but Xander was calling that part of him a big old coward and shoving it in a closet. And he shoved the 'wanting to explain' part in the closet after it because Buffy was right, Willow had to learn to play backup because as leader-girl, she had the suckage going.

"Tactical reserve?" she asked uncertainly.

"You're part of the family, pet. We're not going to leave you behind, but sometimes someone has to be part of the reserve team," Spike pointed out. She looked at him and then at Buffy.

"Right," she said slowly as she nodded. "I can do reserve. Is it okay if I worry myself sick as I'm reserving?"

"Go for it," Buffy smiled, and then she got a conspiratorial look on her face. "But not around Giles because he's looking really cranky today, so when he finds out we've gone rogue on him, he's probably not
going to be in the kind of mood where he brings you chicken soup."

"Oh, Giles isn't in on this?" Willow looked a little worried.

"Giles is busy having issues, so we're moving on without him. He and Bertrand can keep each other company," Buffy shrugged. "This Xander being a Shaman thing is really throwing him for many, many loops," Buffy said, her arm slipping around Willow's arm as they headed for the hotel. Willow looked at Buffy with those wide eyes Xander remembered from years ago.

"Xander being a Shaman is a little loop-worthy," Willow said, and then she glanced back guiltily to where Xander and Spike were following. "Not that I'm doing the looping now. I totally get that you're with the Shamanism, and thank you for not letting me kill Blair because that would have been bad.

"I can't believe Jim didn't shoot you," Riley said quietly.

"You're not bloody kidding. Ellison's not the forgivin' sort when it comes to the fuzzy little Shaman," Spike snorted.

"And speaking of, Jim and Blair are back at the hotel, so
when are we getting the plan going because they actually do have to get back to work eventually," Xander pointed out.

"We're leaving tonight," Riley offered as he walked beside them, the two girls now giggling about something as they kept looking back.

"If we're leaving, aren't we going the wrong way?" Xander asked. "I mean, if we're going to cut Giles out of the loop, I don't want to be there for the loop cutting because he can get big with the cranky."

"Actually, Spike wants to make a visit to Bertrand," Buffy said before she pushed through the front door to the hotel, her and Willow still arm in arm.

"I thought we didn't like him," Xander said, confused.

"We bloody well don't. Arrogant little piss-ant, but he's a healer. Before we go, we're getting that eye socket repaired so you can get a prosthetic."

"But we don't have time, demons and..." Xander paused, "um, demon and demon and demon, oh my," he sing-songed. "And that works a lot better when we're going
after multiple things."

"Loon," Spike complained as they all piled into the elevator. "But we're not leaving until you get healed."

"Seconding that," Buffy agreed. "Like my therapist says, adults have to learn to parent themselves, to take care of themselves and set their own boundaries and love themselves unconditionally. The eye thing, so not parenting yourself, Xan."

"But this still isn't me taking care of myself," Xander pointed out.

Buffy shrugged. "So my therapist is wrong." She slipped her free arm around Xander's waist so that he was held between Spike and Buffy. Xander closed his eye, and for the first time since before Africa, before the end there at Sunnydale and his eye and Anya dying, for the first time, he felt truly and completely whole. Spike was right; it was time to get his eye fixed so that he at least looked as whole as he felt.
Part Thirty-Six

"I can't believe Jim is driving the whole way. I mean, he just has to drive back through Coeur d'Alene to get home. He could just ride with us." Xander said as he glanced toward the back of the RV. Jim's blue truck was barely visible through the miniblinds covering the shaded back window.

"After Willow attacked him, I'm surprised he's coming at all," Riley countered as he leaned against the tiny refrigerator and rocked gently with the motion of the vehicle. "I don't blame him for needing some distance."

"That's true," Xander admitted. "And then there's the lack of fast getaways. Jim's truck moves way faster than you would expect considering it looks slightly piece of junkish. This thing... not a good getaway vehicle not to mention bringing back some really unpleasant memories." Xander sat back in the booth-style seat and looked around the RV uncomfortably. This was way, way too familiar. "Hey, if we get you some really stupid sunglasses, it'd be like old times, only without Willow or crazy talking Tara," Xander said to Spike.
Spike looked up from his book and raised one eyebrow. "They weren't stupid."

"Uh-huh, yeah," Xander nodded without even trying to hide the whole not believing him thing.

"Brat," Spike complained.

"Xander, the military has flagged every credit card, every alias, every bank account anyone in this group has ever used. Paying cash and staying out of any hotels is the only way we're getting near base," Riley explained for the dozenth time. "And if Jim and Blair want to camp out, that's their choice, but I think we all prefer beds." Xander looked at Riley suspiciously. He was pretty sure that special ops meant lots of time sleeping without a bed, but instead of pointing that out, he went with complaining about the whole government keeping an eye on them.

"The spylike watching of us is big with the creepy. We should have Willow make new ID's," he said with a shudder.

"And the military will find out weeks, maybe days or
hours, after you use them for the first time," Riley said. "You worry them."

"Hey, I don't worry them. I'm the harmless one-eyed carpenter of the group."

Spike snorted. "That's because they're brainless gits. It's always the quiet ones ya have to watch for. When I came into town lookin' to cause real trouble, I'd keep my head down and play nice. Any time I make a lot of noise, I'm just looking to blow off steam."

Xander watched Riley frown in Spike's direction. Spike put his book down next to him and glared up. "Problem, Finn?"

He shook his head. "I'm just still adjusting."

"Wot? To getting your arse kicked?" Spike asked sweetly.

Buffy's voice yelled from beyond the curtain where she was driving. "Play nice. I'm just starting to enjoy being in the same room without you two fighting, so if I have to pull over and oh my god, I'm turning into my mother. Why didn't someone tell me I was turning into my mother? I don't want big hair," she wailed in an
exaggerated voice.

Xander laughed. "I'll save you from the curling iron, Buff, but if you're going to turn into someone, your mother isn't a bad person to go for."

The RV went silent. It was true, Xander realized. This time, Buffy's large-and-in-charge felt way more like Joyce and the way she just sort of quietly organized everything without really giving anyone a chance to even blink before she'd made the plans. Joyce-like Buffy was way better than general-like Buffy. In England, she hadn't wanted to let them go and look for Riley, but she had listened and she had stopped arguing even when she still didn't want them to go because she realized they needed to go. Xander realized for the first time that if Buffy had been all general-like, Spike would have eventually backed down and Riley probably would have died on the mountain.

"She was a classy lady, your mum," Spike said in the silence.

"The best," Riley agreed. He came and sat on the edge of the booth seat, glancing toward Xander before quickly looking away. Oh yeah, no awkwardness there at all.
"Right then, what are you adjusting to?" Spike eventually asked.

Riley looked over. "I hated you," he said with a voice that was almost dreamy, like he was describing something that he couldn't quite believe. "I would have put a stake through your heart in two seconds except I thought that would hurt Buffy, but now..." Riley's words trailed off before he crossed his arms and his voice got a whole lot firmer. "I still think you're a manipulative bastard, and I don't think getting the soul changed that. You sent Xander with Willow knowing they'd get in some sort of fight."

"Yeah, but I can't fight the boy's battles for him," Spike shrugged without denying the whole being manipulative part. "And I still think you're a soddin' pillock for going to a suckhouse. If they'd figured out exactly who you were, you would have been turned for sure. Turnin' the Slayer's pet human would be too tempting for any vamp, and that would have left a vamp version of you walking right up to Willow or Xander and slippin' a fang in them. Did you even think of that?"

"I don't think I was thinking of much of anything at the
time," Riley admitted softly. "But the strange part now is that I can dislike you without the anger I had for so long."

Spike didn't answer right away. He leaned back on the sofa-slash-couch and stretched his legs out. "Can't say I ever liked Penn. He was a small-minded, stick-up-his-ass prick, but he was family. Least, he was until Angel staked him. Ya don't have to like family, but if ya trust 'em to watch your back, they're still family."

"And if you don't trust them?" Xander asked.

Spike didn't answer right away. Reaching over, he fingered the edge of his book. "The old days, it was pretty simple. If ya didn't trust the one above ya, you left. If ya didn't trust the ones under ya, you dusted them."

"I'm going to assume you're talking about life before a soul," Riley pointed out. "I'm not dusting or killing anyone, and I don't care how untrustworthy they are. Killing isn't something you do unless there is literally no other choice."

"Yeah, mate," Spike answered. "Souls make things a bit more complicated."
"Okay, not to be the one to point out the elephant in the room or anything," Xander said as the silence returned, "but are we talking about Willow?"

Spike snorted a quick laugh. "Yeah, pet, I guess we are."

"Okay, then I'm voting with Riley on the no killing, not that I'm voting with Riley against you but more like I'm voting for not killing because obviously killing bad."

"Oi, never said we should kill anyone!" Spike protested. "She's doin' her best right now, and if she stops doin' her best, Buffy has the right idea. Send her off to the coven or to Bertrand and remind her that she doesn't have a choice about givin' up these schemes of hers. And we have to show her that if she gives up the schemin', we'll make sure she always has that family she wants so much."

"Spike," Buffy called from the front. "Are you really sure she's scheming? I mean, yeah, trying to kill Blair was hugely wrong, but he had put the mojo on her, and it's not like she doesn't have precedence for thinking mojo is bad and people who mojo us are usually up to no good. In fact, Willow was up to no good when she did the memory whammy on us."
"So she uses her mojo even though Xander tells her Blair is a friend?" Spike cut her off. "Luv, that's more than just an accident. That's her thinkin' she knows more than everyone else, and it's not like this is a new pattern."

From the silence up front, Xander was guessing that Buffy agreed. "Her judgment is questionable," Riley slowly added, and there was the freakiness with Riley and Spike doing the agreeing thing again.

"Yeah, I thought about making her a vampire back when I first saw her just because that lack of common sense would have made for some lovely chaos. The boy, he was all dark power flowin' right under the surface, I could smell that even before. But Red? That one would have been fun," Spike mused. Xander pulled his feet up and leaned his chin on his knee as he watched. Yeah, he'd seen demon-Spike plenty, but demon-Spike didn't usually come out around other people, and right now, Riley was watching Spike with something that came close to horror.

"Oi, it's not like I'm going to do it," Spike frowned. "You know better than most what my demon is capable of, and unlike my wanker of a sire, I'm not going to pretend
that it's not in there clamoring about how good it would feel to knock you on your arse and remind you that you don't get to judge me," Spike pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

"Can you control it?" Riley asked seriously.

"Demon's part of who I am, but I'm not about to go off eating villagefolk because the soul's part of who I am, too."

"I had my soul when I went to that suckhouse," Riley said quietly. "A soul doesn't stop you from doing things that you know you shouldn't be doing."

Spike shifted in his seat and leaned forward. "Get one thing right, soldier-boy. My soul's a mite bit better than yours. William died without one sin bigger than liking his own hand a little too much in the middle of the night, never did one thing to hurt another being in his whole life. I may not remember what happened those missing hundred years, but I know where he was. And when the demon went and asked for the soul back, William made a choice to try and make me a better man by coming back. The demon and the soul chose to work together, so don't think I'm anything like my idiot sire. I'm not some loaded
gun ready to go off if the boy gives me a good enough time." Spike leaned back with a self-satisfied grin. "If that were the case, I'd have lost my soul a dozen times already." He looked over toward Xander and the grin turned into a leer.

"No no no," Buffy called from up front. "I am not going to be trapped in this thing while you discuss sex. One more word about Xander-sex and I'm finding Mariachi music on this radio, mister."

Spike laughed. "Don't ya want to know what you passed up, luv? He's a right treat."

"Not listening," Buffy yelled as the radio clicked on with a staticy hiss.

"Xander?" Riley asked, finally looking at Xander for longer than 3 seconds.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"
"Your heart rate just jumped." Riley cocked his head in a gesture that Xander had seen so many times on Jim's face.

"Oi, that's called embarrassment. When somethin' goes really wrong, his heart goes like a rabbit's," Spike offered. "So, this the first time you've used your senses, then?"

Riley slowly shook his head as he continued to stare at Xander, and if Xander thought the whole lack of eye contact was freakish, the staring was even more with the freakish. "Maybe we should work on the whole Guide thing before we get to the base and I have to trust you to keep me from getting dead," Xander said hopefully.

Riley stared at him a second and then blinked into motion, shifting around in the seat. "Yeah, that'd probably be smart." And then he just sat there.

"Uh," Xander eventually said. "Where are your senses right now?" Riley looked at him blankly. "Is anything loud or strong or, you know, not with the normal?" Xander tried again.

Riley nodded this time. "Hearing is giving me the most trouble. It goes in and out a lot. Sometimes things will
get so loud my eyes water and then it will fade out to almost nothing. Last night, Buffy was--"

"And that's a story we will not be sharing," Buffy yelled back.

"She's still a screamer, huh?" Spike asked with a laugh.

"I'm in hell," Buffy muttered, and this time even Riley smiled.

"She did something she's done a thousand times, and I thought my ears were going to start bleeding," Riley edited himself. Xander could still hear Buffy harrumph.

"Okay, ignoring the whole TMI moment, I should be able to help you fix that," Xander said. "Imagine a dial. Five is normal, the way you used to hear. So, right now, does my voice sound loud or soft or just sort of normal?" Xander asked.

"A little loud, but not bad," Riley answered after a second.

"Okay, so we're calling that six. You really have to imagine the dial, see the setting where it's at right now."
"Got it," Riley immediately answered.

"What color is the dial?" Xander asked, silently thanking Blair for this little trick. His Sentinel was not getting away with the tricky not-really-going-along while faking crap Jim had tried.

"What?" Riley turned on him.

"You have to see the dial, which means you have to be seeing a color. Does it look like a radio dial or one of those silver dials on the old televisions that click from station to station? You have to work with me, here."

Riley stared at him silently for a second and then closed his eyes with a sigh. "Fine. It looks like a Clansman PRC-320 radio dial. Black. Numbers on the dial and a white triangle painted on faceplate to show the setting."

"It's a what?" Xander asked. Riley opened his eyes and glared.

"It's a vintage World War II military radio from England. My dad collects vintage military equipment. That's what my dial looks like." And that would be Riley's cranky
voice. Xander glanced over toward Spike, but he was back to reading his mystery.

"Okay, good," Xander hurried to say even though that wasn't a good look Riley was giving him, and Xander didn't expect the crankiness to really improve until Riley slammed him into a wall, but he was pretty sure there wasn't a polite way to ask someone to slam you into a wall so that the general weirdness would go away. Nope. Probably because random slamming into walls would create weirdness for most people. Too bad no one had a pseudo-demonic Miss Manners book out because Xander would so be buying it.

Riley was giving Xander a concerned look, so Xander shoved the random thoughts aside and focused on the Sentinel stuff. "So, your dial for hearing is on six right now, a little loud, but not too loud."

"It's moved," Riley said as he closed his eyes again, but this time he kept the frown.

"Are things louder or softer?"

"Louder."
"Are you on a seven or an eight?"

"How would I know?" Riley demanded as he burst up and started pacing the room. Spike just sat reading like Riley wasn't furiously pacing right past him, five steps toward the front, brisk turn, five steps toward the back, brisk turn and repeat.

"Hey, I get that this is frustrating. Trust me, I get it," Xander said as he thought of his own stress trying to learn how to handle his Shamanic powers. And the lack of wall-slamming was definitely not improving Riley's mood, not if Xander was reading the weirdness with the eye contact right. Riley stopped mid-pace, his jaw tight.

"I can usually push the senses back," he said. "I know this isn't your fault; I don't mean to take this out on you," he said, but his hands were fisted at his sides.

"Is it out of control now?" Xander asked.

Riley nodded. "The second I could see the dial, it started moving, and it just keeps getting higher. The sound of the wheels against the road is cutting through my head."

"Okay, so this is... this is totally not in Blair's notes. I don't
think I've done anything to screw you up, but I'm kinda new at this," Xander admitted. "Can you imagine yourself holding the dial, keeping it steady?"

Riley stood, his eyes closed for a second before he shook his head. "It keeps going up. What do I do?"

Xander got up and inched closer as he tried to remember everything he'd written into those reports. "Listen to my voice. Just listen to my voice and let that help you find where to put your setting, and does it seem freaky to anyone else that I can normally babble for long periods of time, but right now, I can't think of anything to say? I think I know why Blair keeps all that trivia in his head, it gives him something to say."

Riley's frown started fading, but then he flinched back, his eyes popping open, and Xander could see the pain in them. "Buffy," Xander called a little louder. "Now might be a good time to pull over for a little Shamen conference."

Xander gasped as strong hands caught him by the shirt, nearly lifting off his feet before he landed on his back on the dining room table. "Stop screaming," Riley demanded, his voice a whisper, but the tone still
managed to sound like a shout, although a really, really soft one. Xander froze, his back on the table and his legs sticking awkwardly out and he just blinked up as Riley held him down, Riley's forehead slowly sinking to Xander's chest as the RV started slowing.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell," Xander said as softly as he could, but Riley still flinched, and oh yeah, he had been a Guide for all of five minutes and he had already totally and completely screwed it up. Xander looked desperately toward Spike since Spike was supposed to fix all things Xander did stupid, but the idiot vampire was still reading, glancing up every few seconds as the RV rolled to a stop.

Xander let his hand rest on Riley's shoulder, and the hands wrapped around his shirt tightened.

"Hey, I thought you might want a little help in here," Blair said as the RV door popped open and he scrambled up into the RV. Jim was a half step behind him, but at least he thought to close the door so no one accidentally turned the flammable members of the group into ashes.

"Guys?" Buffy asked as she stuck her head through a slit in the curtain. Riley made a pained noise somewhere
between a whine and the sound chalk made when the teacher caught it just wrong on the chalkboard.

"Do you know what sense he lost control on?" Blair asked.

"Hearing," Xander tried to whisper. Riley flinched.

"I've never seen him this bad," Buffy said, clearly worried, and Xander gasped as Riley nearly flattened him, pressing tightly to Xander's chest.

"Okay, just whisper to him, and give him another sense to focus on, try touch," Blair whispered so softly that the words were little more than a breath. Xander could feel Riley start to tremble.

"Riley, you're freaking me out here. Of course, Spike would say that wasn't hard. He might even say that driving me to a freak is more of a putt than a drive, and I don't even want to admit how long it took me to get that joke. Vampires should not be making golf jokes. Just dial back the hearing. I know you can," Xander whispered whatever words came to his mind, his hands stroking Riley's shoulders because he really couldn't reach anything else.
"Blair, help me out here," Xander asked.

"Just keep talking to him. Let him know you're here and that he can control his own hearing."

"Riley, did you hear that? Of course you heard that. You're probably hearing everything down to my blood going through my veins right now, but you have to take control of that knob and turn it down. You can. I know this because Blair says you can and Blair is the big teaching guru around here, and he says you can."

"Get him to focus on touch," Blair whispered, his arms crossed over his chest and Jim's arms around his stomach, either to hold him back or to comfort him, Xander wasn't sure which. "Tell him where you're touching him, focus him on that."

"Okay, focus on the feeling of my hands on your shoulders, or hey, you could focus on your hands grabbing my shirt, and I'm pretty sure I'm losing chest hair here. You might want to just give me a little slack, not that you have to let go because I'm starting to think getting slammed into things is just normal for me. Actually, I'm oddly okay with getting slammed into
things. And hey, you and Spike both picked a table to slam me into. Jim was more of a door-slamming man himself. Okay, that was irrelevant. I'm touching your shoulders. Focus on feeling that. I know this isn't naughty touching or anything, but this is weirdly personal, especially considering that our two lovers are watching, and then there's the fact that our two lovers used to be lovers and is anyone else thinking this is particularly weird? I'm thinking this is weird."

Xander would have kept embarrassing himself with random babble but Riley took a deep shuddering breath.

"You have control now, soldier?" Jim asked.

Riley nodded. "Yes, sir."

Xander took a deep breath, and he could feel himself shaking as the fear that had gripped him slowly loosened its hold. For a second, he felt his chest like someone had just punched him, like several someones or maybe a demonic someone, because his upper body ached from the tension and fear that even now clung to him. He could have killed Riley. How many times had he typed that warning into the reports he wrote? Zones and slowing heart rates and coma or sensory spikes and pain
and heart failure and shit, he'd just about killed Riley. Xander forced a normalcy into his voice that he didn't feel. "Okay, that is called officially scaring the shit out of the person who obviously shouldn't be a Guide." He gave a weak laugh. "You know, I bet Giles has a list of potential Guides already drawn up. He's organized like that. We should definitely be giving him a call."

"What?" Riley demanded as he pushed himself up, both his hands still braced on Xander's chest.


"No. Look, I screwed this up," Riley started.

"You have been hit on the head one too many times with... whatever you get hit on the head with in covert ops," Xander finished lamely as the Aladdin reference sort of fell apart in the middle on him. "I'm the one who not only couldn't center you, but obviously set you off in the first place which is huge with the not so good. Maybe you need to find someone who doesn't suck at this stuff."
"You don't suck. I just, the minute I pictured the dial I could feel it sliding away. Xander." Riley suddenly let go and stepped back. "Xander, I'm sorry, I had no right to touch you. I really had no right to—" Riley waved a vague hand at the table where he'd flattened Xander. Then Riley's eyes darted over to Spike, but the vampire was just sitting, a boot on the couch as his book dangled from one hand.

"I wouldn't have hurt him," Riley quickly assured Spike.

One of Spike's eyebrows went up, and Xander could tell Spike was way too amused at Riley's sudden panic.

"Spike obviously doesn't know as much as he thinks he knows because he told me to expect you to shove me up against a wall, and this is definitely not a wall," Xander pointed out as he sat up on the table.

"He told you I—" Riley stopped. "He still let you work with me?"

"Told ya, I don't fight my boy's battles for him," Spike shrugged. "Now, if your nob gets anywhere near him, if you even start having a lusty thought in the same zip code with my Xander, I'll rip your genitals off."
"Spike!" Buffy yelped.

"Just callin' them like I see 'em, pet," Spike said as he pursed his lips and looked at Riley in a way that made it way too clear that he really wasn't kidding.

Riley shook his head. "I wouldn't do that. Xander is a friend. I shouldn't have grabbed you, I'm sorry," Riley offered Xander. Xander just shrugged.

"Hey, Willow and Buffy are kinda denially about the whole dominance thing and Jim is totally denially." Blair snorted in an attempt to cut off a laugh and Jim glared, but Xander ignored them both. "I'm all for it. Actually, I'm all for anything that means I have more someones who will stop me from going all Willow with the black eyes. You missed that period, but fun was not had by all."

"Xander," Buffy said as she slipped through the curtain, "you're not going to go dark."

"And I'm not going to pick another Guide," Riley said firmly.

"And you're both living in the land of 'wouldn't that be
nice," Xander countered. "Come on, Riley. I did the 
Guide thing and I am officially calling myself really bad at 
it."

"Man, this was not your fault," Blair hurried to say. 
"Riley, have you ever tried to use the senses before?"

"Consciously? No. I have used them, but never because I 
actually tried to use them."

"And I'm not big with the helping," Xander pointed out 
again.

"I lost control, you didn't," Riley said, and that was his 
cranky look again. "I'll do better next time."

"Blair, will you tell them I'm big with the sucking?"
Xander begged.

"Oh, hey, not a chance, and not just because Spike looks 
ready to bite me if I even think about saying something 
like that," Blair laughed, which just made Spike glare 
even more, and Xander had never known someone quite 
so immune to the whole glare of death Spike had spent a 
century perfecting. Blair just kept right on talking. "This 
was the first time Riley tried to actively control the
senses. Taking control means there's more chance to lose control."

"See?" Riley demanded.

"Okay, just to check. This was normal?" Buffy asked, and her voice made it pretty clear that she was hoping for the answer to be a big no.

"For a new Sentinel, one who's still learning to control his senses, yeah. But no way is this going to be his life from now on. I mean, it takes time. He has to learn to control his dials and listen for Xander when things get out of control."

"Is anyone actually listening to me?" Xander demanded. "I suck at this. I just sent Riley into the land of zones and spikes."

"Pet." Spike put the book aside and slipped past Riley to stand next to Xander, and Xander leaned into that strength. "Do you want to be Riley's Guide?" Spike slipped an arm around Xander's waist, the fingers slipping between two buttons on his shirt to brush against the warm skin below, and Xander shivered at the small brush of skin against skin. It distracted him for a
half second, but then he thought of Riley, holding him, trembling because Xander had fucked up.

"Okay, I just voted 'no' on the whole Guide issue multiple times, so no," Xander said firmly.

"But Xander, you said you would," Buffy protested. "If any of us could do it, we would, but it needs to be a Shaman."

"And there are lots of other Shaman fish in the sea, but this one is officially off the menu," Xander insisted.

"Pet, why don't you want to work with Riley? Did he hurt you?" Spike's free hand started brushing over Xander's chest, fingers working the buttons near the top of his shirt, but Xander pushed it away in annoyance.

"I've been hit harder by grandmothers, and yeah, the grandmothers in question were demons, but you get my point. Riley didn't hurt me."

"So, ya don't care enough about the wanker to work through this?" Spike tried again. Riley's face twisted into something that looked like pain, and Xander felt guilt rise up and settle in right next to fear.
Xander glared at Spike. "You're just trying to be an asshole," he accused his vampire. One of Spike's eyebrows rose in a clear warning. "You know I like Riley, and I mean that in a 'he's good for Buffy' way."

"So, tell me exactly why you don't want to be a Guide," Spike asked. Xander glared harder.

"In case you were sleeping," Xander snapped, "I just failed the entrance exam. The whole making things better for Riley test... I'm obviously not any good at the 'better' part of that equation. I just completely and totally fucked up."

"Right then, so you're afraid of making a cock-up of the whole Sentinel bit," Spike summarized.

"I think I already proved I did make a cock-up of it."

"I'm the one who messed up," Riley protested.

"As the official expert here," Blair said, raising his voice, "I'm saying no one messed up. Man, you two have issues. I thought Jim was a pain in the ass to work with, but I'm thinking of revising my hypothesis to say that all
Sentinels are anal retentive perfectionists. And Xander, you so did not make anything worse. That was Riley's first time to intentionally control the settings on his senses, which just means he just needs more practice."

"With someone else. He needs more practice with someone else," Xander insisted. Spike's hand reached up and cupped Xander's face. For a moment, Xander resisted as he tried to keep staring Blair down, but Spike's hand firmly forced him to look away from Blair and focus on Spike.

"Pet, ya agreed that I have better judgment than you do, right?" he asked softly. Xander took a deep breath and tried to ignore the rest of the people in the room as he focused on just Spike. Blue eyes studied him, and Spike's thumb made small circles on Xander's cheek, soothing him.

"Yeah," he whispered.

"Right then, I figure that means you'll forgive me for this just as soon as ya get over this inferiority complex of yours. Riley," Spike said as he tilted his head, "Xander's your Guide, and he already submitted, so it seems like it's your turn to remind him to stop trying to blame himself."
"I already was." Riley sounded confused, but then Xander wasn't feeling all that confident that he understood what was going on either because that was Spike's amused look, and sometimes things that amused Spike were a little scary.

"Try sitting on him and making him listen," Spike suggested with a casual shrug, and with a push, Xander found himself bouncing into Riley, and he would have bounced off except that Riley's arms came up around him.

"Oh, hey, inappropriate touching," Xander immediately protested when he couldn't get away, and yeah, there wasn't actually anything inappropriate because Riley was holding his arms, but Xander had learned from Blair that obfuscation could be a beta's best weapon. Unfortunately, this time everyone ignored his little lie.

"Oi, I’m right here, pet," Spike insisted. "Nothing inappropriate is going to happen, but the fact is that you're Riley's Guide, and if you get your knickers in a twist about it, Riley's going to have to sit on you until you get your head on straight. I'm not fighting your battles for you either, Finn, so if you want him, you make him
listen."

"Spike, I'm not so sure this is a good idea," Buffy said slowly.

"Bloody hell, do you really think Xander somehow fucked this up?" Spike demanded.

"What? No! Hey, I'm right there with you on the thinking he needs to stop blaming himself, but sitting on someone to get them to change their mind is not really... and this is where my head and my ass are meeting isn't it?" Buffy asked in a tired voice. "This is one of those submitting things, right?"

"Yeah, luv, it is. I don't suppose someone who's all alpha gets it, but sometimes ya push just hoping that someone pushes back."

"Which is exactly what I'm not doing here," Xander complained as he tried to move away, but Riley's arms just tightened more.

"You do realize this has disturbing implications for the whole hate-hate thing you had going on with Angel, yes?" Buffy asked Spike with a slightly squicked
Spike started laughing. "Soddin hell, you're only now putting that together? Rupert definitely hid the good research from you if you didn't know that bit of history."

"Okay, officially squicked now. And why is everyone gay? Not that there's anything wrong with being gay," she quickly added, and that might have something to do with the cold expression on Jim's face.

"Do I get a vote here?" Xander asked.

"Not really, pet. If Riley wants you as a Guide, he gets you," Spike shrugged. "And you can do something nice for me later to thank me for that." Spike walked back over to the couch and flopped down. "Right then, since that's sorted, Riley needs some time to sit on the boy. Buffy, you can either take a walk or borrow Jim's keys so we can get moving again."

"Me? I'm leaving? Why am I leaving?"

"Wot? You want to stay?" Spike asked. Buffy looked around the RV for a second.
"Point made. Jim, you want to loan me your keys? Watch third gear because the RV makes this weird clunking noise, but I'm hoping nothing is going to fall off the engine before we get out to the base, and why does the base have to be in the middle of nowhere, anyway?"

"You think you're going to drive my truck?" Jim asked incredulously.

"Okay, it's either I drive your truck or I take a really long walk because I know Xander. Xander is really stubborn about... well, about everything, but he's really, really stubborn about his own insecurities, so if Riley is going to sit on him until he gives up blaming himself and starts guiding, this is going to take a while."

Blair reached up and rested his hand on Jim's arm. "Jim, if you're driving the RV, I can stay and help them. And think about it. The faster we get there..."

"The faster we can get this over with," Jim finished, his expression still cold and still focused on Buffy. "You put one scratch on it, and you will pay."

"Oh, come on. It's a junker. How much damage could I do?" Buffy asked as she caught the keys Jim tossed her.
"I don't want to think about it," Jim sighed. With a smile, Buffy was out the door, slamming it behind her.

"Riley, you can let me go now," Xander complained.

"Are you going to work with Blair on guiding me?"

"You'd be better off picking someone else."

"And I'm not letting go until you stop believing that," Riley said as he tightened his grip. Xander squirmed, but Riley had all those unfair special ops muscles that were not letting him go.

"Spike," Xander appealed one last time.

"If ya don't want to do what he says, beat him in a fair fight," Spike suggested, flipping the page on his mystery. He looked up. "Or an unfair one if that works better. Your choice, pet."

Standing with Riley's arms holding him pinned between a cabinet and the table, Xander gave one thought to seriously fighting back, to challenging Riley's right to tell him what to do.
"I know that wasn't your fault, Xander, and even in all that pain, I could feel you there like an anchor and I knew if I could get back to you that the pain would go away. I'll do better next time," Riley promised. "I just know that I need you as my Guide."

Aw hell. Xander sagged. "Next time, just remember that you freak me out when you do that because I am really not into seeing people in pain."

"I promise I'll try," Riley offered.

"Guys, we have a good twelve hours before we get to that secret base. I'll have you two ready for the Sentinel Olympics by then," Blair promised. Up front, Jim started the RV and they started slowly rolling forward. "Okay, let's go back and start with the dials."

**Part Thirty-Seven**

Jim stood stone-faced.

"It's a stupid place to put a rock anyway," Buffy shrugged, but Xander could tell from the way she wrinkled her nose and kept looking everywhere but at them that she had the guilt going. "Who puts a
boulder on the road?"

"It isn't on the road. It's on the shoulder," Jim said, his words clipped.

"Which is part of the road!" Buffy pointed out in triumph.

"Which is part of the mountain, and how could you not see a boulder?"

"Oh, come on, it's a scratch. It's less than a scratch. It's a scratchette."

Jim's expression didn't soften.

"Look, I'll pay for the stupid scratch," Buffy said as she crossed her arms and stared right at Jim. "I didn't mean to bump the boulder. Bump, not hit, bump—nudge—barely make contact with."

"Oh hey, shouldn't we be focusing on the breaking into the military base and not the lack of driving skills?" Blair suggested as he reached up and rested his hand on Jim's arm. Xander could almost see Jim struggling to dial back the aggression.
"Yeah, what he said," Buffy agreed, and Jim's eyes narrowed.

"Seein' as how I'm the one who's going to end up in a little white cell if we get caught holding our arses with both hands, I'd like to get this bloody done and over with," Spike snapped. He had been leaning against the RV, but now he stood up and dropped his cigarette to the road and ground it into the gravel with far more enthusiasm than he really needed before he stomped off. Xander went to follow Spike, but Riley put a hand on his shoulder.

"Give him some time," Riley said softly.

"Okay, you officially do not get to tell me how to handle my relationship with Spike." Xander shoved Riley's hand away, ignoring the hurt expression visible in the weak light of the RV lamp.

"Xander, what Maggie did in those cells... Spike has never told you guys. He needs some space." Intellectually, Xander knew that Riley was only trying to help, and a little piece of him was all 'woo hoo' for Riley wanting to help Spike, but that did not make Riley right.
"He can have his space only I'll be spacing with him," Xander said firmly before he headed into the darkness. They'd parked near the edge of a low mountain, and Xander headed down into the rocky flat bit between this rounded peak and the next one. Then again, maybe these were tall hills. What was the difference between a tall hill and a really short mountain, anyway? Xander tripped over a rock and had to take several running steps to get his balance back. Yeah, he had no idea where Spike was, but he was guessing that Spike knew where he was so he was going for aimless wandering until Spike came and got him. Well, that or until he fell and broke his neck. A hand caught him by the elbow.

"Knew you'd find me," Xander said triumphantly. "And what's with the walking away? At least, what's up with the walking away if the Jim versus Buffy smackdown wasn't what drove you to the darkness because the Jim versus Buffy thing is enough to drive anyone nuts."

"I don't expect them ta like each other," Spike answered as his arm slipped around Xander's waist and Xander leaned into him.

"Yeah, but this time, it's really not just about dominance. They just don't like each other. Or Jim doesn't like Buffy
anyway. You know, I hadn't thought about it, but it is kinda annoying the way she pretends to not lead when she's leading, but really, really not as annoying as when she pretended she was all Major Domo Buffy telling us what to do."

"Majordomo?" Spike sounded amused.

"Yeah, you know, back in Sunnydale when we turned on her and you didn't, and she acting like she knew all the answers and not even hearing what we were saying, so unlike Jim, I’m voting for the dumb blonde act over the major domo act."

"Pet," Spike said slowly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know that if we were all with the demony, we would have followed her anyway, and we actually would have been better off in the whole not almost getting dead way if we'd followed her, but having a soul means that I want the person in charge to at least pretend to listen to me."

"Oi, she always listened," Spike objected. He steered Xander a bit to the left, and Xander followed Spike's lead.
"Then she did a good job pretending to not listen. Really good job. Yep, Major Domon Buffy large and in charge of all things slayer, potential slayer, or demonic, and if it isn't an emergency, don't bother her. That was a weird phase I was not fond of."

"Pet," Spike tried again, "A majordomo is the servant who runs the house while the master is away."

"He.... What?"

"Like a butler, pet."

"Oh." Xander scrunched his eye shut. "Okay, that didn't actually make sense, the thing I just said, but I'm assuming you get the general drift of where I was going even though I was driving down the wrong road to get there."

"Yeah, I do. And you're right, the rules are different with souls. I'm starting to think the furry little Shaman's right when he said that dominant just means bein' more aggressive and direct, at least when all the people involved have souls."

"Yeah, but he also kinda let it slip that he actually ties Jim
up from time to time in the kinky rope-for-fun way, so I'm not sure he and Jim really have the dominance going."

Spike stopped. "You have to explain that bit using a few more words, preferable ones that actually make sense together."

Xander sighed. "In the car after Willow almost killed Blair and I had to stop her and how scary is it that I'm the reasonable one out of the two of us?"

"Pet."

"Right, back on topic. Anyway, Blair said that sometimes the dominant one, and this is where he looked at Jim, sometimes the dominant one was the one who liked getting tied up during sex."

"You discussed sex with Willow in the car?" And now Spike sounded like he was ready to laugh. He tugged at Xander's waist, getting them moving forward into the darkness again.

"Willow brought up the sex," Xander said as he poked an elbow at Spike's stomach. "She was all 'Spike tied him up.}
Spike is evil.' Or something like that, anyway. I was still trying to get off the panic train at the time, so I'm not remembering exactly how we got off onto our sex life, but we did."

"So, you think Jim's not dominant because sometimes he lets Blair in the driver's seat," Spike summarized.

"Yep."

Spike did laugh, a soft sound that evaporated into the wide night sky.

"Okay, you're laughing at me. No fair laughing at me when I can't figure out what I've done that's laugh worthy."

"Bein' dominant means making the big decisions, being the one who takes the challenges, standing at the front in the big fight, and making people listen," Spike said, his arm tightening around Xander's waist. "If I give you permission to pull out the chains and tie me to the bed, that doesn't make you dominant, pet. It just gives our sex life a little more spice."

Xander stopped, dragging Spike to a stop next to him.
"Wait. Whoa. Okay, that I need to hear again because I think my brain just broke. In fact, I'm really sure my brain just broke. Broken brain bad, Spike."

"Oi, ya really thought you'd play bottom forever?"


"Submissive means ya don't want to be the one up front getting in a pissing contest to see who has the bigger knackers. Submissive means that you'd rather play peacemaker and make others happy than get in their faces. It's got nothing to do with which sex acts you use. Bertrand's domme isn't bending him over the back of the couch, leastwise, not unless she's got a nice toy in the toybox. She's still the boss, even when Bertrand's the one who does the penetrating."

"That sounds slightly on the side of ick," Xander said softly.

"Bertrand havin' sex? Bloody hell yeah. I'm tryin' not to get a mental picture of that," Spike snorted.

"I'm there with you on the Bertrand sex being squicky,
but I actually meant calling sex 'penetrating.' That's a bad word for what we do. We need better words."

"I'm fond of the word love, myself," Spike said softly.

Xander leaned into Spike's strength and had a quick fantasy of Spike spread out, his arms straining against cold steel, as Xander tortured him with kisses and leisurely blowjobs and then rode Spike as slow as he could until Spike was ready to pop. "Love's a good word," Xander agreed.

"Speaking of Bertrand, how's the eye feeling?"

"You know, I didn't even notice that it always ached until Bertrand did his thing, and now it actually feels really good. Looking back, not getting the eye taken care of was up there on the list of stupids."

"Bloody hell, I tried carvin' my own heart out with my fingernails, so I'm not goin' to say anything," Spike snorted. "Sometimes you're just not in a place where ya can take care of yourself."

"We are dangerously close to breaking the man laws and becoming sappy here," Xander pointed out.
"Right then, we'd better stop. I need ya to use your vision here, pet."

"My vision? Why?"

"This is the edge of the base. I can hear the electronics and I need ta know if they do regular patrols through here."

"Wait a sec. We're going in alone? Spike, I was all voting for you to wait at the RV because you are the one person the soldiers will bury under the base where the rest of us only have a fifty-fifty chance of getting buried in one of their labs if caught, and you want us to go in alone?"

"The others will catch up."

"The way Buffy and Jim are fighting, they'll catch up in a year or two," Xander objected. Seriously, those two were still going to be fighting about Buffy scratching Jim's truck when the sun came up, which would be bad because two vehicles stopped in the middle of nowhere would catch the military's attention way too fast for Xander's comfort. And the whole switching license plates on Jim's truck was not going to fool anyone for long.
"Even if Jim isn't listening for you, Riley sure as bloody hell is. As many times as he did that out of control shite in the RV, he's going to keep at least one sense locked on you at all times," Spike pointed out with a snort.

"It's called a spike," Xander said as he smirked at the darkness.

"Then call it somethin' else. I'm not calling it a soddin' spike," he growled. "Now, turn on your sight so we know if we can expect soldier boys to come patrollin' this area."

Xander blinked away the darkness and studied the now faintly glowy world around him. His own blue cord trailed behind him, shimmering in opalescence and bending towards Spike's double helix and the trail he had left behind. "Okay, I am officially stupid," Xander snorted.

"Someone comin'?" Spike demanded, pulling Xander closer, and the double helix of dark red and nearly midnight blue cords looped around Xander and his own lighter blue cord.

"No, I just realized I'm not big with the clear thinking. I
was looking for you, and I didn't even think about the fact that I could just turn on my sight and follow your cord, which is hugely stupid. I thought superpowers were supposed to make me supercool or at least less likely to act like a complete doof."

"You're not a doof, and that isn't even a bloody word. And it's not like powers have made Buffy or Willow perfect, so I don't think you can expect being a Shaman to make you into someone different. 'Sides, I like you like this," Spike whispered into Xander's ear, and even Xander could hear the footsteps scrambling over the rocks behind them. He turned his head and watched the ghostly upright cords wander closer. Jim's deep red and Blair's sagey green ebbed and flowed together like ice skaters, Riley's brilliant blue and Buffy's gold weren't as coordinated, but the cords would drift toward each other, move in tandem for a couple of seconds and then fall into their individual motions again. The four of them followed the trail Spike and Xander's cords had left behind even without being able to see it.

"Okay, what's the sitch? I mean, running off to chase the bad guys alone is so very not cool," Buffy complained.

"Oi, knew you'd follow," Spike shrugged, and Xander
could see the shadow of the movement in the faint light of the cords. "Time to get this show on the road. We've talked this to death, luv, so time for some action. Are any soldier boys goin' to be comin' through here, pet?"

Xander shook his head. "Nope, no people cords, which I'm guessing means that no one has come through in the last couple of days."

"Which means they haven't added any patrols," Riley said with a sigh of relief. "That suggests that the situation is status quo and Lieutenant Clark hasn't had any symptoms."

"Ya mean she hasn't started eatin' the base yet," Spike corrected him. Riley didn't argue. "Xander, can you see anything like that cord of Sungsen's?"

"Small problem, Spike. Demon cords suck up light, they don't go all glowy like other cords. Well, your cord is a little glowy in a really, really faint dark blue way, but I wouldn't be able to see it in the dark without your soul cord right there, and Sungsen's cord was totally black. Black cord plus black night makes it really hard to see anything."
"Oh man, that's fascinating. I wonder if that's an evolutionary adaptation because demons are more likely to hunt at night. Camouflage for the soul. Cool."

"Only you would think demons were cool, Chief," Jim complained, but Xander could hear the indulgent amusement in his voice.

"Man, whatever. You have to have some part of you that thinks this is just a little—" Blair paused.

"Insane," Jim finished dryly. Xander could hear an 'umph' as someone caught an elbow in the stomach, and he was guessing Jim was doing the umphing.

"You got your toy?" Spike asked. Xander watched as Jim's cord scrunched down. Xander could almost taste Riley's need to ask where Jim had gotten the little anti-covert ops-covert op toy he was now playing with, but Jim hadn't given a straight answer the first three times Riley had not-so-subtly asked, and the soldier had pretty much given up.

"Tell me when the system goes off," Jim said as the machine started clicking. From Xander's point of view, they were all just standing in the dark while Jim went
click, click, click.

Jim stopped just before Spike said, "That's it."

"Already got it," Jim answered as he stood up.

"Oh man, dueling senses. I so want to test that," Blair muttered.

"Not a bloody chance in hell," Spike immediately snapped.

"I'm with him, Chief. Let's just get this job done and get home before Simon sends out the cavalry."

"Man, this is the chance of a lifetime, and I can't even do one lousy little test, this bites," Blair complained and then all of them were moving forward into the dark.
"One test. I could do something right here. Of course, I don't have the equipment to verify the results."

"And Spike lies," Xander pointed out. Spike would so totally lie before ever admitting one of Jim's senses was better.

"Besides, didn't you say you're changing your
dissertation?" Jim asked.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I can't use the Atego research without looking like a fruitcake."

"That's never stopped you before."

Xander could hear another 'umph' as Blair retaliated.

"Fine, but man, if we find any more vampires, I am so testing you against them," Blair huffed.

"If you find any more vampires," Buffy interrupted, "call me, or Riley, or Spike and Xander, but testing vampires is a quick way to get eaten. Of course, if Giles and idiot-boy are right, the vampires will be avoiding you. Wait," Buffy said much louder than the soft whispers they'd all been using. "If Riley and I are together, does that mean my life's going to be vamp free? And for that matter, how can Riley hunt demons if they're all 'ew, ick, Sentinel.'"

"Ew, ick?" Jim asked, and that tone of voice really said it all.

"You know what I mean."
"Buffy, I've only been a Sentinel for a week," Riley pointed out.

"Oh man, are you sure?" Blair quickly asked. "I mean, Jim had episodes in his childhood, and your genes are your genes. You've always had those Sentinel genes."

"Yeah, but I always had the potential to be a Slayer, and before the last Slayer died, I was not much with the Slayerness," Buffy argued. "When it comes to the mystical, genes are not everything.

"As interestin' as all this shite isn't, the base is right on the other side of that ridge, so maybe we can wait until later to figure this all out," Spike interrupted the bickering.

"Way to be all logical, and when did you start being the logical one in the group? This is slightly disturbing," Buffy said softly. Spike didn't answer, but Xander could hear a not-happy grunt from Jim's corner of the darkness, and then they were at the ridge, the military base spread out below with straight lines formed from street lines lining the roads. A few cars drove between boxy buildings. Xander blinked his Shamanic vision away to get a better look.
"We're breaking in there," Xander said unhappily.

"No time like the present, pet," Spike said and he scrambled over the ridge quickly. Since Xander's hand was in Spike's, he scrambled after Spike, not stopping until they stood beside a boulder taller than the RV. The others followed. Immediately, Riley stepped close to Xander, putting a strong hand around Xander's shoulder and squeezing hard enough to let Xander know he wasn't letting go soon.

"Problem?" Spike asked.

"Something's wrong," Riley answered, and his fingers tightened more.

"We're breaking into a military base to potentially kill a soldier. There's not actually much right about that," Xander pointed out, and then he grunted as Riley pulled him away from Spike so fast that he sort of collided with Riley's chest. Xander opened his mouth to make big with the protesting when he felt Spike's hand on his back, slipping in under Xander's shirt and tracing soothing circles on skin.
"I feel it, too," Jim added.

"Whoa, feel what? Come on, give me something to work with here."

Jim didn't immediately answer Blair. "I can feel something sliding over my skin, something that tells me to either get the hell out of here or shoot something. It's coming from the base."

Xander let his arms go around Riley's waist, anchoring him when Riley's hands gripped him hard enough that Xander knew he was in danger of losing himself in his senses. "Okay, just focus on me, here," Xander encouraged him. "You know what I should feel like, what my voice should sound like, so dial back until you can feel that you're holding me hard enough to bruise."

"Oi, you bruise him, soldier boy, and I'll bruise you."

"Not helping," Buffy added.

"What are you feeling, Riley?" Xander prompted him, trying to imitate Blair's work with Jim.

"Something's wrong. I need to get you out of here."
"Which would be great, I'd normally be all for the getting out, except if we don't do something, Susan Clark is going to eat the base and then she's going to be way higher on the hard to kill list. That's not a good list, and I vote we avoid that."

"We need to go back," Riley mulishly insisted, and Xander found himself getting pulled back toward the ridge.

"Riley!" Buffy hissed about the same time Jim issued a curt, "Soldier, stand down!" Riley stopped, and one large hand came up to the back of Xander's neck, pulling him close. If this is how Jim had been, no wonder people had thought Jim and Blair were doing it like bunnies years before there was any bunnying going on. Xander could just imagine how this looked, with his face pressed to Riley's shoulder, and then there were their lovers, standing there watching. Yep, his life was officially the center of the Twilight Zone. Rod Sterling should be narrating his thoughts. You're traveling through another dimension -- a dimension not only of sight and sound but of freaking weirdness.

"This doesn't feel like Sungsen, there's something not right here," Riley said desperately, and Xander could feel
Riley trembling with a need to run.

"He's right about that. Sungsen made me uncomfortable, but this is more," Jim agreed. "But soldier, you will not let your emotions control you on the battlefield."

"Yes, sir," Riley immediately answered. "But this is not the place for civilians."

"Hey, I am so not civilianlike," Xander protested, immediately knowing where Riley was going with this. "I mean, yeah, I'm a civilian in the not having joined an official branch of service, but I am part of this army," Xander added as he squirmed away from Riley. He got just enough slack to turn, and then Riley tightened his hold. Xander gave up. "Spike," he pleaded.

Blair started laughing softly. "Oh man, 'stay in the truck' is genetic."

"Don't start, Squirt," Jim warned. "Riley, we need Xander for the mission, so stay close to him and watch his six."

"Riley," Buffy stepped forward, stumbling a little in the loose rock since seeing in the dark wasn't one of her talents. She put a hand on the arm Riley had wrapped
around Xander's chest. "I know you're worried. I get that feeling every time I take them into a fight, and you know that feeling from leading your men. I don't know how much this Sentinel stuff is playing scramble with your thoughts, but you know that Xander can handle his own. You were the one who told me he was a good soldier, and I needed to stop trying to keep him fray-adjacent."

"You told her that?" Xander asked, surprised. Riley didn't answer.

"He's not even armed," Riley eventually said, his arms tightening around Xander.

"Oi, boy's got a bigger arsenal than you do, Finn. Right now he could reach in and rip your soul out without even battin' an eye. Besides, as much trouble as he has seeing with his Shamanic vision, he's more likely to shoot us than any of the soldiers down there."

"And I'm thinking that's a good point," Xander agreed. "Riley, I know that whatever is down there is freaking you out, and being new to this Sentinel stuff, you aren't really used to having a Spidey sense, but I'm your Guide, and I can't walk you through this if you try to send me back to the RV."
"Bloody hell, none of us can go in without you, pet. If Clark's becoming a Mazzikim, the rest of our abilities aren't worth a tinker's damn without you."

"Okay, see, logical reasons why I'm going with," Xander pointed out. "Lots of logic."

"Yeah, that and the fact that we're all going down there," Buffy pointed out. "He's safer with us, Riley. Come on. Let's go kick some demon ass."

"And knock a few soldier heads together," Spike said cheerfully. For a second, Riley stood still as the others moved out. Xander could only wait.

"Xander, I know you can handle your own, but..." Riley's voice trailed into silence.

"Hey, I've sent baby Slayers out. I watched them die and gave the survivors the pep talk," Xander said, and he ran his hand over the arm holding him. "If I could have left them home painting their nails while I did the hard stuff, I would have."

"But you couldn't do what they could," Riley finished for
him.

"I can't even open the peanut butter, so breaking demon necks with my bare hands is slightly out of my league."

"Is it harder being the special one who has to go in or the normal one who has to watch others take the risk?" Riley asked quietly.


"Yeah," Riley said after a second. "It is. Don't try to do anything heroic. We need you for the Mazzikim, so until we get there, just stay behind us."

"No problem. Unlike Blair, I'm actually pretty good at staying in the truck. It comes from years of being the one tripping or tripping other people, and everyone is just safer when I'm in the truck."

"Xander, it's not that. I don't think you'd screw up," Riley quickly said.

"Hey, you have lots of precedence on your side if you did think that."
"No, I don't. You handle yourself better than any recruit. I'd take you in my unit in a second, Xander."

"And why am I hearing a but?"

Riley was silent for a second. "We're going up against my old command down there. I don't want you to be in a position to kill one of the good guys, not even one of the misguided good guys who are potentially endangering the world."

Xander thought about that. He carried the guilt of having never done enough, of surviving when so many others, others who were better than he was, died. He'd never carried the guilt of having to send the person he loved to hell. He never slid a knife into some innocent guy's guts on accident. He knew that the others carried guilt that Xander couldn't even imagine. Hearing Riley's pain, Xander suspected the soldier was in that category.

"No problem. I'll keep my head down," he promised his Sentinel. Riley tightened his arms for a second, and then he put one hand under Xander's elbow and started helping him down the slope to the base and their big plan for saving the world... again.
Part Thirty-Eight

Xander was going to have a heart attack. Yep, he was going to drop dead and then his lover and his Sentinel could just fucking suffer.

Xander kept his head down as another small group of soldiers passed them. One offered a faint nod in Riley's direction, and immediately got a blank expression before following his friends down the street.

Riley's hand tightened around Xander's arm, and Xander suspected that Riley was driving himself crazy trying to track all the heartbeats around them, struggling to identify anyone who might have seen through the magical disguise that didn't disguise them as much as make people not notice them. And even in the army clothing they'd stolen, they were so totally noticeable. Buffy's sleeves hung past her fingers. As plans went, this one kinda sucked.
"Let it go, Riley. Jim can track them. Focus on the best path to the medical place," Xander whispered.

"Infirmary," Riley corrected him automatically, and Xander rolled his eye. Right now, he didn't care if they called the thing Bob as long as they got there and back without running into too many people. His heart so wasn't taking this well. He preferred plans with dynamite... hell, right now he'd settle for having a big rock because he was feeling like a guy without a rock, and that was a worse sort of cavalry than a guy with a rock, and yep, he was officially losing his mind. Riley paused and looked over at him, his hand coming up to rest on Xander's shoulder.

"Oi, time for panic later, pet, alright?" Spike asked as he immediately moved in behind Xander, wrapping an arm around him in a pose that was so not Army approved.

"Way to be conspicuous," Xander hissed.

"No one around ta see, pet. Just take a deep breath."

"He's right, we're in the clear," Riley reassured him. Xander closed his eye and tried to remind himself that they'd survived way stupider plans than this before.
"Let's just get this over with," he said as he opened his eye again. Spike pulled down the army cap and gave Xander a leer and a wink before he fell back to Buffy's side with Jim and Blair pulling up the rear. "Still calling this a stupid plan," he muttered as Riley tugged his arm to get him moving.

"We'll be out of here as fast as we can," Riley said in a serious voice that made it pretty clear that if he had his way, as fast as they could would include breaking sound barriers.

"Just focus ahead, Riley. Keep your sight and sound balanced, move the dials up together," Xander coached.

Riley gave him a nod and turned a corner into a more well lit area and walked up the stairs to a square block building that looked like every other square block building. He pulled open the door and entered in front of Xander, stopping at a table set in the hall. Xander could feel the sweat starting as the soldier looked up and immediately lowered his brows in confusion.

Riley showed him a blank page in a small notebook, and the man considered it seriously, the confusion deepening
as he eventually waved them in without a word. He picked up his pen and the list where names and numbers were neatly recorded. Holding it as the others came through the door, the soldier blinked at it as through trying to figure out English, and then he eventually just put it back down without writing anything. Woo hoo for the mojo, Xander thought to himself as they headed for the stairs, Buffy and Spike close behind.

"Up or down?" Xander asked when Riley paused on the first landing.

"I’m not sure. There are so many voices," he said, and his voice sounded freakishly small and unsure. Blair and Jim came through the door into the stairwell last, closing it softly behind them so that all six of them were now on the slightly cramped landing. Of course, maybe just Xander felt cramped because Spike was pressed up against his back and Riley had pulled him close against his chest.

"Forget the senses, Finn," Jim advised him. "You were a soldier here long before you were a Sentinel. They know she's infected with the same thing that sent Sungsen off the deep end. If they haven't killed her, where would they have stashed her?"
"Basement," Riley immediately answered with a relieved sigh. Letting go of Xander's waist, he caught Xander's wrist and started for the stairs going down. On the way past, Jim slapped his shoulder.

"Don't ever think that the senses are the only thing you have going for you, soldier," Jim offered. Riley paused on the first step.

"Thanks for the reminder," he answered before he headed down, Xander in tow. Two stories down, the stairwell ended, and Riley headed through a door into one more white hallway. Two soldiers were coming toward them, but they passed without even making eye contact. Of course, that didn't keep Xander's heart from pounding.

Now Riley strode forward looking every bit the officer in charge as he passed locked metal doors with keypads. At the far end of the hall, a door came open and short man with dark hair and a wicked scar from cheek to chin headed toward them. At first, his eyes slid right past them, and then he paused.

Xander gasped as Riley's hand on his wrist tightened just
a little too much. Scarface stopped and looked at Riley, stepping back in alarm.

"Major Finn?" he asked. He shook his head like a dog climbing out of water and blinked before he stepped forward.

Xander found himself thrust behind Riley who turned to face the soldier.

"Sergeant Jimenez," Riley said calmly, which was more than a little on the impressive side because Xander was all for hyperventilating right now. Hyperventilating and passing out.

"We got word you'd been killed in-country." Sergeant Jimenez looked confused.

"The rest of the unit went down."

"Hostile?"

"Sungsen went hostile," Riley said curtly, and the other man dropped his eyes to the floor, his jaw tightening as he gave a brief nod.
"You're still scheduled on leave," Riley said even though the guy obviously wasn't on leave any more. Spike slid forward until he stood next to Xander right behind Riley.

"I came back early." Jimenez still looked a little bewildered.

"But Karen..." Riley stopped when Jimenez looked up sharply. For several seconds, there was only silence, a silence that Xander obviously didn't understand because Riley eventually just offered a quiet, "I'm very sorry."

"Major, the general never said anything about you returning."

"He doesn't know." Riley stood up a little straighter, and Xander could see that register with Jimenez. The man froze for a second, not even blinking. "He left me out there to die. He let the whole unit die because he didn't call the mission when I recommended it."

"Does he know you're alive?"

"Yes." Riley didn't elaborate, and the two soldiers watched each other. Jimenez shifted from one foot to the other and glanced at the rest of the team. Buffy had
inched closer, but Jim and Blair held position about twenty feet back.

"He didn't even tell me." Jimenez didn't sound exactly happy about that, but if Xander hadn't lost the plot somewhere along the way, Clark, Jimenez, and Riley were the only surviving members of the entire team, so he could see where getting left in the dark might make a person cranky.

Riley gave a sarcastic huff. "He doesn't have our best interests at heart. He reminds me of Dr. Walsh." Jimenez's gaze snapped to Riley at that name.

"Sir?" he asked slowly, pulling the word out uncertainly.

"Sungsen was infected. The general wanted field exercises. He wanted to know the extent of Sungsen's abilities, and he didn't even attempt to remove the infection. Susan Clark was infected at the same time, and as far as I know, he still has her on base."

"So, you've what? You've come here to kill Clark?" Jimenez narrowed his eyes in a clear challenge, but Riley wasn't backing off.
"No, we've come to evaluate Clark, to determine if she has been compromised." Riley sounded way too tense, even with all those pretty words that made the mission sound so much nicer than just coming to kill the woman. Xander was so lost in considering euphemisms that he flinched when Riley's hand landed on his shoulder.

"This is the Slayer and her team," Riley said as he looked back at Buffy.

"Ms. Summers," Jimenez offered warily. He glanced her way, but then focused on Xander, which made Xander want to shake off Riley's hand, but he didn't think his Sentinel would appreciate that too much. But the fact was that Jimenez was watching that hand with more than a little suspicion.

"This is her Shaman," Riley introduced Xander without offering a name. Jimenez's eyes went large for a second.

"He's going to do the evaluation?" That was definitely a not-friendly tone of voice.

"He'll do a fair job. I've known him a long time, and he's lost people to hostiles. He won't make a snap judgment. If anything, I have to worry that he'll give her too much
benefit of the doubt; he has more compassion than common sense."

"A potentially fatal flaw."

"If he were in the army, yes. But he isn't, and he's never going to be." Riley let his hand fall away from Xander's shoulder as he took a step toward Jimenez. "Understood, soldier?"

"Yes, sir," Jimenez answered automatically. He gave Riley an almost smile. "I assume we're off the books here, then?"

"We're so far off that we'll end up buried if the sides fall in," Riley agreed, but Jimenez didn't seem particularly bothered by the potential for treason.

He nodded and glanced down the hall. "And they're all with you?"

Riley kept his eyes focused on Jimenez. "Sungsen took out the entire unit except me." Riley paused for a second. "Sungsen ate the whole unit," he corrected himself. Jimenez jerked.
"Major?" he asked.

"It's why we had to bring a Shaman. We can't have her go that way."

"So the Shaman kills Clark?" Jimenez demanded.

"Absolutely not!" Riley snapped. "The Shaman is here to determine whether she is infected, and if she is, to neutralize her powers. I will take care of Susan." Riley's back went stiff as he stared angrily at Jimenez. For a moment, the two stared at each other and then the other soldier nodded wearily.

"She deserves to have one of us do it," he agreed.

For long seconds, a hushed silence whispered about stories that Xander so did not even want to know. He remembered when his stake had slid into Jesse's chest, and yeah, that hadn't been Jessie, so it wasn't like he'd really killed his friend, but it had still haunted him. And Xander had a pretty good idea that these guys had killed their friends, and that sent a cold chill down his back. Yep, he was adding Riley to his list of people who needed therapy.
"We don't leave our own for the hostiles," Riley said, his tone turning the sentence into a well-worn maxim.

"Never," Jimenez agreed. "I want to go with you. If you have to... I want to say goodbye."

"Soldier, if we have to, then Susan was lost a long time ago."

"Then I'll say goodbye to whatever is left, lying in that hospital bed," he insisted mulishly. Riley didn't answer right away.

"Ri, this hanging out in hallways thing, so high school," Buffy encouraged him with the subtlety of a bull moose, and Riley gave her a weak smile.

"Jimenez, you're with us. Just stay out of the way because not everyone here uses conventional weapons, but they are definitely all on our side," he said firmly.

"Yes, sir. I copy that." The man glanced back, and Xander could see suspicion flash across his face when he looked at Spike. Oh yeah, the magical muck-up people's concentration ball definitely had some flaws because he was a good half-way to figuring out that Spike was a
vampire, Xander could just feel it. "I just came from visiting her. They have the security glass down, but I assume you have a plan for that," Jimenez said as he fell in next to Riley as they walked down the hall.

"Security glass is no problem as long as we don't have an actual security guard. I would hate to have to knock someone out," Buffy offered. Xander waited for Spike's obvious offer, but for once, his vampire actually stayed quiet.

"Just a camera focused on the bed," Jimenez said as he ran his security card through a reader just above the number pad.

"Any sound?" Riley asked.

"Just picture. She went through a phase where she did a lot of screaming, so they turned the mic off." The door clicked and Jimenez pulled it open. "She's quiet now."

Xander came into the observation area just behind Riley and Jimenez. A large glass wall with a metal mesh embedded into it separated the two halves of the room. On their side, a black plastic and metal chair sat next to the glass. On the other side, a woman with a nose too
large for her face was lying on the white sheets with tubes dripping something into both arms and a dozen wires running under the gray blanket. Her arms lay on top of the blanket, and brown restraints anchored her wrists to the solid frame. She didn't move.

"There's the camera," Jimenez said as he nodded toward a box on their side of the glass that pointed into the other room.

"Camera, no problem. We have our handy-dandy confuse the techno-crap gizmo," Buffy said as she pulled a small round donut shaped ring of metal out of her oversized army surplus jacket. "The finest in witchly electronics." She pulled the chair over and stood on it, pressing the metal thing to the side of the camera. After a second, a soft green glow sort of visually pinged. "Problem solved," Buffy shrugged. Xander might have taken her casual tone for uncaring, only he could see the way she carefully avoided looking at the pale body lying in the bed. She returned to the far side of the room, and Riley's fingers brushed her arm as she passed him. She gave him a small smile.

"Xander?" Jim asked from the door. "You need us in there?"
Xander jumped, and Riley's hand landed at the small of his back. "Soldier?" Riley asked him. Yeah, Xander knew that Riley was just trying to avoid the other guy getting his name, but he appreciated that the secret identity was 'soldier' and not 'freaking out guy.'

"They left her alone like that," Xander said to explain his reaction.

"I've been here with her as much as I can," Jimenez quickly objected.

Riley shook his head. "He means that they didn't let you go in there. They didn't let you hold her hand. Xander, we need to know if she's a danger. We both know that if she's overcome by the Mazzikim infection, the glass and restraints won't mean anything."

Blinking away the world, Xander focused on the soul in front of him. Her soul cord was orangey pink, but Xander could see the shadow that had attached itself. The darkness clung to her soul, and Xander stopped breathing as he could almost feel the evil pressing in against Clark's very soul. Stepping forward, Xander put his palm against the glass. He could see through the
shadow the way you could see blue sky in the cracks between the clouds on a stormy day, but her soul was so small, little more than a string and quickly fading to a thread.

"Xander?" Riley asked.

"She's taking it out with her," Xander said as he cocked his head and looked at the scene in front of him. Clark's emaciated cord undulated slowly, the darkness sliding over it like oil, but he could feel death pressing in at the edges of the scene.

"Pet, ya have to explain a bit better than that," Spike said, his hands now resting on Xander's waist, anchoring him.

"The darkness, it's there. It's pressing in on her, wrapping around her," he tried to explain. "It wants in her cord, it wants to possess her cord, only her cord isn't letting it in. It's suffocating her soul. Spike, it's horrible. You have to stop it. You have to do something." Xander could feel his words slip out faster and faster as he started backing away from the glass wall, his heart pounding heavily in his chest as he watched with horror.
"Pet, blink it away. Focus on me," Spike's voice demanded, but Xander couldn't look away from the slow death in the other half of the room.

"Pet," Spike snarled, and strong fingers wrapped around the back of Xander's neck and pulled him around so he was facing the other way. The double helix of burgundy and midnight of Spike's perfectly twined cord distracted him from the horror. "Focus on me. Put that sight away." Xander blinked, and Spike's face came into focus. Glancing around, Xander could see Jimenez and Riley both staring at him with undisguised horror.

"We'll keep watch," Jim said as he pulled Blair out of the room.

"We have to get in there. We can't let her... like that," Jimenez said, his teeth clenched.

"Oh, I'm so with you there," Buffy said. "This is where I really like being the Slayer." She stepped forward, but Riley held up a hand.

"One minute," he said as he pulled up his sleeve so that it covered his hand. Then he scrubbed the glass where Xander had pressed his palm to it. "I'm not making it easy
for them to find him," he said simply as he finished and stepped back.

"I so hate this secret military crap," Buffy muttered and then she sent a side kick into the center of the glass wall. A deep crack thundered in the small room and a spiderweb of white spread across the wall. "Way to not get the job done," Buffy huffed unhappily before she aimed a second kick at the same spot. A section of glass shattered, the metal grid ripping so that there was a rough and dangerous hole connecting the two halves of the room.

"That's impact-resistant. It should take a tank..." Jimenez stopped and just looked at Buffy. She smiled sweetly.

"It's good to be the Slayer." Then her eyes slid to Clark and all expression slipped off her face.

"I'll do this. Spike, take him outside," Riley said as he pulled out his sidearm.

"Riley," Buffy said quietly.

"We don't leave our own for the hostiles," Riley repeated as he stepped toward the hole.
"Riley, no, wait," Xander said as he pushed away from Spike.

"She'd want this," Riley said as he turned emotionless eyes toward Xander. Years ago, Xander had been fooled when Buffy looked at him with those eyes. He'd actually believed that she didn't feel anything for them anymore, but he was older and wiser now.

"If we can't help her, she would want you to do it. But can we leave the last resort for last? I mean, I might not be able to actually help, and a little part of me is really scared that if I try to help I might do something really stupid like give the Mazzikim the opening it needs to get into Clark's soul, but..." Xander stopped and chewed his lip.

"You think you can help her?" Jimenez asked hopefully.

"I think it's a long shot," Xander said carefully.

"Then bloody well let soldier-boy take care of this," Spike grumbled, but he didn't pull Xander away.

"If I have to, I will. I just need to try," Xander said as he
looked to Spike, hoping he understood because Spike was the one who he needed to convince. Spike's demon didn't care about Clark. Spike's demon just wanted Xander safe, and Xander could see that need tugging on Spike as emotion made him tighten his lips.

"Right then, Finn goes in and makes sure she can't get her hands on you if she turns, right?" Spike asked as he stepped forward. Xander nodded. "Bloody hate this," Spike muttered softly, and Xander could just imagine how much Spike hated the fact that only Riley could protect him from a Mazzikim.

"I'll protect him," Riley promised as he stepped forward and rested his hand on Xander's shoulder. "And I'll finish it if I have to."

Spike reached up and rested a hand against Xander's cheek without sparing Riley a look. "Pet, I know you'd save the world if ya could, but ya won't save anyone if you don't look out for yourself first. If she starts turning, you pull that power out of her and let Finn finish it, you understand?" Spike stared at Xander.

"Got it," Xander agreed weakly. A part of him wanted to leave and let the others deal with this, but he knew he'd
never be able to live with himself if he didn't at least try. He turned toward the glass wall, and Riley used his sleeve-covered arm to push chunks of hanging glass free before stepping through to the other side.

"Okay, you do know that I don't know what I'm doing here, yes?" Xander asked as he caught a glimpse of Jimenez's hopeful expression.

"I know that you're going to do your best and that if she dies it won't be because of anything you did or didn't do," Riley answered calmly. When Xander stepped through, Riley rested his hand on Xander's shoulder and guided him to the side of the bed.

"Man with friends like yours, you so need to find a new job," Xander muttered to the silent woman. "Well, except for Riley and Jimenez because they like you, but your other friends, in the not-friends but co-workers and superiors way—they're not doing right by you." Xander blinked into his Shamanic vision.

The infected cord bent away, and Xander reached out for it only to find Riley's blue cord suddenly tangling with his blue cord, and all the blue pushed Clark's cord farther away like two magnets repelling each other. Xander
blinked away the sight.

"Okay, it's not that I don't appreciate the overprotectiveness here, because I do, although I realize that I'm in danger of losing my man-membership for saying that. However, I can't work with her cord if you don't stop with the trying to get it away from me," Xander crossed his arms and glared at Riley, who didn't even bother to deny it.

"Fine, but one word, and I'll finish this," Riley finally answered after a long silence he walked to the foot of the bed, which gave him a nice clear shot of Clark, and the idea of Riley shooting someone who was unconscious in a bed really did creep him out more than he wanted to admit. Jimenez whispered something to Riley, but Xander ignored them and blinked into his vision again.

This time Clark's cord didn't retreat when Xander reached out. The shadowed cord slid across his fingers leaving his skin chilled and slimyish. Tightening his hold on the cord, Xander slid a fingernail into the edge and tried to catch an edge of the shadow as it flowed around the cord. The first three times, the shadow slid away from him, feeling like a live eel under his hands, but the fourth time, he could feel his fingers catch the edge of
something that felt suspiciously chicken-skinish. His fingers sank into it and he shivered with the cold as he pulled carefully. A chunk of shadow twisted in his hand like a worm, helpless until Xander's own cord drifted close, and then it darted out of his grip and clung to the new cord. Before Xander could react, a half dozen other strings had migrated from Clark to himself, and the shadows danced across the blue of his cord feeling like ants running down his spine.

Xander backed away, and almost didn't hear Riley.

"Xander!" Riley almost shouted, and Xander blinked away the sight. Spike was inside the hole in full gameface, and Riley was between Xander and Clark, his gun up and ready to fire even though she was still motionless. Buffy had ripped a leg off the chair and looked ready to beat to death whatever needed beating.

"No, no, I think I actually got some of the infection off her," Xander said as he stepped forward and laid a hand on Riley's arm. His guts rolled and he backed away from his Sentinel.

"What happened? What's wrong?" Riley asked as he turned away from Clark and faced Xander, his head
cocked as he obviously used his senses on Xander.

"Um, I think some of the infection got on me, and the infected bits aren't fond of... you know," Xander finished lamely as he realized they had company. Jimenez stood on the far side of the glass watching with his hand on his weapon, but he wasn't shooting anyone yet, which was good. Surprising but good.

"Come here," Riley holstered his gun and held an arm out, but Xander couldn't do it. Blinking into his vision, he could see the shadow bits pulling away from Riley, their efforts pulling at his own cord. Going on the theory that what was bad for the shadow was good for him, Xander forced himself to step into Riley's embrace even with the oogy-boogy crawling across his skin. Spike stepped closer and rested a hand on Xander's arm, and Xander watched all four cords circle, his own shadowed cord nearly swallowed in Riley's cord as Spike's double helix wrapped around them both.

Xander gasped as the contact stripped the shadows from his soul, leaving him feeling sensitive like the fresh, pink skin under a newly picked scab. When the shivering discomfort finally stopped, he sagged into Riley's embrace and reached out his hand for Spike. Spike
interlocked their fingers and held on tightly.

"Please tell me that no one has been in here because I may have felt bad that they didn't let anyone hold her hand, but if someone was in here holding her hand, I'm so going to have to check them for infection." Xander looked to Jimenez as he rested his head against Riley's shoulder. Jimenez's eyebrows had pretty much disappeared into his hairline.

"She's been in total isolation. Minimal contact and never without isolation suits," Jimenez offered.

"Do we need to check the others?" Riley asked him. Spike just drew soothing circles on Xander's arm.

"I don't think so. I mean, the infection only jumped to me after I pulled on it, so I don't think it's going to jump easily, which begs the question of how they got infected in the first place.

"I don't know, Sport," Riley said, picking up Jim's nickname for him. "I wasn't with the team, and the report the general gave me was vague enough to be laughable. I pressed for more details and got the infamous 'need to know' line."
"I was with the team. We were supposed to pick up a Shaman. He was supposedly some big magical sort, and the general wanted him for the Sunnydale mission," Jimenez offered softly. "It was an eyes only briefing, top security."

"Sunnydale?" Buffy demanded. "There is no Sunnydale, there's just a big Hellmouth sized crater in the middle of nowhere. He knows this, yes?"

Jimenez dropped his gaze to the ground. "He wants to excavate. He thinks there's something powerful down there he can use to figure out where you got your power. You weren't strong until you hit Sunnydale, so he thinks he can find whatever gave you superpowers and..."

"Well, shit. Okay, this is the part where I go ballistic, right? I think I'm entitled to some ballisticness," Buffy demanded as she looked around the room.

"Feel free, luv," Spike offered. "Them banging around a hellmouth, closed or not, is soddin' idiotic, and for one, I say they deserve whatever they find."

"And nothing in Sunnydale gave me power. I was born a
potential slayer, and when the last slayer died, I became the slayer, no mystical objects required. Whatever is buried down there... so not of the good in a huge way." Buffy leaned back against the wall and thumped her head against it a couple of times. "We finish up here, and then we go and sabotage the Sunnydale archeological dig. You know, I was planning on a vacation. Me, Riley, warm beach, lots of sand."

"Buffy," Riley said sadly.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll send a baby Slayer on vacation for me," she shrugged. "Duty calls, but can we take care of this pending disaster before we move on to the next one?"

"Speaking of pending disasterage, the infection is off me, but let's not have anyone else get too close to her because I do not want the rest of you getting infected," Xander sighed. He pushed out of Riley's arms and reclaimed his hand from Spike as he faced Clark again.

"Are you going to be okay?" Buffy asked. "This is so not worth dying for."

"Yeah, she is Buff. You know you'd risk your life for one victim," Xander said quietly before he went back to
Clark's bed. Xander repeated the process of pulling slimy bits of shadow free so often that his arms ached from the struggle and his own soul ached in a way he couldn't describe. If he felt this bad having bits and pieces of the Mazzikim cling to him between Riley-hugs, Xander didn't even want to think how crappy Clark felt. Hopefully the drippy things were giving her some good drugs. Right now, Xander wouldn't mind a few good drugs himself.

By the time he pulled the last of the shadow free and ran his hands down the length of Clark's weakened cord, Xander could barely stand and his shoulder screamed in pain. Xander stepped back from the bed, and Riley's arms went around him, giving him that temporary creepiness that melted into relief as the Sentinel's presence drove the shadows away. If anything, Clark looked worse now, dark shadows making her eyes look sunk into her face and her skin a pale yellow.

"Is she going to be okay?" Jimenez asked from his spot sitting on the ground with his back to the glass. Buffy was balancing on the three-legged chair and Spike was leaning against the wall. Xander was guessing more time had passed than he thought. He glanced down at the sleeping woman.
"I don't know," he admitted. "She's not infected any more, but she's really weak. If the doctors can get her body healed, she'll be fine, but I'm not sure I pulled the Mazzikim off her in time."

"You've given her a chance, that's all she would want. She's a fighter. You yourself said she was taking the Mazzikim out with her rather than give in, so she'll fight even harder now," Riley said with confidence. "I've never known Susan to give up in a fight."

"She can be one seriously hard-headed woman," Jimenez agreed with a chuckle.

"Yeah, but she's so quiet about it, you don't know you've been bulldozed until an hour after she's gotten her way," Riley said fondly. With one arm still wrapped around Xander's waist, he reached forward and rested a hand on her arm. "She's running a temperature. We should get out of here before one of the medical alarms goes off and we have nurses to deal with," he said.

"Major?" Jimenez asked. Riley looked over.

"You not coming back to the unit... it's more than just the general, isn't it?"
Riley didn't answer right away, he just tightened his arm around Xander's waist. "It isn't an infection, it isn't dangerous," Riley answered without actually giving an answer.

Jimenez nodded. "I guessed that. Your friend there could pull an infection off you with that weird hocus pocus hand magic, right?" Jimenez waved his hands in the air so that it looked like he was trying to trace a flower in the air. Xander looked at him in confusion.

"Hand magic?" Xander asked.

Spike started laughing as he stepped through the hole in the glass and headed for the door. "Yeah, pet, you looked like a right Shaman doin' that." Spike made similar hand gestures in midair, and Xander realized that both men were imitating him. "Give you some feathers and a rattle, and you'd get along perfect with that git Giles hired for the ghost problem."

"Oh god, I looked like a weird dork, didn't I?" Xander asked in horror as Riley pushed him toward the hole in the wall.
"You looked like a man risking his own life to save a woman he doesn't even know," Riley insisted, but Xander was way more convinced by Spike's smirk. Yep, he'd looked like a dork. It was just a good thing that years of high school had prepared him for it.

Buffy opened the door to the hall, and Jim stood just on the other side with a serious expression on his face. "Finn, can I talk to you out here, without him?" Jim glared at Jimenez, making it pretty clear that he didn't like the man. Although really, Xander realized, Jim pretty much looked at everyone like that when he first met them. It was just special people like Buffy who he continued glaring at after he got to know them.

"Uh, sure," Riley said as he headed for the door. Spike caught Xander's wrist and pulled him out of Riley's arms at the door, and for a second, Riley stopped and looked ready to pull Xander back into a hug, but then he blinked and followed Jim out into the hall. Spike and Xander followed, leaving Buffy to babysit Jimenez. Jim walked to a door and stood in front of it with his arms crossed.

"You want to explain this to me, Finn?" Jim asked. Xander looked from Riley to Jim in confusion, but Riley looked just as confused.
"Explain what?"

Jim tapped the door. "What do you hear, Finn?" he asked.

"Tapping."

"Oh man, listen to the far side, it's like echolocation," Blair explained. "Listen to the tap bouncing off the walls on the far side of the door."

Jim tapped again.

Riley shook his head. "I don't know what I'm listening for."

"You're listening to the sound of that tap echoing off a deep staircase. Whatever is making us uncomfortable is down there. What is this general of yours playing at?" Jim asked, and that was his cranky face.

"Wait, you mean there's more weirdness? Is the general just collecting weirdness as a hobby, because I could get him a nice starter set of stamps," Xander offered. Jim reached over and rested a hand on Xander's arm.
"Let's get out of here," Riley suggested, and Xander could tell from the way Riley was looking at him that what the Sentinel really meant was let's get the exhausted Guide away from here.

"I'm not leaving an enemy at my back," Jim said seriously. "Whatever is down there, it's setting off every alarm I have."

"No joke," Blair made a face. "I'm guessing this is a take care of it now or take care of it later situation because even his spirit guide is growling at the door."

"Spirit guide? You mean you can see the cat from your dreams?" Riley asked in a tone of voice that clearly called Jim's sanity into question. Jim spared Blair one dirty look, and Xander could read that pretty easily as 'you just had to tell them, didn't you, Chief?' Blair just looked back utterly unfazed.

"It's not from my dreams. The spirit guide is just as important as your actual Guide," Jim insisted. "And once you find yours, if you ignore it, I can promise you that bad things will happen." Jim reached out and draped his arm across Blair's shoulder as his expression made it very
clear the subject was closed. "Right now, the spirit guide wants to take care of whatever is behind this door. So, get that friend of yours and find out what the government is hiding in here." Riley nodded and headed back to the room.

"I miss simple missions. Go in, blow up a school, get out. Nothing is simple anymore," Xander complained softly as he leaned into Spike, his whole body one giant ache.

Part Thirty-Nine

"Are you sure there's another level below us?" Jimenez asked doubtfully. Jim's face went from cranky to just flat out homicidal, and the man held out his hand in a placating gesture. "Okay, I'm believing you, but I don't know anyone who's mentioned a lower level. There are a few people left from the Sunnydale disaster, and they tell stories that make the rest of us steer clear of anything that even smells like a secret project."
"Graham and Thompson transferred out, I turned in my official resignation, Ellis was promoted to Washington, Scott, Peterson, and Walczak were all killed on mission with Petru going on long-term disability. Who's actually left?" Riley asked.

"Sounds like a whitewash job," Jim pointed out. "That happened in my unit, everyone ended up dead or leaving the service. The higher ups were running a game they couldn't afford to lose, and those of us who'd been around a while posed a danger because we might put things together." Jim just looked thoughtful, but Blair had an expression of sympathetic pain on his face as he leaned into his partner.

"Seems likely," Riley agreed. "We don't actually lose many people, not until Sungsen, and we've lost a lot of the old Initiative personnel."

Jimenez looked at Riley for several seconds before answering. "Okay, if what you're suggesting is true. If the general is going Maggie Walsh on us, what exactly are we supposed to do?" he asked.

"You don't do anything," Buffy said. "Go get some dinner."
Go watch a movie with someone, but do something that establishes that you're somewhere else."

"Oh, and you have a plan to deal with this?" Jimenez asked.

"We do our best work without plans," Spike said with a wicked smile with just enough fang to make Jimenez back up a step. He looked toward Riley.

"Spike is one of the good guys," Riley sighed. "Annoying as hell, but on the right side," he added as he gave Spike a dirty look. Spike just smiled wider, showing most of a fang. "And Buffy's right, you need to establish an alibi. The magic that disguises us isn't going to cover the hole in the wall back there, so when the nurses come through for a bedcheck, the alarms are going to go off. Get yourself out of here."

"And leave you to clean up the mess? Not happening," Jimenez insisted.

"Ray," Riley said, his voice verging on annoyed.

"Major," Jimenez returned in the same tone of voice as he crossed his arms over his chest, which just happened
to show off some seriously scary arm muscles. Yep, it didn't take demonic bits for guys to do the dominance bit, Xander realized. "Karen is gone. My family died years ago, and Karen's family can't look at me without seeing their dead daughter and their unborn grandson. And now, I find out that the general I've been fighting for is doing something that goes against everything I believe in. Do you really think I'm going to walk away from this? What the fuck do I have to lose?"

"Your life," Buffy said quickly.

"I risk that every day, lady."

"No," Riley added, holding up a hand to keep Buffy from answering that. "She means you won't be able to come back to this life. They find out that you helped with this, and they'll bury you under the stockade, and that's if you're lucky. What happened to Forrest and Sungsen, don't think that it's not going to happen again."

"Oh man, I don't even want to know what happened with Forrest, but if you're suggesting the government stands back while soldiers get turned into demons like with Sungsen, I'm voting against this president next election," Blair complained. "And I don't blame Jimenez for being
willing to walk away from this life. This sucks."

"The kid is right; I'm not leaving you to fight this, Major. I don't know why you trust a vampire at your back, but I don't, and your Shaman looks ready to pass out with exhaustion."

Spike's arm tightened around Xander as he tried to stand up a little straighter, but the fact was that he was pretty close to running out of steam.

"The longer we debate this, the more time someone has to find the mess we made. We're pressing our luck now. So let's soddin' get in there and get this mess taken care of before someone finds us and we've got a bigger mess ta deal with," Spike complained.

"I'm seconding that," Buffy agreed. "We've been here for over two hours, and someone has to check on Clark eventually. So, let's get in there and take care of whatever needs taking care of."

"And after this, you lose my number," Jim said darkly as he gave Buffy a nasty look.

"I won't even call to get you the money for that tiny little
scratch in the truck," Buffy smiled sweetly as she pulled the donut like disk thing out of her jacket and held it to the door. The thing flashed and she tucked it away. "Okay, security is off, so does anyone have any ideas about getting in there? I really don't want to dislocate my own knee trying to kick down solid steel."

"I can override the lock," Riley said as he pulled a small tool kit out of his jacket and knelt in front of the door.

"Major?" Jimenez asked in surprise.

"I survived the Initiative. I learned to not trust locked doors," Riley said as he took the number pad apart and worked with the wires. "I just didn't think I had to go opening doors around here. Spike, keep him up here. If the rest of us can take care of this thing, we will, but he's too tired to get in the middle of a fight."

"Don't bloody tell me how to take care of him," Spike snapped. "And bloody right he's staying up here. Boy can't even put one foot in front of the other, and after he fought off a Mazzikim, the least you can do is take care of the nasty down there."

"Play nice and share," Buffy sighed as the door clicked
"If you're coming with us," she said to Jimenez, "then remember that me Slayer. That means if I tell you to duck, you duck. You don't go looking to Riley to confirm my orders."


"Sergeant, Buffy is in command. In the field, you do exactly what she says, no matter how unwise it seems. We have a clear chain of command here, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Jimenez answered. "I know how to follow orders. But unlike you guys, I need to get a weapon." Spike reached into his coat and pulled out a pretty nasty looking short machine gun.

"You... but you're a vampire," Jimenez said in shock as Spike handed the weapon over.

"Like I said, he's annoying but on the right side, you take his orders too," Riley said as he faced a deep stairwell.

"We'll wait on the landing," Spike offered as the others headed down the stairs. "If ya get in trouble, scream like
a girl and I'll come save your sorry arse."

Xander didn't catch Riley's answer as the others started down the stairs.

"Chief, you wait here," Jim said as he pressed a hand to Blair's chest.

"Oh man, don't start," Blair said as he crossed his arms. "You're the one who wanted me to go undercover. You know I don't need babysitting," he complained.

"Chief, I knew how to control the situation that time. And you don't need babysitting. You just need to say back when we're talking about a demon. I don't want to be wondering where you are. Besides, Xander's staying here."

"Xander's done something useful," Blair grumped unhappily.

Jim brought a hand up and rested it against the side of Blair's neck, fingers curving around to the back. "You taught him how to use those gifts of his, and you taught Riley how to control his senses well enough to function in the field, so you've done a lot, Chief. Now it's my turn to
do something more useful than threatening to write Buffy a ticket. Wait here."

"Man, Mother Ellison strikes again," Blair sighed but he sat heavily on the step.

"I'll be back," Jim promised before he turned and headed down the stairs. Xander sat next to him.

"If you're stayin' here, I'm going to get close enough to see what they're up to," Spike said as he pulled a cigarette out and stuck it in his mouth. With the army outfit and the bleached hair and black nail polish, it made Spike look pretty damn strange. "If anyone comes through the door, remember that the mojo will make them want to not notice you. Just use your powers to encourage that, and you'll be fine," Spike told Blair, and then he headed down the stairs, his heavy boots weirdly quiet on the stairs.

"Left in the truck again," Xander joked softly.

"Yeah, and I'm thinking it's smart in your case. You look wiped out," Blair offered as his hand rested against Xander's thigh.
Xander tilted his head to look at his friend and one-time lover. "Yeah. But you know, I got to save one. There have been so many I couldn't save that I forgot how good it feels to save one."

Blair studied him for a second and then smiled. "I hear you. Sometimes I forget just how much like Jim you really are. You guys have guilt complexes that could eat Cleveland."

"Don't say that around me. Coming from the hellmouth, I firmly believe that saying things like that leads to things eating Cleveland, which we just don't have time to deal with right now," he laughed weakly before he pushed himself to his feet. "Okay, let's go see what trouble they got into."

"Whoa buddy, we are officially in the truck, here," Blair protested.

"This is me being all truck-like or in-the-truck-like, but I just want the truck to be a little closer," Xander shrugged. "I promise to stay well behind Spike."

"Yeah, and Spike is going to bite me for letting you go down there at all. Xander, you look like you just ran three
marathons and a triathlon in one day."

"That would be kinda hard to do in one day, wouldn't it?" Xander asked as he reached the first landing and followed the stairs around another set of turns. Someone had buried the last level deep.

"That's the point. Xander, this is not smart on a grand scale."

"Yeah," Xander said as he smiled at his partner in disobedience, "but you know you want to see what Jim is up to. We'll stay safely fray-adjacent."

"Yeah, well you're explaining that logic to Jim because, man, I am so not going there."

Xander headed down the last set of stairs and stopped outside a door barely cracked.

"JUMP!" Buffy yelled. Xander turned and looked at Blair who had a horrified expression. Xander nudged the door open onto an enormous room and watched Spike sail into a huge, blobby, Mt. Everest shaped demon with short tentacles circling the base of his mountain-like mass. Spike got in several strikes and then leapt back.
Riley was caught by one foot and Jimenez was firing his weapon at the base of the tentacle that was holding Riley, which didn't seem to do much but make the nearby tentacles wave around more.


Xander looked and Buffy was on the far side, wielding her broken chair leg against a tentacle that had Jim by both feet. Jim was calmly placing shot after shot from his handgun into the creature's center. His gun ran out and he loaded a new clip even as the beast pulled him closer one inch at a time.

"Jim!" Blair cried as he ran into the room. Darting around Spike who made a grab for him, Blair got behind Jim and grabbed his belt.

"Chief, get out of here!" Jim snapped as he put three more shots into the blob.

"No way, man," Blair said as he set his feet against the floor and started pulling for all he was worth. Jim just
calmly fired two more shots before Buffy moved in and attacked the tentacle with renewed energy.

"I'm low on ammo," Jimenez called. Spike pulled a clip from his pocket and tossed it in the soldier's direction before he leaped again, landing on the demon's big blobby middle and punching deep into the folds with his knife. A tentacle reached up for him, and Spike leaped away again right before Jimenez fired a new round into the creature.

"Spike!" Xander called. "Riley's in trouble."

"Can bloody see that. Get out of here!" Spike snarled. Jimenez's gun fell silent, and Spike leaped onto the creature again, stabbing so deep that his arm was purply with demon blood. Xander darted forward and grabbed Riley around the waist, adding his own weight to Riley's struggles just like Blair was fighting to keep Jim away from the creature. Jim and Blair and Buffy were having better luck though because Jim was a good two feet from the mountain shaped beast, and Riley only had six or seven inches to go.

"Xander, get away," Riley snapped as he brought the heel of his free boot down on the tentacle, beating it as hard
as he could.

"No getting eaten!" Xander insisted as he worked harder to pull Riley free. The soldier grunted but Xander couldn't get enough leverage to pull him free. Blinking into his Shamanic sight, Xander could see Jimenez's greeny-aqua cord streaked with mustard yellow fear and Riley's blue cord, and a deep black pool where the demon cord should be. Each tentacle undulated with its own miniature cord and Xander reached out and grabbed the soul cord attached to the tentacle holding Riley. Cold shot up his arm as Xander pulled, and suddenly Riley was sliding back, and Xander was sliding forward.

"Xander!" Riley screamed. Xander let go of the soul cord, but suddenly couldn't pull back. He felt warm hands around his waist, pulling at him. Blinking out of his Shamanic vision, Xander saw that the cord had grabbed his wrist and was now pulling him toward the demon.

"Spike!" Riley yelled as he threw his body over Xander right before a ripple raised a cave-shaped opening at the base of the demon and Xander was pulled in, Riley on top of him.

"Fuck!" Riley cursed. Xander felt something heavy fall
across his legs and then they were in the dark.

"Riley? Riley, are you okay?" Xander asked as he reached up. Riley was inches above him, kneeling across him. When Xander felt Riley's arms shaking from fatigue, Xander figured out that he was bearing the weight of the demon, keeping it off Xander.

"Oh fuck," Xander agreed. Blinking into Shamanic vision again, he looked at their small flesh prison. Riley's face was twisted with pain, and a drop of sweat slid from Riley's face to fall onto Xander's arm. He didn't have much room to work, but Xander reached out into the inky black pool of the demon's soul and ripped, digging his fingers into the icy cold and pulling. His elbow hit Riley's chest, and the Sentinel nearly screamed with pain.

"Oh no. Riley, you have to dial down touch," Xander said as he abandoned the demon attack and put his hand on Riley's chest. "Riley, I know you're hurting right now, but you have control over that pain. Find the dial for touch. See that in your mind. It looks just like that weird radio thing of your father's, with the black dials. What number is it on?"

"Eight," Riley grunted the word.
"Okay, just listen to me. Move that down to seven and everything hurts a little less. You can feel it move under your fingers, right?"

Riley didn't answer as he panted, but Xander kept going.

"Okay, slide it down to six. I know that the knob is stubborn, but you can turn it. Turn it down to six and feel the pain fade because it doesn't matter. You have control over it."

Blair had told him to go slow, to confirm that Riley was with him on each number change, but Xander just didn't have time.

"Turn the dial down to five and then four and then three. You can do it. Make the dial move. You have control over your dials, so do this for me, Riley. Turn the pain down so that you can just feel it. Five to four to three, Ri. Come on, you can do it."

Xander was starting to panic until Riley took a deep breath. "Three, got it," he agreed.

"Okay, we're going to be fine, Xander said as he felt
something brush against his feet which were still outside the creature.

Riley didn't answer, but then he was kinda busy trying to keep the weight of Mt. St. Demon off Xander's face. Xander reached out again, carefully digging his fingers into the demon's soul until his fingers brushed the rough skin of the actual beast. Since Xander couldn't effectively pull, he settled for shredding the bits of soul he could rip free. The skin trapping them rippled, and light appeared as the edge of the monster raised for a second.

Riley gasped for air, and Xander shredded faster, his fingers getting tangled like when Willow had tried to teach him cat's cradle with that multicolored yarn of hers. Xander had ended up pretty much tying his own hands together.

Above them, the skin shuddered again, and Xander felt someone grab his feet. "No! Riley!" Xander yelled as someone pulled at him. Xander reached out for Riley's shirt, and the man shoved his hand away. The move cost Riley his leverage, and he crashed to the ground, crushed by the weight as Xander slid free.

"Riley!" Xander yelled as he found himself face to face
with a gamefaced Spike. Buffy knelt at the side of the dead demon and forced the end of the chair leg into the crack between the demon and the floor and started leveraging it up.

"Get him back!" Spike snarled, and Xander found warm hands pulling him away from the demon.

"Riley's still under there!" Xander struggled against the hands.

"Sport, calm down. I'm not letting you go. You need to give them space to work, and you're too tired to be of any help," Jim said. Xander couldn't breathe. No. No, he couldn't lose Riley like this. Buffy was crying as she drove her lever in deeper and used all her slayer strength to lift the edge. The tears rolled down her face, but she didn't make a sound. Spike put his back to the dead demon and grabbed the edge, pulling until the muscles on the sides of his neck corded.

"No, no, he can't be dead," Xander whispered even though he knew the words wouldn't help. He'd prayed the same words when Rebekah had been burned and lay dying in his arms. He'd prayed those words when he'd come back to a dust village and found the woman he'd
grown to respect lying dead in the dust, flies gathering around the blood that had pooled between her legs. The words never helped. Xander couldn't catch his breath and the world started going grey at the edges as he slid down to the floor, Jim's arms still around him.

"Sport, don't count him out yet," Jim said, and a large hand brushed the hair away from Xander's face.

Spike was struggling, but he only had the edge of the creature four or five inches off the ground. Jimenez was on his stomach, reaching under the mass, but it wasn't working.

"Chief, take him," Jim said, and Xander found himself wrapped in Blair's arms. He leaned his head against Blair's shoulder and tried to hold his breath as he imagined how long it would take for Riley to suffocate out there. There was a series of pops from the stairwell, and then Jim came back in with a section of handrail, the edges ragged where Jim had blasted that metal to get it free. Xander could feel his muscles tremble as Jim drove his own impromptu lever as deep as he could and then he applied his own muscle to the mass. The opening lifted another inch.
"I can feel him. Just a little more," Jimenez called, his own head now under the beast. Spike let go, and Jim gave a grunt as he struggled under the new weight, but the Spike was there, putting his shoulder under Jim's lever and forcing the mass up another six inches.

Jimenez pushed himself deeper with his toes so that now his whole upper body was under the creature.

"I got him!" Jimenez called triumphantly. Xander watched as the man's legs squirmed ineffectively.

"Got it?" Jim asked Spike. Spike gave a curt nod and Jim let go of the rail and grabbed Jimenez by his belt. Heaving as hard as he could, Jim pulled him a few inches out.

"I can't hold it," Buffy cried out.

"Chief!" Jim called as he doubled his efforts, leaning back and putting all his muscle into it.

"The beta boys to the rescue," Blair said as he gave Xander a push, and he grabbed one of Jimenez's legs and started pulling as hard as he could. Xander grabbed the other leg, but he could feel his muscles tremble even as
he threw everything he had into pulling Jimenez clear.

They had all of Jimenez and the top half of Riley out before Buffy's chair leg bent and snapped. The extra weight drove Spike to his knees as the beast's body trapped Riley again.

"It's okay, take a break," Riley whispered, as he lay panting.

"Don't plan to be here when the idiots figure out we've killed their pet Nagay," Spike snorted, but he didn't go right back to work either. He stretched his head one way to the other while Buffy sat down next to Riley and stroked his back.

"We'll have you out in a second," Buffy said, and the tears had dried into cheetah trails down her face.

"I can wait," Riley said as he reached up to hold her hand.

"Do I even want to know why they have a mountain in their basement?" Blair asked as Jimenez scooted back and rested his head on his hands.

"I was thinking that," Buffy said as she held Riley's hand.
"I was too tired to actually ask, but I was thinking it."

"They can give magic users a boost, so you have a minor level witch or Shaman, and this thing can make them into a real threat," Spike said as he poked the demon with the broken hand rail. "We're just lucky they kept this one small and kept those damn tentacles trimmed."

"That's small?" Jimenez asked as he lifted his head. "This is the biggest demon I've ever taken on, and I've been doing this for ten years."

Buffy snorted. "You government guys think you have all the fun. They give me the contracts for the big guys, they just let you clean up the little stuff, but this new general... he's so off my Christmas card list. I thought it was bad when Maggie was collecting random demon bits, but going after magic users is so not of the good. This guy is looking to get dead and you'd better believe I'm so telling on him."

"Yeah, you can make unhappy calls to the president later," Spike interrupted what was looking to turn into a good old-fashioned rant. "Right now, we need ta get this thing off soldier boy here and shift our arses out of here before the day shift shows up."
"Day shift. Oh god, Spike, we have to get you out of here." Xander looked up as though he could see the lightening sky in the ceiling.

"Not time to go yet, pet, and you need ta not be tellin' me my business, not when I'm this angry with you," Spike did not look like he was kidding at all.

"Hey, back off the kid," Jimenez jumped in, and Spike growled at him, flashing into gameface.

"Stand down, Jimenez," Riley said. "Xander knows the chain of command, and he was so far out of it, that he deserves whatever Spike does. Personally, I plan to be in the line that's going to form right behind Spike because I plan to let the kid have it, myself," Riley said wearily.

"Ri?" Xander asked softly.

Riley shook his head and held out his hand. "Come here, idiot Guide of mine." Xander slid forward, sighing with relief when he took Riley's free hand.

"I'm sorry," Xander said to Buffy as he made eye contact with her over Riley.
"Hey," she shrugged. "We all screw up sometimes. You made it a doozy, though."

Xander flinched away from the truth. "Yeah, but screw up and move on, right?" he asked. Buffy smiled at him.

"Yeah, that's all we can do. We screw up and we move on."

"Right then, I’m getting soldier boy out from under there before I gag on this rot," Spike complained as he jammed his lever under the edge of the demon and started prying.

"Oh yeah, like you aren't sappy to the core. I've read your poetry," Buffy said with more than a little humor in her voice as she knelt next to Riley's thighs and started pulling at the mass still trapping him.

"Yeah, well," Spike grunted, "at least I don't," he growled as he forced the lever deeper, "get all sentimental when the bloody enemy could show up any time."

"I think I'll head up to the hall and sidetrack anyone who is coming. I know we're short-shifted, but I'm not willing
to trust our luck any farther," Jimenez offered. No one answered him as he got wearily to his feet and headed up the stairs. Xander moved back to let Blair and Jim pull on Riley because he didn't have the strength to even stand up.

**Part Forty**

"I vote we tow the truck," Blair said wearily as they reached the RV as the first red rays of the morning sun stabbed across the horizon. Spike had been forced to leave the group and race ahead just to avoid immolation.

"I'm not sure any one of us is up to driving," Jim said wearily. Buffy opened her mouth. "No." Jim said firmly.

"Hey, I drove up here."

"You drove into a stationary rock. A large rock... with my truck. You are not driving the RV."

"I think I'm probably nominated just in terms of being the least beat up," Jimenez offered.

"You have the job," Jim said quickly.
"Hey, for all you know, he doesn't even have a license."

"In this case, the unknown is preferable because I already know for a fact you shouldn't have a license."

"It was one rock, and a rock in the road. Who puts a rock in a road?"

"You straddled the center line more often than not in that RV. I thought you were just uncomfortable with something that big, but now I'm guessing you can't drive anything if you ran into a rock. I'm going to hook up the truck," Jim said as he veered away and headed for the truck.

"I'll help," Blair said as he followed. Xander would have volunteered to help if only to avoid Spike, but he didn't have the strength to make it that far. He'd leaned on Spike for most of the walk back, and now he had one arm over Buffy and one over Riley.

"He really gets on my nerves," Buffy complained as she pulled the door to the RV open. Xander could see the glow from Spike's cigarette as he sat in the dark.

"Luv, let me and Xander have a moment, okay?" Spike
asked in a terrifyingly calm voice. As Xander's eyes adjusted to the dark, he could see Spike sprawled on the couch, which had been pulled out into a bed. He'd gotten rid of the army-duds and wore a pair of jeans and a deep red shirt. One leg stretched out and Spike leaned on the arm that was part of the couch when the bed was folded up. Reaching down to the floor, he crushed the cigarette on whatever he was using for an ashtray.

"We can help Jim with the truck," Riley quickly added.

"This is another of those things I don't want to see, isn't it?" she asked. "We need to get moving as soon as the truck is hooked up, so if you're going to kill him, make it quick and clean up the mess," Buffy shrugged. "Good luck," she offered Xander as she helped him up the stairs and pushed the door closed behind him.

Outside Xander could hear raised voices.

"Come to bed, pet," Spike said, and considering Xander had expected something closer to death threats, that tone really threw him.

"Okay, I've figured out that I really screwed up big time," Xander said uncertainly as he came to the bed. He sat on
the edge gratefully because his legs felt pretty noodlish, and not the noodles that Buffy cooked that were hard and stuck up in the middle of her casserole, but overcooked, mushy noodles. Yep, he had mushy-noodle legs.

"Shirt off," Spike said as he held up a yellow t-shirt with a picture of a bottle of glue and the saying 'I wish it came in different flavors.' When Xander had spotted it for sale at the back of a garage where he was having a Council car fixed, he'd had to buy it. Xander pulled the army shirt off and let Spike help him into his own shirt.

"I bloody thought I'd lost you when I saw you go under. I can't believe I owe Major Moron for giving you back to me."

"I'm really sorry," Xander repeated as Spike pulled him close, rearranging Xander's limbs so that they were spooned together on the bed.

"Never been so scared in all my life. I killed that pilchard as fast as I could, and I still thought I was going to find you suffocated."

"You aren't mad?" Xander asked quietly.
"I'll be mad later. Later I'm going to remind you that you're the submissive because you know you have crap-all judgment, always putting yourself in harm's way. Bloody hell, later I'll probably chain ya to the bed for a good week and buy you a bloody leash and let Riley sit on you because as much as ya scared me out of a century of life, ya almost killed him. But I'll do that later. Right now." Spike stopped and strong arms just wrapped around Xander, pulling him close and Xander could feel Spike press his mouth to Xander's neck.

They lay in the embrace for long seconds, the pale shadows from the rising sun lighting in the inside of the RV in dim patches. "Love you," Spike whispered, the words a whisper against Xander's neck.

"I love you, too. And I trust you. I just... the body acted before the brain engaged."

"Shhh," Spike hushed him. "Time enough for dealing with that later." Spike placed a kiss against Xander's neck and then gently nibbled the sensitive flesh.

"Do it," Xander urged as he arched his neck to the side. He jumped when sharp teeth pricked his neck and Spike
started sucking softly.

"I'm so sorry," Xander said as he lay quiet in Spike's arms, his back pressed to Spike's stomach. "I should have gotten out when you said to. I really do know I fucked up, but I was feeling so good. I helped save Clark, and when I saw Riley going under, I thought I could do something right, that I couldn't watch..." Xander didn't finish his comment; he just closed his eyes and let the slow pull of blood create a warmth that centered him. It wasn't quite desire, which was good since they were going to be sharing the RV, but it was close. It was safe and family and belonging.

Spike fed slowly and then eventually pulled out and licked the skin clean as he tightened his hold around Xander.

"This is about Rebekah, yeah?"

Xander jerked. He shouldn't be surprised because Spike had been there, killing the demon that had charred Rebekah like... and Xander refused to finish that thought. Rebekah didn't deserve to be remembered as anything less than a beautiful young woman, one who had died way too young because Xander had convinced her that
being a Slayer was important and worth it.

Spike's hands stroked his arm. "Ya want to save the world; I always understood that about you, just like I know that you carry all this guilt that isn't yours to carry, pet. But you aren't Superman. I put you up front with Clark and, given the chance, I would have put you up front in the battle against the Mazzikim. I'll let ya save the world when your powers give you the edge, but when I tell you to get back, you get back. A Nagay is a tough beast, gettin' through that shell and diggin' out the brain is the only way to kill it, so your powers wouldn't work on him."

"I just..."

"No, pet. Crap-all judgment, remember? I'll give you plenty of chances ta save the world, but only if I know I can trust you to save yourself first. It's like the old cliché about the lifeguard. If ya don't save yourself, ya won't be around to save anyone else."

"I got it," Xander agreed slowly.

"Not yet, you don't. But as soon as we get home and I stop shaking at the thought of losing you, we'll work on
making sure you don't forget your place again. You want to argue with me over breakfast, and I'll argue right back, but ya don't argue in battle, pet."

Xander nodded. "I do so totally got it. Or at least the brain gets it because the gut is still catching up."

"Never should've let you go off to Africa. Still blame the bloody Watcher for that. You were running on fumes, and he sent you into a war zone because you were the one he could trust ta not muck things up. Rather, he could trust you to not muck up with the Slayers and their families, but he had to know you did that by takin' all the pain in yourself."

"No fair blaming Giles. I'm an adult and I decided to go."

"No, pet," Spike said softly. "You stopped growin' up when you were about sixteen and after that it was all about survivin'. You haven't felt safe enough to grow up since then. Ya act like a sixteen year old boy still, rushing in where angels fear to tread."

"Blair rushed in," Xander defended himself.

"Blair stayed far enough back ta keep away from the
beastie. Jim got caught unawares, and he still kept calm and rational. You let panic take over and you stopped listening to the people who were taking care of you. Riley and I both told ya to get back."

"So, this is about me being screwed up?" Xander asked, just a touch of bitterness creeping in around the edges.

"No, pet." Spike sighed and then stroked Xander's hair, his strong finger tracing patterns on Xander's scalp until he just wanted to close his eyes and forget the talkiness in favor of just feeling. He could handle feeling, or he could handle the physical kind of feeling anyway, but this talking stuff was just more than he really wanted to deal with. After nearly losing Riley, his fears and his guilt and his pain was drifting too near the surface, and his skin felt like stretched tissue paper and the jagged edges of his feelings might just rip right though. He couldn't do this right now.

"Pet, this is about all the people who failed ya. You counted on the watcher ta be a father figure, and he was more about his mission than he ever was about you. And now he comes in and tries to play your champion and I want to bloody eat him. You counted on Buffy to always be there to save the world..." Xander opened his mouth
to protest, and Spike silenced him, a finger sliding gently over Xander's lips. "Wasn't fair of you, but you needed her to be the leader and give you hope, yeah? Only she's not perfect and she left you and then she died. You counted on your parents, and we aren't even going to discuss them because my soul isn't enough to keep me from wanting to eat those negligent gits.

The bitterness washed away in the rush of pain as Spike listed every aching need that Xander could still feel. Xander focused on just breathing. He didn't want to hear this, but it was Spike, and he couldn't walk away from Spike, Xander could feel that need to stay deep in his soul, even when every cell of his body just wanted to flee. He could feel himself start to shake.

"Been around more than a century, pet. I'm never leaving you, and I'm never lettin' you carry this alone. But ya have to give me your trust, pet."

"I do trust you," Xander said, focusing on speaking clearly as unshed tears threatened to make him hiccup the words.

"Pet, if ya trusted me, you would have gotten back. I needed ya with Clark, and I let you take the lead because
it was right. You need to trust me when I tell you it's safe for you to help someone, but you have to trust me when I say it's not. I promise, I'll never keep you from takin' a reasonable chance if it means saving a life, but please, Xander, please don't ever make me watch you die because you're feeling so guilty that you'd rather throw your life away than stay with me."

"No, I didn't—" Xander squirmed to turn around and reach Spike, alarmed by the way his words broke and the Giles-soft accent.

"Yeah, pet, you did. You threw yourself into a fight you couldn't win. You didn't think we could save Riley, and you bloody well decided to go out with him before watching someone else die, but you would have left me behind."

"Oh god, Spike..." Xander stopped, a protest formed on his lips, but he couldn't say it. He couldn't say it. "I..." Xander could feel his heart pound painfully.

Spike gave a pained half-laugh. "You didn't know? Never saw that in the mirror when you looked?" he asked.

Xander gasped as though he'd just been hit in the chest.
Breath and thought slid away as he struggled to reorder his own thoughts. Had he thought Riley was lost? Sinking into his memories, Xander remembered the moment when he'd seen Riley sliding inexorably toward the mountain-sized demon. "Spike," Xander said, desperate for anything to keep him from facing a truth he couldn't handle. He couldn't. Tears started. Spike didn't offer a word as he stroked Xander's arm. "I hope Willow's therapist has room for me on that couch," Xander whispered. He felt raw... ripped open to the core.

"Don't leave me, pet." Spike's words, whispered into Xander's neck reached a dark part of Xander, one that shivered at the need and love in that plea.

"I promise. God, Spike, I really didn't think... I..." Xander stopped. He didn't have words for this. Spike shushed him and pulled him closer. The raw pain hovered for a moment and then faded, leaving only cold truth behind. Struggling to get himself together, Xander focused on the fact that Buffy and Jim were out there—together—and probably pretty close to killing each other. He gave a brief laugh. "You know, I thought you were going to be so angry you'd be spanking me in front of the others."

Loosening his hold, Spike tugged at Xander until he was
on his back and he could look Spike in the face. "When I promised I'd never hurt you, I meant it, pet. Our games aren't about punishment, and I won't punish you that way. I will, however, be taking you on nightly patrols where you'll follow every bloody order if you don't want to give me an excuse to find a more creative punishment."

Hearing Spike threaten him without the fear and pain of a moment ago, Xander smiled. "Whatever you want," Xander agreed as he pressed himself to Spike's chest feeling the strength that he wanted to hide within. Fatigue pulled at him.

"You may be sorry you agreed to that later," Spike said dryly, "Just as soon as I get over this dicky fit I'm having."

"This is you having a fit?" Xander asked.

"Bloody right. And if ya want to avoid having a cage installed in the bedroom, you'll never put me in another one. Thought I'd lost you." Spike's hand slid around to the back of Xander's neck and pulled him close.

"Is everyone decent? If you're having make-up sex, I'm not coming in," Buffy said from the door.
"I don't think Xander is awake enough for sex," Riley said as he came in. Xander had his forehead pressed to Spike's chest, but he could feel the bed tilt, and then Riley rested a hand on his hip, and Xander could feel the connection between them. Riley was silent, and from the lack of recriminations, he could pretty much guess that Riley had been listening.

"Thanks for the save," Xander said quietly.

"Stretch out," Spike said. "Can see the bruises forming now, and if ya try sittin', you're going to end up one giant ache."

Xander didn't say anything as he felt Riley slide into the bed, only his hand on Xander's hip touching, but Xander could feel the pull of Riley's worry. He turned his head.
"I'm okay," he promised. "I'm actually really good, just tired from the Susan Clark thing but I really didn't get hurt during the part where I acted like an idiot because this really brave soldier type protected me."

"As long as you know you acted like an idiot," Riley said in an almost playful tone as he reached up and ruffled Xander's hair, but the playfulness didn't reach his eyes
which watched Xander carefully. He put his hand back on Xander's hip. "Don't ever think that your life is worth less than mine," Riley whispered, his words so soft they couldn't possibly carry past the bed. Xander blinked as tears threatened again. "I'm a soldier. If I die taking an acceptable risk, then that's my choice, but I would never choose to take you down with me."

"Riley," Xander whispered, and he let his own hand rest on top of Riley's.

"We'll just have to remind the boy what a chain of command means," Spike said with mock cheerfulness as the others started piling into the RV.

Xander forced a weak laugh. "You just want to order me around, but there will be no cleaning of bathrooms with a toothbrush, not for the Xan-man. And Ri, I can't believe you almost got yourself killed over me. Buffy would have been really cranky with you," Xander tried for a lighter tone, but no one laughed. Jimenez came closest with a snort before he went up front and started the RV. Jim and Blair settled into the bench seat around the table, and Buffy hovered near the door to the tiny bathroom.

"You're my Guide. I don't think I had a choice about
trying to save you," Riley pointed out. "But in there, I was losing it, and you talked me through the dials, so you saved me, too."

"No more reminding me of how close I came to losing either one of you. I'm officially declaring a demon-free week," Buffy said with a sigh. "Shove over. If you guys are laying down, I am too."

"Can you just declare a demon-free week?" Jim demanded. Xander felt Riley press close as Buffy piled into the bed.

"It never worked before, but I figure with two Sentinels around, the demons have to be going 'ew, ick, Sentinel'."

Jim didn't answer, but Xander could just imagine the expression he had on his face. However, as the RV got up to speed, the clicking of wheels over the pavement and the fatigue in his body and the feeling of Spike's strong arms holding him and Riley's heat at his back pulled him down into a deep sleep where he didn't even care that Jim and Buffy were now trapped in a small space together. With luck, he'd sleep all the way back to Coeur d'Alene.
This would be a whole lot easier if I wasn't tied," Xander pointed out as he leaned a hip into the island of the small country house. Riley smiled at him, the edges of his eyes crinkling.

"Forget it, Sport. You can't play innocent injured party with me when I was there last night. You know the rules. If you don't follow orders on patrol, you get the day to think about the fact that you need to trust Spike and me to take care of you."

"Hey, I am all about the trust, it's the engaging the brain part that sometimes trips me up. And speaking of having to take care of me, that's not really with the fair because Spike's asleep and you're stuck babysitting the Xander," he pointed out with his best hopeful expression.

"Put the puppy eyes away, Guide of mine," Riley said as
he held up the ham sandwich. Xander sighed and leaned forward to take another bite.

"I killed the vamp, didn't I?" Xander asked with his mouth full.

"Xander, this isn't about whether your decision was right or wrong, it's about you not following orders. Spike and I had both spotted the new vampire, but even if we hadn't, a quick, 'look--new vampire!' would have worked. I'll put you up against a kith-harn or a lomyx any day of the week, but you and vampires together give me gray hair."

Xander almost snorted his sandwich, and Riley gave him a dirty look. "You know I don't mean you and Spike. You're in a mood today, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yep," Xander admitted. "And manly pride dictates that I have to object to this. I mean, having to ask to be fed is bad for the male ego."

That made Riley hesitate for a second as he looked at Xander with a little concern. "I hate to point this out, but you agreed that this was fair. I was all for bootcamp style training and pushups. I was actually looking forward to
ordering you to drop and give me twenty. You and Spike vetoed me."

"Ri," Xander laughed, "you take me way too seriously sometimes. I mean, the cuffs are annoying," Xander yanked at the leather and chains that kept his hands behind his back, "but pushups are cruel and unusual punishment, and there is a line where I have to put my foot down."

"Well then, it looks like those cuffs are staying," Riley smiled, the worry gone once his Guide gave him a little reassurance. Riley held up the last of the sandwich and Xander took it, chewing before he bent over to drink his milk through a straw.

"You could still unlock me, though. I promise the lesson has so been learned, or relearned. But, hey, I am definitely improving on the whole working as a team thing, and I was supposed to go Christmas shopping with you today," Xander pointed out when he'd finally gotten the last of his late lunch down. He turned his best puppy eyes towards his Sentinel. "You know Buffy will be all disappointed. If I had woken up before she took off, she so would have unlocked me." Xander was probably overstating that since Buffy rarely unlocked him, and
then usually only after he confessed why Spike had cuffed him in the first place, which was almost always more embarrassing than just being cuffed, but he gave Riley his saddest pleading expression and hoped for the best.

"You can go with Willow and Susan tomorrow," Riley said, a look of amusement on his face.

"Oh no. No, I am not going shopping with the girls. Do you have any idea how scary that is?" Xander demanded.

"It'll be more scary if Clark hears you call her a girl. The woman is a decorated soldier with dozens of kills under her belt."

"And Willow is the most powerful witch in the world. Your point?" Xander asked. Susan wouldn't do more than roll her eyes and slip Ex-Lax into his hot chocolate.

"Well, I suppose you could still go with Buffy and me, but you're going to have a hard time explaining those cuffs to the lady at Harrod's." And now Riley looked like he was about to start laughing.

"Ha, ha." Xander rolled his eyes. "You know, I've gotten
used to not having people stare and point now that I dumped the one-eyed pirate look. I think I'll skip the reminder of those inglorious days of yore."

"They would definitely stare and point," Riley said cheerfully as he headed for the living room, ruffling Xander's hair as he passed him.

"Okay, there should be a rule about you not doing that when I can't retaliate," Xander complained as he shook his head to get his hair out of his eyes.

"You can't ever retaliate. I can take you whether your hands are chained or not," Riley pointed out as he grabbed his coat. "So, are you okay here with Spike?"

Xander sat on the arm of the couch. "Yeah, he'll be up soon. If I need something, he'll be easy enough to wake. So, are you going to steer Buffy past that little jewelry store? Maybe see if she's particularly fond of any diamonds?" Xander prompted.

"We'll see," Riley said cautiously. "Four months living together isn't that long, Xander. I don't want to make another mistake and have another woman hate me as much as Sam does. I really don't want Buffy to hate me."
"I keep telling you, your souls are doing the flowing together thing. It's not going to fall apart, not unless you do something to sabotage it," Xander promised.

"And I have my Guide around to stop me if I'm doing something that stupid again," Riley added as he pulled on his coat and gloves.

"Not me." Xander shook his head. "I'll tell Spike, and he'll kick your ass."

"That's true," Riley laughed. "And he'd enjoy doing it a little too much. If Giles calls with that..." Riley stopped and looked at him. "I guess the machine will pick it up."

"If he calls before sunset, yep," Xander agreed. He had at least a slim shot at getting Buffy to cut his punishment short, but Spike never fell for the puppy eyes and Spike was so not going to pick up a call from Giles—magical, mystical book that they really, really needed or not.

Riley paused for a second, and Xander figured the man was probably plotting the reconciliation battle-plan version four. Buffy wanted Giles happy, Giles hated that the rest of them had fallen into their little hierarchy;
therefore, Riley had to do something to make it all better. Xander wished him luck, but he doubted that Giles would ever do anything except grudgingly accept the changes. Spike insisted that Giles was just like an old, dethroned king whining about the whippersnappers who'd taken his power. Buffy and Willow thought he just needed to know they still needed him. Xander suspected that Riley would be happier if Giles just went away and took the last of the weirdness with him. After a second, Riley sighed, obviously shoving that problem off for later.

"Buffy and I are going to swing through Hemel Hempstead after dark. We think that's where all these new fledges are coming from."

"Just keep everything dialed back unless you plan on coming back here for me and Spike," Xander said as he went along with the topic change. He didn't really want to think about Giles too much, either. Conflict was so much worse when he knew it came out of love and worry because then he couldn't even get angry with Giles for doing the minimally-supportive thing.

"You could meet us there after sunset: the warehouses off Eaton."
"I'll tell Spike," Xander agreed. Riley pulled on a hat.

"Be good," Riley suggested.

"With you and Buffy out of the house and a few hours of privacy? No chance," Xander smiled and wiggled his eyebrows. Riley rolled his eyes before heading out the door. "See you later," Xander called after the door was closed, but he knew his Sentinel would hear.

Xander wandered into the bedroom and considered Spike sprawled across the red sheets. Crawling onto the bed, Xander used his teeth to pull the sheet down far enough for him to reach a small, dark nipple. He started with small licks until he was fairly sure Spike was awake and then he settled down to suck and nip the sensitive nub until it hardened under his lips. Lying next to Spike, he brought his knee up and rubbed it over the growing bulge under the sheet.

"Part of you is awake, anyway," Xander said as he watched Spike's lips slowly twitch up.

"Someone's feelin' frisky," Spike said. His hand darted out and caught the back of Xander's neck and pulled him in for a long kiss. When Spike finally released him, Xander
was breathless and hard, and so off balance he couldn't right himself and sprawled across Spike's chest. Wiggling, Xander tried to get a leg under him, but then Spike's hand landed on his back, and Xander sagged. He rarely won the playful wrestling matches in their bed, but with his hands chained he wouldn't have a chance.

"I had hoped to wake a certain someone up by chaining him spread eagle to the bed and torturing him for hours," Xander mused. Spike pursed his lips.

"Then a certain someone had better learn to follow orders because a certain someone gives up the right to play like that when he gets caught doin' something stupid."

"And like I told Riley, I killed the vamp, so all's well that ends well."

"That line work with him?" Spike asked as he pushed himself up on one elbow.

"Nope."

"Good. If that'd been the master of the line comin' round to challenge, you would have been dead before you
could have pulled out your secret weapon, pet. You know the rules." Spike's words might have been grumpy, but the hands wandering over Xander's naked back and dipping under the waistband of his jeans were definitely not grumpy hands. "So, ya had dirty little plans for me today? I thought you were planning a shopping trip with Riley and Buffy."

"Nope. I ordered all my stuff online, so I was just going to go and torture Riley with some control tests, but when I saw you fighting last night, doing that whirling kick of death thing... I so had fantasies about tying you down and having my evil way with you." Xander wiggled an eyebrow in a way that he hoped looked evil. Spike cocked his head.

"We'll have to put your evil on hold, pet. 'Course that means I have time for my evil."

"I thought you weren't evil anymore, you know, what with you being soulboy now."

"Oi, don't even joke like that. I'm nothin' like him, and unlike some brooders, I still remember how to enjoy a little evilness," Spike said, and with a smirk, he flipped Xander so that Xander was now on his back, his arms
trapped under him as Spike straddled his hips.

"Take torture, for example," Spike said calmly as he settled back, his naked butt settling in on top of Xander's crotch and slowly rocking forward and back. Xander threw his head back and gasped as his cock strained in the way too tight confines, and now he remembered why high school had been four years of baggy.

"Oh, shit..." Xander swallowed his words as Spike bore down a little harder. Lost in the rising need, he closed his eyes and gulped oxygen until finally, Spike stilled. When Xander opened his eyes, he found Spike leaning over him, a hand braced on either side of Xander's head.

"Problem, pet?"

"Oh yeah, big problem, and not to boast, but I do mean big."

Spike's lips twitched.

"And since I'm cuffed, it's your job to take care of me," Xander pointed out with a smirk of his own.

"Usually," Spike said slowly. "Problem is that someone
admitted he'd planned to torture me. Can't blame a bloke for not wanting to be particularly kind to someone who'd planned to torture him."

Xander blinked, and maybe he just had too much blood detoured south, but it took him a second to catch on to the rules of this new game. Spike cocked his head to one side with his lips pursed together in that same expression he used when he was about to take Xander's queen in chess, and that so should have been an instant giveaway.

"So, pet. What exactly did you think you were going to be doin' to me today because I have to determine whether I'm offended enough ta torture you," Spike prompted, the lines around his eyes crinkling.

"I... oh!" Xander said as the little blood still in his brain hit the right cells. Spike rolled his eyes. "I would have chained you to the wall," Xander said quickly. Spike raised an eyebrow.

Spike didn't move, and Xander squirmed a little under the almost amused expression. "What?" Xander finally asked.

Spike bent down and pressed lips to Xander's neck.
Xander squirmed as his cock hardened more, but all he could do was throw his head to the side to encourage his lover. Trailing kisses over the collarbone, Spike worked up until he nipped an earlobe and then whispered in Xander's ear.

"Slow down, pet. Have all night. So," Spike pinched Xander's nipple, and Xander arched off the bed as he pulled his shackles tight. "What exactly were you plannin' on doing to torture me.?I think I have a right to know what my subordinates have brewin' in those heads of theirs," Spike asked, his words lazy and slow against Xander's ear as a thumb stroked the tender nipple.

"I'd..." Xander swallowed and forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down before he came in his pants like a horny teenager. "I'd pull your arms up over your head... chain you to the wall so you couldn't do anything to stop me," Xander said as he watched Spike's eyes darken. Nervously, Xander licked his lips, and Spike's eyes tracked the movement.

"You would, huh?"

"Oh yeah. I'd see you naked and stretched out, all that strong muscle straining under the skin," Xander said
slowly as his erection really did start protesting the tight clothing and Spike's weight.

"Seems like someone needs a taste of his own medicine," Spike said, his voice low and evil, but the expression was all lust. Xander hooked a heel on the edge of the bed and started scooting back right before Spike pounced, tossing him over onto his stomach and pinning him down.

Xander writhed, either that or he humped the mattress in an attempt to find some relief, but he was going to call it writhing and bucking as he fought hands that uncuffed him, but then held him helpless. Again, Spike flipped him, and Xander didn't even pretend to fight as Spike buckled new cuffs around his wrists. The cool leather soaked up the heat that seemed to pour off him.

"Somethin' wrong with this picture," Spike mused.

"Something like the fact that I wanted you chained here, helpless at my mercy?" Xander asked. He could get into this game. He could so get into this game. Spike smiled crookedly as he considered Xander like the last piece of chocolate at a girls' slumber party.

"Gonna pay for that, pet. Conspiring against your betters
is a dangerous game." Spike reached down and unbuttoned Xander's jeans. He couldn't contain a sigh of relief as his cock finally got enough room to actually fill out. His boxers tented up as Spike slowly pulled the jeans down and off. Then he cat-crawled up Xander's body, dropping kisses at random points until Xander was squirming and fighting the restraints as he tried to buck up into that solid body above him.

"Right then, confession time. What evil plans did you have brewing?" Spike leaned down and sucked at the soft curve where Xander's neck and shoulder met. For a second, Xander couldn't come up with anything as his whole body was reduced to that one point and that one need. Spike pulled back, and Xander was panting.

"Won't confess? We'll see how long you can hold out against torture," Spike said with way too much amusement. Xander opened his mouth, but when Spike slid down and mouthed Xander's erection through the silk boxers, the words turned into a strangled squawk. Xander's whole body twitched as Spike slowly sucked the shaft through the silk, and each time he moved closer to the tip, the damp fabric left behind cooled in the air and sent shimmers of lust through Xander's body.
Xander twisted and struggled and gasped, but strong hands simply caught his hips and held him down. When Spike finally reached the sensitive head, Xander howled and fought with every muscle to get Spike off his legs. He had to have more or he had to make Spike stop or he was going to explode, and he really might not mind if he exploded.

Spike sat up and ran his tongue along his teeth. "Ready to talk?" Spike asked.

Xander nodded, words still scattered through his brain so that he couldn't actually form sound.

Spike shifted and lay down next to Xander, an idle hand stroking Xander's heaving chest. "So, confess or I'll show ya what a hundred years can teach a man. I'll bring you so close to the edge that you'll beg for release."

"Beg, I could beg," Xander agreed. He threw his legs open and then pulled his knees up. He just needed a little more.

Spike quickly moved to sit on Xander's thighs again. "Oh, I can make you beg any time, pretty. But right now is confession time. What exactly were you plotting against
your master, pet?"

Xander took a deep breath and tried to ignore the throbbing need that had just about stolen from him the ability to form words. "I was going to tie your feet spread eagle and play with your ass until I could slide that big black vibrator all the way up you," Xander said as he watched Spike. Both their cocks twitched.

"Can't have ya thinking you can get away with thoughts like that," Spike eventually said as he stood up, stripped Xander of his boxers, and headed for the closet. Xander watched the play of muscles as Spike walked back with the leg chains. In seconds, Xander was laid out helpless, his arms over his head, his legs spread obscenely wide, and his cock bobbling happily in the air.

Spike settled in between his legs and opened the lube. "Don't have a lot of room to work with you all stretched out, but that's not the point. This is torture, luv. There are consequences for having dirty thoughts about tying me up," Spike said as he slipped one finger inside Xander. The familiar feeling of movement inside him almost made Xander come right there, but a sharp pinch to the inside of his thigh interrupted the perfect bliss. Xander glared.
"Can't learn your lesson that way, pet. If you had thoughts about shovin' this whole thing up my arse, you'll just have to endure." Spike smirked as he added a second finger, and Xander twisted as the fingers just barely brushed his prostate, making contact just long enough to drive up the hot need without actually giving any relief. From Spike's smirk, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Almost lost in need and the throbbing between his legs, Xander missed the first part of the vibrator sliding into him, but when the thick plug forced him open, Xander threw his head back and arched his back.

"More," he begged. "Just a little more. Harder." Xander's words came out jagged and rough, but Spike continued the slow press, the plastic thicker and thicker as it spread Xander wide, and then the thickest part was in, and his ass tightened around the neck of the toy.

"Need ta get cleaned up, and someone needs to calm down and think about the foolishness of plotting against his master," Spike said as he stood up and tossed the tube onto the nightstand.
By the time Spike came back from washing his hands, Xander had reclaimed enough blood from his cock in order to form not just words but complete sentences.

"So, what else did the evil little boy have planned for his master?" Spike asked as he circled the bed and considered Xander from all angles.

"You can't make me talk," Xander said, and that might have been an actual rebellious tone except his cock went and twitched again. Spike quickly turned a smile into a smirk of true evilness.

"You bloody well will," he promised.

"Dream on, oh peroxided one."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Mighty mouthy considering your situation, pet," Spike pursed his lips and sat on the edge of the bed. After brushing Xander's hair back, Spike's hands lingered on Xander's face, tracing the bow of his lips and trailing across his closed eyes and then slightly skimming down Xander's neck and across his chest. The almost invisible touches set Xander on fire, and he quickly lost his new-found ability to form words.
Strong fingers rolled his nipples until they darkened and puckered, and then Spike leaned over and gently sucked on one. Xander's brain happily focused on that, ignoring the threads of desire sparked wherever Spike's wandering hands brushed: a thigh, his side, the small white scar from Africa, his shoulder and the giant hickey Spike had already left. Then Spike's fingers skimmed past Xander's balls, barely brushing the curled hair, and Xander gave a pitiful moan as his cock ached and twitched.

"Ready to talk?" Spike asked as he finally released Xander's nipple. Xander nodded.

"Right then, what did you have planned for me next?" Spike asked.

"I planned to let you come and then tuck you back in bed?" Xander asked with wide eyes. Spike looked at him for a second, cocking his head.

"Fine, I so would not have let you off. No way. I would have just been getting started," Xander admitted. Yeah, a little part of him wanted to come, but a bigger part just wanted more.
"Thought so. You always did have an evil streak, pet. That's one reason I picked you," Spike nodded. "So, are you going to talk or should I keep torturing you? Have to say, I am enjoying the torture, so you'd better talk quick or you'll lose your chance," Spike said as he sat next to Xander, one hand resting on Xander's chest.

"I would have gotten that ring gag and buckled it on you," Xander said. He could see Spike's eyebrow go up because that wasn't one of their favorite toys. "Oh yeah, the big ring gag," Xander clarified, and the eyebrow went up further. "Then I was going to turn that vibrator on and give you something to suck on. I figured I'd make sure you were filled so full on both ends that you couldn't think about anything else." Xander blushed. This was way past his normal quota for dirty talk.

"Can't let ya get away with thinking things like that about me, can I? What kind of a master would I be?" Spike asked as he headed back toward the closet. Spike was two steps away before Xander started feeling just enough panic to take the edge off the need. This was playing harder than they normally did.

Spike stopped at the closet door, and turned back. "You okay, pet?"
"Equal parts blind lust and slightly embarrassed panic," Xander admitted.

"Safe as houses, my little Shaman," Spike said before he vanished into the closet and reappeared with the large ring gag. "And I do appreciate the fact that you would use the gag on me because if you got me chained up and then turned the vibrator on, well, I would feel bad if I bit off that lovely cock of yours," Spike said as he came back to the bed. "However, I still need to teach you a lesson about what happens to evil little boys with their naughty fantasies."

Spike held the front of the gag with both hands, and Xander opened his mouth wide enough for Spike to slip it between his teeth. Almost immediately, Xander felt the saliva start, and if he could, he probably would have asked that Spike take it off, but Spike was buckling it, and Xander was reduced to random noises.

"You are evil, pet, planning to torture me like this after everything I've done for you," Spike said as he let his hands trail over Xander's body, across his stomach, down his spread thighs, and then Spike flipped the switch on the bottom of the vibrator, and Xander screamed. His
cock was so hard that Xander almost came, and he fought the restraints. Need. That's all that existed in his world.

"Oi, can't have ya wakin' the dead. I guess I'll have to keep you quiet," Spike said as he crawled into the bed. Spike positioned himself over Xander's head and slipped his cock into the gag, pressing so far in that Xander had to focus on breathing for a second. Spike's cock filled him, pushing away all other thoughts. The vibrator worked on, sending hot flares through Xander and stretching him and filling him until he couldn't thing about anything else. Bending down, Spike took Xander's erection in his mouth, and Xander really did appreciate the ring gag because Spike would have lost something.

Spike pulled his hips back, pulling most of his cock out of Xander's mouth, and Xander tried to follow it up, sealing his lips around his prize and sucking. Spike thrust back down and released Xander's cock as he gave a strangled cursed, and Xander let his head fall to the pillow as Spike made small thrusts into his mouth.

When Spike again sucked on just the head, Xander screamed around the cock in his mouth and started coming. As his muscles tightened, the plug seemed to
grow and Xander stretched and fought as he thrust up into Spike's mouth and then collapsed to the bed, his ass still full.

Spike reached down and flicked off the vibrator, and Xander sagged in relief as sensations that had been too much settled back into being just pleasantly overwhelming.

"Still haven't learned your lesson, pet, so you stay nice and plugged until you make me come," Spike commented as he sat up, his cock so hard that it was purpling. Xander frowned and tried to lean toward Spike's cock, a line of drool escaping. With quick fingers, Spike unbuckled the gag and tossed it to the floor.

"Open wide, pet," he ordered as he got back into position. Xander happily obeyed. With more freedom, now he could play with the foreskin, running his tongue along the edge. Soon Spike was thrusting again, and this time Xander worked harder, sucking and swallowing as he tried to take in more and more of Spike even though the angle was wrong for deep throating. He was rewarded by a jerk that drove the cock deep into him and then Spike was coming with a rough shout.
Spike pulled out, dribbling a few drops of come onto Xander's face and chest as he flopped down next to Xander.

"Right then, you learned your lesson, pet? You have any more deep dark fantasies about torturing your master?" Spike asked as he lay panting, which always made Xander feel good because when you can make a creature who doesn't need air pant, that's got to be worth something.

"I was planning on keeping you plugged just so you remembered that I'm evil," Xander commented casually.

"Randy bugger," Spike said with a laugh. "For that, you can keep that monster in you until I'm ready to get up for real," Spike said as he reached down and unbuckled Xander's ankles. Xander bent his knees to work the circulation back, but the vibrator in him was a monster, so he couldn't close his legs. With a sigh, he settled his legs back down.

"Ready ta finish sleepin' now," Spike said in that drowsy post-sex voice of his.

Xander just hummed.
"Ya alright, pet? You went kinda quiet on me."

"Brain leakage," Xander sighed. "And now you're going to have to tell Riley that you broke the Guide and made his brains come dribbling out."

"You'll recover," Spike snorted as he ran a hand across Xander's chest, his thumb detouring west to tease an unprotected nipple.

"You keep doing that and I'll make a recovery," Xander hummed. "Just not soon," he admitted. Drained didn't even begin to cover it. "Oh, and Riley said that if we don't have plans, we can meet him and Buffy by the warehouses in Hemel Hempstead. They think they've tracked the new vamp in town," he said before he forgot.

Spike hummed as he settled in. He threw a leg over Xander's leg, and settled his arm in on Xander's chest. Even if Xander hadn't still been chained to the wall, he wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Right then, should probably go and help them track the nest," Spike finally offered.

"Riley definitely can't be tracking without me," Xander
agreed.

"Pet, no offense, but he's not that good at tracking with you," Spike pointed out.

"Hey, no dissing my Sentinel," Xander complained. He brought his knee up and gave Spike a shove since he couldn't do much more than that.

"Not dissin' the clod. He's a treat in a fight, and he can use that Sentinel hearing well enough, but he doesn't have a range anywhere near Jim, and I'm startin' to think he never will. The upside bein' that he doesn't have those zone outs Blair described."

"Don't count the Ri-man out so quick. He had a freaky dream last night," Xander said smugly. Yeah, Riley didn't have Blair around to put him on the fast track, but they were coming along just fine.

"Boy had a blue dream?" Spike asked, suddenly all interested. He had been about ready to settle his head on Xander's chest, but now he sat up and considered Xander with a whole lot of very alert curiosity.

"It wasn't blue," Xander admitted, and he could see
Spike's interest immediately wane. Yep, Spike's demon definitely wanted Riley to develop the mystical side of Sentinel life. Like Spike had said a dozen times, the senses just meant a Sentinel was a human with more vulnerabilities; the mystical abilities were a Sentinel's true power. But when Riley's mystical side didn't appear, everyone had just sort of stopped talking about it.

"He was circling over a jungle when he saw what he called a cute, tiny jaguar kitten with round ears, and I am so not appreciating that particular description," Xander snorted. And yep, there was Spike's interested face again.

"He saw your spirit animal?"

"Yep, that was definitely a kod kod, unless you know of someone else with a spirit animal that's smaller than a house cat and looks like a miniature jaguar with round ears, and no, I didn't ever tell him what my spirit animal was. I have never told anyone that I have a spirit animal that makes people go awwwww. One of these days I really am going to trade up to something bigger," he sighed.

"Don't look a gift spirit guide in the mouth, pet," Spike
said as he pinched a nipple. Xander's body tightened in desire, and the plug seemed to grow two sizes. Xander forced himself to take a deep breath and relax. Spike waited as Xander calmed his body; he might not be recovered, but his body was ready to try. "So, Finn was flying above?" Spike eventually asked once Xander sank back onto his pillow.

"Yep."

"Feel the need to make a birdbrain joke for old times' sake, I do," Spike mused.

"We aren't to the interesting part yet," Xander promised. "There was a big snake curled around the cat, an iridescent black and red snake that looked big enough to eat three kod kods."

"Yeah?" Spike lowered his brows.

"Riley challenged the snake, told it to get away from the cat, and the snake called him an idiot and told him it was ophiophagous, so Riley went fishing. And that last part is definitely dream logic for you."

"The snake was what?"
"I'm really glad you asked because now I feel less stupid for having no idea what it meant this morning. Apparently that's an animal that eats snakes. So, I was being protected by a beautiful snake that likes to eat other snakes. I'm thinking that's not so hard to interpret, although Riley was having this weird conversation with himself about how snakes symbolize hidden fear or phallic symbols or something weird and psychologic that wasn't really much with the making of sense."

"I've heard of someone talking to himself, but he was having a conversation with himself?" Spike asked, both eyebrows going up in an expression that very clearly suggested that the therapist was getting a call.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Okay, he was trying to have the conversation with me, but I just sort of nodded my head at him."

"You didn't tell him it was a Sentinel dream?" And now Spike just looked confused.

"Hey, I tell him that, and he's going to drive himself crazy trying to have more, and that way leads to frustration and short tempers. Nope, I'm going for letting him figure
this one out on his own. Personally, I'm a little disappointed that he's totally off on the wrong trail with the snake thing. I was thinking that was pretty obvious."

Spike shook his head. "I know where you're going, pet, but he might be right. You're a Shaman and Riley's a Sentinel, so of course you have spirit guides. I don't know of any vampires who have them, so the snake might be somethin' out of Riley's imagination."

"Nope. You're the snake," Xander declared confidently. Spike raised an eyebrow. "I'm the Guide, and I say you're the snake. After all, when I’m using my powers, you're the one who guides me. I love Riley, in the older-brother and not the gay-man-sex way—Riley and sex are so off the list of approved thoughts—but even though I love him, I have to say he sucks on the helping me with the Shaman stuff. His advice is usually to just concentrate harder. Not really with the helpful. So you're the Guide of the Guide, and you now have your very own spirit guide."

"Pet, spirit guides are powerful mojo, just sayin' it's true doesn't make it true," Spike said slowly as he studied Xander.

"Spike, I know I'm big with the crap-judgment in the heat
of battle, but when I'm not doing stupid stuff that puts me in the middle of danger, you trust me, right?" Xander asked. Spike cocked his head and then let his hand rest in the middle of Xander's chest.

"Trust ya with my heart, pet. Trust ya with everythin' except your own safety."

"Then trust me when I say this," Xander said seriously. "That's your spirit animal who's there with my spirit animal. I'm the Guide, so I know stuff like this. I have trouble explaining it sometimes because when I try to, I end up sounding slightly crazyish and I don't always know where my imagination stops and my powers begin, but I do sorta know what I'm doing with the Shaman stuff."

"You're bloody stunning at the Shaman bit, pet. And if ya say I have a spirit guide, too, then I believe you." Spike got a thoughtful smile as he considered the idea. Xander just knew his demon was going to be all over this no matter how many doubts the soul had. Yep, Spike's demon was still a power-hungry little beastie. Spike settled down next to Xander and pulled the covers up over both of them.

"Oh yeah, my vamp's got him a spirit guide," Xander said
happily. Blinking into his Shamanic vision, he snuggled into the pillow. Spike rested his head on Xander's shoulder and draped a leg across his thighs, holding him down. Smiling at his lover, Xander watched the soul cord shimmer into the form of a large snake that gravitated toward Xander's warmth, draping a coil over Xander's body before settling his wide head down on Spike's chest. The unblinking eyes watched Xander the way they always did, the light reflecting off the black of them and the black and red of his scales, although if Xander looked closely, he could see the blue reflected even on the darkest scales.

He had to concentrate harder for the next part, and it took several seconds of staring into the shadows before his own blue cord coiled and knotted and slowly formed the small head and round ears and then the body and the short bushy tail. The color came last, the blue finally fading into the brown and black spots as the tiny cat walked up Xander's body, stepping over the coils of the snake that now watched them both, a forked tongue coming out to taste the air. The tiny cat circled several times before finally picking a section of coil and throwing himself down so that his back pressed to the snake and he nestled between Spike and Xander.
Knowing that all was well and that either his vampire or his spirit guide would warn him if it wasn't, Xander closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

The End