

Old Friends

by
Cimmer

Part One

"It's not like I never tried to talk to her about my feelings, you know?"

Spike sighed and continued to line up his shot; if Harris would shut up for just two seconds he could sink this ball.

"And since when did just asking for a little time mean I want to break up with you? I never said the words 'break up'. I said, 'I love you and I want to marry you but I think we should just slow down a little.'"

Spike slowly dropped his head forward and sighed again. He straightened and looked at the ruffled lad almost pityingly. "Women can smell fear you know? Just plain human women can smell fear on a bloke from a mile away and you thought Anya, a former vengeance demon,

would buy that load of crap about just needing some time?" Spike snorted.

Xander looked slightly affronted. "Who said I was afraid? Hey pal, I've faced down hell demons, fish people, werewolves, and you. Besides, my best friend's a woman. I know about women. She's just being unreasonable." Xander nodded decisively.

Spike just shook his head wearily. A couple of older guys at the next table glanced at the boy upon hearing that last bit of nonsense and shared a commiserating look with the vampire.

Spike leaned down to line up his shot again.

"I'm not going after her either. If she thinks I'm going after her, she's got another thing coming. A man's got to have some pride." Xander took a swig of beer.

Spike sunk two balls, gave the brunette a disgusted look and walked around the table to place his final shot. Maybe he could end this in the next minute and get the hell out of here. If he had to listen to Harris natter on about Anya, chip or no chip, he was going to rip the kid's throat out.

"I mean you didn't let Dru get away with that stuff right? Oh sure, you were a pathetic drunken maniac at first but then you got it worked out and stood tall right? Buffy told me, you went back and let her know what was what, right?"

Xander stared at him hopefully. Spike stared back and then seemed to come to a decision. He beckoned the boy over. Xander stepped closer. Spike waved him closer still then leaned in and whispered very softly in his ear.

"I did what just about every male does when the light of his life tosses him out on his ear and he feels like his heart's been ripped out."

Xander looked horrified. "No, say it ain't so?" Xander met the blonde's unblinking gaze. His shoulders slumped. "You threw yourself on her mercy and begged?"

Spike shrugged and nodded. "Did you think it was different for vampires?"

"But, but, it wasn't your fault." Xander floundered. "She was being, being....."

"She was being Dru." Spike smiled fondly and a little sadly. He promptly sank the last two balls and finished his beer. He patted his pockets down looking for matches. Damn, was he out of matches?

Xander slumped dejectedly against the pool table. "So how long should I give her before I go up to San Francisco and beg her to come home?"

Ah, matches, but only four. Well he only had three cigarettes left so that would work. He'd have to nick some more before the night was out. He hated waking up with no smokes. "Don't know, what were her exact parting words?"

"Alexander Harris you need to grow up." Xander said in monotone.

"Give her until Monday otherwise she won't believe you actually thought about what she said." Spike headed for the door and Xander roused himself. He quickly finished off his beer and caught up with the departing vampire.

"I'm not scared, I mean not really. I do want to marry her. I love her. I just, everything's moving so fast you know? And she was talking about kids, not right now or

anything, but kids! And I just, I don't know." Xander trailed off.

"How old are you Harris?"

"Twenty, why? You don't think I'm old enough to get married? Well I am. I'm responsible too, I just." Spike stopped the flow of words by putting a single finger against Xander's lips.

"I don't know whether you're old enough to get married or not. That's not for me to say, besides I want to reserve the right to laugh my arse off at you if you screw up." Spike gave the outraged boy a slightly twisted smile. "There is one thing you should think about though; getting married is not a rite of passage for adulthood. It's something you do because you just can't imagine your life without that person in it."

Spike gave him a final stern glance and then resumed his leisurely stroll home. Xander stood very still for a moment and then hurriedly caught up with the blonde. They stopped at a store on the way and he paid for a whole carton of smokes for Spike. The vampire had nicked some chocolate while he'd been paying for the cigarettes. Spike offered him half and Xander hesitated

briefly before he accepted the pilfered candy.

"I could have paid for those too."

"Yeah?" Spike looked disinterested.

"So you want to get together tomorrow, watch some videos or something?"

Spike tipped his head to the side studying the human before him. Xander bit his lip and tried not to look too hopeful.

"Yeah, sure." Spike shrugged. He didn't have much else to do, what with Dawn being away with the witches for the weekend.

Xander grinned hugely and then tried to cover. "Great. Well see you around then." He bounced into his apartment building.

Spike shook his head; it was like having a pet. He ambled home, scaring a couple making out in the park on the way. Idiots. He'd just gotten in and turned on a late night movie when he stopped and sniffed the air. He frowned, Naw, couldn't be. He sniffed again. He had almost

convinced himself that he was wrong when he heard the knock on the door.

He closed his eyes, maybe if he stayed very quiet she would think he was gone and go away. Silence, and then, another timid rap. "Will, are you there?"

Spike watched fatalistically as the door slowly opened and a bright head of shiny gold hair attached to a blue pixie like face peered cautiously around the corner. She gave a relieved smile as she caught sight of him and stepped inside the crypt. She carefully juggled the little bundle in her arms.

"Thank goodness. I was afraid we might have the wrong crypt."

She held the baby in her arms a little higher and cooed, "Look honey, it's daddy."

Spike gave her a weak smile.

Part Two

Spike walked up to the young woman and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. He gently moved the blanket aside and peered into the face of the disinterested baby. She was almost a miniature of her momma; the same pixie like features and golden hair. In addition though, she had darker blue stripes across her cheeks. The markings looked a bit like war paint.

"That's apt," thought Spike. "Got a bit of her Da in her."

"She's a beauty luv, real pretty, just like her mum." Spike said quietly.

"Thanks. She looks a lot different than when you last saw her, huh?"

"Yeah, well she was just a little egg then. When did she hatch?"

"Last month, right on time and everything." She glanced around and Spike took pity on her. He dusted off the chair and offered her a seat.

"This is nice. I can tell you've really gone to a lot of trouble to brighten everything up." She tried not to look too closely at the stains on the battered old piece of furniture. She sat down very gingerly on the edge of the chair before giving him a brightly awkward smile.

Spike watched her arrange the babe carefully on her lap. A large rat scuttled between two coffins in the corner. She flinched but then caught his eyes on her and tried to cover her dismay with a cheerful façade. He smiled wryly. "Pet, why are you here?"

She didn't answer immediately and Spike steeled himself. When she bit her lower lip and looked at him entreatingly he groaned inwardly. It was going to be bad.

"I've left him Will. You were right. He doesn't have a sensitive bone in his body." She sniffed and reached up to wipe away an errant tear. Spike rummaged in his coat pocket and pulled out a fairly clean bandana, kept for first aid emergencies. She smiled her thanks and dabbed at her eyes.

"He wasn't even around when she hatched. I mean I don't think that was asking for too much do you? You

were there when she was born. He was supposed to be there when she hatched." She sniffed again. The baby sensing her mother's unrest began to fuss so she concentrated on soothing her, making soft little nonsense noises.

Spike pushed away from the wall he'd been leaning against to sit on the chair arm. She leaned her head against him and sighed sadly. "Loving someone who doesn't love you back is terrible. You'd think I'd know better."

Spike wisely kept his silence. He could tell she had a great deal more to say on the subject and was just warming up.

"All he ever does is issue orders. He just tells me what we're going to be doing. He never asks. And every time I want to talk things over he just says, there's nothing to talk about" Her eyes flashed although her voice stayed low so as not to upset the baby.

"He doesn't hurt you or the little one does he luv?" Spike asked grimly. He was fairly sure the answer was 'no' but you could never tell. He'd learned that a long time ago.

"No, of course not!" She looked shocked and he nodded.

"He wouldn't do that! He's just, just bossy and insensitive and, and," she searched for the right word. "He's a wanker," she finished triumphantly.

Spike snorted inelegantly. "Well you knew that before you married him luv," Spike gently reminded her. "I seem to remember you insisting that you liked your men forceful."

She blushed a becoming shade of indigo and dropped her head, peaking up at him through her lashes. "Well, I may have said something to that effect but there's a difference between forceful and jerk," she finished primly.

"It's all in the eyes of the beholder luv." He stroked his hand through her hair, letting the silky strands slide through his fingers.

She hrrumphed, "Besides, I thought after we got married it'd be different, you know?"

Spike rolled his eyes, "How many centuries old are you love?" He gave a slight tug to the locks of hair in his hand. He stood and pulled two suckers out of his coat pocket,

offering her one.

She took it with a little pout and watched him watching her. They stared at each other for a few seconds before she broke into another one of her sunny smiles, although this one was slightly rueful.

"Alright, I'm an idiot, go ahead and say it. It's what you're thinking."

He smiled back, "You're an idiot."

"That's why you're my favourite husband, you say the sweetest things." She winked.

"I'm your only husband now love." And a good thing too, he thought. Wouldn't want to meet his nibs in the state he's bound to be what with the wife and baby having up and left him. Divorce doesn't sit well with most demons and he's probably busy destroying a village somewhere to vent.

She blinked and looked away before clearing her throat nervously. Spike felt his stomach tighten.

"Well, actually, I didn't really formally end the marriage."

The look she gave him begged him to understand. "I still love the big idiot. I just needed a little space." She cringed slightly at the dark look the vampire was giving her. William could be so old fashioned about things sometimes. "I left a note," she offered brightly.

"A note," he echoed faintly. "What did it say?"

"Nothing much," she said mutinously.

Spike straightened and gazed very sternly at the woman before him. "Nualla," he growled.

Her eyes widened slightly but the stubborn tilt remained to her chin and her lips stayed firmly closed. Spike eyed her narrowly and crossed his arms. Two very old creatures locked horns, figuratively speaking, and there was a tense silence in the old crypt for a good five minutes before Spike shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly and reached for his jacket. He popped the sucker back in his mouth as he pulled on his duster and headed for the door.

"Oh all right, I said that I was going to visit you in the States," she snapped. "I don't see that it matters. It's not like he's going to come and fetch me

home."

Spike snarled, "Come and fetch you home? We'll be lucky if that's all he does."

Spike fumed as he paced back and forth. "It's your own fault," he thought, "no one told you to go on a week long bender in South America after Dru told you good bye that last time. Serves you right to wake up married to the local forest sprite because she's got an egg in the oven."

He stopped and took a deep unnecessary breath and glanced at the object of his ire. She looked miserable. She was pleating and re-pleating the baby's blanket and gnawing her lower lip almost raw. She looked up when he stopped.

"I'm sorry Will," she said quietly. "I just didn't think. I can't imagine why I did something so crazy. I do know better." She sighed heavily.

"Love makes madmen of us all," Spike quoted gently. He held out his hand, "C'mon then luv. Let's go."

She stood with a question in her eyes.

"Well you and the little one can't stay here. This is no fit place for a babe. We'll go to my mate Xander's place. He's got an extra room." Spike was already turning away and heading outside so he missed the surprised look in the blue sprite's eyes as she followed him out the door.

"Did you hear that baby? Daddy's taken another mate. I hope he's not as crazy as Dru." Nualla whispered to the bundle in her arms.

Part Three

Xander tapped his foot impatiently waiting for the microwave to beep and signal an end to his wait. Ummm, hot, buttery popcorn and back-to-back Jet Li movies. He rubbed his hands in anticipation. Not even the prospect of grovelling to Anya dampened his enthusiasm. He frowned, well maybe just a bit. He looked down at his ragged t-shirt, old sweatpants and rainbow scuffs. The scuffs were a present from the witches, who lately had been in some sort of mad crocheting phase.

He sighed and thought back on his conversation with Spike earlier in the evening. Man, what a total let down. He'd really thought that Spike had returned to Drusilla and laid down the law. Not that Xander approved in any way, shape or form of torture as a way of cementing a relationship but to find out that the Big Bad had caved and thrown himself on the mercy of the court so to speak. Xander gave a slow shake of his head. It was like finding out that Superman wasn't really faster than a speeding bullet or that the Lone Ranger didn't use real silver in those bullets.

Whoa, back up, not that he thought of Spike as a hero. He didn't, although he had come to think of him as a friend. It's just that his whole worldview had been skewed. He'd never thought of demons as just regular guys. The thought of some big Fyarl demon getting nagged at by the Missus just gave him the wiggins.

He giggled suddenly, overcome by the thought of Ralph Cramden played by some horned demon yelling 'To the moon Alice.' Heh, oh boy, two beers on an empty stomach were two beers too many. The microwave beeped at him invitingly; ahh, popcorn, one of the four basic

food groups.

He carefully juggled the hot bag as he grabbed a cold bottle of water out of the fridge. He had about five minutes to get settled before the movie started, perfect timing. If he couldn't spend the evening having wild sex with Anya, this was the next best thing. He arranged everything within easy reach and was just about to hit 'play' on the remote when the doorbell rang.

It was after midnight and no sane Sunnydale resident would just blindly open their doors at night. He reached under the couch cushion and pulled out a stake and a small vial of holy water. He approached the door at an angle, standing slightly back and to the side before calling out.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, open up mate."

Xander raised an eyebrow suspiciously. It sounded like Spike. "What's the password?"

"Let me in before I kick the bloody door down whelp." He heard the vampire snarl, followed by what sounded like a

muffled giggle.

He opened the door a crack, which was quickly enlarged by Spike as the vampire shoved his way into the living room. Xander's eyes widened comically as a small blue woman carrying a baby followed him inside. She gave him a shy smile and a little wave.

"Shut the door Harris, you're letting the heat out." Spike gestured to the small woman, "Nualla, Xander. Xander, Nualla." Spike dropped gracefully onto the couch and waved Nualla and the baby over to the easy chair. "Have a seat luv."

"Actually, Will and Xander," she bobbed her head in the still stunned boy's direction, "where's the bathroom? She needs changing."

Spike grimaced slightly, "Yeah, she does, doesn't she. Down the hall and to the left."

Xander continued to stand, mouth slightly agape. He had managed to shut the door however. "Who, what, why?" he finally stuttered.

Spike regarded the young man mournfully, poor lad,

maybe he'd been dropped on his head when he'd been younger. From what the vampire knew of his home life there was a good chance that's exactly what had happened. He patted the cushion next to him invitingly. "C'mon pet, have a seat. I don't have all night and we need to talk."

Xander scuffed his way over to the couch and flopped down looking a little bit lost. Of course Spike thought the kid always looked a little confused. He glanced down. "Nice slippers," he commented dryly.

Xander blinked and then glowered at him. He opened his mouth and Spike just shook his head and held up a hand.

"She's a forest sprite originally from the Old Country and now guarding territory deep in the Brazilian jungle. She's not really a demon, more like a dryad or faerie. Yes that's a baby and it's hers."

Xander, trying to make up for his earlier surprise, nodded sagely, like he'd seen it all before. He casually reached for the water and took a swig.

Spike grinned evilly, "Did I mention that she's my wife and that I'm one of the baby's fathers?"

Water spewed across the entire coffee table as Xander started coughing. Spike helpfully slapped him on the back but carefully so as not to set off the chip. "You all right mate?"

"You did that on purpose," he gasped, glaring at the smirking vampire before he went to get a cloth to wipe up the mess.

Spike laughed softly to himself. "I still got it." He probably shouldn't antagonize the kid. He was going to need his help after all. He'd talk Harris into letting Nualla and the baby stay here while he quietly pulled in a few favours to find out where that hulking husband of hers was. In the meanwhile, maybe he could convince the barmy lass to 'go home' or at least talk to the big oaf.

He watched Harris mop up the table as he absently rubbed his temples. He felt like he was getting a headache. He shouldn't be able to get a headache should he; would an aspirin help?

Xander glared resentfully at the blonde menace sitting on his sofa. Spike was rubbing his head like it hurt. Well good, maybe his chip was bothering him; serves him right

for that last bit. Stupid vampire jokes, ha ha, tease the human. He knew vampires couldn't have kids. He'd done a lot more reading than people gave him credit for, at least when it came to vampires. Besides, that baby hadn't looked more than a few months old. He frowned, or not. It was a supernatural baby after all. Maybe Nualla had laid an egg in the body of some poor sap Spike had killed for her and the egg had grown until the baby had chewed its way out of the corpse. He drew in a sharp breath then gave himself a mental slap. Get a hold of yourself Xander. A couple of bad incidents involving insect teachers and hatching egg demons and this is what you get, letting your imagination run away with itself.

Spike was looking at him strangely. Xander decided it was time to go on the offensive. "So when did the marriage take place?" he inquired with false politeness.

Spike gave him a razor thin smile, "Two years ago, last time I was down in Brazil."

Xander sneered, "And the baby, when did she enter the world and don't try to tell me she's two years old."

"Well the baby only hatched about a month ago but the egg was laid about two years ago." Spike said

conversationally.

"And you're the dad." Xander scoffed.

"Like I said whelp. I'm one of them." Spike puffed his chest out just a bit.

"Vampires can't have kids. It says so." Xander snapped.

"Where?" Spike inquired innocently.

"In Giles's books and before you ask which ones, even Angel said so." Xander having quoted one of his least favourite people, now considered the argument won.

Spike sneered at the mention of one of his least favourite people and was about to tell the lad what was what when Nualla returned.

"All clean. Thank you so much for letting us stay here with you Will's mate." She gently laid the newly cleaned and sleeping baby on the easy chair, pulling extra blankets out of the backpack she'd had over her shoulder.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to find you so stable; not

that Drusilla couldn't be stable but, well, you know what I mean." She chatted happily while she fixed a little bed for the child. "I had no idea that William had taken another mate, and such a nice young man at that." She turned to face the bewildered pair. Her gaze flickered between the two astonished men. "Did I say something wrong?"

Part Four

"Pet I think you're a bit confused," Spike recovered his composure first and spoke gently to the puzzled young woman.

"Well, you did say we were going over to your mate Xander's place and this is Xander's place isn't it?"

Xander who'd spent the past few seconds feeling shocked, to say the least, recovered enough to enter the conversation. "Hey, you told her we were mates?" He gave the vampire a friendly punch on the shoulder and

grinned happily.

Spike glanced at his shoulder and then at the goofily grinning boy. "Watch it Harris," he growled. Nualla was giving them an 'aww isn't that cute smile'. Right, well it was time to nip this in the bud.

"Look luv, when I said mate I didn't mean in the shag you senseless for the rest of eternity kind of way; I meant friends you know?"

"Oh I get it," she gave a little wink and a nod. "Say no more, just friends. I understand."

Spike snarled in disgust, "No, I mean it. Does he look like someone I'd sleep with?"

"Hey," Xander and Nualla declared in unison.

"That's not very nice William!" she scolded.

"Yeah, that's not very nice 'William'," Xander smirked. He turned to Nualla with a pitiful expression in his eyes and sniffed theatrically, "He's such a brute sometimes."

She managed to nod sympathetically at the woeful young

man while simultaneously glaring at Spike, which was a fairly impressive feat as far as the vampire was concerned, although Dru had done something similar on several occasions when he'd really ticked her off.

Spike gritted his teeth and mentally counted to ten and then twenty before a thought popped into his head, which caused a truly evil smile to cross his face. Xander did not like the look of this; he should have remembered that it's not nice to tease the vampire.

"Yeah, well I guess there's not much point in my trying to deny is there?" He shook his head sadly as he put an arm around Xander and squeezed just hard enough to make his point. "I can't wait to see the look on old Anyanka's face when we tell her, can you?" He turned to the suddenly frozen human with jovial smile.

"Anyanka?" Nualla questioned thoughtfully, tapping her lip.

"Friend of ours, just about the most easy going lass you'd ever want to meet; grand sense of humour too. She just loves a good joke, doesn't she pet?" Spike gave an extra hard squeeze; happily ignoring the warning twinge the chip gave him. It was worth it.

Xander's mouth was opening and closing like a fish out of water. He started to speak but it came out as more of a squeak than anything verbal. He coughed and tried again. His voice coming out only slightly cracked this time.

"Actually, Anya's my fiancé. Spike and I aren't together. Heh heh, I was just teasing. I don't know what got in to me. It's probably the beer. I don't usually drink on an empty stomach. Not that I'm a big drinker. It's just that we went out to play pool and they don't do that blooming onion thing like they used to and no chicken wings tonight if you can believe it?" Xander rubbed the back of his neck fretfully. "Did I mention that Anya and I are planning on getting married?" He smiled nervously at the woman who was still tapping her lip and appeared to be deep in thought.

She suddenly slapped her forehead, "Of course, Anyanka!" She stared at the pair before her, "Are you cheating on a vengeance demon? That's not very bright, William. You at least should know better."

Spike opened his mouth to explain but Xander jumped in first. The boy just had to keep babbling away; no wonder

he was best friends with Red.

"Actually she's human now so the whole curse us with boils or other nasty spells thing isn't really available to her anymore. Not that there's any reason to because, not with Spike. Nope, we are not a couple, so of course there's no reason to cause important bodily parts to fall off or anything. Not that she couldn't make my life a living hell if she wanted to," he laughed, "she's a woman after all." He stopped suddenly aware of his audience.

Spike winced; the kid had no survival instinct whatsoever. Nualla frowned.

"Not that there's anything wrong with women. I like women." He tried to pull away from the stranglehold Spike had on his shoulder but the vampire was getting such perverse pleasure out of his discomfort that he wouldn't let go.

Xander risked a quick glare in his direction promising revenge before forging gamely on. "Heck, I'm going to marry one and boy am I happy about that." He gave her his most ingratiating smile.

Nualla threw up her hands. "Males, you're all insane. I

have no idea what's going on but you know what? I don't care." She resolutely turned back to the blankets she had started to fold before this entire crazy conversation had begun.

Xander jerked loose from Spike's hold with a passable growl for a human. The vampire returned it with a self-righteous look. *Serves you right to be hoisted on your own petard*, he thought. He turned to the too straight back of the sprite. He heaved a sigh.

"We're really not a couple luv. Just having a bit of fun." She disdainfully shrugged one shoulder but didn't turn around.

"It's nothing to do with me. It's none of my business. I'm not mixing in." She continued taking everything out of her backpack and carefully folding it before putting it back in.

"Ah pet, don't be like that." Spike wheedled. He'd been reliably informed that he wheedled with the best of them.

"Yeah, Nualla, I'm sorry too. We were just being silly," Xander added, using his puppy dog eyes.

She turned, giving the two contrite males a long look before smiling slightly. "You're idiots. I hope you know that."

They nodded solemnly in agreement.

"Okay, now that we've settled that what do you want to do?" she asked.

"Well, Spike was going to explain how he could be a dad and how you met and everything." Xander grinned.

"Oh, the story of how Will and I met. This is so romantic." She winked at the brunette and gave him a saucy grin. Spike actually looked embarrassed.

She slipped to the floor and leaned back against the easy chair. Xander arranged himself comfortably on the couch and Spike sat down with a weary air of resignation.

"I remember his first words to me like it was only yesterday." She paused dramatically before continuing in a fair imitation of the vampire's accent, "Bloody hell woman, I think I'm gonna hurl."

Part Five

Xander burst out laughing then slammed a hand over his mouth with a quick look towards the baby but his eyes were still dancing.

Spike raised an eyebrow and calmly pulled what was left of his sucker out of his pocket and popped it in his mouth while Xander tried to get his snickering under control.

"To be fair I'd just dumped an entire pail of water over him," she smiled.

Xander managed to catch his breath and gave Spike a slightly disapproving look. "He was that drunk?"

The again was left unstated but you could hear the implication. Xander didn't approve of anybody getting that drunk. Spike sneered around his sucker. The boy had a bit of the Puritan in him sometimes.

"Actually, he was about to burst into flames. He was smoking like a bad chimney and it's a good thing I found him when I did. He was lucky that it was my doorstep he passed out on and I was able to drag him inside in time," she said wryly.

It was Xander's turn to raise eyebrows. "That was pretty nice of you."

"Well, the whole community knew about that crazy northern vampire who'd spent the past week drinking and getting into fights at the local tavern. It was the juiciest bit of gossip we'd had in a long time." She gave Xander an apologetic look. "Things move slowly where I live which normally is just fine but as you can imagine in a quiet place like that when anything different happens, well." She leaned forward conspiratorially and Xander found himself leaning forward to meet her; "A handsome, dangerous stranger, obviously heartbroken over some little filly, saunters into town, well all the local demon girls and a few others spent a lot of their free time discussing how he might be 'consoled' if you get my drift." She giggled and then sobered mockingly, "Not me of course, I'm much too mature for that kind of thing."

Spike snorted inelegantly and Xander chortled at the

disgruntled vampire, "Hey, romance novel material." Spike scowled back at him but the effect was somewhat ruined by the lollipop. It just didn't appear as menacing as usual.

"Have you ever seen him without his shirt on, whoa!" She fanned herself delicately and then patted the blonde's knee.

"Havin fun pet?" he asked conversationally. He was a little surprised at how calmly he'd taken the retelling of one of his most embarrassing moments. Maybe it was because he felt comfortable with these two. Harris wasn't in any position to laugh too hard at relationship troubles and neither was Nualla. Plus they all shared the same self-deprecating sense of humour, which, considering how their lives went was probably just as well. They weren't just laughing at him, they were laughing with him.

"Yes," she said in a childlike voice and with an unrepentant twinkle in her eye.

"Okay, Spike's sexy, fine, I get that." Xander stopped, "Wait, what I mean is, I can understand how some woman could get that. But, well, why would you think

'daddy' about some vampire who was too drunk to come in out of the sun?" Xander felt truly perplexed. Maybe it was different for supernatural creatures, but compact body and good looks aside, Spike did not strike him as good parenting material. Although, to be fair, he was really good with Dawn; in fact he was a lot stricter than Xander was about curfews and such. From what little he knew of demons, including Anya, they tended to be wild and maybe strict was good?

Nualla smiled a little sadly, "My people are few and far between. There aren't a lot of us left, no wild place, no sprites." Xander bit his lip and looked uncomfortable.

"Bloody humans," Spike muttered under his breath.

She shrugged in resignation, "Hey, that's progress. It happens and I got over being really angry about it a long time ago. The problem is, male sprites. There were never a lot of them to begin with and there are a lot less now. So, quick lesson in sprite biology if you're up for it?" she questioned the brunette.

Xander cleared his throat and nodded in his best mature manner. "Yeah, sure." He hesitated briefly, "Not too in depth right?"

"I'll censor out all the icky bits," she smiled. Spike laughed softly.

"When it's 'that time' and there is a male sprite available, well then things pretty much happen the way they do with humans except that the end result is an egg that is laid in a nice little nest that the male has created. The egg grows slowly and after two years it hatches and out comes a beautiful little sprite, usually female. Simple, yes?"

Xander nodded. This was really interesting, why couldn't they have studied this kind of stuff in school? This was so cool.

"Now if there's no male sprite around, the female has to find someone else, sometimes more than one. One to sort of start the process and one to finish it." She blushed a bit. "Also, we don't have a lot of time to do it either. Just one week or no more egg until the next cycle, which is every fifty years."

"When my time came, I already had my eye on someone, who was not cooperating. In fact he was being a pain in the neck."

"Too bloody right," Spike sneered.

"Who's telling the story, you or me?" Nualla asked primly. Spike grunted and waved her on.

"William had been staying with me for about a week at that point; drying out, making himself useful, keeping my hormones in a whirl." She laughed softly and gave him a fond look. "And just generally being a nice guy. So when I came home in tears one morning after another fruitless attempt to get my honey's attention before my biological deadline, he comforted me."

"Yeah?" Xander said, giving the vampire a rather dark look.

"Not that kind of comforting and aren't you sweet. No wonder you two are friends, both of you has a bit of the knight errant in you." The two men looked uncomfortable.

"No, I poured my little heart out to him and that's when we came up with a plan to get my man's attention. It ended up working too but that's another story and in the meantime I was going to lose my chance at a baby." She

gave Spike a truly beautiful smile. The vampire gave her a wry grin in return.

Xander sighed softly. It was pretty obvious those two shared something on a much deeper level than sex.

"So to make a long story short, one night William and I started a baby."

"But he's a vampire and, well, nothing's alive," Xander squirmed a bit.

"But he is magical and I can work with that." She gave the blonde a wink. "I still needed the idiot who became my second husband though. He is alive, at least for now," she finished dryly.

She ran a hand through her hair and yawned delicately. They heard a little gurgling coo coming from the depths of the easy chair. She rolled her eyes slightly. "Oh, look, someone's awake again. Gee, I wonder why she's up half the night?" she said with a pointed look at the blonde.

"I expect it's because she has a bit of her Da in her." Spike crowed. "You get some rest luv, I'll look after her."

Xander jumped up, "Hey, where are my manners, let me show you the spare room. It's got clean sheets and everything.

"Thanks," she said tiredly. She bent down and gave the baby a kiss and a cuddle and then another kiss and another cuddle. It ended up being a good fifteen minutes before Xander was able to show her to the bedroom.

When he returned, it was to find Spike sitting on the floor with the baby cradled in his legs. He had a bit of string with a shiny piece of cellophane from his cigarette pack tied to the end and he was dangling it over the baby while she swatted at it. He kept encouraging her to grab and looked as proud as a peacock every time she swiped at it.

"That's it, grab it luv, 'grrr', wrestle it to the ground. Move in for the kill, that's my girl." Spike whispered encouragingly.

Xander slid down next to the vampire. "She's going to have to bring down a kill? What do sprites eat?" he asked a little worriedly.

"Oh, they're vegetarians, you know tree sap and such.

Pretty disgusting if you ask me." Spike crinkled the paper for her and the baby blew a bubble at him in return. He grinned hugely. "Clever girl, who's a clever girl, yes you."

"I don't think she's going to have to wrestle any trees to the ground." Xander peered at the baby. She was a cute little thing.

Spike raised an eyebrow and gave the lad his trademark sneer. "Oh she won't eh? Ever been to the jungle?" Xander shook his head. "Well shows what you know."

Xander's eye's widened as the implications of that statement sunk in. Note to self, do not visit the deep jungle without lots of backup.

Xander bit his lip and peered at Spike who looked pretty relaxed. He decided to chance it. "Can I hold her?" He steeled himself for a cutting reply. The vampire gave him a long measuring look. Xander didn't think he'd ever been looked at that carefully before.

"Yeah, all right." Spike carefully held up the little bundle. Xander held out both hands.

"You got to support her head, make sure you got a firm

hold now."

"I've got her head, I've got it!" Xander concentrated on receiving the tiny creature.

Anyone watching the operation would have thought they were moving highly volatile explosives. Finally she was settled on Xander's lap.

He stared down at her in awe. She stared back and yawned, obviously blasé about the entire procedure.

"She's so small," he breathed.

"Not even a mouthful," Spike agreed gently.

"Okay that was a disturbing comment." Xander said.
"Why do you do that?"

"What?" asked an obviously confused Spike.

"Well, when you like someone you refer to them as food; like Nibblet or Little Bit, or Nummy. It's weird."

"Not if you're a vampire," Spike stated reasonably.

Xander thought about that for second and then shrugged mentally. "Can't argue with that I suppose," he thought.

"She's so cute."

"Yeah,"

They both sniffed and then grimaced. Xander looked at Spike. "Well Dad," Xander looked hopeful.

"You're holding her." Spike backed up a bit.

"Oh man," Xander, "Together?"

They stared at each other then at the baby. She cooed delightedly and kicked her little legs.

"Right then," the vampire answered. "How bad could it be?"

"Ohh, bloody 'ell," the vampire quickly stepped back. Xander had lost the coin toss so he got to unwrap the package. He had protested vehemently, saying that he was not the dad so it wasn't even fair to have a coin toss. But, Spike had pointed to his nose and mentioned that his ability to scent prey was a necessary survival trait that he would need if he ever had to look out for his daughter. That made absolutely no sense to Xander but he had given in and was now faced with the results.

He grimaced, actually it wasn't that bad. Really, not that bad, although how such a little thing could make such a big mess was beyond him. A hand appeared around the bathroom door proffering a clean bit of cloth. Xander quickly wrapped the soiled one up inside two trash bags. He hesitated briefly about tossing the diaper but then thought, "Heck, I'll just get her more." He sniffed again, "It's gotta go."

Spike poked his head around the corner and watched Xander expertly pin the baby into a new diaper. Xander caught his eye and finished with a little flourish.

"Viola, thank you, thank you, no applause please, just throw money." He gave the astonished vampire a cocky grin.

"Where'd you learn to do that mate?" Spike tried to regain his usual cool.

"Like I keep telling you," he said pointing to himself, "best friends with a woman here, hello? When we played house, Willow was into progressive parenting. She insisted that Jesse and I know how to diaper her dolls." Xander gently tickled the squirming baby. "Never thought I'd be using that particular skill."

Xander wrapped her back up in her blanket and he and Spike headed to the living room. "Hey, we just keep calling her baby. What's her name?" Xander asked as he settled cross-legged on the couch.

"Doesn't have one yet. Won't have her Naming Day for another couple of months. That's how it is with her Father's people." Spike propped his feet up on the coffee table and yawned.

"Is she running away from him?" Xander asked in a very quiet, very serious tone.

Spike didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Naw, she just needed some space you know? He's the overbearing

type and he's got no idea how to handle her." Spike nodded towards the guestroom. "Probably spent all his time giving orders and what woman likes that eh?"

Spike shook his head, "Tried to warn her but she had heart set on him she did, and wouldn't see no one else."

"Did you want her to 'see' you?" Xander asked and held his breath. He felt a little out of his depth although strangely he also felt very adult. He'd never had a really serious conversation with the blonde and for some reason he felt proud that Spike thought he was mature enough to talk to about the situation.

The vampire gave him a sidelong glance and for a moment Xander thought he wouldn't answer then Spike shook his head. "No; don't love her like that, although maybe I wish I could." He shrugged, "can't choose who to fall in love with, just happens."

Xander's thoughts strayed to a head of bright red hair and pretty green eyes. He nodded in understanding. "Yeah."

Both men sat deep in their own thoughts for a while before Xander roused himself to ask, "What's the plan?"

Do you want her to stay here until she gets her head together?"

Spike gave a dry chuckle, "I don't think we have that much time. If I know the big oaf, he's on his way here right now bound and determined to bring the little woman home."

"Well if she needs some space maybe he should just give it to her," Xander snorted. "I mean, it sounds like he was pushing, you know?"

"Much as I dislike the bloke and would love to agree with you whole heartedly, I happen to know Nualla." Spike shook his head, "He may be a right wanker with more muscle than sense but my wife is no shrinking wallflower either. Nualla's been on her own a long time and she's not anymore used to being married than the big idiot. When Nualla wants to do something well Nualla does it." Spike gave Xander a wry look.

Xander winced, "Irresistible force meets immovable object?"

"Too right," the vampire agreed. "You don't just walk away from the local demon leader with a note saying 'Ta,

be seeing you when I see you.'" Spike snorted, "Man's got to have some pride."

Xander bristled, "Hey, when I said that about Anya you thought I was being an idiot."

"Yeah, well you were and so are they, happy?" Spike wondered about the kid sometimes although this was nice. Well nice was too smarmy a word, more like a bit of all right. He hadn't had another male to just talk to in a long time, not since the Poof, well not even him actually and Master Vampires did not 'hang out' with minions. Aside from the baby he'd never had a Childe. Now he had Dawn and a baby and a wife and a couple of crazy witches and an affianced man-child for friend, throw the Watcher, Anya and Dru into the mix and it was a real mess. *I wonder if my un-life is this crazy for a reason?* He thought about that for a moment and then decided it was best not to know.

"So again I ask, what's the plan 'oh wily one'," Xander was busy watching the baby grab his finger. "And why do you keep referring to him as the big oaf or big idiot or big anything?" He smiled down at the entranced child who had decided that Xander-finger was the best toy in the world.

"The plan whelp, is to find him before he finds us and pulverizes us into little blobs of demon goo or human goo in your case." Spike pulled out a match to chew on. He was going to have to trust the lad with the baby soon so he could catch a smoke. "And I call him big because he is a very large demon."

Xander looked up, "When you say large, are we talking 'large' or 'good lord it's blocking out the sun'?"

Spike stroked his chin thoughtfully, "Somewhere in-between I reckon." He caught Xander's worried look and gave him a cheeky grin. "Not to worry ducks, too late to do it tonight but I'll put the word out at Willy's tomorrow and we'll get it settled. Besides," Spike puffed up a bit, "I can take him."

Xander hoped this wasn't one of Spike delusions of grandeur.

The baby yawned hugely while Xander gently rubbed her little tummy. She liked these strange creatures; they were funny. She liked the one who smelled a bit like mommy and whose face could change. She liked the other one who was rubbing her tummy too. She closed

her eyes and slid into sleep.

"Let me have her, eh? I'll put her down with her mum then I've got to have a smoke." Spike carefully picked up the sleeping infant and cradled her against his shoulder. She fussed a bit and he rubbed her back soothingly and started making a low rumbling noise that an astonished Xander could only describe later as a purr.

His mouth fell open as he watched the vampire walk down the hall to Nualla's bedroom. "Vampire's purr! Wait until I tell Willow," he thought excitedly. He got up and stretched, walking into the bathroom and getting ready for bed.

He waited until Spike returned and then tossed him an extra set of keys. "I'm heading to bed. There's extra blankets and stuff in the closet. I don't have any blood though so you might want to pick some up before you settle in for the evening."

The vampire gave him a long look and then slowly raised an eyebrow. Xander shrugged and grinned self-deprecatingly, "I know, I know, you're not domesticated and I can't trust you as far as I can throw you and no, I'm not taking you for granted."

"Good," was all the blonde said before opening the door.

"Oh hey Spike?" Xander handed him the bag with the diaper in it and gave him cheeky grin, "don't forget the trash."

Spike grimaced and held the bag well away as he left.

Part Seven

It was a bleary eyed Xander who contemplated his cereal the next morning. Actually it was technically 12:01 pm but it was morning as far as Xander was concerned. He'd roused a grumpy Spike and moved him into his own bed, thank you very much, at around 11:30 so that he could putter in comfort; one thing he'd learned from spending time with the bleached wonder was that Spike was not a morning person.

He'd heard Nualla get up earlier. He listened to her

quietly give the little one a bath and then dozed off to the sounds of Sesame Street playing on the TV in the guest room. By the time he rolled out of bed she must have gone back to sleep to nap with the nibblet. He grimaced, "Great, now he has me doing it too".

He heard sounds of life and a tousled sprite and baby appeared in the kitchen. She gave him a sleepy smile. "Good morning. How are you?"

"Fine thanks. What can I get you and baby?"

"Oh don't worry about the baby. I've got her covered." She smiled sweetly at the suddenly blushing young man. "Do you have any granola, moss, lichen, tea?" she asked.

Xander hesitated and then offered sheepishly, "I have Fruit Loops. They recently brightened the colours."

She peered into the box somewhat warily and sniffed delicately, then shrugged, "Yeah, all right."

Xander gave a sigh of relief and then brightened, "But, hey I do have tea." He stood up and reached into the cupboard, "It's Green Tea, is that okay?"

"Oh perfect. Thank you." She was trying to juggle the baby while pouring cereal and had just about decided to set her down when Xander held out his arms.

"Can I hold her?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure." She watched him very carefully support the baby's head before cradling her in his arms. "You like children?"

"Yeah," he smiled shyly. "My girlfriend talked about having kids and I kinda freaked. I'm not sure why but, this is sorta cool." He gave her a grin.

"Well, lots of people, male and female 'freak' when the topic of children come up. It's a big adjustment." She stared at the wall with a sad look.

"You okay?" Xander asked quietly.

"Yeah, I think I just realized that maybe I didn't give someone as much time to adjust as I thought I did," she said wryly. "To think that I might have made a mistake;" she gave him a twisted half smile.

"Shocking," the brunette said with a relatively straight

face.

She stuck her tongue out him. The baby giggled. Nualla watched the young man play with her daughter. She'd listened to him and William arguing about changing the baby's diaper last night. She'd had to bite the pillow to keep from laughing out loud. That nonsense Will had given the human about sensitive vampire noses inspired a giggle every time she thought of it. She could tell by the tone in the boy's voice that he hadn't fallen for it but he'd still ended up changing the diaper. Her William could talk his way out of just about anything given half the chance. She'd seen him do it.

"Xander, is William all right? I mean does he have someone, besides you of course," she asked seriously.

Xander didn't even glance up, his gaze focused on the baby he was gently rocking. "Well, not really, not since Buffy died."

"Buffy?"

"The Slayer," Xander stopped, frozen in shock. What had he just said? No one was supposed to know that Buffy was dead. They'd all gone to so much trouble with the

Buffbot and now he just babbled it all out about Buffy and how Spike felt about her. The vampire was going to kill him, chip or no chip, Spike would find a way. He swallowed miserably, meeting the grave look in the sprite's eyes.

"The Slayer, oh, my poor, poor William," She said sorrowfully and slowly shook her head. She met Xander's stricken gaze, reaching across and patting his arm. "It's okay. It'll be our secret."

Xander let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

"My goodness this certainly is a very bright breakfast food." She delicately plucked a floating fruit loop from her milk. "I don't think I've ever seen this exact shade of glow in the dark green before, hmm, interesting." She pretended to study the loop intently, giving the shaken young man a chance to regain his composure. He seemed to be a rather endearing mix of innocence, bravado and wisdom. The fact that he was William's friend was in her opinion a good thing for Will and from what she'd seen of Xander, probably a good thing for him as well. *Well, speak of the Devil*, she thought as an obviously newly awakened vampire appeared.

Spike's eyes were at half mast and his hair was sticking up every which way. He shuffled directly to the fridge and pulled out what appeared to be bagged blood. Without even looking, he held out a palm and Xander slapped a mug into his hand. He poured the blood into the mug and put it in the microwave and then leaned against the counter. The entire procedure had been performed in silence.

The microwave beeped and Spike took out his 'liberated' Kiss the Librarian mug swallowing a healthy dose of blood. His eyes opened a little more. He took another smaller sip. Xander waited until the third sip and then ventured a "Morning Spike." The vampire grunted.

Xander held the baby up, "Look baby, scary vampire. Grrr" The little girl cooed delightedly as the blonde gently chucked her under the chin.

Spike finished off his mug of blood and poured in the rest of the bag and popped the cup back in the microwave. He ran a hand through his hair so that it regained some semblance of order and yawned.

"Mornin' whelp." He winked at Nualla, "'ello Beautiful."

"Good morning William," she said through a mouthful of cereal. She had ventured an entire spoonful and was now determinedly munching away on the sugary substance. She felt herself getting a bit light-headed. *No more sugar for me. I need to go find some vegetables.* She thought.

Spike saw her blink a little dazedly. "We need to find you some veggies luv." He looked at the bowl of breakfast cereal reprovingly.

"Hey just make a list. I can go shopping. We can do salad and stuff. We'll be all healthy until tonight." Xander said.

"Tonight," murmured the sprite distractedly. She felt distinctly odd, not bad really, just odd. "Are we going out?"

"No, I'm going out. I just need to run a few errands." Spike glared at the boy.

Xander winced, "Sorry," he mouthed.

"I think," she stood up suddenly, "Oh dear, please excuse me." She made a run for the bathroom where she lost the entire contents of her tummy. Note to self, no more

sugary breakfast cereals.

"You all right pet?" Spike asked. She waved him away.

"Just fine, no problem," she breathed slowly, in and out, okay, all done being sick, feeling much better.

"I'll send the boy out for some proper food." Spike hesitated until she got up and gave him a reassuring smile. "Pet, good rule of thumb, if Xander likes it, it's probably not good for you."

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Spike handed Xander a wad of cash and sent him to the store armed with a long list of food items that consisted mostly of fresh vegetables, fruits and a box of Wheatabix for the vampire. Nualla was feeling much better by the time he returned and they spent the rest of the afternoon watching movies and playing with the baby. The four of them got along with cheerful camaraderie right up until the point that Spike put on his jacket and mentioned that he was going out for a smoke. The sprite must have had some sort of sixth sense because she had stood up and indicated that she wanted a breath of fresh

air.

Xander had a front row seat to a very subtle battle of wills. Unlike the loud and sometimes violent disagreements his parents engaged in or the avoidance arguments he and Anya had, this was a match of champions. He watched them duck and weave with the expertise of world class contenders. For awhile there, it almost seemed like Spike just might make it out the door alone but in the end he'd found himself holding Nualla's backpack for her while she wrapped the baby up in preparation for the trip to Willy's.

Spike had lost Round One but he came back swinging when they finally arrived at the bar. He absolutely refused to let her come in. He pointed to the baby and Xander saying that neither could come inside and someone would have to stay out here and protect them. Xander bristled but his protest was quashed by a single raised eyebrow. He pouted, she pouted, but Spike remained unmoved. He'd been pouted at by the best. No one could out-pout Dru in a high dudgeon.

Before going inside he came up to the annoyed sprite and rubbed against her temple and cheek. He then did the same to the baby but for her he added a lick to which

she cooed appreciatively. He then moved over to Xander who was trying to decide what the heck was going on. The vampire grimaced then grabbed him firmly by the scruff of his neck and blew along his both sides just below his ears. Xander shivered and Spike pulled back with a smirk.

He looked at his little group. "All mine," he growled before entering the bar with a decisive whirl of his duster.

"What just happened?" Xander looked over at a seemingly unconcerned Nualla.

She rolled her eyes, "Vampires," she said as if that explained it all and maybe it did.

They waited outside mutinously receiving several odd stares from the incoming and outgoing patrons but no one bothered them. A few demons stepped closer than Xander would have liked but then immediately backed off. Xander wasn't sure whether it was Spike's scent or Nualla's hiss of displeasure which caused it but he started to feel less like a walking Happy Meal.

Spike returned looking grim. "He's already in town luv,"

he said looking at the sprite. They walked away from Willy's, Spike and Xander automatically falling into flanking positions around the woman and the baby.

A surprised and pleased expression crossed her face. She glanced at the two men and quickly covered it with a casually disinterested shrug; "Yeah?"

The vampire gave her a vaguely disgusted look, "Yeah, he must have left right after you did; happy now?"

She shrugged again but this time looked a little uncomfortable.

"When we find him the two of you are going to have a talk and get this foolishness worked out, you hear me?" Spike said sternly.

She bit her lip, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. She nodded slightly.

"Nualla," he warned. "You two can't go on like this, it isn't good for the baby."

"Low blow," she glared. "You're playing dirty."

"Yeah, well I'm evil." Spike growled. Xander hid a smile.

They took the short cut across the park stopping to let Xander retie his shoe. He glanced up and then froze. Spike froze, Nualla froze, the baby on the other hand continued to snooze. In front of them stood one of the biggest demons Xander had ever seen. Heck, he was one of the biggest anything's the kid had ever seen. Xander swallowed past the very large lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. He pointed.

"Daddy?" he squeaked.

"Daddy," Nualla confirmed.

"Oh bloody 'ell."

Part Eight

Rationally Xander knew that the demon facing them was probably only about seven feet tall but the small atavistic

part of his brain that had kept him alive on the Hellmouth all these years was screaming *It's a giant monster, run!* Rational Xander, however, refused to leave his friends and certainly was not putting a baby in harm's way.

'Daddy' stalked closer with surprising grace for something so large. Xander felt his stomach tighten; regardless of what Spike had said, this demon didn't appear to be a big oaf. For one thing he wasn't rushing forward blindly or bellowing in wounded outrage or just generally snarling mindlessly. He stepped to within six feet of the little group and then stopped, arms held loosely at his side.

He nodded brusquely, "William." He bowed to the sprite, "Nualla", he said coolly. He then turned to Xander, "You're that human that runs with the Slayer." It wasn't a question.

Xander took a calming breath, "Xander" he said evenly. He saw Spike give him a nod of approval. The demon gave him a measuring look and then nodded. *Oh yeah,* thought Xander, *the big scary demon now thinks of me as worthy of being pounded into goo.* Oddly enough the thought was somewhat comforting for the young man.

At least he wasn't being dismissed.

The demon scented the air and narrowed his eyes at Spike who just raised his eyebrows questioningly. The demon gave a very low growl, which Spike promptly returned. Xander felt his stomach tighten further. *Oh this is so not good.* He groaned silently.

The demon turned to Nualla. "If you're done visiting, it's time to come home. Now."

Xander winced, even he knew that phrasing a sentence like that in that tone of voice was not of the good, as Buffy used to say. He watched the sprite stiffen. *Yup, the chin goes up, the lips drop down. Oh yeah, she's gonna do whatever you want, not Xander* thought as he mentally slapped his forehead. "And everyone tells me I don't have a clue."

"Baby and I aren't done visiting my husband and his friend yet," she answered with regal coldness.

"I've been patient," he bit out.

"Ha! You wouldn't know patient if you sat on it."

"Any patience I have is quickly being used up by a spoiled little forest sprite that insists that it's her way or no way at all!"

"My way! My way!" she shouted, "Well maybe I do dig in my heels but if I didn't you'd walk all over me with those big feet of yours."

Xander could swear he saw Daddy's eyes spark. "We are not going to have this discussion in front of him," he pointed at Spike, "and a human. We are going home!" He made a grab at Nualla's arm, which was slapped out of the way by Spike.

Wow, Xander hadn't even seen the vampire move. He'd apparently been content to let the argument go but as soon as the demon had reached for Nualla, that was that. He was in gameface and standing right in front of the sprite and the baby, snarling like a wolf on steroids.

"Mine," he hissed. "Share yes; take no!"

Daddy roared in outrage and Xander quickly grabbed Nualla by the shoulders and yanked her and the baby out of the way. Oh yeah, this was bad.

"Stop it! William, Rolf! I mean it!" she yelled trying to get the circling males' attention.

"Rolf?" thought Xander. "What the heck kind of name is Rolf for a demon. No, no Rolf is the name you give a Scandinavian massage expert, not a big scary demon. I just find that disturbing." There was a loud crack and a howl. Xander jerked his mind back to the matter at hand, namely two very pissed off demons and one very angry sprite.

Apparently Rolf had just taken a swipe at Spike and had his nose punched for his troubles. Now Rolf feinted to the left, oh but he snuck in with a right hook. Give the Devil his due that was a nice move. Spike was back with a roundhouse kick though that scored a direct hit; unfortunately, not much damage. Now they were circling each other again, both a little more wary than before. Xander remembered Spike saying he could take down Daddy, yeah right. *Look out, duck, oh that had to hurt. Wow, good thing Spike didn't need to breath.*

Xander found himself ducking and weaving and wincing with the battle. Spike was holding his own but Rolf was not going down anytime soon. Nualla was yelling and Xander suspected, cursing in a language he didn't

understand. Finally she stamped her foot and handed Xander the baby who was awake and watching the proceedings with wide eyes. Rolf grabbed the vampire in a bear hug and started to squeeze. Xander could swear he heard bones creaking. Spike smacked the demon's ears and Rolf howled and dropped him. The demon stumbled slightly, shaking his head to clear it. Spike was dancing and weaving like a professional boxer, jumping in for quick jab then jumping out of range again and laughing, the loon. Xander held his hand up over the baby's eyes when Spike caught the demon a good clip to the chin. Then Xander held his hands up over both their eyes when Rolf managed to grab Spike around the neck in one meaty paw. He was lifting the vampire clear off the ground and pulling back a fist. Xander glanced around wildly for anything to hit him with or a place to set the baby or something.

With a sudden high-pitched war cry Nualla launched herself at Daddy's back and latched on. In all the excitement, Xander hadn't noticed her manoeuvring into position. What did she think she was doing, she was way too small to have any effect on the big guy. She had managed to keep him from hitting Spike, although the vampire was still being held off the ground. The blond was hissing and clawing like a wet cat.

"You let him go right now or so help me I'll do it. I swear I will!" Nualla yelled.

The enraged demon didn't seem to be listening to her although, Xander noted, aside from trying to shake her off his back he wasn't making any other move to hurt her.

"Rolf!" she yelled raising her hand. "Fine, I warned you."

Xander saw Nualla slap a palm hard against her husband's neck. He heard the demon groan before he stood straight up like he'd been pole axed. Xander saw Spike's eyes widen almost comically as he just managed to gasp, "Oh bloody 'ell!" before Rolf fell on him like the proverbial ton of bricks.

After the dust settled, so to speak, all that was visible of the blonde were two splayed out arms and his booted left foot. Xander had the wholly hysterical fear that when they lifted Rolf off the vampire he would be flattened like a cartoon character from an old Road Runner episode.

"Spike, Spike, are you all right? Talk to me buddy."
Xander raced forward. He must be alive otherwise he'd

just be a big pile of dust.

Nualla had lightly jumped to her feet and then stared down at her husbands in shock. She cringed, "Oops."

"Mffwfflglmgf," came from beneath the fallen demon.

"Oh, thank god," Xander sighed in relief. "Just hang on, we'll get you out of there." He turned to the chagrined sprite. "How are we gonna get him out of there?"

She held up a hand, "It's okay, I got it." She reached down and Xander's eyes bugged as she rolled the big demon off Spike with surprising ease. "Oh, Will, I'm so sorry," she said contritely. He just glared and she wisely moved off to see to Rolf.

Xander dropped to his knees beside the disgruntled vampire. Spike was muttering under his breath and still in gameface. He was swiping at the dirt on his coat, as his angry rumblings got louder. He glared at the fallen demon and opened his mouth. Xander winced and pointed frantically to the baby still in his arms.

"Little pitchers have big ears," he said as soothingly as he could. It was pretty obvious that Spike was at the end of

his rope as far as family was concerned. Spike settled for snarling and Xander stood offering the angry blonde a hand up.

Spike shifted back to his human features and let the man tug him to his feet. He didn't really need the help but he did need the contact to help him continue to calm down. Xander stood very still as Spike moved so close that he was almost leaning against the human. He just stood there and seemed to be consciously breathing, in and out. It took Xander a minute to realize that the vampire was soothing himself with the scent of his child and Xander.

Nualla had rolled Daddy over onto his back and was now kneeling by his side. "If you're going to behave yourself, blink once." She must have been satisfied with his answer because she drew her arm back and again slapped his neck. This time though, Xander was able to see a thorn or something protruding from the palm of her hand.

The demon began blinking rapidly and then suddenly sat up. He stared at her; she stared at him.

"Are you okay?" they both asked at the same time.

"Right, that's it. We are going to the apartment and the two of you are going to get this settled, tonight. I'm not putting up with this anymore and neither is Xander and I'm not having any child of mine raised in this kind of atmosphere." Spike spoke each word very clearly and succinctly. Xander had never heard him use exactly that tone of voice before but for the first time, Xander suspected he was seeing Spike the Master Vampire.

Xander held his breath. Nualla and Rolf met each other's eyes and then looked away, both nodded guiltily. Spike indicated the way and the odd little procession headed back to Xander's apartment.

Part Nine

It was a very subdued group that made its way back to Xander's apartment. Xander handed the baby back to Nualla and walked by her side back to his place. Spike was stalking along next to Rolf. The two demons had

automatically moved out in front as the procession had started home.

Xander hadn't missed Nualla and Rolf's worry over each other at the end of the fight. Because Spike was his friend and he liked Nualla and the baby he'd been prepared to dislike the errant father on principle, but it was pretty obvious, even to someone as young as him that those two crazy kids were head over heels in love. The guy didn't have a clue how to deal with women though. Xander tried to imagine giving orders to Anya or Willow. He shuddered, even worse, Buffy or Cordelia. Why even Joyce, who in his opinion had been about the best mom in the world, regardless of her occasional lapses, wouldn't have responded well to orders. He could see her getting that very polite, slightly confused look on her face while she asked you to please repeat yourself, she couldn't have heard you correctly.

It was funny really, the weekend had started out with Spike telling him to get a clue in learning how women think and it was ending with him getting a complete crash course. He was determined to pay close attention because he had a very strong feeling that he could pick up some useful information concerning relationships. He'd already decided that Spike was way more patient

and thoughtful then he'd ever realized. He was also a total romantic. He'd helped Nualla get the man, er, demon of her dreams. He'd been prepared to let Nualla and Rolf yell at each other all night if they needed to; it wasn't until Rolf had made a grab for her that he'd gotten involved. Even after getting knocked around and putting up with big and jealous, he still wanted these two to work it out for the sake of his daughter.

Xander, smiled to himself watching the two demons covertly keep an eye on each other. Yeah, Spike knew that Rolf was jealous, of that Xander was certain. Heck, why wouldn't he be; good looking blonde vampire who just happens to be your wife's other husband and not her ex-husband either. She's having trouble at home and whom does she go running to; her white knight, Spike. What guy wouldn't be resentful?

He glanced at the sprite. She looked so sad. Man, he hoped she wasn't going to cry. He hated it when women cried; he just turned to mush. Not that Anya had ever cried. He would have totally freaked if she had ever broken down in tears. Willow had wept on his shoulder a time or two. He smiled a tad bitterly; he was surely even the cause of a few of her tears. The thing was, when women cried he always felt like he should do something,

take action, slay a monster or at the very least give someone a stern talking to. He wasn't very good with the "I just need to get it all out" type of tears that Willow usually cried on his shoulder. After trial and error, he'd finally figured out that his job was to just keep nodding and handing over Kleenex. He was not to try to make useful suggestions or jump up and swear to kill the guy; at least not more than once.

Nualla sniffled a little and cuddled the baby. She turned to talk to Xander and caught him staring at her with a look approaching horror. He began frantically rummaging around in his pockets before pulling out a very tired looking wad of paper napkins? He was offering them to her like a supplicant trying to appease his goddess. She reached out and took one of the less battered napkins and smiled hesitantly. The poor young man, even for someone used to fighting at the side of the Slayer, tonight must have seemed quite harrowing at times.

"It's okay Xander. I promise, no more violence. I'm so sorry and so ashamed. You must think I'm just a terrible parent." She gave him a bewildered look. "I don't even know how it got this bad."

"Maybe it's hormones?" he offered. "Not that I'm one of

those guys who assumes everything is hormones because I'm not, unless of course you think it might be?"

"You'd let me try and get away with that excuse huh?" She gave a half-smile. "I don't think Rolf is going to fall for that and I know William won't" She ended wryly.

Spike didn't even turn around, "Too bloody right, luv," he tossed over his shoulder.

Rolf grunted in agreement. He jerked his head in Xander's direction. "He your new consort?"

"Why the bloody 'ell does everyone assume that the whelp is my mate?" Spike growled.

The big demon gave him an incredulous look as he ticked the reasons off one by one. "He smells like you. We're going back to his place where you apparently have an invite. Nualla said she was visiting you and your 'friend'. He's another good-looking brunette. He's human and you haven't eaten him."

Spike opened his mouth to answer, then closed it, then started again. "Right, well when you put it that way, I can see how maybe, someone might get that idea but they'd

be wrong. I mean, look at him, he's a puppy." Spike growled indignantly. Rolf held up his hands and just shrugged. They continued to walk in silence.

"So you think he's good-looking then?" Spike asked nonchalantly.

"For a human, he's all right; didn't run." Rolf answered.

Spike smiled with a certain pride. "Yeah, he's a brave one. Don't let on I said so though, can't let a human get the upper hand. You know how they get."

Rolf nodded and he and Spike shared a knowing look.

They reached Xander's apartment without further conversation. It was an awkward group that Xander ushered into his living room. "Look, can I get anybody anything to drink or something before I make myself scarce."

Nualla sat perched on the edge of the easy chair with the baby in her lap. She looked up apprehensively, "You don't have to go."

"This is family business. I'll just go into the bedroom and

watch TV or something while you guys talk. You are just going to talk right?" The young man bit his lip worriedly.

"No worries mate, everyone is just going to talk." Spike assured him giving the other two a pointed look.

Xander spared a last glance at the little group before going to the kitchen to get a soda and heading to the bedroom. He was definitely trying not to listen but he couldn't help but overhear the beginning of the discussion.

"You wanted to talk, so let's talk." Rolf started brusquely. "Why don't you tell me what it is you think I've done that's so terrible?"

Spike growled warningly.

Xander peeked his head out of the kitchen and caught Nualla looking at her husband with big stricken eyes. Her lower lip was quivering slightly but she was trying valiantly not to cry. "You want to know, well fine I'll tell you, you didn't even ask how she was," she cried before abruptly standing up and giving Spike an apologetic look. "I'm sorry William I just can't talk about this right now." She turned and rushed into the guest room before

closing the door solidly.

You could have heard a pin drop. Spike turned and gave the demon a fierce look. Xander quickly moved into the living room to forestall any violence all the while chanting like a mantra "Fragile human in the room, fragile human in the room, fragile human in the room, fragile human in the room."

"You have got the sensitivity of a bleeding ox. Why the 'ell she ever thought that you were the demon for her I'll never know." Spike shook his head, "I actually thought that her running off to see me was rash and immature but after seeing the way you've acted this evening I believe I've changed my mind. You don't deserve her and you sure as bleedin 'ell don't deserve that beautiful little baby in there." He ended his tirade with a snarl.

Xander waited for the resulting explosion so he was completely caught off guard when the big demon dropped his head into his hands and said, "You're absolutely right, I don't deserve them. I'm a terrible husband and a bad father."

Xander blinked and looked at Spike who was staring at the obviously distraught demon with narrowed eyes. Xander crept quietly back to the kitchen, switching his

soda for three beers. He returned and offered one to the vampire and set one down in front of the troubled demon. He settled into the easy chair. He had a feeling it was going to be a long night.

Part Ten

After further studying the brooding demon, Spike finally sighed disgustedly. "I am not spending my evening watching some big bloke brood. If I wanted to do that, I could go to LA and watch a professional brooder so why don't you tell me why you're such a bad father and husband and after I get done agreeing with you, we can all get on with our lives."

Rolf managed a half-hearted sneer in the vampire's direction before taking a rather dainty sip of beer. He stared off into the distance for a bit before answering with a seeming non-sequiter. "She's so small you know. That's what struck me the first time I laid eyes on her. She's just a little bit of nothing, as fragile as a butterfly's

wing."

"I'm risking a guess here that we're talking about the baby." Spike said quietly.

"Mostly the baby, but Nualla too." Rolf shook his head. "I know she can take care of herself. She proved that tonight. In fact she can take care of herself so well that sometimes I wonder why she even needs me around. She just whirls around organizing this and taking care of that," he motioned vaguely.

"She's been on her own a long time mate. Did you want her coming to you about every little thing?" Spike questioned.

Rolf snorted, "No, of course not. I'm not some insecure young one that needs constant reassurance from his mate."

"No one said you needed constant reassurance but some is a bit of alright." Spike smiled slightly.

The demon returned the smile reluctantly, "Some would be nice, yes." He heaved a sigh. "I know I can be slightly overbearing."

Xander couldn't help it. He swore he couldn't, he choked on his beer. Spike reached over and casually slapped his back.

Rolf glared, "Right, well some of what she sees as bossy is for her own good. She's not on her own anymore. I'm a chieftain; there are clan disputes and old grudges. I want her to be safe. I want the baby to be safe but whenever I put my foot down and insist she stay close to home, she argues with me and usually does the exact opposite." He looked very aggrieved.

"I'm just venturing a guess here; you ever explain why you were laying down the law?" Spike asked conversationally. Rolf grumbled something unintelligible. "Right, I'll take that as a no."

"Chieftains don't explain decisions," Rolf grumbled.

"Chieftains might not, but good husbands and mates, do. They discuss things even when they don't think there's any room for discussion. They ask questions to which they already know the answers just because it'll make things easier down the road. And whenever possible, no matter what the situation, they turn to their mates and

say, 'I don't know, what do you think about it.'" Spike stared into the others demon's eyes very seriously.

"Am I getting across here? Your mate is the one person you should be able to talk to no matter what. The one person you can admit not having all the answers to all the questions and they won't care. They might even have some answers you hadn't thought of but you have to bleeding tell them what's going on." Spike finished with a snarl.

He rubbed a weary hand over his face. Xander looked at the tired vampire with respect. The young man leaned forward and nudged the blonde slightly, handing him his unopened beer. "Wow, you're good."

"That's probably why she loves you," the demon said grudgingly after a moment.

"She loves you. She spent months trying to get your attention. You are all the chit talked about while I was with her. You just had to be the father of her baby. The only reason I'm involved at all is because you were too dense to figure out what was going on." Spike threw up his hands.

"Really?" Rolf perked up. "She had her eye on me for that long. I always thought that she just settled for me because you wouldn't stick around. She just needed some security and so she picked me."

Spike gave him a disbelieving look, "And all those times at the market place with her constantly accidentally running into you and dropping things and you having to save her, what did you think that was?"

"I just thought she was clumsy." Rolf looked vaguely uncomfortable.

Spike just stared, "No one's that clumsy, not even Nummy here." Spike jerked his thumb.

"Hey," Xander exclaimed. "I've outgrown a lot of that."

"Well I did wonder." Rolf's face was suddenly lit by a beatific smile. "It was always me? I was first choice?" The demon was grinning like a fool and kept repeating; "I was first," before suddenly standing up and marching down the hall to the guestroom and rapping on the door.

"Nualla, I would like to speak with you please and say hello to my daughter." He caught Spike's eye and

nodded, "If now is a good time for you of course, otherwise I'll just wait out here with William and Xander until you're ready."

Xander held his breath as the door slowly opened. Nualla's head appeared as she motioned him into the room and the door closed. Xander looked at Spike. Spike looked at Xander as the pair waited with baited breath. Five minutes passed, then ten and still no explosion. Xander cleared his throat and grinned at the blonde.

Spike lifted an eyebrow, "What are you grinning at Whelp?"

"You," he sassed back. "William the Bloody, Marriage Counsellor Extraordinaire."

The vampire leaned back cockily and took a long pull at his beer. "Yeah, I am pretty damn good."

Xander leaned forward, "Actually you are. All that stuff you said about mates and husbands and wives and stuff. You were right. I guess if you're marrying for love that's how it should be." Xander frowned slightly and seemed about to say something further when the phone rang. Spike picked up the cordless and tossed it to him.

"Hello? Anya? No it's not too late. What's up honey? "Oh, yeah, hang on a sec." Xander hit the mute button and stood up, taking a shaky breath.

"You okay?" Spike asked quietly.

"I'll let you know. She wants to have a talk. Will you be here when I get done?" Xander tried to look composed.

"I'll be here pet," Spike nodded. Xander looked relieved before entering his bedroom and closing the door. "I ought to start charging by the hour." He was contemplating going out for a quick smoke when Nualla's door opened and a grinning sprite and husband exited the room. Rolf was holding the baby very carefully in the crook of his arm although he could have just as easily held her in one hand.

"Rolf and I wondered if you would watch her for just a bit. We wanted to go out and enjoy the park and the stars." Nualla couldn't seem to stop smiling and looking up at her big husband like he was a goof but the most wonderful goof in the world. He was just grinning back like a fool.

Spike raised an eyebrow; those two were totally besotted with each other. "I'll be happy to look after the Nibblet while the two of you 'take a walk in the park'" Spike stressed the last words with a smirk. Who were they trying to kid, walk in the park to enjoy the stars, right.

The sprite blushed and darned if Rolf did flush as well. The baby was exchanged carefully. Spike smiled down at the gurgling baby. Nualla stared at him for a moment before abruptly dropping to her knees and giving the astonished vampire a fierce but careful hug. "I love you and thank you very, very much. You are always welcome in our home. You and your friend." She kissed him gently on the lips before standing back up and entwining her arm with her husband's. He gave the flustered vampire a grave look; "We will expect you at the Naming Day, William," he said firmly before the two lovebirds turned and left on their stroll.

Spike waved them on their way before bending down and blowing softly on the baby's tummy, causing her to coo delightedly and wiggle. "You're probably going to be driving the blokes just as crazy when you get older." He grimaced, "I'll have to trust Him to keep the louts away. You listen to him though, he's a bit of a

tyrant but he means well. Although, you'll probably have him wrapped around your little finger by the time you're one." He stared at her intently, "Naw, you're my daughter. You'll have him wrapped around your finger by your Naming Day." He winked at her.

He leaned forward and pantomimed swallowing her hands. She laughed at him. "You'll be a lady though, both of them will see to that; a real live princess. But princess or not you listen to those that know better. Always make sure of your kills. Don't turn your back on an enemy. You can't trust a vampire and proper ladies and gentlemen always have a clean handkerchief," he pulled a bandana out of his duster pocket to show her," because you just never know."

His daughter stared at him very solemnly for a moment and he actually had the feeling that she was committing his little speech to memory but then he laughed, that was a nutty thought.

He heard the bedroom door open and he glanced down at his daughter. "Don't know which is worse princess; when a woman says you have to have a talk or when she says there's nothing to talk about."

Xander entered the living room and smiled sadly at the blonde and the baby. He hung up the phone and dropped next to the pair. He gave Spike a sardonic grin; "After thinking about it, she decided I was right, we did need time and slowing down was a good idea." He leaned his head back, "First time I've even been right in an argument with Anya and it has to be about this."

Spike and the baby waited patiently.

Xander turned his head and stared at the blonde. He gave him a tired smile and closed his eyes. "I'm okay though, after what I've seen this weekend, I've decided you have got to be in serious love or in desperate need of money because why else would you put up with the craziness?"

He opened his eyes and looked down at the little bundle. "I have however decided that I want one of those." He tickled the little girl and she obligingly blew a bubble at him.

"Mine, Harris, go get your own." Spike said mockingly.

"But she's kinda like mine." Xander said. "We both belong to you so she kinda belongs to me." The young

man seemed to realize what he said and stammered,
"What I mean is,"

Spike laughed out loud. "Harris, don't even bother."
Xander grinned ruefully.

Spike suddenly sniffed suspiciously. Xander sniffed. They
both looked down at the cooing baby.

"So she kinda belongs to you?" Spike offered her to the
suddenly wary young man.

Xander scooted back, "Yeah but you're her dad."

"You've had practice."

"That's right, I've had practice that means it's your turn."

"Harris."

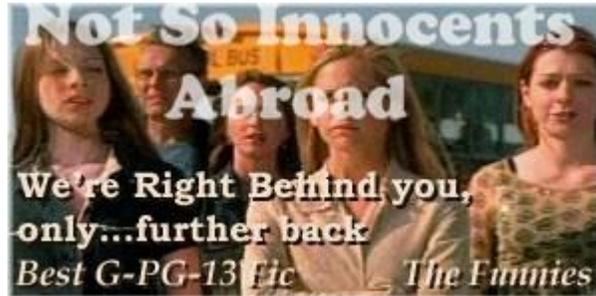
"William."

"Oh bloody 'ell."

The End



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Not So Innocents Abroad

by
Cimmer

Part One

"Spike, duck!" Xander yelled.

The vampire responded by ducking and spinning around with a sweeping kick that knocked the demon they were

fighting off his feet where the blonde quickly dispatched him.

Meanwhile, Xander and Tara were trying to hold their demon still enough for Giles to skewer him. Luckily Spike was able to step in and neatly impale said demon.

"I almost had him but thank you for your assistance nonetheless." Giles nodded and straightened his jacket.

"Oh yeah, right mate, you almost had him. If I hadn't stepped in you would have stabbed the Whelp or Glinda Two." Spike smirked as he lit a cigarette.

"I'll have you know that I've been well trained in hand to hand combat and Xander and Tara were in absolutely no danger from me." Giles huffed.

Xander and Tara exchanged a dubious look at this declaration.

Willow arrived with the Buffybot in tow and slightly out of breath. "Did we get them? Oh, look, we did, eww." She wrinkled her nose at the still oozing remains. "Are they suppose to decompose that fast?"

"I vote we move way, way over there, who's with me on this?" Xander held up his hand and looked to the group for approval as he backed away.

The group quickly moved away with the Buffybot sandwiched between the witches.

"Did you get her patched Will?" Xander indicated the torn shirt on the robot.

Willow gave a nod and held up her handy glue gun. "Just call me the Martha Stewart of the Hellmouth." She grinned. "You know though guys, we should figure out a way to put her in mesh or something so that a skin tear wouldn't be so obvious. I mean I can't keep sealing her up, especially in the middle of a fight."

"Oh, oh, we could put her in biker leather and fishnets!" Xander bounced. "What! Oh yeah, like I'm the only one right?" Xander met their scandalized stares, well except for Spike who was grinning at him.

"Bit of the old Black Canary right pet?" Spike winked at him and Xander gave him the thumbs up.

The girls just shook their heads while Giles tried to look

disapproving.

"We are not putting the Buffybot in fishnets and a pushup bra." Giles stated firmly.

"You know we'd have to glue her in to make sure everything stayed put in a fight." Tara ventured shyly. Willow raised her eyebrows at her sweetie.

"Not, that, well, I'm not saying we should. It's just that they never make that clear in the comic books. Its like gravity doesn't exist during those fight scenes but that's because it's male artists and they don't really know how breasts work." Tara ended her stammered explanation with a fierce blush.

"Tara, you closet comic book fan you. All right, I'm not the only one." Xander enthused.

"You told me you were looking at those for class," Willow said in mock horror.

"I was, my modern writing class." Tara stammered.

"Right and Harris and I read Playboy for the articles." Spike said patting her shoulder conspiratorially.

"Yes, well as enlightening as all this is, I don't really think I need to hear any more." Giles shook his head; discussions like these were just one of the hazards of working with the young. He sighed, he'd been seriously considering going back to England for a while but how could he leave people he'd come to think of as his family? They all tried to act so grown up but even the eldest, Spike and Anya still behaved like children at times.

He watched Spike showing Xander some silly putty he'd found or stolen somewhere. The two young men stretched it out and then Spike vamped out and slapped the pancake of silly putty to his face before quickly shifting his features back to human. Xander peered carefully at the putty and then nodded his head in awe. Spike smirked. Giles sighed to himself. "Don't ask, just don't ask."

They all arrived back at the magic shop intact. Anya counting out the till for the day while Dawn finished her homework.

Dawn looked up with a smile. "Hey guys."

Spike ruffled her hair gently as she pouted at him and attempted to smooth it back into place. "I'm not a baby."

He stopped and gave her a measuring look. "No, you're a young lady. I should start treating you like one," he said gravely and a little sadly.

"We can start small," she said hurriedly, biting her lip as she met his eyes, "You know, make it easier on you."

He smiled, "Thanks Nibblet, that's good of you."

"Hey Anya, how's the take for tonight?" Xander leaned casually against the counter.

"We did quite well, even taking into account the items that had to be marked down from that damaged shipment." Anya neatly entered the final tally in her laptop before closing out the program and powering down for the night.

She looked her former fiancée up and down, "You appear undamaged, good. Now that you are back we can leave." She gestured to the other women. "We have a great deal of studying to do for our mid-term." Anya began gathering up her backpack and purse.

Ever since they had their 'talk' and decided that they needed to take a breather in their relationship, Anya had mellowed considerably. Xander hadn't realized how much strain they had both been under with the engagement and Glory and everything else. Now that the engagement was off Anya had found an outlet for her energies in college courses. She was studying Archaeology and was even in some classes with Tara and Willow. The three women had actually managed to become friends, real friends.

Xander shuddered inwardly; it was downright scary.

"Need me to walk you ladies home?" he asked with a smile.

"Thank you but no." She pulled out her taser. "I believe we can protect ourselves. We are going to consume a great deal of sugar and caffeine and gossip while studying together."

"Yeah and I get to help," Dawn added proudly.

"Should I be afraid?" Xander waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Yes, of course you should. We will be initiating Dawn into our secret female organization and by this time tomorrow she will possess all the knowledge needed to bring down the fall of male dominated society as you know it." Anya stared at him and Dawn smiled sweetly.

"That's a joke right?" Xander asked. Willow and Tara waved good-bye as they followed Anya and Dawn out the door.

He turned to Spike and Giles, "They were kidding right, right?" Spike patted him consolingly as he steered him outside. Giles managed to look resigned.

"No, c'mon now, that was a joke right?" Xander continued protestingly as the door shut on the retreating males.

Giles smiled to himself and then frowned deeply. On the counter was what appeared to be a formal invitation addressed in a flowing script to "William the Bloody and Mr. Alexander Harris". There was no return address. He was sure it hadn't been there when they came in.

"What the Devil?"

Part Two

"So are we on for tomorrow night?" Xander asked Spike as the two made their way to Xander's apartment. Xander had picked up a stick along the way and was parrying and thrusting at various bushes and trees in mock swordplay.

Spike was watching him carefully as the boy fooled around. He was probably the most accident-prone being on the face of the planet. Actually come to think of it: he, Xander and a pointed stick in close proximity to each other was a poor idea.

"Harris, you want to drop the stick mate?" Spike asked and then had to quickly jump back as Xander whipped around. "Bloody Hell, whelp, put it down! Someone's gonna get hurt!" Spike snapped.

"Whoops! Sorry Spike," Xander grimaced in embarrassment and carefully set the stick on Mrs.

Wolinski's lawn. "Just messin' around."

"Oh sure it's all just fun and games until someone loses their entire body," the vampire grumbled.

Xander gave the blonde another sheepish look before his natural exuberance took over and he started bouncing along, trying to walk backwards and carry on a conversation at the same time.

"So, I got Dynasty Warriors 3 and the new snowboarding game; my snappy new Playstation(tm) and I will be ready and waiting for you tomorrow night. You bring the beer and soda and I'll provide the pizza. Get ready to have your ass kicked." Xander snickered condescendingly.

Spike just gave him his patented raised eyebrow look and said, "Tree."

"Wha?" Thunk! "Oww!" Xander rubbed the back of his head and gave the offending tree a dirty look.

Spike gave a genuine full out laugh and just shook his head. "Harris, you're a walking disaster."

Xander ducked his head and gave the vampire a rather

shy smile. "Yeah, I know." He kicked at the ground in an 'aww shucks' manner.

Spike stared at the young man's down bent head almost fondly for a moment before shaking the feeling off. *Do not get attached to the human, give them even a little encouragement and the next thing you know they're following you home,* he admonished himself.

The moment was broken by the dulcet tones of "Strangers in the Night" played out on Xander's cell phone.

"Oi, I thought you were gonna change that?" Spike said in disgust.

"Hey, I have a very busy life firmly packed with responsibility. I'll get around to it." Xander huffed. "Harris here. Hey Giles, long time no see. What's up?"

"A what?" Xander's eyebrows rose slightly before Spike snatched the phone out of his hands.

"When did you notice it?" The vampire nodded while holding an irritated brunette at bay as the boy tried to snatch his phone back.

"And it's addressed to both of us? Right, we're on our way back." Spike closed the phone with a snap. Xander stared at him frostily. "What?"

"Where do I begin; the eavesdropping, the grabbing, the hijacking of my conversation with Giles?" Xander shook his finger at the unrepentant blonde. "Bad vampire, bad." Xander held out his hand, "Phone?"

"You gonna change the tune?" Spike held the phone just out of reach.

"Does it really bother you?" Xander asked with seeming sincerity.

"Yes," Spike said slapping the phone into the young man's hand.

"Then no, no I'm not." Xander smiled evilly.

Spike returned the grin with one of his own, "That's my boy," he said proudly.

They arrived back at the magic shop within a few minutes. Giles was staring distrustfully at the envelope

on his counter as if waiting for it to manifest itself as something other than a piece of correspondence.

Spike walked up to the counter and picked up the envelope. As soon as he touched it there was the faint chime of bells and a slight sprinkling of silvery dust glittered through the air.

"That was pretty," Xander said as he and Giles peeked over the vampire's shoulder. Spike just rolled his eyes.

"I say, I haven't seen a faerie blessed invitation since I was child." Giles smiled reminiscently.

Spike just grunted and opened the enclosed card.

"Your presence is respectfully requested at the Naming Day celebration etc., etc., etc." Spike glanced at the young man peering over his shoulder. "Looks like this is it pet. You fancy a trip to Brazil?"

"Really, I mean I can really go? Wow, way cool." Xander was absolutely beaming.

"Just a moment," Giles interrupted, "Naming Day celebrations, Brazil, Xander and you?" The Watcher took

a deep breath and removed his glasses for cleaning.
"Please explain."

Spike opened his mouth but Xander jumped in, the words tumbling over one another as he tried to explain. "Well, it's the baby's Naming Day and I can't believe that Nualla and Rolf actually invited me along with Spike although she did stay at my apartment and all but then she left the next day after Rolf came and of course they would invite Spike because the baby's father has to be there but I didn't even think they would remember me although there was that entire confusion about Spike and I being mated but we got that all worked out. I can't believe they invited me." Xander sighed as he took the invitation from Spike's hands and looked down at it with gratitude and a sweet smile. "Gosh, she sure is a cute baby. What do you think they'll name her?"

He looked up to find Giles and Spike staring at him with varying degrees of disorientation. Giles took another deep breath and continued to clean his glasses as he turned to the vampire and inquired politely. "Naming Day celebrations, Brazil, Xander and you?"

"Without going into too much detail, a couple of 'old friends' of mine and their child were in town a few

months ago. Harris and I did a little babysitting and as a result we've been invited to the Naming Day celebration. 'Course they live in Brazil, which is where I met them and the two o' us will need to go down there or risk insulting a very powerful demon leader and setting off a bloodbath that could bring about the end of the world as we know it." Spike shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

Giles replaced his glasses and gave the vampire a disgusted look, "Do you expect me to believe that?"

Spike smirked, "Well, I threw in the bloodbath bit but the rest of it's god's honest truth." Spike did his best to look sincere.

Giles watched Xander turning the invitation over in his hands and carefully tracing his name written in gilt on the envelope. He was still smiling so sweetly like he'd won first prize or been kissed by the prettiest girl in school. Giles gave the boy a fond slightly sad smile then looked over at Spike who was still attempting to look sincere.

"I want an itinerary laid out to the hour." Giles admonished the two young men. They both nodded solemnly. "I mean it. I want phone numbers where

possible and responsible contacts in case of emergency. I want to know where you'll be and whom you'll be with. I want a timetable that British Rail would be proud of and I want it kept to; no gallivanting about."

The two continued to nod seriously. Giles fixed the vampire with a stern look, "You will look after Xander and make sure he comes to no harm."

"And you," he addressed Xander, "will pay attention to what Spike tells you. He's an adult and used to travelling abroad." Giles closed his eyes briefly as the magnitude of what he'd just said sunk in. "I must be mad," he muttered to himself.

Xander nodded his head so quickly the Watcher feared it might detach itself from his body. "I promise Giles. You don't have to worry."

"Right, Rupert, not to worry mate. I'll make sure the lad stays out of trouble. This is just a nice, quiet little civilized affair. Piece of cake." Spike nodded confidently.

"Who are you calling 'lad', blondie?" Xander groused. "I can keep myself out of trouble."

"You have to do what I say, the Watcher just said so."
Spike smiled arrogantly.

Xander narrowed his eyes mutinously but then caught Giles' stare on him. He smiled through gritted teeth.

"Shall we meet back here tomorrow? That should be enough time for you to make travel arrangements." Giles addressed Spike.

The vampire nodded, "About sunset then?" He turned to Xander, "Vacation days pet?"

"I'll arrange everything with work," Xander said haughtily, still annoyed at Spike for his previous comments.

Spike just smiled to himself and gave the Watcher a wink before scooping up the invitation and throwing an arm across the whelp's shoulder. "C'mon your highness, growing boys need their rest."

Xander punched him in the ribs and Spike pretended to double over in pain coaxing an unwilling laugh from the brunette.

"Jerk."

"Laddy."

"Idiot."

"Takes one to know one."

"I'm rubber and you're glue....."

"What have I done?" Giles rubbed the bridge of his nose. He suddenly froze as part of Xander's previous babbling finally worked its way into his brain. "Good Lord, did he say Spike was the baby's father?"

Part Three

Nualla looked up from folding diapers upon hearing the faint tinkle of chimes. Oh how nice, William and Xander had picked up their invitation. She did hope that both of them would be able to come. Despite their protestations

shook it for emphasis, causing the straps to rattle a bit. The baby giggled appreciatively.

"Look, she likes it." Rolf grinned at his daughter.

"But, Rolf, sweetheart, we don't have a car. We don't even know anyone with a car." Nualla interjected hesitantly. He was so proud of himself. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. Ever since they'd returned from visiting William, he'd become more confident of her feelings for him. He'd grown closer and closer to her and the baby. From being fearful of hurting the baby or not doing the 'right' thing he'd become the most attentive father any woman could want.

"Well, no, I know that, but well we might get into a car someday before she's old enough and well, I realized we didn't have a car seat," he began to look crestfallen.

She came over and perched on his knee. "That's right, human children need to be in car seats past the toddler stage don't they?" She gave him a big kiss. "What good thinking. I hadn't even remembered that." Of course she had remembered that she was a several hundred-year-old sprite with more than enough magic to keep her child from being hurt in a car accident but that wasn't

important right now.

He gave her a sweet smile. "You think I'm being silly and over-protective?" he asked.

"I think someone's being a wonderful father." She turned to the baby, "What do you think? Is Daddy being silly, is he?" She tickled the baby under the chin and the little one burbled joyously. Rolf laughed and hugged his family.

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She folded the last diaper. "William and Xander picked up their invitation."

Rolf looked up and grimaced, "That's nice."

She merely smiled indulgently and picked up her market basket. "I'll be back in a bit. Don't forget, she needs her nap soon." She gave him a stern look.

He nodded absently as he and the baby studied the diagram of how to adjust the car seat for growing babies.

She knew of Nualla by reputation although she hadn't known she was married. Nor had she known that Spike was one of her husbands. That piece of knowledge had elicited a raised eyebrow from the ex-vengeance demon. Xander felt slightly guilty about telling her, but then figured he needed to know what to expect.

He packed his duffel bag while they chatted then sat back and watched her re-pack his duffel bag. She'd had him try on his best white shirt and dress pants and then declared the shirt too tight, so it was off to the store for a new one, a respectable tie and a pair of comfortable walking sandals. He was admonished to be careful of bugs, snakes and various other creatures, some of which did not show up in his guidebooks. Luckily, Giles had always insisted that the Scoobies be up on every shot know to man, what with all the various saliva, slime and blood they encountered in their nightly patrols.

Because they were flying 'Air Spike', a passport wasn't strictly necessary but Xander had one anyway. He'd applied for it when he and Anya had been an item. He'd hoped to take her to Mexico for their honeymoon.

She caught him staring at it rather sadly and after a moment of silence, took it from his hands and slipped it

into his walking knapsack. She'd given him a brisk pat on the arm and handed him a slip of paper with the words to a summoning spell on it.

"Only use this in case of dire emergency." She said very seriously.

"What will it do?" he asked rather hesitantly.

"It will summon a friend of mine who owes me a rather large favor. I got rid of her rather large husband." Anya smiled in fond reminiscence. She shook her head, gave her ex-boyfriend an exacting once over and pronounced him suitable for public.

Everyone else but Spike was already present when they arrived. Giles had already filled in Willow, Tara and Dawn and they were bursting at the seams with questions. Giles too had a few more questions now that he'd had time to digest last night's explanations. He brought out a treatise on South American demon culture and blanched when Xander pointed out Rolf's species. Xander had also paled slightly after he'd finished reading about these warrior demons that often served as mercenaries. They were highly regarded for their cunning and ferocity in battle along with their occasional berserker rages. They

seemed a lot like the Vikings of the demon world.

The girls, who had been reading over his shoulder, gave him a wide-eyed look of respect.

"Wow," said Dawn with awe, "One of them stayed at your apartment? Wow."

Willow looked worried. "Are you sure you're going to be okay, Xander? I know you'll be with Spike and everything but - wait a minute, what am I saying? Xander are you really sure?"

"Don't worry Wills, Rolf's a pretty cool guy and believe me Nualla is one tough cookie. I don't want to get into it here but let me just say, 'the female of the species is more deadly than the male'. He nodded sagely and tapped his nose with his index finger. "Spike and I will be just fine."

"Course we will," said the vampire as he sailed in the door with a small knapsack over his shoulder. "Just a short jaunt to the next continent over; nothing to it really." A somewhat hyper Spike waved his hand in the air. "We take off at midnight Harris so, got your gear, bags all packed? Is that what you're wearing for the trip?"

Why not just paint a bulls-eye on your back?" Spike gestured to the bright Hawaiian shirt decorated in multi-colored parrots.

"We are going to the jungle, I picked a jungle motif." Xander huffed, "This is one of the few times that I can blend in dressing like this." He indicated his shirt proudly, "It says 'Tourist'."

"It says 'Lunch'," the vampire snarked back.

"Ah ha! You see the beauty of my plan. To anyone who sees us we will simply appear as Master Vampire and Snack." Xander beamed proudly. "It's the perfect cover in demon territory."

"That's actually....," the vampire started.

"A very good plan, Xander." Giles finished looking suitably impressed. "I say, 'well done.'"

The girls clapped as Xander gave them the royal wave. "Thank you, thank you."

Spike snorted, "Right, well thought out plan. You just came up with that, admit it."

Xander shook his head firmly, "Nope, did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Did," Spike pouted

"Didn't." Xander sing-songed.

"Gentlemen, please," Giles intervened. "Now, Spike, if you please, there is something I would like to ask you about this child before you leave. If you would step over here." The Watcher indicated the back table.

Spike frowned then grimaced. Giles had apparently processed the Xander-babble from last night. Damn.

"Are you going to ask him about being the baby's father?" Anya asked looking up from Xander's knapsack, which she and Dawn were filling with snack foods and disposable cameras.

"Oh," said Willow.

"My," said Dawn.

"Goddess," said Tara

Part Four

"You're a dad?" Dawn stared hard at the annoyed blonde who was in turn glaring at Xander. Dawn put a stop to that by walking right up and slapping him on the arm, hard.

"Oww, Nibblet!" Spike actually looked shocked, as did everyone else in the room.

"You told Anya and you didn't tell me?" Dawn looked outraged.

Faced with a highly irritated teenager, Spike rubbed at his arm in an apparent bid for sympathy, "I didn't! It was the whelp!" He pointed at Xander. "Or maybe, the Watcher!" He swung around in accusation. "Oi, let's have

it! Who spilled their guts?"

Giles drew himself up to his full height, "I've never 'spilled my guts' in my life but that does answer my question to a certain extent. So, you were simply babysitting for old friends eh? Yes, well, obviously quite good friends."

"Well no one spilled their guts to me, at least not literally, although Xander did mention that you were married to Nualla. I just assumed that the baby must be yours. " Anya interjected then blinked as everyone who hadn't already been aware of that titbit of information turned to stare at the ex-demoness.

"Marriage and then babies; as if I couldn't figure something like that out on my own." Anya tipped her chin regally.

"So it was you, Harris!" Spike nodded his head, "I should've known."

"Wait a minute! You can't nail me for telling Anya after I already told Giles last night and you were here for that!" Xander defended himself energetically, at least until Willow stepped up and smacked him on the arm.

"Oww, what was that for?" Xander whined.

"You knew that Spike was a dad and married and you didn't tell me?" Willow gave him her version of puppy dog eyes. "I'm just a little hurt." Tara gave her a squeeze and frowned deeply at Xander and Spike.

"Right, that's it, there will be no more hitting, by anyone. Is that understood?" Xander recognized that Spike was using his Master Vampire voice to get his point across and to give him his due it did sound just as imposing as the last time the brunette had heard it. Unfortunately, this time around it was completely wasted on a Watcher, two witches, an ex-demoness and a teenage girl. Everyone simply snorted and waited for an explanation.

Spike sighed in resignation before he began. "Fine, I'm married and yes I have a daughter. Xander and I are going to Brazil for her Naming Day celebration. I never told you because I hadn't seen her mother in two years and before you start asking, no, I did not abandon a pregnant forest sprite with a baby. She got married, before I left, to her second husband, the demon of her dreams. He's a complete pillock but that's not the point." Spike had drawn himself up to his full height, playing to

the crowd. "The point is that I didn't tell you because it's not really any of your business."

"Now, are there any other bloody questions?" he snarled, his eyes glinting with just a hint of gold.

"Do you have any pictures?" Dawn ventured, seemingly unimpressed with her friend's mood.

"What? No, I don't have any pictures!" The vampire's voice had risen slightly.

"No baby pictures at all?" this in a soft, slightly scandalized tone of voice from Tara.

Spike stared nonplussed into the faces of three shocked women, Hell, even Anya looked vaguely disapproving. Bloody Hell! He took a mental step back, cautiously assessing the situation. It was at this point that Xander and of all people, Giles, came to his rescue.

He felt Harris step up behind and put a hand on his right shoulder and Giles move up on his left. It was a bit of a male bonding moment and Spike felt his inner demon grimace. On the other hand, beggars can't be choosers.

"In Spike's defence he was little busy when the baby was last here; thank goodness you've packed all those disposable cameras. I'll be sure to take just tons of pictures at the ceremony." Xander smiled ingratiatingly, "As long as someone doesn't object and say, rip my arm off. Will that do it for you ladies?"

Dawn stepped forward and gave the wary vampire a hug. "I'm sorry I smacked you and I bet she's just the cutest thing if she looks anything like you." She stared up at him from under her lashes.

"All right, you're forgiven but don't do it again." Spike growled. Bloody Chit! When he got back they were going to have a talk about respecting your elders. Although that was a healthy punch, got quite a good right hook, the Nibklet did.

"I'm sorry too," Willow gave Xander a hug and a smile. "I was just feeling a little, jealous, I guess." She swallowed hard and turned to the blonde. "You're right, it's not really any of our business if you're married and have a baby." Willow stopped and turned to Tara who was giving her a look like, 'who are you and what have you done with my girlfriend?'

"What am I saying, of course it's our business. I don't care if it sounds nosy, is anyone else hiding any other deep dark secrets?" Spike opened his mouth but the young witch held up her hand, "And no I don't mean about having dispatched hundreds of people in disgusting or," she gave a nod to Anya, "highly inventive ways. I mean does anyone else have any marriages or children they want to tell the group about?"

Everyone nervously looked around the room for the space of a few heartbeats and then shrugged. Willow gave a brisk nod, "Well then good, good. I'm glad we were able to clear the air."

"Are we done bonding?" Anya asked. "Because we need to start for the airport. I just don't want to do anymore bonding in the enclosed and relatively small space of my SUV." She looked about hopefully and then gave a slight smile. "Good."

"Stick a fork in me and call me done," Xander quipped.

"I'll stick a fork in you all right," The vampire grumbled.

"Are you going to sulk all the way to Mexico?" Xander admonished the blonde.

"I might," Spike snapped, still a little miffed at Xander. He wasn't even sure why he was annoyed. It was just something about Xander and Anya having been comfortable enough with each other for Xander to tell her about Spike, it just rubbed him the wrong way.

"I brought my extra Gameboy(tm)," Xander coaxed. He still felt a little guilty for having told Anya about Spike, just a little disloyal to the vampire although he felt better about clearing the air. Willow was right; these little secrets didn't do anybody any good. Witness Spike's use of them to sabotage the Scoobies during the Adam affair. Nope, talking was good.

Spike gave him a sidelong glance, "I get first choice of games." Xander dropped his mouth open in mock outrage.

"Oh all right you big baby."

"And the window seat for the first part of the trip." The blonde raised an eyebrow at Xander's indignant gasp.
"Take it or leave it."

"You have no shame do you?" Xander stared at the

smirking blonde.

"Very little mate, very little. I'm being seen with you in that shirt aren't I?" Spike snickered, mentally adding a 'one' to the score he kept in their ongoing repartee.

Xander at a loss for words merely sneered.

They all piled into Anya's car and after the initial jostling for the shotgun seat got settled for the trip to the airport. Dawn had manage to seat herself next to Spike and slipped him two thermoses; one filled with blood and one with hot cocoa and a packet of mini-marshmallows. "Just in case," she'd whispered. He kissed the top of her head softly.

They arrived at the airport with twenty minutes to spare. To his credit, the vampire had actually prepared an itinerary for the Watcher as asked, never mind that he wouldn't keep to it. It was the bloody thought that counted, right?

The Scoobies followed the intrepid travellers out to the far end of the runaway where they encountered a piece of machinery right out of a World War II film. It was a large propeller driven cargo plane with the picture of a

buxom beer drinking demoness in a revealing red dress painted on the side.

"Good Lord!" Giles intoned and the girls nodded in silent agreement.

"Maurice!" Spike shouted. "C'mon mate where are you?"

"Spike, mon ami, I am here. Where else would I be?"

Xander blinked, then blinked again. He swallowed. He and the rest of the Scoobies were faced with something that resembled a cross between Oz on his wolfier days and a World War I flying ace. Maurice was big, furry and yet surprisingly dapper. He sported an aviator's cap perched on his head at a jaunty angle and a leather-flying jacket. A rather dashing red scarf completed the demon's entire ensemble.

"Spike!" He dragged the vampire into a hug, kissing both cheeks. "You are looking surprisingly well." Spike scowled albeit patiently.

Maurice turned to the women with a gleam in his eye, "And these must be the delightful young women I have heard so much about. Enchanted, absolutely, enchanted.

And from what I've heard I could be meaning that literally, yes?" He bowed to the witches and kissed their hands with old world charm. Willow giggled like a schoolgirl while Tara blushed bright red and smiled shyly.

Maurice turned to Spike, "Absolutely charming." Spike rolled his eyes.

Maurice then turned with grave courtesy to Anya, bowing deeply as he took her hand, "Madam, I am honoured." Anya gave a stately nod and a pleased little smile.

"And this must be Dawn." He held out his arms, "Aptly named though Aurora herself could not hold a candle to you mademoiselle." Dawn looked bemused but accepted the compliment with a grace beyond her years.

It gave Spike a pang in the region of his heart, if he'd had one. He'd just caught a glimpse of his Little Bit full grown.

Maurice then turned to Giles giving the Watcher a firm handshake. "Sir, I salute you."

"Yes, well, thank you." Giles said, sounding very British.

"And you must be Xander." Maurice clapped two furry paws on the still stunned young man's shoulders, kissing both cheeks. "It will be my pleasure to escort you and Spike safely to Brazil." He gestured to his plane.

"You have ten minutes to make your farewells. Do not worry, Yvette and I have never lost a passenger, willingly." He mounted the stairs to the cockpit stopping at the top to give a final salute, "Adieu!"

"Wow!" Dawn said in awe. "He's totally..."

"Yeah, he's a bit barmy but a hell of a pilot. Well, right then, let's try to keep the sentiment to a minimum shall we? I don't think my demon can take much more hugging and goodwill." Spike clapped Giles on the shoulder, shook hands with Anya and the witches and suffered through a final hug from Dawn before mounting the stairs to the plane.

"Hurry it up whelp. Night's a wasting." Spike yelled over his shoulder.

Xander felt the butterflies in his stomach flutter even more wildly but still managed an excited smile. "Well this is it. I'm off."

"Be careful and don't forget, dire emergency." Anya kissed his cheek as she whispered the reminder in his ear.

"You are so lucky," Dawn groused good-naturedly as she hugged him.

"Have a wonderful time and be careful," Tara gave him a careful hug.

"Yes, well I expect you to keep your wits about you Xander. I believe Spike will do his best but, well, best to be prepared." Giles shook his hand before Xander grinned and pulled him into a hug. "If you get into any trouble, just call please." Giles added.

"Not to worry, Giles." Xander gave him thumbs up.

He and Willow looked at each other for a moment before grinning at each other goofily. "I got you a pre-paid phone card with enough money on it to make a couple of long distance calls and I wrote the country codes on the back and I laminated the instructions for making an international call." She handed him the card and instructions before giving him a fierce hug.

"I expect you to be careful Mister. Don't make me come looking for you." She gave him her resolve face.

He grinned, "I'm Mr. Careful, Wills. I'm so excited. I think I'm going to be sick." He blanched slightly and held his stomach.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she handed him a small pouch. "This is something we made up for motion sickness, just inhale and you'll be fine."

"Harris!" Spike's voice could be heard from the plane.

Xander gave everyone a final wave from the top of the stairs and then stowed his gear and took his seat next to Spike. The vampire gave him a look and they settled in as the stairs were drawn up and the engines started.

Xander took a deep whiff of the herbs in the pouch he'd been given and felt filled with serenity and clarity of thought. Wait a minute.

"Spike, did Maurice say something about not losing a passenger willingly?"

Part Five

They were two hours into the flight and the immediate excitement of long distance travel had subsided to a slight case of boredom. Xander and Spike had played their computer games and had graduated to cards, cribbage to be precise. Xander could actually play a pretty mean hand of just about any card game owing to a cardsharp of a grandmother. He learned a fair amount about card counting, bluffing and cheating at her knee. Thus, he was able to give the vampire a run for his money and spot at least half of Spike's attempts at cheating.

"Put that ace back!" Xander snapped for the third time.

Spike grumbled but didn't even try the 'who me' look anymore. A steely-eyed mortal who took his cards seriously had replaced Donut-boy. Spike wouldn't admit it out loud but he was having fun. He was also contemplating a side trip to Rio and the casinos for him

and the boy. The casino owners usually frowned upon vampires cruising the game tables unless they were intent on playing. Now, all he had to do was come up with enough cash for a grubstake and they could be talking about some serious money.

"Why do you even bother cheating? It's not like we're playing for real money." Xander huffed as he rearranged his cards.

"What d'ya mean not real?" Spike worked a sucker around in his mouth. Maurice had absolutely refused to let him smoke on board owing to a small fire that had occurred on a previous journey. Spike had pointed out that it had been Dru and not him but Maurice remained firm.

Xander gave him a slightly disgusted look, "Oh yeah, we're playing for real money and I really owe you," he checked the score sheet, "One million, four hundred and sixty-three dollars."

Xander shook his head, "Less of course the amount that you owe me so that would actually bring the tally down to seventeen dollars. Will you take a check?" Xander laughed softly at the vampire's sucker distorted sneer.

Spike growled before pulling the sucker out of his mouth and yelling, "Oi Maurice, how about some service back here?" Spike smiled evilly at the Scoobie, "I'm getting peckish, might have to eat your other passenger."

The furry pilot appeared shaking a finger at the vampire as he stalked by on his way to the back. "For shame! To even joke about such a thing; there will be no eating of passengers on board."

"Yeah, shame on you!" said an aggrieved Xander. "Is that a UFO?" Xander's eye's widened as he glanced out the window.

"Wha?" Spike turned to look then whipped back to stare suspiciously at the artlessly smiling human.

"Must have been a trick of the light." Xander blinked innocently.

"Just like that fighter plane you spotted earlier eh?" Spike snorted derisively.

The human nodded solemnly.

They quickly finished out the hand with Xander winning, just barely. Spike cocked an eyebrow at him as he saw the cards in his hand. Harris had picked up the King of Clubs that Spike had palmed to the bottom of the deck. Xander just smiled.

Maurice returned dressed in a white dinner jacket with small towel draped over his arm and wheeling a cart bearing the before dinner drinks and hor d'ouvres. "For mon ami Spike, a nice O negative and an excellent merlot." He presented the vampire with a crystal goblet. The vampire took a small sip; his eyes flashed gold briefly before he nodded. The pilot smiled.

"And for you m'sieur, we have a small but distinguished choice of micro brews or your favourite soda pop." Maurice gestured proudly to four brightly colored bottles.

"Oh this is just so cool." Xander enthused, "I'll try that one."

"Excellent choice monsieur. I think you will find that it compliments both of tonight's dinner choices. I'll leave you to enjoy your drinks. I will return to take your dinner orders momentarily." He set the hor d'ouvres tray within

easy reach before leaving the men to their cocktails.

Xander stared at the assorted offerings with something approaching awe. Spike hid a smile as he leaned back in his seat. Watching Harris, he was reminded of his first trip abroad. His family hadn't been able to afford the entire Grand Tour but he had gone to Italy for several months. It had been a very enlightening experience. He'd been so worried he'd do or say the wrong thing at first. Luckily his cousin Bertie had taken him under his wing and smoothed over any minor mishaps. That's precisely what he was going to do for the lad.

Xander hesitantly reached for a puff pastry. Spike laughed out loud at the look of rapture on the human's face as he bit into the snack. "Oh, Spike, this is wonderful. It's some kind of fruit, nut, meat thing."

Xander swallowed and gave a contented sigh. He stared at his friend for a long moment. "Thanks for bringing me. I mean that. This is just great." Xander said sincerely. He gave the vampire a big grin before snatching a mushroom cap.

"Yeah well, Nualla'd have my hide if I didn't bring you, probably never hear the end of it." Spike muttered

awkwardly.

Xander just laughed at the uncomfortable blonde.

Maurice returned and took their dinner orders and handed out small scented towels. It was then that Xander started to feel a twinge of panic. When the meal arrived it was on a cloth draped cart with china plates and real crystal glasses. It was the most elaborate place setting that Xander had ever seen. He watched Spike taste the dinner wine and nod his approval. He'd never imagined his friend in this type of setting. Spike seemed perfectly at home. Xander tried not to squirm. He felt grubby and a bit like a poor relation.

Spike, picking up on the human's sudden distress, caught his eye and winked. "Soddin human meals, all these utensils and such when all you really need are these," he said briefly flashing into game face and showing an impressive array of fangs.

The awkward moment was broken as Xander wrinkled his nose in disgust and Maurice rolled his eyes delicately. Spike just laughed and then went on to explain in humorous detail about place settings and just how large they could get. Xander was completely relaxed and in a

very jolly mood by the time the meal was done.

Maurice cleared away the dinner cart and returned with after dinner brandy and some fine cigars. Xander was in a very mellow mood from the food and half glass of wine he'd had with his meal. The pilot poured him just a touch of brandy and handed him a cigar. Spike raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

"Going to let me smoke it then mate?" The vampire asked hopefully.

Maurice nodded an affirmative and took a cigar and seat for himself. "If you have no objection?" he asked Xander. Xander quickly shook his head. He stared at the cigar with indecision; he didn't want to insult the pilot but he wasn't a smoker. Spike again came to his rescue.

"A man should always have a cigar on hand, mate. You never know." The vampire said patting his own pocket. Maurice nodded in agreement as he settled comfortably into his chair.

"So Xander, Spike tells me that you were born and raised on the Hellmouth? You must have some fascinating stories to tell." Maurice smiled encouragingly at the

nervous young man.

Xander flushed in embarrassment. He looked at Spike entreatingly but the vampire just gave him a calm look. "Yeah, Xander's got some great stories. C'mon mate, tell him the one about the Porak demon we took on." Spike turned to the pilot, "I took him out but Xander here gave me a bit of a hand." Spike propped his feet up and took a sip of his brandy.

"What?" the human gasped in outrage. "A bit of a hand, you were about to be skewered!"

Spike shook his head condescendingly. "That's not how I remember it." He tapped his forehead and gave the pilot a knowing look. "The lad's taken a couple of hits to the head over the years - memory's not what it should be for a young man." He winked at the human who was doing a good imitation of a gasping fish. "Sad really, close your mouth luv, you'll catch flies."

Xander, now completely over his shyness turned to the grinning pilot, "Let me tell you what really happened." He embarked on a highly entertaining version of the Porak demon story as well as several other amusing anecdotes of life on the Hellmouth.

Spike watched the human loosen up and bask in the approval of his audience. He felt almost proud of the boy before giving himself a mental shake. He was already far too attached to humans for his own good and now he was feeling proud? *I've really got to start hanging out with more demons*, he sighed to himself.

Maurice was laughing softly and turned to the pensive vampire. "I like your friend. It is a pleasure to have a civilized conversation. Ah, Yvette and I don't have too many passengers who like to engage in those."

"Yvette's a beautiful name for her." Xander complimented.

"Oui, my beauty," the pilot said proudly patting a chair lovingly. "We have been together for years she and I."

"Well she's a great plane, really." Xander looked around with interest. He felt wonderful and it wasn't just the brandy or at least not completely. It was the conversation and the camaraderie. Here he was, Xander Harris, drinking brandy and being witty and even, dare he think it, a bit sophisticated. He didn't think he was the screw up kid he'd been in high school anymore. He didn't

think it, not consciously anyway but deep in his heart he'd always wondered if anyone outside of his friends would really like him; want to spend time with him. Granted he was talking about sprites and demons and vampires, oh my! Xander laughed at himself. *Hey, at least I've finally got male friends.*

Xander refocused on his companions. Spike was smirking at him in that way that always meant trouble and Maurice was looking perplexed.

"What, what did I say?" Xander quickly reran the previous conversation in his mind.

"We're flying Yvette all right pet, but she's not a plane." Spike told the worried young man almost gently then ruined it but doubling over in laughter at the look on his face.

Spike had been laughing on and off for over fifteen minutes. He would quit and then catch Xander's eye and be off on another bout of evil giggling. "Oh mate," he kept saying, "You should have seen the look on your face."

Xander gave him a mock growl. "Yeah, like of course I knew that we were flying around in a large, 'usually docile' shape changing demon. Maurice thought I was an idiot."

"Well, you're Hellmouth born and bred. You should have a sixth sense for these things." The vampire retorted virtuously. "You should know to look beyond surface appearances."

Xander "pshawed" him; "Thank you Master Po for that lesson on Zen and the Art of Demonology."

Spike gave him the two-fingered salute.

Xander narrowed his eyes then reached forward and rapped the vampire gently on the top of his head. "How would I know that Spike? No one would know that Spike. This comes under the heading of things Xander needs to be told, okay? Besides, I know you did it just to freak me

out," he finished muttering under his breath.

Spike tried to keep a straight face but lost the battle and started laughing again.

Xander raised one eyebrow, "Anytime you want to stop giggling hysterically is just fine with me."

Spike widened his eyes in shock, "Oi, I'm a Master Vampire! We don't giggle!"

Xander gave an exaggerated yawn then fixed the 'Master Vampire' with a bored stare. "Son, I was possessed by a hyena for several days and let me tell you if there's one thing I recognize, it's giggling." Xander nodded wisely.

"Possessed by a hyena? Yeah all right, that would explain it." Spike said seriously.

Xander stared at him suspiciously, "Explain what?"

"Well, that smell of wet dog you sometimes have after a shower. Don't tell me no one's ever mentioned it?" Spike managed to look stunned while hiding a smirk.

"I do not smell like a wet dog." Xander snapped. "You're

making that up."

"No, of course you don't. I was just joking." The blonde said soothingly reaching forward to pat the boy's knee making 'there there' noises.

"Just you wait, I'll get my revenge and it won't be pretty." Xander retorted ominously.

Spike sighed deeply, "What have I told you about telegraphing your intentions?" Spike shook his head. "You lot, what am I going to do with you? I'm not going to always be around you know." Spike gave the boy an almost brooding stare.

Damn it all, I've gone and gotten attached. I knew this was going to happen. Spike you idiot! If you had any sense of survival left you'd ditch the kid in Brazil and make a run for it. The vampire snarled to himself.

Xander reached forward and hesitantly put a hand on the vampire's arm, giving it a quick pat. "We're lousy fledges, huh?" Xander gave the vampire a tentative grin.

Spike returned the smile reluctantly, "The worst."

"Hey, what you said, about not always being around, you don't mean like soon or anything, do you?" Xander asked a little worriedly. "You just meant, like someday, right?"

Spike stared into the earnest, anxious eyes of the young man across from him and mentally threw up his hands in defeat. "Yeah pet, I just meant someday."

Xander felt himself relax, "Okay then, that's all right." He smiled in relief a little surprised at just how comforted he felt that he wouldn't be losing the blonde any time soon. Spike had turned to stare out the window pensively and Xander searched for something to cheer his friend up.

"Hey Spike, bet you don't know what the conventional long name of Brazil is?" Xander sing songed.

"But you're going to tell me whether I want to hear it or not, aren't you mate?" Spike turned long-suffering eyes on the brunette.

Xander smirked at him, "Federative Republic of Brazil." Xander leaned back in his seat and propped his feet up. "Yup, Brazil, only slightly smaller than the United States and the largest country in South America received its independence from Portugal on September 7, 1822.

Portuguese is the national language followed by Spanish, English and French."

Spike's head dropped back in despair, "Oh Lord, stake me now. This is your revenge innit?"

Xander waggled his eyebrows and cackled gleefully.

"Did you know that the rivers come in three colors in Brazil? Yes indeed, green, white and black. Let me explain to you about how sediment and organic matter cause these color changes." Xander lectured in his best Giles' voice. Spike just groaned.

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Xander had enjoyed tormenting the vampire for a good half hour before Maurice's voice came over the intercom announcing that they would be landing for refuelling in Mexico and could they please fasten their seatbelts.

They touched down at a small conventional airport. Xander wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, something more exotic perhaps but this looked just like Sunnydale Airport except that everything was in Spanish.

Maurice lowered the stairs and told them they had time to get out and stretch their legs. It would take Yvette about thirty minutes to 'refuel' and then they would begin the final leg of their journey.

Xander stifled a yawn and headed across the tarmac toward the small terminal in search of caffeine. Spike stayed to talk to Maurice.

Even though it was the middle of the night there were a surprising number of people in the little terminal. Some were human and some weren't. Xander spotted three vampires right off the bat but aside from a cursory look they ignored him. There were two demons whose species he didn't recognize sitting quietly in the corner. The female appeared very pregnant and was passing the time knitting what looked like a very long tube while the male was carefully ripping newspaper into long strips and putting them in a paper bag. Xander frowned but then just mentally shrugged his shoulders and continued his search. He failed to notice a furtive little rat faced demon dressed in a cheap white suit watching him in his search for caffeine.

He passed a Fyarl demon using the pay phone in the

corner. Next to it was a huge stuffed teddy bear with a big pink bow tied around its neck. Xander continued walking, ah ha, you could always find a concession stand. He ordered the largest soda they had; there was a little confusion over pesos but he got it sorted out. If he knew Spike, and he liked to think he did, the vampire hadn't thought to get any money exchanged before they'd left. Xander grimaced; it was very possible that Spike hadn't brought any money at all.

He started to amble back to the plane when he noticed a man standing in the corner apparently talking into the lapel of his trench coat. The man immediately quit when he caught Xander looking at him.

"Hey, how's it going?" The guy, young and clean cut asked with a pleasant smile.

"Fine thanks. You?" Xander answered.

"Just great. Well, I gotta go. Be seeing you." The man gave him a friendly wave and quickly slipped into the women's bathroom.

Xander's eyebrows raised as he waited for any forthcoming shrieks, before he slowly backed away

shaking his head. "There are some very strange people in this terminal," he muttered to himself.

He found Spike and Maurice bent over one of Yvette's wheels.

"Is everything okay?" Xander peered over their shoulders.

"Everything is fine my friend. We are just being careful. Yvette is not as young as she used to be. Of course," the pilot gave a fatalistic shrug, "neither am I." Xander laughed.

"Hey Spike, there are some really odd people here. There was a guy in there talking into his coat. Very hush, hush. I think he was a spy or something." Xander slurped his soda.

Spike was still bent over the wheel, "Yeah mate? That's nice."

Xander glared at the vampire's back. "You're not listening to me are you?"

"What pet?" Spike pointed out a rough patch on the tire

and Maurice nodded his agreement.

Xander snorted and was about to make a scathing remark when he caught sight of a vending machine across the tarmac promising American chocolate. His eyes lit up and the vampire was quickly forgotten.

"Don't wander off mate. We're going to be leaving soon." Spike admonished the empty space Xander had just occupied.

"Let's see, I think I have enough change." Xander mumbled to himself. "Oh damn!" Xander bent over to pick up the coins he dropped when he heard a loud bang and the vending machine in front of him gave a strangely human groan before disgorging numerous candy bars and gummi babies in its death throes.

Xander looked up in shock to see a large hole where his head had been only moments before. "Hey? Hey!" Xander yelled as he realized that for the first time in his life, someone was shooting at him. He tossed his coke and hit the dirt rolling behind some trashcans trying to figure out who was shooting at him and why.

Spike's head jerked up when he heard the first shot. He

and Maurice shared a quick look as they rolled for cover behind Yvette's tires; Spike desperately trying to locate Xander. He spotted the boy hunkered down behind some trashcans. Spike snarled in frustration because of course Xander wasn't just hiding like a smart human, oh no, he kept trying to sneak quick peeks to see who was firing at them.

Maurice hissed at the vampire and pointed. They saw three or four demons being directed by a creature in a rumpled white suit. Spike's eyes narrowed and he hissed in anger. "Bloody Hell, Ernie, that little rat faced bastard!"

The ground was peppered by a round of semi automatic gunfire as Spike slipped into gameface. Maurice got the vampire's attention again and pointed upwards before patting the tire before him. There was a soft chugging noise as the engines came to life.

Spike nodded to the pilot. He needed to get Xander and get out of here. It was obvious Ernie wasn't trying to kill them probably just keep them here until more of his goons arrived. Spike watched Maurice slowly change color until he blended in with the tarmac so well that even with vampiric sight it was hard to spot him. Maurice

slowly made his way to the cockpit. Now, to get Harris and get out of here before the reinforcements came.

Xander saw Spike crouched behind the plane wheel. He'd seen Maurice too but now the pilot seemed to have disappeared. He must have gotten inside and started the engines. That meant they had to leave now. He couldn't figure out why these guys with guns weren't just rushing them. Of course guns didn't really bother vampires, although they hurt and maybe guns didn't bother Maurice at all. Great, he was the only lucky target that could bleed to death or be used as a hostage. Right Xander, time to call on any of that old soldier training still left in the brain and move it.

Spike sorrowfully pulled out his whiskey flask. "Sorry luv, I know we've been together for years but 'needs must'." He gave the container a last kiss before tearing off a piece of his tee shirt and stuffing it into the neck of the flask and pulling out his lighter. He lit and threw in one smooth motion. It hit the ground in front of the demons and exploded spectacularly just like a giant sparkler. Spike pumped the air with his fist and crowed in victory. Yes, he'd paid a lot of money for that spell over fifty years ago but he just knew that one day it would come in handy.

Xander watched the explosion with admiration. Yes, way to go Spike! Xander made a break for the plane while the demons were dazed.

"C'mon on pet, move it!" The blonde yelled as he darted out and grabbed the human. They just made the stairs when the gunfire recommenced.

"We're being shot at!" Xander yelled as he scuttled up the stairs.

"I know pet." Spike pushed the human forward.

"I've never been shot at!" Xander dived into the plane.

"Yeah, a rush innit?" Spike finally laughed as he dived in after the boy.

The stairs came up and the door shut with a bang as the plane began to taxi down the runway.

Xander sat against the wall gasping for air. Spike sat on the floor across from him before pulling out a cigarette and calling out "Do you mind luv?" Xander didn't hear a reply but maybe the blonde did because he gave a short

"Sir, Private Owens reporting."

"At ease Private. What was so important it couldn't wait until morning?" The CO covered a yawn.

"We just got a report from Johnson in the field sir. It's Hostile 17; our informant in Sunnydale was right sir. He's on the move and we believe he's heading this way."

"Are you sure Private?" The CO was awake now.

"Yes Sir!" Owens grinned. He'd heard about Hostile 17. If they could get him back it would mean promotion for sure

"Inform the Lieutenant and keep me posted. Dismissed." Riley Finn covered his face and groaned to himself.

Spike you idiot!

Part Seven

Lt. Graham Miller stared worriedly at his old friend. Riley had summoned him to his quarters but had yet to say a word. He sat on his bunk staring morosely at a crack in the floor. Graham was about to break his silence when Riley heaved a big sigh.

"I guess you heard huh?"

"About Hostile 17? Yeah, it's all over the camp." Graham leaned forward, "Is that what all this is about, bringing back bad memories of Sunnydale and the Initiative?" Graham hoped not. Even since Riley had left Sunnydale and all that craziness behind he was becoming his old self, the gung ho kid that Miller had signed up with; Graham didn't want to lose his friend again.

"His name's Spike, you know, not Hostile 17." Riley met his eyes then rubbed his face wearily. "What the Hell is he doing here? Why isn't he in Sunnydale where he's relatively safe?"

"He's a vampire Ri, why the Hell do they do anything? Those kids probably got tired of having him around." Graham carefully did not mention the Slayer's name.

That was definitely a 'no fly' zone with his old pal.

Riley perked up a bit, "You think? Yeah, that would make sense. He probably pissed them off. He pisses everybody off." Riley smiled but then the smile faded again.

"What, what's wrong?" Graham burst out.

"You know what they're gonna do to him if we catch him don't you?" Riley asked seriously.

Graham squirmed a bit. He didn't really like thinking about stuff like this. He was more of a straight-ahead guy but this was war. Riley never really got that. He was too soft hearted for his own good sometimes.

"Yeah, I know but we've got standing orders where he's concerned. Hostile 17 is just an assignment; that's all." Graham explained.

Riley stared at him.

"Look Ri, I mean it. You can't get involved with these demons. So what if Spike..."

Riley's eyebrows raised at the slip and Graham just

slumped in his chair.

"Okay, this officially sucks." Graham threw up his hands in disgust then fixed his friend and commanding officer with a look. "So, Captain, what are you going to do about it? It's a little late to pretend we don't know. The whole camp's talking about it."

Riley rubbed his neck, "Yeah, I know. Hey, maybe we'll get lucky and the son of bitch will outsmart us?" Riley gave him a weak grin.

There was knock on the door and Private Owens entered and saluted, "Sir, we've had another report from Johnson in the field. He said there was some sort of gun battle but that Hostile 17 got away." The Private swallowed, hating to deliver this kind of news. "Also Sir, Johnson reported that the vamp has taken a human hostage. Some poor tourist that he's got in thrall."

"A hostage, is Johnson sure, Private?" Riley looked sceptical.

"Yes Sir! He's some younger guy, dark hair in a loud Hawaiian shirt. He was yelling about being shot at; the vamp is probably dragging him along as some sort of

living snack." The Private looked vaguely ill.

Graham closed his eyes and just shook his head. The Private noted that the lieutenant looked just as disgusted as he felt. The CO on the other hand looked very calm. The Private couldn't be sure but he almost got the feeling that his Captain was trying not to smile. The Private shuddered to himself; damn his Captain was cold. He probably thought that poor hapless bastard Hostile 17 had kidnapped would slow the demon down. He wondered if the tourist was going to fall under acceptable losses.

"Thank you Owens, dismissed."

It was now Graham that gave the heavy sigh. "Tell me that's not Harris."

Riley had a beatific smile on his face, "Yeah, that's got to be Xander."

Graham snapped, "What the Hell is he doing flying to Brazil with Spike?"

"I don't know. They're probably on vacation or something." Riley shrugged.

Graham just stared incredulously then tried to focus. "Well this is just great; with Harris slowing him down we've got him for sure; if he really is heading this way."

Riley still had that same joyous smile on his face, "No don't you see? This is perfect. I was a little worried but," he glanced heavenward, "someone's definitely looking out for us."

"What?" Graham wondered if his friend had finally snapped.

"Look, we both agree that Spike is one lucky demon right? It's almost like something is watching out for him, right?" Graham nodded his head reluctantly.

"About the only person I know who might be luckier is Xander Harris. Think about it; he's got to be the most accident prone, demon magnetized human on the face of the planet but he always makes it. He grew up on a Hellmouth, he's best friends with a Slayer but yet, he's still alive. He's like an idiot savant of survival. The two of them teamed together, well let's just say it, they're close to unstoppable." Riley flopped back into his chair, completely relieved.

Graham shook his head again, torn between wanting to argue and just giving in to the apparent inevitability of the situation. "You are going to let the men at least try to get him though, right?"

"Oh sure, sure, now that there's no real danger of actually catching him it'll be a good exercise for the men." Riley gestured expansively.

"I could have been a Navy Seal. God knows they wanted me but nooo." Graham left muttering to himself. Riley frowned, poor Graham, after this was over, he'd make sure his friend got some leave time.

He leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up. "Spike you are one lucky vamp."

Part Eight

Spike leaned back in his seat staring off in to space, thinking about nothing in particular. Xander had fallen asleep next to him, feet propped up and lanky form reclining in a boneless mass on his seat. It had taken him almost an hour to calm down enough to fall asleep. Most of that time was spent in explaining whom Ernie and his boss, Big Mike were. Xander, smart lad that he was, appeared unconvinced that this Big Mike character was just upset with Spike over a little misunderstanding. He fixed the vampire with a stern look, asked him point blank if it involved anybody dying, listened to Spike's vehement denial and then gave a sharp nod and yawned widely. He'd fallen asleep soon after.

Yvette had shuttered the windows and dimmed the lights. Edith Piaf singing 'La Vie En Rose' was playing softly over the speakers. They would arrive at the airfield about an hour before sunset. Maurice said that he could time the arrival for after dark but Spike wanted Xander to have his first view of the jungle and the Amazon River in sunlight. He'd almost changed his mind after Maurice gave him a knowing smile but then decided, to Hell with it, he was the Big Bad, he could do what he liked.

Xander gave a little grumbly murmur as his blanket slipped down to his waist. Spike stared at the sleeping

human, watching his chest rise and fall and listening to the steady slow beat of his heart. He glanced around almost furtively before slowly reaching over and pulling the blanket back up and tucking it under the boy's chin. Xander made a happy noise and his head dropped over to lie against the vampire's shoulder. Spike reached over to push him back and then let his hand drop back to his lap. He scowled as he glanced up.

"Not a bleedin' word luv," he admonished the plane. The cabin lights flickered briefly.

Spike grimaced; he had to be the world's unluckiest vampire. "First an insane Sire, then there's the entire Buffy/Angelus fiasco leading to the loss of said Sire. Oh, lets not forget losing the bloody Holy Grail of vampirism, the Gem of Amara. That was a stellar moment. Good thing the Initiative captured me and saved me from spending all my time wallowing in self-pity. Then unauthorized brain surgery, forcing me to throw myself on the mercy of the Slayer and her rag tag bunch of do-gooders. And of course being me, I end up falling in love, or something close to it with my worst enemy. And when she dies, does it stop there? Oh no." He glanced down at the softly snoring human on his shoulder. "No, I find that I've grown fond of the food. There's no excuse for it;

obviously, I'm cursed." Spike nodded decisively to himself. "And now I'm talking to myself, sad really." He heaved a sigh and settled back, slipping into a dreamless sleep.

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Xander yawned widely and blinked several times. He rubbed his head and sniffed, hey pancakes? He became a little more alert. Blueberry pancakes to be precise, and coffee. He closed his eyes again and breathed in deeply, good, rich coffee. He smiled widely before finally noticing a sleeping Spike-shaped object. The vampire had draped a blanket over himself. Xander lifted it carefully and took a peek. His face softened. Spike's hair had fallen forward in soft curls across his forehead. He looked a bit like pictures of James Dean that Xander had seen in his mother's old movie magazines. The ones she had hidden in the back of her closet. Xander lifted his hand to reach out and push those curls back into place. His eyes widened as he stopped and stared down at his hand with an expression approaching horror.

Okay, that was weird. Xander what are you doing? The brunette was just a bit panicked. He slapped his hand

lightly, 'bad hand, bad' he scolded silently. He carefully slid out from under his blanket by inching himself slowly to the floor and then standing up, all the while keeping a wary eye on the sleeping demon. He congratulated himself on not waking Spike before looking up and facing a bemused looking Maurice. The pilot had one eyebrow raised, at least Xander was pretty sure he did and was standing quietly holding a breakfast tray. He indicated that Xander should meet him in the cockpit when he was ready.

Xander gave him a weak smile and a little wave before grabbing his kit and stepping into the tiny bathroom. He stared at the unshaven, tousled looking young man in the mirror. Aside from looking ruffled, which was pretty standard for him, he looked kinda, well, cool. The beginnings of the beard made him look older. He unbuttoned his shirt and took a quick sponge bath before pulling on a clean tee shirt and another tropical shirt, this one with an orchid motif. He then carefully pulled out his going away on vacation gift for himself. He unwrapped it, staring at it almost reverently. It was a straw hat, but not just any straw hat. It was a duplicate of the hat worn by Ed Norton's character on 'The Honeymooners'. He'd spotted it in a shop over a year ago and just had to have it. He loved 'The Honeymooners', watching that and 'I

Love Lucy' and various other old time sitcoms on TV had been his only escape from his parent's fighting. He'd never worn the hat; no time had seemed right, until now and this trip.

He finger combed his hair before setting the hat neatly on his head. He grinned at the bright-eyed stranger in the mirror. The shirt, the hat, the stubble, all of it combined to make Xander Harris look like a man on an adventure. He could see himself seated at an outdoor café, languidly ordering another drink while surreptitiously keeping an eye on some international spy or jewel thief at another table. In his imagination the non-descript jewel thief's face began to alter and shift into the angular planes of Spike's features. Spike giving him one of his trademark sneers, getting up and trying to give him the slip, only this time, Xander was ready for him because he was a man with a mission. He had Spike trapped in an alley. He was moving forward slowly when...

The brunette suddenly pulled his fantasy up short. *Whoa there big fella. Where do you think going with this little drama?* He admonished his psyche. *I need coffee and breakfast. Yup.* Xander dropped his eyes from those of the man in the mirror. He wasn't sure he was ready to face the emotion that might be in those eyes and he

certainly was not ready to face it on an empty stomach.

He sneaked a quick look around the door. Spike was still asleep. Good. He should be able to make the cockpit unmolested - *unnoted! I meant to think unnoted!* He mentally slapped himself before dashing for the relative safety of Maurice and breakfast.

Spike blearily opened one eye in time to catch a streaking Xander shaped object. He scented the air. Oh, blueberry pancakes, that explained the boy's haste. Spike pulled the blanket up over his head again.

Xander stared at the cockpit in awe. "Wow, this is amazing." There were buttons and dials and levers dotting the control panel. Xander took the co-pilot's seat. He had a wonderful view of the countryside. Xander suddenly frowned.

"Maurice, do you use all these dials and things. I mean, are they real?" Xander asked hesitantly.

"Well they are as real as I want them to be. Yvette likes me to keep busy and out of her hair while she's flying." The pilot grinned at him.

Xander laughed. Maurice settled the tray on his lap and Xander now noticed that these weren't blueberry pancakes, they were crepes covered in fresh blueberries and crème. Xander took a big bite and gave a happy sigh. Maurice chuckled.

The pilot pattered about until Xander had finished his breakfast. He watched the contented young man. "I like the hat. It is very much, you." The pilot nodded approvingly.

Xander gave him a shy smile in return. He fidgeted a bit running his hands across the instrument panel almost soothingly. The engines took on a deeper tone, almost a purr. Xander snatched his hand back guiltily and gave Maurice an apologetic look.

"Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it," he stammered.

Maurice cocked his head to the side, giving the boy a long look. Xander wondered if he was about to be punched or something for, well, whatever it was he'd been doing that caused Yvette to purr like that.

The pilot reached toward Xander and he flinched. Maurice gave him a wry grin and carefully pulled a small

leather case about the size of a cigarette case from next to the co-pilot seat. He opened it, staring at it for a moment before showing it to Xander. It was a very old tintype in sepia of Maurice and another smaller, female version of the pilot.

"My wife. I suspect you would not think so, but she was very beautiful. I was very lucky for a great many years." Maurice touched his wife's face tenderly before continuing. "We did not have a great romance. Great romances are a great deal of trouble. They very rarely end well for anyone involved. Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere; these were not happy people. There was great passion in their lives but very little joy, I think. My wife and I did not have a great romance; we had a fine romance. Do you know the difference?" Maurice asked the young man.

Xander swallowed passed the sudden lump in his throat and shook his head.

"A fine romance is where one moment you can look at this person you love and think, 'have they always slurped their soup like that? It is annoying.' Then something happens and they laugh and you think to yourself, 'that is the most wonderful laugh. I will never get tired of

hearing it.' The pilot patted the boy's arm. "That is a fine romance and that is what we had for a time." He sighed a little then smiled at a teary eyed Xander. "Everything is always coming or going. I think you already knew that, yes?"

Xander nodded and gave him a watery smile. Yvette gave a little rumble and Maurice patted the plane. "Yvette is in the same position as I. She too lost her mate some time ago but we found each other." He winked at the human. "She keeps me out of trouble and I give her something to scold. We are partners and we are friends." He gave Xander a sidewise glance. "Like you and Spike," he said artlessly.

"Oh I don't think Spike would like us being referred to as partners, friends maybe but partners?" Xander laughed self-consciously. "I'm a bit of a screw-up, you know, always tripping over my own feet and just generally being a goof. I don't think the Big Bad wants to have The Zeppo for a partner." Xander shrugged and gave a self-deprecating laugh, "Comic relief maybe."

Maurice crossed his arms and glared sternly. "I think, young man, that you underestimate yourself. However, if what you say is true, then you would do well to

remember that most vampires do not have friends that are goofs or comic relief, as you say. Most vampires I have met have very little sense of humour at all unless it involves unpleasantness. Of course, most vampires are not Spike." Maurice smiled fondly and Xander rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Amen!" Xander said fervently causing the pilot to burst into a deep rolling laugh. Xander felt the tension leave him as he joined in.

Spike pulled the blanket down and glared at the door of the cockpit. Bloody inconsiderate of those two, there were people trying to sleep back here. He had a good mind to go up there and well; he wasn't sure what he'd do but something befitting his evil, undead state.

He was about to get up and make his displeasure known when the chair he was in subtly altered its shape, becoming longer and a little softer. A comfortable heat began to radiate from it. Spike started to purr unconsciously and snuggled deeper into his blanket before dropping off to sleep with small smile on his face. The lights flickered briefly in laughter before dimming again.

Part Nine

"Wakey, wakey, Mr. Vampire."

Spike grumbled and swatted ineffectually at the annoying whatever it was that was tapping his nose. There was silence and then the smell of richly brewed coffee with the underlying scent of human blood. Spike sniffed sleepily.

"I don't know Xander, he doesn't seem to be moving. Maybe we should try the chocolate croissants," trilled Xander in a chirpy voice.

"Good thinking Mr. Sockpuppet. You go get the croissants and I'll stay here and continue to try to wake up Mr. Sleepy Demon." Xander chirped.

"Mr. Sockpuppet is going to find himself shoved where the sun don't shine if you don't stop tapping me on the nose." Spike snarled; opening one eye and glaring at the

grinning fool he called a friend and the hastily created Mr. Sockpuppet. Both Sockpuppet and Xander stared at each other in mock horror and gave a high-pitched squeak before ducking behind one of the cabin chairs.

Spike just lay there, staring at the ceiling in a bleary eyed daze for a moment before Mr. Sockpuppet re-entered his field of vision, peering over the chair at him. He had a sudden flashback to Dru holding up Miss Edith to his face, insisting he talk to her doll because Dru was too angry to speak to him herself. "Is it me," he wondered, "do I attract insane brunettes with figurine fetishes?"

Xander's head followed that of the puppet's, he had a tall cup filled with warm blood and coffee in his free hand. "I come in peace. I have breakfast and Maurice says we'll be landing in another thirty minutes."

Spike sat up running his hand through his hair before taking the coffee. "I have told you you're an idiot, right?"

"Well not in the past twenty-four hours. Is that some sort of record for us?" Xander grinned good-naturedly offering him a warm croissant.

Spike gave him a narrow eyed stare before deliberately

ripping off a piece of chocolate croissant and dipping it deeply into the blood and coffee mixture. Xander didn't blink although he did swallow a little heavily as the vampire continued to eat his breakfast making a great production out of eating the bloody mixture. It wasn't until Spike slurped the last bit of his coffee that Xander's nose finally inched upward; almost unconsciously Spike was sure, into that revolted wrinkle.

"Three, two, one," he counted down silently to himself.

"Ewww, that is so disgusting!" Xander exclaimed.

"Yes, I still got it." Spike raised his fist in victory. "And don't talk to me about disgusting after that entire yogurt fiasco last week." Spike shuddered. "Here Spike, does this smell all right to you?"

Xander just sneered. "Shows what you know. I keep telling you, its yogurt and the expiration date means nothing when it comes to yogurt. All that happens is that it becomes more 'yogurty'; As long as it's not green it's fine to eat. It's a biology thing, Willow will back me up on this."

The vampire looked unconvinced but settled for a

superior look before heading in to the bathroom to throw some cold water on his face and brush his teeth. When he returned, Xander was carefully checking his knapsack and the various portable cameras, water bottle and food rations it contained. He pulled out the calling card Willow had given him.

"Hey Spike, remind me to call Willow when we get to a phone okay?"

Spike growled. "You're a grown man Harris. It's not like you've got to call home every five minutes."

"Yeah, okay Mr. Big Bad. I'll just pass that sentiment along to Willow and Dawn. I'm sure they'll understand, not." Xander said sarcastically.

Spike grumbled under his breath until Xander took pity on him. "Oh give it up and just accept the fact that there is someone out there who cares whether you're okay and the trade off for that is the occasional phone call." Xander admonished him. "You're not just a foot loose and fancy free demon any more my man, you've got a family now, responsibilities. It's time to grow up."

"That'd mean more coming from someone who wasn't

talking to a sock earlier." Spike said dryly.

Xander seemed unfazed by the criticism as he continued checking and re-packing his knapsack gear.

"Gentlemen we will be landing soon. Please take your seats." Maurice intoned.

Xander felt his stomach flutter in excited expectation. Spike glanced over and Xander gave him a 'thumbs up' sign. Even though Spike had done all of this before, he found Xander's excitement infecting him to a certain extent.

Yvette touched down smoothly and glided to a gentle halt. Xander looked over at Spike uncertainly when the vampire didn't make any move to stand.

"You go on mate. It's still light out. I'll just wait here while you go have a look around, get some of those damn pictures out of the way." Spike waved the brunette to the door.

Xander stood and put his hat on. Spike raised an eyebrow at the straw hat. Xander crossed his arms and waited for the forthcoming snarky comment.

"Nice hat, mate." Spike said pleasantly and skinned his teeth back in a smile.

Xander scratched his chin while contemplating the vampire and then gave a curt nod. He turned to grab his duffle bag.

"Along with the beard, makes you look like a sleazy reporter." Spike smirked. He was therefore slightly taken aback when Xander turned and gave him a sincere grin.

"Yeah? Thanks." Xander rubbed his chin again and slung the duffel bag over his shoulder as he headed for the door that Maurice was carefully opening. Xander pulled out a pair of shades and slipped them on, stepping forward into the late afternoon sun to catch his first glimpse of the Amazon.

Xander surveyed the lush jungle before him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of humid air. He could hear all sorts of exotic sounds. He propped his duffle bag next to the door, pulled his handy guide to Brazil out of his knapsack along with one of the portable cameras, gave Maurice a boyish grin and blew his cool image by galloping down the stairs.

He could see they had landed in a large field only about 100 yards from the river on which sat a small dock. He wasn't sure where to start. There was a loud howling sound and he gave a yip of delight, whipping out the camera and taking two quick pictures.

"Oh my God I hope these come out, wait until the guys see this, an actual Howler Monkey. Ah, there's a baby too. Oh my God!" Xander ran towards the jungle wall and the curious monkeys who seemed transfixed by the brightly colored human.

"Oi, what's he found then?" Spike quickly stood up when he heard Xander's whoop of delight. He motioned to the open door. "Well go on mate, keep an eye on him."

Maurice gave the fretful vampire an indulgent look. "He is a grown man mon ami, not a child. I can see him from

here and there is nothing very dangerous in the vicinity."

"Yeah, well I know him and trust me, keeping an eye on him from up here isn't good enough." Spike grumbled.

"He's bound to trip and break a leg or something and then I'll have a hurt human to look after and they're a right pain in the arse."

The pilot hid a smile, "Yes of course I had forgotten how fragile humans can be. You are correct I shall keep a closer watch on him."

Xander was busy tipping over a log and grimacing with disgusted delight at the giant golden cockroaches he found. He was busy snapping several pictures of these.

"Work with baby, give me smile," he grinned happily at the slow moving bugs. The cockroaches ignored him and went about their business. He looked up as Maurice approached him. The pilot squatted down next to him looking over the various creepy crawlies Xander had uncovered.

"So what, he's afraid I'm going to get eaten by a snake or something?" Xander jerked his head towards the plane.

"He worries, but don't tell him I said so." Maurice shrugged.

Xander gave a rueful shake of his head, "Told you I was a klutz. He's probably afraid I'm going to break a leg and then he'll have to shoot me." He grinned at the pilot good-naturedly.

"I think he is more afraid that his friend might get hurt and then he'll be on his own." Maurice returned gently.

Xander felt his cheeks grow warm but decided to attribute the flush to the heat. He hopped up and pointed to the river. "Any piranha in there?"

"Well perhaps, more likely there are giant catfish." The pilot said carefully.

Xander flipped his tourist guide open, read the description and pulled out a fresh camera, "Cool." He grinned and headed toward the river. He yelled into Yvette as he was passing, "We're going to look for piranha, Spike, be right back." He winked at the pilot.

"Maurice!" came a yell from the plane. Maurice gave a deep sigh.

with those born and raised and aware in Sunnydale: the rest of the world just didn't seem that dangerous. The vampire abruptly raised his head and scented the air, humans; a group of them headed this way, natives. He looked over at the pilot who had his head cocked to one side and a wide grin on his face. Xander looked up a moment later, imbued with that sixth sense that continued to keep him alive in one of America's most dangerous small towns. He broke into a wide smile when the Native group entered the clearing. There were several adults but the group primarily consisted of children of varying ages and sexes. They hung back shyly, as they surveyed the strangers, with Maurice however there was no such reticence.

"Bonjour, bonjour, mes amis," he called out gaily, holding his arms wide. Several of the children scampered up, tugging and petting the pilot while vying to be picked up first. He bent down and staggered theatrically to his feet awash in kids. Those too old to be picked up stared longingly at the stairs leading into the plane. They were too wary to approach the vampire. Spike continued smoking his cigarette and studiously ignoring the kids until Xander walked up. He plopped down on the step next to Spike and casually reached over, snagging the vampire's cigarette. He took one puff, coughed and

hacked dramatically before carefully putting the butt out. Spike looked outraged but Xander just nudged him while pulling his sunglasses aside to waggle his eyebrows entreatingly.

Spike growled, Xander nudged, Spike grumbled, Xander dropped his head to the vampire's shoulder and batting his eyelashes outrageously; the children giggled.

"Oh all right," grouched the vampire standing up so the children could skip past him up the stairs. "You're ruining my image you know? I've got a reputation to maintain."

"You're still a vain, rude bad tempered demon in my book Spike." Xander clapped him on the shoulder. Spike was about to return a scathing reply when they heard the clear deep horn of the riverboat that was to take them to Nualla's village.

Xander fairly bounced in place waiting for the boat to come into view. When he saw the old steamer he almost clapped his hands in delight. It was a small boat with a dog of indeterminate pedigree barking a greeting from the prow.

"This is perfect. Spike go stand over there so I can get a

picture of you and the boat before the sun goes down." Spike simply raised his eyebrows.

"You know Dawnie is going to want some cool pictures of you in the jungle Spike. She'll be so disappointed." Xander cajoled.

Spike yawned, pulled out another cigarette and lit it before stalking to the riverbank and striking a pose. Xander snorted and snapped several shots. Secretly he thought the vampire looked, well sexy, although he stuttered over the word a bit.

The boat docked and a character straight out of a pulp novel came out of the pilot's cabin and onto the deck. He looked like a cross between Humphrey Bogart and Popeye. He tossed a rope to the vampire and Spike tied the boat off.

"Spike, you ready to go then? I've got a timetable to keep and the missus is waiting dinner." The captain asked gruffly.

"We're ready all right. Harris quit taking pictures and get your stuff. Let's be off before we're swarmed by more of these ankle biters." Spike finished his smoke, caught

Maurice's eye and gave a nod. The pilot smiled and waved as well as he could with a child on each arm. Xander ran and grabbed his duffle bag. He skidded to a halt beside the pilot. He grabbed a free hand and pumped it vigorously.

"Thank you, thank you so much. We'll be seeing you on the way back right?" He turned and waved at the plane. "Bye Yvette," he called, the engines purred to life briefly.

"Harris!" Spike yelled impatiently. Xander rolled his eyes and hurried to the boat. He ducked his head politely at the Captain who returned the greeting. The dog barked his own salute while they cast off.

Spike slumped into a seat on the deck. "Bloody Hell, didn't have to worry about those Little Meals last time. Maurice wouldn't let them around when Dru and I passed through." Spike pulled a beer from the cooler on deck and tossed one to Xander before popping open his own beer and drinking half the bottle down.

Xander raised an eyebrow at that piece of news but wisely refrained from commenting. He turned to wave one last time and literally felt his eyes grow big, for there in the clearing was a very large and graceful creature

glowing softly in the gathering gloom; long necked like a swan with wings neatly folded and children playing about her nesting body.

"Spike?" Xander whispered in wonder.

"What pet?" Spike was squinting at the far bank and didn't turn his head as the little boat sailed around a bend in the river and out of view of the clearing.

"Never mind," Xander smiled tenderly, "Never mind."

Part Eleven

Spike turned to catch a look of bemused wonder on Xander's face. The vampire frowned slightly then went back to staring at the far riverbank. He was sure he caught movement, the kind produced by people. It was just hard to tell with the lush rainforest; even his supernatural eyesight wasn't proof against dense underbrush and his sense of smell was picking up too

many scents to easily identify them. He wasn't sure where vampires came from originally but he'd be willing to bet it wasn't the rainforest. Oh well, probably wasn't that important. Ernie was back in Mexico and Big Mike didn't know where he was and who else would be after him? He shrugged unconcernedly and finished his beer.

The Captain lit the boat lanterns. Spike relaxed back and just enjoyed the approaching night. He stretched luxuriously; this was the life, warm night, semi-warm beer and a warm human. From under lowered eyelids, he watched Xander fiddle with his camera. He took in a deep breath filled with Xander-scent and felt himself relax even further into an enjoyable haze. This was pleasant, peaceful even compared to the last time he'd been down South America way.

Xander watched the vampire unwind into a big old squishy lump of vampire goo. He sniggered to himself. Sometimes it was hard to remember that you were sitting across from a highly dangerous and successful predator who just happened to be leashed right now. Xander never had bought that whole 'I'm neutered' business. Oh sure, there was a chip but if Spike really wanted to hurt them, he would. Xander was also pretty sure that if the chip ever came out, Spike would just

leave after scaring the stuffing out of them, laughing manically as he hit the road. He thought about not having Spike around and again got that pang of loneliness. He sighed, oh well; it was bound to happen someday, no use worrying about it now.

Spike heard the heart-felt sigh and wondered what was making Harris sad. He was probably thinking about Anya and how romantic this boat ride would be if he were with Anya and how Anya would have liked this for a honeymoon or something. Spike felt a growl starting in his throat; well he wasn't with Anya, he was with a Master Vampire, the Big Bad not some doozy ex-vengeance demon. The boy would just have to swallow his disappointment and tough it out!

Xander slowly raised his eyebrows at the low growl emanating from the blonde. Hmm, so much for vampire goo, Spike was obviously slipping into one of his moods again, probably thinking about Dru. Xander sighed softly; vampires sure were testy creatures.

"Hey Spike," Xander ventured.

"What," he snapped.

"Want to see what I got the baby for her Naming Day present?" Xander asked gently as he carefully pulled out the small box. He wasn't going to wrap it, just tie it with a bit of ribbon, and maybe do a fancy knot. He held the box out shyly, biting his lip in anticipation of the vampire's response.

Spike sat up and reached for the box, stopping briefly to wipe his hands down on his jeans before taking it out of Xander's hands. He lifted the lid and uncovered two tiny barrettes made out of wire and glass beads and twisted into the shape of butterflies.

Spike traced the outline of a wing and looked up at the nervous young man. "Anya help you pick these out?" he asked gruffly.

"Naw, Dawn gave me the idea. I remember her wanting a pair of barrettes shaped like dragonflies when she was little." Xander stopped and then shrugged, "Well I don't 'remember' but you know what I mean. She thought they were just the coolest so I figured, you know for when the baby gets more hair." Xander gestured vaguely to his head. "You don't think they're a dumb idea do you?" he asked anxiously.

Spike didn't answer right away, couldn't answer actually past the sudden lump in his throat. He gave the worried human a small smile and pulled his own box from an inner pocket. He offered it to the brunette.

Xander grinned up at the vampire when he saw what was inside; four child-sized lace handkerchiefs embroidered at the corners with little blue flowers.

Spike motioned to the handkerchiefs almost shyly. "She's going to be a proper lady; she'll need those."

"Absolutely," agreed Xander enthusiastically. They switched boxes, each carefully putting their treasures away, companionable silence once again restored.

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"Are you sure that's him?"

"No, there's probably another vampire with white blonde hair dressed in leather wandering around the Amazon." The soldier said sarcastically holding up the heat sensor and double-checking his readings. Yup, one vampire, two humans and a dog.

sign. "Man I used to love that harem costume."

"Too right." Spike agreed.

The dog barked out excitedly as they rounded another bend in the river and Xander saw the village come into view. Chinese paper lanterns hung all along the dock. There were several canoes tied to the shore. Xander could hear music and smell wonderful cooking aromas.

Spike watched Xander scenting the air like a hound dog. The vampire had this sudden picture of Harris letting out a deep baying howl and running off to tree a meal. He snickered; he'd better get the boy some food, get himself a drink and let Nualla know they were here.

He and Xander sprang lightly to the dock. Xander, ever polite, shook the Captain's hand and patted the dog before he left. Spike just shook his head; it really was like owning a big old friendly puppy. Xander just ambled along, happy to be friends with those who were friendly and keeping an eye on those who didn't; this was a very different compared to the last time Spike was in the village. After the initial binge drinking and fights he'd spent his time helping Nualla get Rolf's attention and acting the part of a true Master Vampire. He cringed

inwardly, he'd been all broody and pompous and Angel-like, observing the rules of formal vampire lore concerning mates. It had been a right pain; this time was going to be much more fun.

Xander was trying to look everywhere at once. Spike grabbed his sleeve and tugged him towards the village cantina. There were various demons and humans sitting outside on the patio drinking and eating. There were several speculative looks when they caught sight of Xander and Spike but no one ventured any comments.

"I'll order us some food and something to drink. You, go make your bloody call to the chits so we don't have the entire gang showing up on our doorstep." Spike pointed to the back of the cantina.

Xander dropped his duffel and gave the vampire a big grin. He pulled out his phone card and was reading the instructions when he noticed a large stuffed teddy bear tied up with a big pink bow. He frowned, now that looked familiar. He studied the bar and spotted a Fyarl demon by the phones in the back. He was hunched over the receiver and speaking rapidly to someone on the other end.

Xander slid in next to him and studied the written instructions Willow had given him. After five rings Tara picked up.

"Hello, Summer's residence." Tara intoned softly.

"Hey, Tara, it's me, alive and well and checking in. We're here." Xander bubbled.

"Xander, hang on." Xander caught the smile in her voice.

Xander heard Tara shouting for Dawn and Willow. He looked at this watch, wondering what time it was there, morning he figured.

"Xander, hi!" Dawn's excited voice came over the receiver followed by Willow on another extension. He realized that he was talking to all three women at once.

"Ladies, ladies, there's only so much Xan-man to go around," he babbled happily listening to the excited questions.

He gave them all a blow by blow of the trip down, leaving out the part about the shooting. They would just worry so he'd moved on to describing his first sight of Yvette's

true form when he heard a rough voice call out.

"Hey vampire, yeah I'm talking to you."

He faltered and turned to locate Spike, hoping against hope that they were talking to some other vampire in the place. Nope, no such luck. There was Spike leaning casually against the bar while four rather large demons of indeterminate origin were fanned out in a semi-circle around him.

"Big Mike's put the word out. He wants to have a talk with you, leech." The lead demon sneered.

Uh oh, Xander gulped. The other patrons of the cantina were starting to edge warily away from the confrontation. The bartender had a long-suffering look on his face and was begging them to take it outside.

"Xander, Xander are you still there? What's going on? Is there a problem?" Willow's voice started to rise in panic.

"No, no Wills, absolutely no trouble here, I think Spike's just trying to get my attention. Our food must be ready." Xander improvised desperately. The demons were still taunting the blonde vampire. Man, they must be total

idiots. Spike just stared back at them with that superior smirk on his face, seemingly totally unconcerned. Xander felt himself tensing up; he recognized that smirk, any minute now. Oh, there we go.

Spike had just smashed a bottle across the nearest demon's face and kicked one of the others in the family jewels. Xander cringed, ouch, that had to hurt.

"Xander! I just heard glass breaking. Where are you? Is there a fight going on?" Willow asked sternly.

"Fight? Don't be ridiculous, it just the TV. Oh wow, this is one of my favourite movies and I think the food really is here. Give my love to Anya and tell Giles we got here safely." There was the sound of a chair being smashed. "I'll call you later." Xander hung up over the vehement protestations of the girls.

Two more demons had joined the fray having latched onto Spike's arms and refusing to let go. The first demon, Mr. Bottle-in-the-Face punched the entrapped vampire a nasty rabbit punch to the kidneys. Xander grabbed the nearest object at hand, which happened to be a woman's parasol and launched himself onto the back of the demon who was punching Spike.

Spike watched proudly as Harris hooked himself like a limpet to the back of the demon, flailing about right and left with the parasol. He looked like a deranged jockey. This allowed Spike to shake off one of the demons holding his arms and claw the other one across the face. It howled and backhanded the vampire over the bar.

Meanwhile the demon Xander was riding managed to finally get a hold on Xander's shirt and was busy tossing him over his shoulder and out the front window.

Xander felt himself flying through the air and thinking ruefully that this happened entirely too often. He hit the ground with a bounce and a roll, coming to rest winded and bruised against what felt like a pretty sturdy tree trunk. He reached up to pull himself to his feet. Hmmm, this was a very odd tree. He looked up and found a very large demon staring back down at him. It looked a great deal like Rolf except that it's markings were lighter.

"Hey, how you doing?" Xander smiled weakly. The demon merely raised an eyebrow, reached down and with one hand easily lifted Xander to his feet. Xander staggered a bit and found himself surrounded by three such demons and, oh thank goodness, Rolf!

"Rolf, you're here. Thank God. They're trying to take Spike away." Xander pointed wildly towards the bar.

"Promise?" asked the big demon mildly.

"What?" asked a flustered Xander.

"Just kidding." Rolf patted the distraught young man consolingly. Xander made as if to re-enter the bar but Rolf held his arm and silently shook his head. He indicated that they should just wait.

They heard cursing, spitting, a couple more howls and then a group of worse for wear demons exited the bar holding a tied and struggling Spike who was busy insulting their mothers. They stopped when faced with the calmly waiting Rolf and clan. Xander prepared himself for another fight, gripping his parasol tightly.

The lead demon looked the group over warily. "What do you want Rolf? This isn't any of your affair just some business for Big Mike."

"I heard that Mike wanted to have a word with William." Rolf gave the vampire a dry look. "But that's not going to

happen tonight so why don't you just untie him and be on your way." Rolf motioned politely.

"But why do you care?" burst out one of the other demons, the one Spike had clawed. He had picked up Xander's hat, which had fallen off during the fight, and was now wearing it perched above his horns.

"He's family." Rolf looked like he just tasted something particularly unpleasant for a moment but then he gave Big Mike's group a strained smile over sharp teeth. "Now untie him and go away."

The other demons with Rolf all took a menacing step forward and Xander glowered fiercely. Big Mike's group, deciding that retreat was the better part of valour yanked the ropes off the now grinning vampire.

Spike made a great show of stretching and generally being obnoxious. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke in his former captives' faces.

Rolf rolled his eyes, "William are you finished?"

Quicker than Xander could track, Spike punched the demon wearing Xander's hat in the solar plexus and

snatched the hat off its head. He handed the now rather battered straw hat to the young man. Xander gave him a big grin.

"Now I'm finished," Spike said virtuously.

Rolf sighed, "Get your things. Nualla's holding dinner for you."

Xander scampered inside and grabbed his duffel bag, gave the forlorn bartender an apologetic look and returned outside.

"Nice move mate, you gave them a run for their money." Spike complimented Xander proudly. "Sorry about the hat."

"Hey that's okay. Now it looks lived in." Xander smiled brightly as they followed Rolf into the jungle.

"They ruined my shirt though," he said fingering the torn material.

"Every cloud has a silver lining, hey pet?" Spike teased, Xander glowered and then they both burst into laughter.

Rolf just closed his eyes and sighed.

Part Twelve

"I've been waiting for you to call, how did it go? Uh huh. So the romantic dinner worked out fine? Wonderful, Maurice I can't thank you and Yvette enough. Now don't forget, if you can possibly manage it we'd love to see you at the party."

Nualla listened to the reply and laughed, "Cross my heart, I wouldn't dream of matchmaking; besides you and Yvette are perfect for each other. My love to you both."

Nualla juggled the baby and her dinner preparations and the little glowing orb that was serving as a phone tonight, all the time keeping her ears open for Rolf's return. He wouldn't be very happy if he caught her meddling in William's love life but darn it, William and Xander were

perfect for each other! William needed to have someone to look after and pet; preferably someone sane with a good sense of humour because living with William required someone with wit and a great deal of patience.

She was sure that Xander was the person for Will. He was smart and funny and brave and she could just tell that he needed someone who would dote on him. William would certainly do that for someone he loved.

"Besides, he's cute and doesn't let Daddy William get away with everything," she said as she rubbed noses with the baby. Her little girl giggled appreciatively in agreement.

Nualla waved the orb away and frowned thoughtfully. She hoped Rolf had arrived and picked the boys up without any trouble. She'd had to beg, plead and pout to get Rolf to go to the village. He'd grumbled and grouched but eventually he'd given in and taken a few of his cousins with him. She'd heard him mutter about family always causing the most trouble as he stomped out the door.

"Daddy's a big old growly bear but he won't let anything happen to Daddy William, not if he considers him family.

At least, he won't let anything happen to him here." She amended as she continued her conversation with her child.

She cocked her head to the side and then made a cheery face at the baby. "Sounds like both your daddy's are here and Uncle Xander too."

She breathed a sigh of relief. She'd been a bit worried about Big Mike and the word he'd put out about wanting William 'alive'. Big Mike was known for holding grudges and losing an appendage was a pretty big grudge. Well, he really shouldn't have tried to touch the baby when she was still an egg. He'd threatened to scramble her. William would have killed him normally but Rolf forbade killing in the village and so Mike had only lost a paw. She grimaced to herself and gave a slight shudder. William had been every inch a Master Vampire when he'd punished Mike. She'd almost felt sorry for him, almost.

She looked up with a big smile as the men returned. She sighed; they'd obviously been in a fight. William was looking cocky, Xander flushed, and Rolf long-suffering. They all gathered around in greeting and she found herself hugged and kissed and the baby taken from her hands and tickled and petted. Everyone was talking at

once and there were too many males in her kitchen, knocking things over and insulting each other, mostly good-naturedly, and trying to steal food and she just smiled, she was so happy to have her family back safe and sound.

Spike raised an eyebrow at the happy sprite and glanced about at the controlled chaos. The two of them shared a look of understanding. He winked at her and then winked at a scowling Rolf as well before taking the baby in one arm and Xander in the other and heading toward the living room.

"C'mon mate, let's get you a decent shirt; one that doesn't glow in the dark. Disgraceful, showing up looking like that," the blonde made a disapproving noise. "Kids these days."

Xander huffed loudly protesting that it wasn't his fault, which caused the baby to giggle. Spike gave her a mock look of horror. "You're just encouraging him you know?"

He laughed as she blew a bubble at him. "Same room as before luv?" he called over his shoulder.

"Oh, yes, but with all the guests, you and Xander are

"Are you trying to tell me that all of you couldn't take out one lousy vamp and his human pet?" Big Mike roared as he slammed the table.

"Rolf showed up boss. He's claiming him as family and you know what that means. We can't touch him as long as he's in the village."

"Then lure him outside the village, idiots! I don't care how you do it but I want that little leech in front of me on his knees, got it!" Mike snarled.

He was not a happy crime boss. He hadn't expected Rolf to actually claim the vampire as family. He knew Rolf didn't like Spike and disapproved of vampires in general. Nualla must still be mighty fond of the blonde if Rolf did that. Well, maybe he could do a little favor for the demon chief. Rolf probably wouldn't be too concerned if something were to happen to Spike outside of the village. He could claim that it was outside his jurisdiction; even Nualla couldn't argue with that.

He had a sudden thought and gave one of those hissing guffaws which raised the hackles of all those listening.

"You say he was mighty fond of that little pet he had with

him?"

His henchmen nodded timidly. "Well that's the answer then, lure the pet and the Master will follow." He snorted, "The kid can't be all that smart, he's with a vampire; should be a piece of cake."

He leaned back, his pupils gleaming as he contemplated the capture of his enemy. He looked up at the still waiting henchmen, "Well, go!" They all scattered, happy to still be able to move of their own volition.

"Yeah, a piece of cake." Big Mike chuckled to himself.

Part Thirteen

"Thanks so much for embarrassing me back there, Fang," Xander groused as he followed the vampire to the bedroom. Spike ignored the complaining with practiced ease and continued rapidly switching from gameface and back again, much to the baby's delight.

Xander heaved a sigh that quickly turned into a crow of delight. "Dibs on the hammock," he cried.

Spike raised an eyebrow and shared a look with his daughter before remarking dryly in a bad American accent, "Darn it! I wanted dibs on the hammock."

The baby gave him what could only be described as a suspicious look that Spike returned with one of his rare genuine smiles.

Xander tried to think of a snarky comeback but he was too caught up in the way Spike's eyes crinkled up at the corners as he grinned at his daughter. *Wow, he's really good looking, movie star good looking,* thought Xander. *And this is yet another deeply disturbing notion brought to you courtesy of Xander's wayward brain.* He gave himself a quick mental shake and dived at the hammock. Unfortunately he overshot the centre and the tricky device ended up dumping him on the floor where he landed in an ungainly heap.

He caught his breath and stared up at a smirking vampire and interested baby. He gave them both a good-natured grin.

"What's going on in there?" Nualla called down the hall.

"Nothing," the two men answered in unison. There was moment's silence followed by, "Fine, we're ready to sit down to dinner."

"Be right there luv," Spike called before reaching down one handed and lifting Xander to his feet.

"Best get cleaned up mate," Spike informed the brunette. He rummaged around in Xander's duffle bag, ignoring the huff of indignation from the young man. He pulled out a somewhat subdued bowling shirt in red. It actually had 'Xander' embroidered above the pocket. Spike gave Xander a look.

"Yeah, fine, I bowl all right and I'm not ashamed to admit it." Xander snatched the shirt from the blonde's hand.

"You got the whole kit then?" Spike asked mildly.

"Yeah, so?" Xander's chin went up.

"I've never seen it." Spike continued calmly.

"Well, it was in the closet," Xander's eyes shifted slightly.

"Not your closet, I ought to know. I'm always going through your stuff." Spike ignored the "Hey!" from the brunette. The vampire contemplated the baby in his arms before continuing thoughtfully, "That means, you kept it somewhere else; Red's place most likely. I can't believe you two managed to keep it secret. I wager even Anya don't know. Am I right?"

"Not a word, not one word to anybody." Xander shook his finger at the vampire. "I mean it Spike!" Xander stared at the shirt in his arms despairingly. He hadn't even noticed Anya packing it and she hadn't paid any attention to it, never knew what it meant to him because he never told her. *And that pretty much sums up our relationship: the blind leading the clueless.*

"So you on a team then?" Spike bounced the baby gently, frowning slightly as Xander continued to stand there staring at the shirt in his hands, making no move to change.

"Not anymore and yes Willow has my stuff and yes, I'm pretty good and no Anya didn't know and I don't want you telling her." Xander said sternly.

"It's just bowling mate. It's not like you're a closet figure skater like the Slayer and are you going to get changed or what?" Spike growled. *Bloody Hell, you'd think they were discussing state secrets not possible blackmail material.*

"Fine, I'll get changed. I'll be out in a minute." Xander gestured impatiently to the door when Spike didn't move. "I'm not getting changed in front of the baby, Spike."

The vampire calmly turned the baby to his shoulder and smirked. Xander gave a passable imitation of a vampire's growl and ripped off the torn shirt. He quickly pulled the undershirt over his head and pulled on the new shirt all the while accompanied by teasing comments like "Take it all off baby!" from the vampire.

Xander wanted to think that the flush he felt was caused by anger at the annoying bleached menace. He definitely wanted to think that because any other thought was just too wiggy.

Xander slipped into the bathroom across the hall and quickly washed up and then took the baby while Spike got cleaned up. They both arrived in the dining room to

find Nualla, Rolf and his cousins already seated. They swiftly took their places after handing the baby to Rolf.

"These are my cousins, Lars and Olaf. I would have introduced you earlier but you were both otherwise engaged." Rolf gave Spike a razor-sharp smile, which the vampire returned.

"And this is William the Bloody of the Line of Aurelius and Alexander Harris of Sunnydale." Rolf finished the introductions. Both demons nodded formally to Spike who nodded coolly in return before turning to Xander.

Xander stood and stuck out his hand, "You can just call me Xander." Lars reached out hesitantly and engulfed the human's hand with his own. Xander shook the massive appendage briskly. "How do you do." He said brightly before turning to Olaf and repeating the greeting.

Spike stared down at his plate, trying desperately not to burst out laughing. The two demons looked gob-smocked after being introduced to Xander Harris, All American Guy. He looked up to catch Nualla's eyes on him. She winked before handing Rolf a bowl of vegetables to be passed around the table.

"So pet, the party's day after tomorrow, right?" Spike asked.

"Do you need us to do anything Nualla?" Xander asked blithely disregarding Spike's scowl at the offer.

"Well, there's some supplies coming in on the boat tomorrow, you could help Rolf pick those up." Nualla answered studiously ignoring Rolf's glower.

"Sure, no problem," Xander smiled at her.

Spike frowned to himself. He didn't like the thought of his friend going off by himself. He wasn't sure that Rolf was going to take the proper care where Xander was concerned. There was a trick to Xander-care that Spike wasn't sure the demon could manage but if he voiced his concerns here, in front of everyone, it would sound odd. After all it wasn't like the human was his mate or consort. He wasn't even a pet. He was a friend, but that relationship didn't exist between humans and vampires as far as the demon community was concerned.

Actually, now that Spike thought about it, how as he going to explain Xander to the party guests? He was one

of the baby's fathers and Nualla's first husband. Rolf had, surprisingly, acknowledged him as family; that meant he had a certain status to maintain and he was still a Master Vampire, chip or no chip. He mentally groaned to himself, *Spike, old boy, you've got to start thinking things through.*

He sighed, *Oh well, why start now?* he thought before shrugging his shoulders as he listened to Xander asking numerous questions about the jungle and nodding wide-eyed at the answers.

The rest of the meal passed amicably. Lars and Olaf seemed to take a shine to the animated young man. Spike noted the interest and made a valiant effort not to show any indication of possessiveness and would have succeeded if Nualla hadn't been watching for any such signs. She smiled to herself as she and Rolf retired for the night. William would end up making a formal declaration before his visit was through, of that she had no doubt.

Spike lay on his bed listening to the nighttime sounds of the jungle; the squeak of just caught prey, the prowling nocturnal hunters, the sounds of the river in the distance and the soft creak of hammock as Xander gently rocked to and fro.

For his part Xander stared out the window through the gauze of the mosquito netting draped over his bed. He could smell the rich loam of the jungle. Although there was no breathing coming from the occupant of the bed next to him, he could sense the vampire's presence and found it comforting.

"Hey Spike? You want to hear a joke?" Xander whispered.

The vampire raised an unseen eyebrow before answering. "Is it dirty?"

"No," Xander said patiently.

"Yeah, all right," Spike propped his arms behind his head as Xander began.

"So this mushroom waddles into a bar and climbs up on a barstool. He says, 'Hey barkeep, I'll have a beer.' Well, the bartender just looks at him and then shrugs and figures what the heck and gives him a beer. Well the mushroom sits there chatting with the bartender, the waitress, and the people around him. He orders a round for the house and starts telling a few jokes and

everybody just loves the guy. The bartender's thinking, 'I'm glad I decided to serve this little mushroom.'" He's so much fun that the bartender asks him if he'll come back the next night and the mushroom says 'Sure,' before finishing his beer and heading home.

He comes in the next night and the same thing happens, he entertains the whole bar and the bartender's business is great, everyone happy and ordering drinks and the mushroom telling jokes and being amusing. At the end of the evening the mushroom gets ready to leave again and the bartender says 'Hey, I gotta ask you, where did you learn to play to a room like that? You're a born entertainer.'

The mushroom just laughs and says, 'What can I tell you, I'm just a fungi.'

Xander didn't even see the vampire move. One minute he was laying peacefully in his hammock and the next he was being unmercifully tickled.

"That was the worst bloody joke I've heard." Spike didn't seem hampered by the netting, which Xander found very unfair as he tried unsuccessfully to defend himself.

"No it's not! I love that joke! Willow told it to me when we were six. It's the only one I can actually remember." Xander gasped and batted at the vampire's hands.

Spike stopped his torture of the human and leaned over the panting brunette. Xander felt his breath catch in his throat because he was now on the receiving end of one of the vampire's rare genuine smiles. "Why am I not surprised?" Spike stared down into deep brown eyes.

" 'Cause you know us so well?" Xander said in a hushed voice caught by deep blue eyes.

"Yeah, that must be it," Spike murmured before capturing the human's lips with his own.

Part Fourteen

Spike heard Xander's breath hitch as he continued the kiss, running his tongue along the softening lips, gently seeking access. With a faint sigh of surrender, Xander

Rolf rolled over heavily and glared at the bedroom door. "Some of us have work to do tomorrow. Some of us aren't nocturnal predators!"

Nualla patted him gently on the arm and made the same soft soothing noises she made for the baby. "Shhh, sweetheart. I'm sure they'll settle down soon."

"You see what comes of meddling? Now we're going to have to listen to their sexual escapades for the rest of their stay." Rolf punched his pillow and tried to get comfortable again.

Nualla cocked her head to the side, listening carefully. Her husband stared at her, scandalized. "Nualla! What are you doing"?

"I don't think they're having sex, honey. I mean, it's awfully quiet and there's no growling or anything." She wrinkled her nose in thought, "Of course, Xander's human and they don't growl and he does strike me as being shy."

Rolf clapped his hands over his wife's ears. "Stop listening for sounds of sex from our guest's room."

"What, I can't hear you, someone has their hands over my ears." She grinned sweetly at the outraged male above her.

He grumbled, taking his hands away and then making a great show of trying to rearrange his covers. Once that was done he determinedly closed his eyes trying to banish thoughts of blonde vampires having sex down the hall: of blonde vampires having sex with his wife. He snarled.

Nualla waited until he was settled before launching herself onto his chest and tickling him until he opened his eyes and scowled at her. She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"I can think of lots of ways to get your mind off what's going on down the hall."

He gave her a slow grin, "Oh yeah?"

"Uh huh," she whispered. "Let me show you."

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Both men recovered at about the same time with Spike being pragmatic as he carefully rubbed his bruised parts. "Well, I suppose it's just as well that I've already fathered a child."

Xander coughed in agreement. He hated getting the wind knocked out of him although at least the fall had served the purpose of knocking some sense into his head. He and Spike had been making out. Spike kissed him and he kissed back. They kissed each other and it was pleasant. Well actually, more than pleasant, pretty great, but still, just kissing. There's no law that says you have to make a complete lifestyle change based on kissing. Xander nodded to himself calmly as he considered the past, he glanced at his watch, wow, only five minutes.

Spike watched Xander nodding to himself and thought, "So, he's in denial then. Well, I'll put a stop to that."

"If we hadn't tipped over I was gonna try and shag you, you know?" Spike smirked half on his way to being angry.

Xander turned to the leering vampire with the same calm look in his eyes and smiled, "Well I have it on good authority that I'm a very shaggable guy Spike."

Spike frowned suspiciously at the serene response. "I was well on my way to seducing you; another minute and I would have had you, too."

Xander cocked his finger at the vampire and pointed, "You the man."

"Bloody Hell, aren't you going to try to deny it!" Spike burst out. "You aren't going to tell me how you're not gay and the kiss didn't mean anything or that you're at least confused by what just happened"?

Xander held his chin, seemingly deep in thought for a moment before turning to the vampire. "No."

"What does that mean?" Spike asked, completely thrown by this strangely tranquil young man sitting next to him.

"No, I'm not going to deny it. We were definitely kissing." He raised his right hand in oath, "I can vouch for that. As for being gay, well, I don't think I am gay. I think the word is bi-sexual considering that I like sex with women and we haven't technically had sex yet so I don't know if I'd like it with you or not."

Spike opened his mouth to protest but Xander forestalled him with a raised hand. "Don't even bother telling me how good you are okay?" Spike gave him a 'you don't know what you're missing' look but shrugged.

"As for the meaning of the kiss, hmmm, well that's a toughie. I'm not confused, perhaps bemused would be the correct wording?" Xander gave the blonde a long look. "How about you? How do you feel about what just happened?"

Spike blinked, "You just used the word bemused correctly in a sentence."

Xander gently whapped the vampire across the back of the head, "Focus, I'm trying to have an adult conversation here." Xander said in disgust.

"I just, why are you being so calm?" Spike asked. "I expected tears, recriminations, accusations, the usual."

Xander patted the vampire's knee sympathetically, "Man, and I thought my track record with relationships was bad. Look, I used to date Cordelia Chase. I used to hide in broom closets making out with a woman who wouldn't acknowledge me in public. I asked an ex-demon to marry

me and I'm not even going into the women who tried to kill me as a method of courtship, so being attracted to a good looking guy is a little disturbing but I'm a grown up, I'll deal." Xander threw up his hands in acceptance.

Spike stared at the young man with new found respect and scooted a little closer. He gestured to his bed, "So any chance we could just pick up where we left off then?"

"Ah, no. I think I've reached my limit of adulthood tonight; give me a little time to decide whether or not I want to ease into the deep end of the pool so to speak." Xander gave the hopeful vampire an entreating look.

Spike grumbled, "Yeah, all right then." He was sure this was just a polite way of telling him to sod off. He stood and felt a slight tug on his hand. He looked down into pleading eyes.

"Spike, I damned near screwed up a great friendship once by trying to become lovers. Willow and I had to really work at staying friends after that whole 'Spike kidnaps us' incident." He and Spike shared a wry smile before Xander again grew serious. "I don't want to take the chance on screwing up another friendship by trying

to make something fit where it won't, understand?"

Spike nodded mutely, swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat. Xander wanted to keep Spike around. He didn't want to risk losing Spike and Spike most definitely did not want to risk losing Xander. He gave the worried human a bright smile. Xander returned it with a relieved smile of his own. The blonde tugged him up and they went about righting the hammock and putting the bed back together.

They heard a loud thump followed by giggling, which was quickly muffled. Spike glared at the door slightly scandalized. "And with guests right down the hall too!" Xander just rolled his eyes at the vampire.

Spike thumped his pillow, got settled in and listened to Xander's breath getting slower.

"Night Spike," Xander murmured.

"Night Xan." Spike turned his head, keeping watch and patiently waiting until his friend was asleep before dozing off.

Part Fifteen

Xander awoke slowly, first one eye then the other. He blinked once, twice and yawned widely. He turned his head to squint out the bedroom window, not that there was much to see through the mosquito netting and overhanging foliage that heavily shaded the room. His head rolled slowly in the other direction. Spike had burrowed into the bed covers and all that could be seen of the vampire were several tufts of white blonde hair sticking above the blanket.

Xander smiled softly, *Aww, he's so cute when he's sleeping*, he thought. *Actually, he's pretty darn cute even when he's not*, Xander gave a silent sigh; *And that's the problem. I think Spike is cute. Kissing Spike turned me on. I like Spike. I am insane.* Xander nodded to himself, his stomach paying no attention to his internal dialogue, growled for attention. Xander glared at his middle, *Pipe down, you. No one asked for your opinion.* His stomach only growled louder in reply.

"Oh for God's sake go get something to eat! There are people trying to sleep here!" The Spike shaped lump on the bed growled before burrowing deeper into the covers. Xander raised an eyebrow and yawned loudly and theatrically.

He rolled out of his hammock, slipping into his jeans before snagging a fresh shirt and underwear. He walked across the hall to get cleaned up and found fresh towels, instructions on how to use the environmentally friendly shower and a small green lizard eyeing him curiously from its perch on the wall. Xander kept a wary eye on the animal (because you just never know when something may morph into a huge scaly demon) while he showered and shaved.

Feeling much refreshed he slipped back into the bedroom to snag his sandals, hat and rucksack, stopping on the way out to ask whether Spike was absolutely sure he didn't want to get up and help run errands; a two fingered salute was his reply.

Xander whistled an off key tune on his way to the dining room. Rolf and the baby were already seated when he arrived. The big demon was sipping a really large cup of

coffee and studying a list while keeping one eye on his daughter. The baby was happily making a mess with something that looked like mashed banana. Xander wasn't sure how much of the food was actually making it to her mouth but she seemed in high spirits. Nualla bade him a cheery good morning and slipped another large cup of sweetened coffee in front of him along with a basket of various fruits and bread. Rolf nodded a greeting and went back to checking his list. The baby slapped her hands down and gurgled at him appreciatively.

Xander pulled out his camera. "Do you guys mind?"

"No of course not, as long as we get copies," Nualla beamed. Rolf grunted in agreement.

"There are four angry females at home that can't believe Spike didn't have any baby pictures." Xander started snapping shots. The baby seemed to realize what was happening and giggled engagingly for the camera. "We can't go home without them."

Rolf laughed, "So, William has four females to answer to, perhaps there is some justice after all." Nualla swatted him in mock outrage. He merely gave her a slow grin in response. Nualla flushed a bit at the look and asked

Xander, rather breathlessly, if he'd like anything else for breakfast.

Xander, recognizing the looks passing between the couple and remembering the noises from last night, hid a smile and just shook his head and continued taking pictures of baby.

You are a natural ham, baby girl. I can see Spike in you for sure. Xander thought, snapping another shot. The baby just batted her lashes and cooed.

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It was decided that Xander would accompany Rolf down to the docks to help unload party supplies. They would stop by the cantina on the way so that Xander could call home and reassure Willow that he was indeed safe and still in one piece and to pick up Rolf's other cousin, Sven. Xander was just dying to ask the demon why everyone in his family seemed to have Viking names but didn't want to be insulting or end up pounded into human goo. He all ready knew that Spike was not one of Rolf's favourite people so he wasn't sure how Rolf viewed him. Since meeting him again, Rolf had treated him with a sort of

amused politeness that made Xander rather uncomfortable, like the demon knew a secret that concerned him.

Xander squirmed mentally; maybe Rolf had picked up on the fact that Xander liked Spike. Xander felt his cheeks heat up, was he that obvious? He didn't think so but he'd never been very good at hiding his feelings when he was interested in someone. Well, except for Cordelia, he managed to hide that from everyone, including himself.

Darn, if Rolf had figured it out, that meant Nualla had too and boy, was this going to add a whole new and exciting complication to his attempts to work out his relationship with Spike. "Well Xander old pal, you always wanted a family that showed some interest; be careful what you wish for," he thought with a rueful smile.

Rolf glanced behind him at the subdued young human. The boy had a half serious look on his face. Rolf sighed. He supposed the human was engaged in some form of soul searching after the events of last night. If Nualla was right, then William hadn't claimed the human yet, perhaps that's why he seemed so introspective or maybe the human was just now thinking through the implications of being mated to a vampire. Perhaps he

should say something reassuring? Rolf frowned, no he was not going to get involved, besides, the boy should think this mating through carefully, mixed marriages were difficult at best and from what he learned in Sunnydale, the Slayer considered this human family.

William was insane, wanting to be family bound to a Slayer. Why it was unheard of for a vampire. It was a good thing the line of Aurelius was either dead, cursed or insane otherwise there would be Hell to pay. Of course now that he'd claimed William as family that meant he could also end up being family bound to a Slayer. Being able to claim a Slayer and Guardian of a Hellmouth as family by marriage might come in handy someday; Rolf narrowed his eyes thoughtfully; perhaps he **could** say something to reassure the boy.

"Vampire's rarely eat their consorts," He said heartily, slapping the young man on the back gently. He gave a self-satisfied smile, well, that should make the human feel better.

Xander stared nonplussed at the smiling demon. What, where, what? Rolf nodded encouragingly then returned to leading the way to the village.

Xander started trying to trace the events of the last few minutes to figure out where in the heck that non-sequiter came from before just shaking his head and giving up. At least this answered his question; yes Rolf did indeed think there was something going on between Spike and Xander. Xander suddenly brightened considerably; Rolf had said consort, which meant he must have picked something up from Spike too and now the vampire's family was taking an interest. Of course the kissing and petting last night had let Xander know that Spike was attracted to him, but consort made the whole thing more respectable and homey.

Xander blanched, homey? Respectable? No, no, they were friends who just might, in future, have sex, maybe, if Xander didn't have a coronary thinking about it first. Spike wasn't courting and he wasn't waiting around for Spike to make an honest man out of him. They weren't even dating for gosh sakes! He wasn't getting rushed into another marriage, not this time. This time he was going to take things slowly.

Xander winced, now see this was the down side to having an interested family: unasked for advice, talk of consorts; it was like be swarmed by a whole pack of resolved and concerned Willows. Xander gave a delicate shudder.

Xander was so caught up in his thoughts, he didn't even notice when they entered the village square and Rolf came to a halt in front of the cantina. Xander pulled himself up short and just avoided bumping into the big demon's back. Admonishing himself to pay attention, Xander found his hand being engulfed by a large paw. Sven, the other cousin from last night, gave him a toothy smile and growled something completely unintelligible at him.

"Right back at ya, big guy," Xander smiled trying to discreetly free his hand before the friendly demon dislocated his shoulder. Sven, oblivious, continued to pump Xander's hand, babbling away until Rolf gently rescued Xander's appendage.

"Go make your phone call. The boat should be here soon. We'll meet you down by the dock." Rolf gestured to the river.

Xander nodded and gave them a cheery wave before heading into the cantina. He didn't notice the small rat faced demon that slipped out the back door upon spying him entering the bar.

Rolf watched the young man depart and then exchanged a look with Sven whose good-natured grin was replaced by a feral smile and a low-throated growl. Rolf growled in return. Sven bowed briefly to his Chieftain before turning and swiftly disappearing into the jungle.

Rolf watched him leave, glanced once more at the cantina and then made his way to the docks.

Xander checked his watch, quickly calculated the time difference and dialled the Magic Shop. This time he got Giles on the phone. The Watcher was relieved, to say the least. He'd apparently received a distraught phone call from the girls last night and had just managed to talk Willow out of flying down to Brazil to 'fetch the boys home' as she'd put it.

Xander tried the loud TV excuse. Giles told him not to insult his intelligence so Xander went with the truth. Oddly enough or maybe not, Giles had pretty much figured out what had occurred and didn't seem all that surprised or scandalized.

"You mean you don't want me to come home right now?" Xander asked hesitantly after finishing his description of the previous evening's excitement,

without the bedroom scene of course.

"No, why should I? You're a grown man. I would of course be much happier if there were no more bar brawls and attempted kidnappings by irate demon gangsters but you are among friends and you have a good head on your shoulders, when you choose to use it." Giles said calmly, trying desperately not to panic and demand that Xander come home right this minute. He would have known he'd made the correct decision if he could see the beatific smile that lit Xander's face in response to the his declarations.

Giles thought he was a grown man, with a good head on his shoulders. Xander stood a little straighter and taller.

"Thanks Giles and, just, thanks. You'll tell the girls I called and let them know everything's fine? Also, tell them I have two disposable camera's worth of baby pictures so far. That may help when you talk to them." Xander asked.

"Yes, of course I will and Xander, you will take care won't you? And if you do need help?"

"I'll call, don't worry. Give everyone my love and I'll try

and call after the party, let you guys know how it went." Xander smiled and bade the Watcher good-bye before hanging up the phone. "Well all right," he couldn't stop grinning. It was definitely going to be a good day.

He walked outside, smiling at two very pretty young women who were busy cleaning the cantina's outside tables.

"Good morning ladies," Xander tipped his hat respectfully. The girls giggled appreciatively and whispered to each other. Xander puffed his chest out just a tad.

He spotted Rolf down by the docks but was distracted by a sudden flutter of color. An incredibly large parrot flew past him before settling on a low roof. Xander carefully pulled out his camera and moved slowly towards the bird as it preened. Just as he was about to snap his shot, the bird flew off to land, this time, on a small shed.

Xander followed it again, trying to line up his shot and again the parrot flew just a little further towards the edge of the village finally landing on a vine outside the village boundaries.

Xander growled, "Look bird, I'm not chasing you all over creation. Do you want your picture taken or not?" The parrot gave a low caw, which Xander took to mean yes. He lined up his shot one more time. He raised the camera and felt a sudden sharp stinging on the side of his neck.

He slapped his hand to his neck and stared in confusion at the tiny, feathered needle that now lay in the palm of his hand.

"Well Hell," he thought disgustedly before passing out face down on the ground.

Part Sixteen

Spike tried to go back to sleep after Xander left the room. He tossed and turned, trying not to listen to the conversation coming from the dining room. He finally heard Rolf and Xander leave.

"Well good, now I can bloody well get some rest," he muttered to himself, grouchily. However, now he started worrying about what trouble Xander might be getting into without Spike there to look after him. Rolf was thick

as a post and besides, he didn't know Xander like Spike did; the kid was a walking magnet for trouble. You couldn't take your eyes off of him for a second.

The vampire rolled over, punching his pillow angrily, "Right, and who's gonna be the one staked right and proper if something happens to him? Me that's who," he grumbled.

It was in this frame of mind that he welcomed the soft knock on the door and two smiling females who didn't wait to be invited inside.

"Morning Will. Could you be love and watch her for me while I clean up the kitchen?" Nualla asked while setting the baby next to him on the bed.

"It's the bloody middle of the morning. Besides that, I'm a guest!" Spike feigned outrage although he was secretly pleased that something had come along to take his mind off of worrying about Harris.

Nualla just laughed, "Don't be silly honey, you're not a guest, you're family."

She gave him a quick kiss and slipped out the door with a

"Thanks."

The baby sat on the bed looking at her father expectantly. Spike narrowed his eyes and mock growled. His daughter gave a gurgling laugh before falling over and attempting to make a break for it. Spike grabbed her and set her upright again. The baby decided this was a wonderful game and it kept her occupied for all of five minutes before she spied a bug crawling across the blanket and tried to capture and eat it.

She was not pleased when daddy took it away from her, tossing it out the window. The sunny smile she usually wore fled her face and her lower lip began to tremble.

Spike eyed his daughter with trepidation. He watched in horror as her eyes grew moist and her pretty little face scrunched up in a fair imitation of a game-face, before she let loose with a truly impressive howl.

"Cor!" he exclaimed. The baby continued to cry. Neither of her daddies had ever denied her anything. She was hurt.

This was a thousand times worse than one of the Little Bit's tantrums. In desperation, Spike grabbed his duster

from the floor and starting going through the pockets, looking for something, anything to appease his child. He found a head from one of Dru's old dolls. She'd decapitated Miss Anne when they'd been playing Henry the Eighth.

He stared at it bemusedly for a second (he really did need to clean out the pockets of this coat) before offering the item to the weeping baby like a supplicant to his angry god.

She stopped crying abruptly, staring at the object, cocking her head to one side before breaking into a cheery smile and cooing delightedly at the vampire.

Spike let out a sigh of relief. He managed to slip into his jeans while still under the blankets before standing and quickly pulling on his t-shirt. The baby was busy shaking the doll's head by its hair and laughing when the eyes blinked at her.

Spike scooped the child up in his arms determined to go in search of Nualla. He looked into his daughter's pleased eyes and a reluctant smile tugged at his lips.

"You're evil, you know that don't you?" Spike

complimented the baby. She wrinkled her nose at him in appreciation.

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Xander woke disoriented, with a mouth full of dead leaves and a tingling sensation in his arms and legs. He tried to move but all he could manage was a rapid blinking motion of his eyelids. Okay this was bad. It felt like his whole body was asleep.

All of a sudden he was unceremoniously rolled over onto his back. He blinked again, able only to stare straight up to the forest canopy before that view was obscured by the faces of two of the demons from the previous evening and a rat faced little demon, dressed in a rumpled white linen suit and Panama hat, who looked vaguely familiar.

He noted that the large parrot he'd been chasing was sitting on one of the demon's shoulders. Xander glowered at the bird, which returned the look with a malicious one of his own. The two demons grasped his arms, hauling him upright and then nearly dropping him again as Xander swung dizzily forward. *Weebles wobble*

but they don't fall down, he thought somewhat hysterically.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum, as he'd come to think of the two demons, cursed and steadied him before taking a firmer hold.

"He's heavy. Mike ought a be paying us by the pound." Tweedledee cursed. "Here hold up your end or he'll tip over again."

"Why don't you shut up?" Tweedledum snarled.

"Both of you shut it. Now hurry it up before Rolf figures out he's missing." Panama hat snapped.

"He won't care. We're outside the village. He'd thank us if he knew." Tweedledee gave a hissing laugh that was echoed by his parrot.

"What makes you think he doesn't?" Xander heard a low voice growl. It didn't sound like Rolf but it did sound like 'help'.

"Sven, hey, where did you come from?" Panama Hat asked in an ingratiating tone.

"Don't bother Ernie, just put the human down and go away." Sven answered in a deep voice.

Although he couldn't move, inside Xander was nodding his head in vigorous agreement. *Yeah, put the human down*, he thought.

"We're outside the village. Rolf doesn't have any say here." Tweedledee hissed in a menacing voice. The sentiment was echoed by his parrot, which gave an evil cackle and flew across Xander's field of vision in the direction of Sven's voice.

The parrot's cackle was abruptly cut off and Ernie gave a gasp. Xander could just manage to see Tweedledee's face. He looked shocked.

"Tasty." Sven mumbled. It sounded like he was talking with a mouth full of marbles.

What is going on? Do I want to know? Naw, probably not, Xander mused rather calmly.

"Now, put the boy down. Don't make me come over there." Sven admonished in a much clearer voice.

"Yeah okay Sven, there's no need to get excited." Ernie could be heard saying in a soothing tone. "Put the kid down boys."

"But, my parrot?" Tweedledee whined.

"Forget the damn parrot! Drop him!" Tweedledum cried, dropping Xander's arm like it was hot. Tweedledee followed suit and Xander waxed philosophical as he watched the ground come up to meet him for the second time that morning.

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Spike found Nualla on her hands and knees, moping up the floor. Spike admired the view for a moment before Nualla sat up and gave him an arch look over her shoulder.

"Quit looking at my posterior, William. If Rolf catches you, I'm not cleaning up the mess," she scolded gently.

"No law against looking luv." Spike gave an unconcerned laugh and shifted the baby to his other shoulder.

She raised her eyebrows, "You lasted almost fifteen minutes as a babysitter. I'm impressed."

"Did you hear that noise she was making? Enough to wake the dead or the undead; like to deafen me. I've got sensitive ears luv." Spike patted his ears gently and gave her a cheeky grin.

"She does manage to make her displeasure known," Nualla agreed finishing up her cleaning. "If you can hold out for another ten minutes or so I'll fix you a nice cup of coffee after I put her down for her nap."

Spike folded himself with natural grace into one of the kitchen chairs. "I'm a Master Vampire. I think I can handle it."

Nualla bit her lip to keep from laughing out loud and nodded in agreement.

"So, get a good night's sleep?" she asked innocently.

"Better than yours, I'll bet." Spike said dryly.

She blushed delicately and wrinkled her nose at him in a

perfect imitation of their daughter.

"I hope Xander slept well," she continued fishing.

"I expect so." Spike returned calmly.

She gave a little huff of annoyance. "He seems like a very nice young man."

"Yeah, can't imagine why he's hanging out with me."
Spike agreed seriously, hiding a smile.

"Do you like him?" Nualla asked in exasperation.

"Must, haven't eaten him yet." Spike answered then laughed out loud at the irritated look on his wife's face.
"He's all right, for a human."

Nualla stopped all pretence of cleaning the floor. "Just all right?"

"He's human luv. You know what they're like." Spike shrugged.

"I thought..."

"Yeah, I know what you thought. 'I hope you don't mind sharing a room.' I wasn't born yesterday pet. Look he's just a friend, nothing more." Spike said blithely.

Nualla frowned, "So I should just mind my own business and there's nothing going on, is that what you're saying?" She took the baby out of his hands.

"Women, you're all hopeless romantics, doesn't matter how old you are or what species." Spike gave a disgusted snort. "I'm not saying I wouldn't mind shagging the lad, don't get me wrong, but women got to read all sorts of love nonsense in just wanting to have sex."

Spike shook his finger at the sprite. "Detachment, that's the key to a good shag, all these soft, silly feelings just get in the way."

"Really," Nualla said sardonically, "What a fascinating approach to relationships you have William."

Spike opened his mouth to return a snappy reply when there was a sudden commotion on the steps and Rolf burst in followed by one of his cousins who was carrying a limp Xander.

"What the hell happened? What did you do to my pet?" Spike demanded as he jumped up to meet Sven's approach and check on his mate. "You've broken him!" Spike turned accusing eyes on Rolf.

"I didn't do anything to him. It was your shady past that caught up to him. Ernie and two of your friends from last night were trying to kidnap him. They drugged him but it's wearing off," a disgruntled Rolf snapped at the vampire.

"Spike! Hey pal, how ya doing?" Xander asked brightly, staring at the vampire upside down from his position in Sven's arms. "Did you know you were up side down?"

Xander giggled and Sven set him carefully on his feet. Xander promptly slid down the demon's legs to a seated position on the floor.

"That first step's a doozy eh?" Xander nodded sagely. "I feel very small all of a sudden." Xander peered at the sea of legs surrounding him. He looked up at Spike and gave a boyish grin.

"Hey Spike, guess what? I think I may be just a bit stoned." He tapped the side of his nose and attempted a

wink at the blonde. Spike just stared and then went back to glaring at Rolf.

Rolf glared back and Nualla sighed before crouching down in front of the human. "Xander, are you feeling sick at all?"

"Nope, no siree, no ma'am, I am not." Xander tried to answer seriously before breaking into another sunny grin. The baby giggled at him and Xander giggled back. They had achieved parity.

Nualla patted his knee consolingly, "I'm going to make you some tea to drink. It'll make you sleepy but I think that's the best thing for you right now." She stood briskly.

"All right, everyone out of my kitchen unless you're serving some necessary function like Sven."

"No way, I'm not leaving my mate. What if something horrible happens? I obviously can't trust this blighter to look after him." He gestured angrily at Rolf. "That's the last time I let you take my mate anywhere." Spike raged.

"Let me? Since when do you 'let me' do anything?"

Besides, he's a grown man; he can do what he pleases. He doesn't need your permission." Rolf snapped back. "Anyway, he's safer with me than you. They were your enemies that were after him, probably in retaliation for your last visit. Why, if I hadn't set Sven to keeping an eye on him, he'd be in Big Mike's hands right now."

"Thanks Sven," Xander patted the big demon's knee before gesturing the demon to come closer. Sven sighed and bent down to the human. He certainly was an amusing little fellow, not at all what he thought William's new consort would be like though.

"Spike doesn't mean it, for a vampire, he's a real sweetie." Xander apologized for the angry vampire.

Sven patted the young man and nodded.

"Excuse me, take the discussion out of my kitchen. Actually no, just end the discussion." Nualla snapped. "Rolf, you know what Mike would have done to the baby if William hadn't been there so it's not really William's fault that a psychopath is angry with him, now is it? And William, Rolf did look after Xander. He's back here, in one piece and if you will all just get out of my kitchen I can make him some tea and he'll feel much better, all right?"

Nualla gestured to the living room.

Both men grumbled but acquiesced to the irritated sprite. Spike gave one last agonized look at the human sitting on the floor. Xander caught the blonde's eyes on him and gave a cheery wave, which Spike returned half-heartedly.

"Detachment my eye." Nualla muttered under her breath as she mixed the ingredients for the tea.

"He's cute isn't he?" Xander looked up at Nualla and Sven. "Do you think he's cute?" Xander continued without waiting for a reply, "I think he's cute."

Nualla smiled and shook her head, and the party wasn't until tomorrow. "My life is just too exciting," she told the interested baby. The baby patted her cheek consolingly.

Spike and Rolf sat in stony silence in the living room while Nualla made the tea. They could hear Xander humming to himself and exchanging baby talk with their daughter.

"Did Xander know Sven was watching out for him?" Spike asked finally.

"No, I didn't think he'd be too happy if he knew he had a shadow." Rolf answered stiffly.

"Probably not." Spike reluctantly agreed. He took a deep breath and grimaced sourly, "Good idea, having Sven watch him. Thanks." It was said through gritted somewhat sharp teeth.

"You're welcome." Rolf said gruffly, relaxing his hostile posture a bit. "Your human is very - different." Rolf finished somewhat awkwardly.

Spike smiled, "Yeah, different, very." The two demons exchanged a look and relaxed a little more.

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"Pretty," thought Xander, waking up slowly to the soft strumming of a guitar. The tune sounded slightly Spanish; a little old fashioned and slow, a ballad maybe. He kept his eyes closed for a bit as he listened. He opened his eyes, turning his head to see Spike sitting cross-legged on the bed next to him, gently picking out the chords on the rather battered guitar in his lap.

Spike stopped and looked up. Xander met his eyes and smiled.

"Don't stop. I liked it." Xander coaxed.

"Can't really play, just messing about. Didn't mean to wake you. Nualla said you'd sleep the rest of the night. How you feeling, mate?" Spike asked hesitantly.

Xander frowned, poor Spike, he looked almost guilty. At least Xander thought he looked guilty. He'd never seen the emotion on the vampire's face before so he couldn't be sure.

"I'll probably fall back to sleep very soon. You didn't wake me and I'm feeling surprisingly good for having been used as a human pin cushion." Xander gave a half smile.

"Yeah, well sorry about that. Didn't think Ernie or Mike would go after you." Spike didn't meet his eyes or return his smile. He just shrugged.

Xander tapped the vampire on the knee to get his attention. "They didn't get me though did they? Good thing too, boy would they have been sorry." Xander

nodded and gave a lousy imitation of a vampire's growl.

Spike gave a reluctant laugh. "You're an idiot Harris."

"Yeah, I know but that's why we get on so well. We have so much in common." Xander teased. Spike growled.

"Play more?" Xander gave the blonde his best puppy dog eyes. Spike shook his head in mock disgust but resumed his strumming. Xander smiled contentedly and dosed to the soft tune.

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"You missed him again!" Mike was in a towering rage. Tweedledee didn't even bother to answer, still in mourning for his parrot and telling anyone that would listen that "Sven just ate him. What kind of person does that?"

Ernie rolled his eyes and tried to calm his boss down.

"Look, what do you want? Rolf obviously takes this whole family thing seriously. He's given the kid a shadow and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's got someone watching the leech as well. We can't get at them while they're in

the village. Rolf's not letting them out of his sight."

Mike's eyes glowed a deep red. "I don't care about Rolf. I want my revenge and I'll get it, no matter what I have to do or who I have to go through."

Ernie stared at his boss. Mike was really losing it. That lousy vamp; Ernie wouldn't mind taking him down either but you just didn't go up against Rolf and his clan, not and expect to keep breathing.

Mike's face suddenly cleared and a truly vicious smile spread over his features. Ernie shuddered; oh this didn't look good.

"Fetch the book." Mike ignored the gasps of horror this pronouncement raised.

"No boss, come on, the bloodsucker's not worth it." Ernie pleaded.

Mike pointed imperiously and Ernie hung his head and with dragging steps opened an ornately carved wooden chest. He withdrew a very old grimoire, etched with dark and powerful symbols. He shivered at the icy coldness the book's touch invoked. He swallowed heavily and set

the book in front of Big Mike.

"It's time to raise the stakes." Mike intoned then cackled, "Stakes boys, get it." He laughed evilly; the boys joined in uneasily and Ernie contemplated taking his vacation early this year.

Part Seventeen

Spike woke up warm and relaxed. Xander was cuddled around him using the vampire's shoulder for a pillow. Spike smiled slightly, he hadn't woken up wrapped in a live human for over a century. Spike blinked then grimaced; he'd also missed the pleasure of being drooled on as well. He mentally shrugged, oh well it was worth it.

He carefully slipped out from under the human, who grumbled sleepily about being moved. He stared blearily at the blonde for a moment before falling back to sleep. Spike just shook his head. He'd definitely lost his 'threat factor' with Harris. Spike couldn't help feeling just a bit

dejected.

He could feel a bout of broodiness coming on; he hated brooding, getting all melancholy and introspective. He blamed these bouts on Dru and Angel and the whole damned line of Aurelius. How many other vampires got the blues? Even the Master had been known to wander around the caves, dressed in white and quoting bad poetry. It was bloody embarrassing when it happened and demons and vamps of other lines had called him Ophelia behind his back. Spike sighed, the fights he, Dru and Angelus had gotten into over the snickers caused by that little peccadillo. Why even Darla joined in to defend the 'family' honour. The other demons had soon learned not to mess with them. That's how they'd really gotten the name Scourge of Europe, although no one felt the need to correct the Watcher's Council when they'd come to their own conclusions.

He sighed again, walking slowly towards the kitchen. Perhaps he'd heat up some blood and watch the sunrise and contemplate this apparently deep attraction he had for Harris. With his luck it would probably end up being a fatal one, getting him killed in some humiliating manner. He could see it now, Xander turning to offer him some mu shu pork, tripping on the rug and impaling Spike with

a chopstick.

Spike desultorily stirred some honey into his blood. He quietly opened the front door and folded himself into the porch swing breathing in the pre dawn air. He closed his eyes and listened to all the various day creatures beginning to stir. The sun wouldn't reach him through the trees but he could watch the sky change colours with the approaching sunrise.

He had no one to blame but himself. He always got too attached to people, demon-people, human-people it didn't matter. He was one of those creatures that functioned best when part of a couple. He did not do well on his own, he never had. What scared him this time though was that for the first time the person he wanted to be attached to a) wasn't insane, b) wasn't stupid, c) wasn't born to kill his kind and d) actually seemed to like him, enough in fact, that he might be willing to scout bisexual territory in order to be with him. For the first time in his life, someone was willing to make some adjustments in order to be with him instead of expecting him to make all the changes.

Spike sipped his blood slowly; this was serious. That entire devil may care attitude he'd tried to pull on Nualla

last night had quickly been shown up as the rot it was when he'd seen Xander in Sven's arms. She was going to say 'I told you so'. He rolled his eyes, all right; he deserved it so that was okay but now what to do about Xander? What if Xander decided that he didn't want to take a walk on the 'wild side'? What if he did? What if Xander thought it over and just wanted to be friends, what was he going to do?

Spike unconsciously started biting his lips, a left over habit from his human days. He could tie him up, although that hadn't worked so well with Buffy and he was sure it wouldn't work with Harris either. He could try courting him? Spike gave a disgusted snort, yeah right, he could just imagine the look on the human's face accompanied by "Hey Blondie, the bleach finally melt your brain?" He'd never hear the end of it.

Hey, maybe he could just claim him, Master Vampire style? Spike brightened for a moment before sighing dejectedly. If he tried that, all he'd see of Xander would be his dust as he took off running for the hills. Besides, human consorts never lived very long. Their vampire's always ended up turning them or getting too zealous in their love play and bleeding the poor creatures to death. Spike didn't want that.

He didn't want a vampire version of Xander. Xander very much belonged in the sunlight. That was one of the things that Spike enjoyed about his friend, the life he brought to their relationship. He liked seeing Xander after he'd been out all day. He liked smelling the sunlight and fresh air that the human brought with him; Xander smelled of Life and Spike liked that, a lot. Besides, Xander was just plain fun to be around and if one thing could be said about vampires or their consorts, it would be that they were not fun people. Although Spike liked to think that he was different.

He glanced up, noting the slight greenish tinge to the sky that came before the dawn. He felt the shivers running up and down his spine increase, an ancient warning to find shelter from the coming daylight. Spike ignored them out of long practice. Dawn held little fear for him anymore. After all that he'd been through a lot in his un-life, a little of the old ultraviolet just didn't cut it anymore especially compared to this latest wrinkle.

Well, speak of the Devil. He watched Xander shuffle out of the kitchen half awake, carrying a very large cup of coffee. He plopped, far less gracefully than Spike had, on to the porch swing. Spike watched him yawn deeply and

loudly before smacking his lips and taking a healthy sip of coffee. "I must have it bad, that actually struck me as cute," Spike thought moodily.

Xander wrinkled his nose at the glum countenance of the blonde. "So what are we brooding about?"

"Nothing, not brooding." Spike answered shortly.

Xander nodded his head before asking, "So what are we not brooding about?"

"Nothing I told you," Spike snapped.

Xander raised both eyebrows. "Okaaaay. But if you're not brooding, why are you drinking blood with honey in it? That's like the Spike equivalent of comfort food."

This time it was Spike's turn to raise his eyebrows to which Xander only shrugged, "I saw the honey out on the kitchen counter." He didn't mention that he could see that Spike had been biting his lips as well, something he also only did when brooding.

"It's my daughter's Naming Day today. I'm just feeling a

little nostalgic is all. I'm allowed." Spike answered, surprised to find that this was partially true. *Great, on top of everything else, I'm feeling old. Hey, maybe this whole thing with Harris is like some sort of male menopause and if I wait long enough, it'll just go away?* Spike thought before catching the understanding smile on the human's face as he contemplated the vampire. Spike returned the smile half-heartedly. *Oh well, nice try Spike.*

"I can see that, Dad." Xander punched the blonde's arm lightly. Spike growled warningly. "I was worried you might be out here brooding about our relationship or lack thereof." Xander took another sip of his coffee, watching the sky turn pink.

Spike felt his heart drop before shrugging one shoulder nonchalantly. "So, you decided you don't feel like flying Air Spike eh? Your loss, mate."

Xander turned and gave the stoic vampire an exasperated look before addressing himself to the lightening sky, "Will wonders never cease Lord? I've found someone with even lower self-esteem than myself. Is it a sign?" He rolled his head to stare at the stunned blonde. "I may have mentioned this to you before. You're

an idiot."

"Oi!" Spike tried not to hope. He tried very hard, that emotion never worked out well for him.

"I'm assuming you didn't hear me telling anyone who would listen last night, that I thought you were cute?" Spike shook his head 'no' carefully.

Xander shrugged and threw up his hands. "What can I say? I was drugged, it must be true."

"Well it is, but what does that mean exactly." Spike asked while holding his breath, metaphorically speaking.

"Well, it means that we apparently agree that you're cute." Xander rolled his eyes at this. "And coupled with the fact that I like kissing you makes me think that we could try moving this, whatever it is, to the next logical step." Xander finished and then looked at the vampire expectantly.

"Great, that's bloody great!" Spike broke into a big smile that Xander returned. Spike was fairly bouncing in his seat. "So, great."

Xander laughed, "Yeah, you said that. So, what's next?"

Spike blinked, "Ah, well what do you think? Do you want to just go for it?"

Xander winced, opened his mouth to speak, closed it then tried again. "Strangely enough, no, I don't want to just 'go for it'. How about we try something a little more intermediate?"

Spike nodded, "Yeah all right, what?"

Xander stared at the vampire nonplussed. "What do you mean what? Don't you know? What did you do the other times?"

Now it was Spike's turn to stare. "Other times?"

"The other times you pursued a man for something other than food." Xander trailed off, getting that uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach that always let him know that weirdness was headed his way. "Oh God, you've never done this before have you?"

Spike looked uncomfortable, "Well, I guess, if you want to get technical about it..."

Xander nodded vigorously.

"Well, then the answer would have to be no." Spike squirmed just a bit.

Xander closed his eyes briefly and took a deep cleansing breath. "Okay, just to make sure there are no wacky misunderstandings going on, by no, you mean you've never had sex with a human male, correct?" Xander smiled encouragingly and a little desperately at Spike.

Xander groaned inwardly as Spike started to bite his lips again. "You've never had sex with a male anything, have you?"

"Well, how hard can it be mate?" Spike smiled bravely before giving up and sighing. "Never wanted to with any other bloke."

Xander reached over and took one of the vampire's hands in his own. Spike watched Xander entwine their fingers before looking up and meeting the human's gaze. Xander felt his breath catch in his throat. The blonde looked very young and Xander realized Spike probably hadn't been much more than his age when he'd been

turned.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Xander's lips twitched. Spike returned the look with a wry smile.

"Are we cursed or what?" Xander asked with a laugh.

"I think the answer to that's pretty obvious pet." Spike shook his head in mock despair.

Xander reached out a leg to the porch railing and gave the swing a gentle push, moving close enough to Spike to brush shoulders. Spike met him half way as they sat in quiet companionship, watching the rest of the sunrise.

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The two men sat side-by-side watching the sky until Spike sensed that the sun had fully risen above the unseen horizon. As much as he enjoyed sitting here with Xander he knew that the household would soon be stirring.

Xander perceiving that their quiet time was over rolled his shoulders, working out the kinks. He gave his friend

an inquiring look.

Spike felt the human's eyes on him and braced himself.

"So, if you've never slept with or had sex with another man, what was all that 'I almost had you, do you want to shag business the other night?'" Xander asked innocently.

"Well, demon here mate, we've got a reputation to protect you know; anytime, anywhere." Spike brazened.

"So you just figured your boundless enthusiasm would carry you through?" Xander didn't look convinced.

"Don't forget my good looks," Spike smirked.

"Oh yeah, those. Look pal, when we get back home we're hitting the gay book store and doing some reading." Xander blushed a bit but stayed adamant. Spike looked shocked.

"I'm not reading up on how to have sex. I'm over a hundred years old mate." Spike thinned his lips and got a mulish look in his eyes. "Not gonna do it." He folded his arms.

"Yes, you are, because I'm not going into this alone."
Xander said stubbornly.

"But why do I have to go? Can't you just pick up what you think we need?" Spike's voice started to take on a whiney tone.

"No, you have to come because in case I pass out from embarrassment someone else needs to finish the mission. Besides, nothing says committed to a relationship like mutual humiliation." Xander narrowed his eyes at the blonde.

"You sure you and Anya never" Spike asked hopefully.

Xander glared at the blonde, "No, what about you and Dru or Angel?" he finished with an arch look.

"Angel, ewww!" Spike's face twisted in disgust and he gave an exaggerated shudder. "No, sides all he ever wanted to do was take Dru away from me and as for Dru, well," he gestured vaguely, "You know."

Xander patted his hand sympathetically. "Hey, maybe we should join a group too?"

"Absolutely not. We are not telling anyone that we've never done it." Spike looked horrified. "Besides, what group would that be - The Gay Demons and Their Human Partners Support Group?" Spike sneered.

"All I'm saying is research is of the good. It's saved our asses more than once." Xander reasoned. "And in this case I definitely want my ass saved and I'd think you would too." Xander said fervently then blushed furiously at the smirk the vampire gave him before retaliating with, "Or your ass, depending on how things develop." Spike blanched slightly, although it was hard to tell.

Spike rallied though, "So does that mean we don't get to do anything until we get home?" His shoulders slumped a little and he kicked at the porch.

Xander watched Spike's lower lip come out slightly and gulped. Please don't pout at me, please don't pout at me, please don't pout, oh damn. Spike's lip finished its journey to end up in the dreaded pout.

Xander sighed in defeat, cast a quick look around and then leaned forward and caught that lower lip between his teeth. Spike gave a slight gasp and Xander slipped his

tongue inside, settling into the kiss.

For his part, Spike was dividing his attention between the tongue playing in his mouth and the feel of unshaven male chin rubbing against his cheeks. He decided it was different but pleasant. He felt his fangs elongate slightly, felt a slight hesitation from the human and then groaned as Xander delicately explored the teeth with his tongue.

Spike arched up suddenly, pressing himself hard against the taller man. Xander responded by snaking his arm around the blonde and pulling him even closer. Xander, only mildly coherent, registered the fact that he'd hit a hot spot for the vampire. "Must remember teeth trigger Spike," he thought. Xander felt one of Spike's hands wandering southward towards his bottom and tried to adjust to give him better access. He was biting and nibbling and licking at the blonde like a starving man which wasn't doing much for Spike's coordination or Xander's for that matter.

Spike was responding with little growls and groans as he tried to do a fair imitation of an octopus. One hand had reached Xander's ass and the other had reached its goal at the front of Xander's shorts when they were interrupted by a loud "Excuse me."

The boys froze. Xander desperately took a quick inventory of where his hands were, what they were touching and whether he would be able to stand up without embarrassing himself.

Spike mentally slapped his head, so much for keen predator senses. He carefully slipped his hand out of Xander's shorts, eliciting a groan and shudder from the young man as he did so. He felt Xander untangled himself and try to sit up. He let Xander pull him along as they righted themselves.

Xander was bright red and Spike didn't feel much better especially when they both looked up and into the eyes of a tall, spare very proper female version of Rolf. Xander gulped and Spike, being Spike, tried to brazen it out. Xander closed his eyes briefly in mortification. The vampire looked positively debauched; lips swollen, hair standing on end and whisker burned cheeks.

The demoness looked both men over carefully before raising one eyebrow in an uncanny imitation of Spike. She addressed Xander, "Young man perhaps you'd consider doing me the service of closing your pants while we are conversing." Xander's eyes widened, he dropped

his head and gave an unmanly squeak before quickly retying his shorts while simultaneously trying to shoot Spike a dirty look. Spike's snicker was cut off by the simple expedient of Xander's elbow in his side.

"Excuse me ma'am. I'm very sorry. I'm Alexander Harris. I'm Spike's, well I'm here with Spike." Xander stood, stumbling only slightly, to offer his hand to the older demon. She looked askance at the appendage.

"I think not young man, considering where it's been just lately." She gave a thin smile. Xander cringed, feeling about ten inches tall. Spike, sensing the human's distress gave a low growl, which Xander quickly tried to shush.

The demoness was unfazed. "You must be William."

"Yeah, that's right and who the ..." Spike scowled at the pleading look he caught on Harris' face. "Right, and who might you be?"

The demoness smiled thinly having caught the exchange. "Why, I'm the baby's great-grandmother Freya, but you may call me Ma'am." She turned to Xander and softened slightly, "You may call me Mother Freya." Xander blinked but gripped Spike's hand very hard when the vampire

started to retort. Again she gave a small smile before gathering her skirts and sweeping up the porch steps like a ship under full sail.

"Gentlemen, my bags if you please." She gestured over her shoulder as she made her entrance.

"And if we don't," Spike muttered rebelliously, reluctantly letting Xander drag him upright.

"Don't mutter young man, it's unbecoming," came floating out of the house.

"I've got this one you take that one," Xander hefted a small steamer trunk. "I haven't been this embarrassed in years and that's saying a lot. I can't believe you got my pants undone that fast." Xander was shaking his head half in disgust and half in wonder.

"Supernatural creature here mate, besides, I had to do something to defend myself after you attacked me and all." Spike leered at the bewildered and disgruntled human. He felt the last of his broodiness leave him as he listened to Xander complain.

"Yeah, fine blame it on the human. We'll see how you

feel if I don't 'attack' you any time in the near future. That'll show you. Of course I'll be punishing myself as well but I can cut off my nose to spite my face as well as the next guy," he grumbled as he lugged the trunk into the house swiftly silencing his complaints upon encountering Rolf, Nualla and Freya engaged in a quiet discussion that abruptly ended as he and Spike entered the room. "Oh God, we are so busted," he groaned to himself.

"Thank you gentlemen. You may set them down in that room," she pointed to the bedroom next to Spike and Xander's room. Spike shot Rolf a nasty glare that the demon returned with an innocent look.

"Oh, you've already met Will and Xander." Nualla smiled a little nervously especially after getting a good look at Spike.

"Yes, we had a chat on the porch when I arrived. It was quite enlightening, one might almost say, intimate." She gave a wolfish grin. Spike felt his lips twitch in reluctant admiration and he gave Xander a slight nudge and a wink.

"Yeah, we're all boon companions now." Spike laughed at

Nualla's perplexed look and Rolf's glower. *Sharp old bird, got a real demon's sense of humour*, he thought to himself, *pity Rolf didn't inherit it.*

Xander wisely kept his silence and pondered the odd ways of demon kind. If this was a sample of what would be at the party tonight, he was in way over his head.

Part Eighteen

It was a somewhat subdued group that sat down to breakfast. Spike was still sulking about Freya being put in the bedroom next door, Xander was still embarrassed about being caught making out, Nualla was nervous about the party and Rolf was just plain quiet. Freya kept one eye on the group with a half-smile on her face as she spoke softly to the baby who seemed fascinated with her great-grandmother.

Nualla caught her husband's eye; he gave her an encouraging wink that she returned with a half-hearted

smile before taking a deep calming breath. *Take the bull by the horns Nualla, my girl*, she thought.

"If might have everyone's attention please? Thank you. I have a schedule here for today's activities. I felt that it would be helpful if everything were organized." She passed the papers on to Xander who took one before passing it on.

"You'll note that everyone is responsible for certain areas, um, now you can see that I've assigned numbers and color codes for everyone so there shouldn't be any confusion." She smiled encouragingly.

"Bloody Hell," Spike said softly staring at the schedule. Xander nudged him and he quickly pasted a smile on his face. "Bloody brilliant, just brilliant luv," he said quickly before returning to stare at the bewildering agenda.

Xander raised his hand, "Um so if I understand this then because I'm blue and Spike's red and there's a number two here that means that at "O" nine hundred we should start rearranging the living room furniture, is that it?" Xander was rewarded by a dazzling smile from the worried sprite.

"That's it exactly," she sighed in relief and Xander looked pleased. Spike nudged him gently, "Nice one pet."

"Well, any other questions? Good, good. If you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to be ill." Nualla swiftly left the table. Rolf gave a half shrug and followed his wife.

Freya stood and Xander quickly leapt to his feet while Spike followed more slowly. She picked up the baby and gave the two men a stern look.

"Gentlemen, baby and I shall freshen up and will see you later." She turned to leave, seemed to hesitate then turned back fixing Spike with a look, "William, you need to make some decisions," she glanced at a confused looking Xander, "there will be questions and speculations. Never forget, you are a member of this family, my family, now and a Master Vampire of the Line of Aurielus." She gave a regal nod and made a brisk exit.

"I could get to like that old bird," Spike smiled fondly before turning to Xander with an unreadable expression on his face.

Xander stared back. "You've got that look on your face," he said nervously.

"What look might that be mate," Spike asked calmly.

"The, 'I'm a really old vampire and you need to do what I say' look." Xander shot back.

"You mean the look you Scoobies never pay attention to, that look?" Spike said dryly.

Xander gave him a big grin, "Yup, that's the one."

Spike stepped forward and caught both of Xander's hands in his. "Just this once, humour me, all right mate? There's gonna be a lot of folk at this party tonight. For a bash like this Rolf and Nualla would have had to invite people that well, aren't their type, if you know what I mean. You be careful, keep your eyes open." Xander nodded solemnly. Spike looked like he wanted to say more but then just shrugged. "Better get dressed and start keeping to the schedule, something tells me Nualla might be a bit tense today."

Xander rolled his eyes, "You think?"

"Nice one, figuring out the schedule so fast." Spike looked impressed.

"Hey, friend of Willow here," he raised his right hand.

"Still," Spike said. "I guess I'm not the only one who's not just another pretty face," he grinned cheekily.

"Please, I just ate," Xander sneered. Spike stuck his tongue out and Xander just laughed.

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It had taken the better part of the day. They'd only fallen off schedule once when a table leg had broken. Nualla looked like she was going to start weeping but Xander rounded some tools up from the village and with Spike's help had gotten the table fixed. Actually Spike had stood well back handing him tools and refusing to get any closer to Xander and a broken wooden table leg.

Now Xander was desperately trying to get his tie straight and worrying that his clothes weren't formal enough for the occasion. Nualla had told him that he could spend the evening standing with them around the baby but Xander was determined to circulate. Besides, Spike hadn't mentioned anything about Xander standing next

to him maybe because it would give him a certain status in the demon community that he didn't warrant.

He hissed in exasperation and started over on his tie.

"Why do you always rush into relationships even when you don't want to rush into relationships Xander? I'll tell you why, because you figure you have to get in there and get what you can before the other person wakes up and figures out who they're actually spending time with, that's why." He stared at himself in the mirror. The tie was as straight as he could get it. His hair was combed, his face washed. He wished he could have remained unshaven. It made him look older, now he just looked like a twenty-year-old kid in his Sunday best. He turned and gave a yell. Spike was standing behind him.

"Dammit Blondie, what have I told you about that, make a noise or something," Xander grouched, shutting up when he got a good look at the blonde. Spike was dressed in a white silk shirt and black leather pants. His boots were shined and the duster gleamed like new. He'd left his hair ungelled for once and it curled around his face. Xander noted that it was much longer than he thought. Xander swallowed hard and felt even younger than he did before.

"Wow, I didn't even know you owned something white," Xander blurted out the first thing that came into his head and as usually happened, wanted to smack himself for it.

Spike just gave him the 'look' and stepped forward to adjust the human's tie before brushing his lips swiftly and softly over the brunette's own. Xander blinked and feeling more relaxed gave the vampire a grin.

"Ready pet?" Spike asked.

"Ready," Xander gave him the thumbs up sign.

Spike straightened and whirled with a flourish, duster flapping artfully.

"How does he do that?" Xander muttered "There's no wind in the room, must be a vampire thing."

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The soldier set his binoculars down and spoke into the radio. "That's right, another boatload of demons just arrived. I don't recognize their type either."

She felt as if her smile was pasted on at this point. She would be so happy when this was all over. She glanced at her husbands. Rolf and William had been standing guard by the baby all night. They made a formidable pair. Rolf was dressed in partial armour and had his ceremonial sword strapped across his back. William looked every inch a Master Vampire, arrogant and aloof. He wasn't in full game-face but his eyes had remained golden all night, his teeth partially elongated.

Freya was making the rounds, stopping to chat or drop a comment. Nualla sighed; she wished she could be that poised. The truth was, she hated crowds. Sprites were solitary creatures. They liked peace and quiet and this was very far from that. Her gaze found the only other person in the room who looked as uncomfortable as she felt. Xander was standing in the corner, nursing a glass of punch and looking very out of place.

Sven and the other cousins had chatted to him earlier but everyone else was giving him a wide berth. A few of the younger demons had cast looks in his direction but their natural curiosity was curtailed by the older demons present. He cast a rather sad look William's way but if the vampire caught it he gave no sign. Nualla frowned; she didn't understand why William didn't just go over to

Xander and claim him. Rolf was right, she didn't understand the relationship and she shouldn't have meddled. She gave a sigh of relief as she saw Freya head in the boy's direction.

"Xander, are you enjoying the party?" Freya asked politely.

"It's very nice. Good cake." Xander held his barely eaten cake up for inspection.

She smiled thinly, "Come, take a walk with me." She held out her hand ignoring the sudden whispers from the room at her gesture.

Xander offered his arm gallantly and they exited to the patio where she gave a quick look around before pulling out a long cigarette holder and carefully attached a hand rolled cigarello. She handed Xander a lighter and he gave her a grin as he lit it for her.

She took a deep pull and sighed giving the human a small smile. "You mustn't be upset with William," she stated.

Xander blinked and shook his head. "I'm not."

She glanced at him and gave a tiny shrug. "I would be if I were in your place."

"He's not ignoring me, he's just busy. No big deal. It's not like we're attached at the hip or anything, just friends," Xander stated valiantly trying to ignore the flashbacks he'd been having all evening of his brief relationship with Cordelia. He knew it wasn't the same but Freya was right, he couldn't help being a little bit upset. Spike had been ignoring him most of the evening and it hurt.

"Really, 'just friends' have gotten much friendlier than in my day but perhaps I'm a little old fashioned."

"Look, I'm really sorry that you caught us making out on the porch but that didn't mean anything. Well, it did mean something; it's just that we haven't figured out what yet. It's complicated." Xander gestured as he spoke needing to defend the blonde and trying to make sense out of his own feelings at the same time.

"Ah, I see. You do know that most vampire/human relationships aren't complicated at all. Either the human is a consort or a pet or a meal. That lot in there is having trouble because they don't know where you fit and William isn't giving them any clue. I suspect, because as

you said, it's complicated." She turned to Xander and smiled almost kindly, "It's up to you to help William out by making it uncomplicated."

"You mean just decide whether I'm going to be a consort or a pet?" Xander asked sarcastically.

"No, by being what you are first and foremost; his friend. He can't come to you but you can go to him. William's lost a great deal of his status lately due to his affiliations, but I believe that what's perceived as a weakness by others is actually his greatest strength - his feelings. He's been staying away from you all evening because he doesn't want to claim you as a consort or a pet. Help him to think outside the box." Freya took another long pull of the cigarillo.

Xander looked at her for a long moment, "You sure? I don't want to embarrass him."

"Nothing in life is sure but William is a demon and if you want to have a relationship with him you have to make a place for yourself in his world just as he is making a place for himself in yours. And as for embarrassing him, well, I should think it would be the other way around."

Xander gave her his first genuine smile of the evening,
"You're all right you know that?"

"Why yes, I believe I do." She waved him towards the house.

Spike saw Xander re-enter the living room. He hated this; he'd watched his friend being snubbed all evening. Nualla had introduced him as William's friend but most of those present thought it was a polite euphemism for 'pet' and demons did not associate with human pets. Even seeing Rolf's cousins talking to him hadn't been enough to break the ice. Everyone knew Rolf's family were sticklers for politeness. He'd wanted to go over and talk to Harris, joke with him about that old biddy in the corner with the atrocious hat or that bloke who'd been nipping out of a flask all evening but he couldn't. What could he say, Xander wasn't a pet but he wasn't a consort. He had no claiming mark and despite spending most of his un-life flaunting the lore and rules, he didn't want to embarrass Rolf or his family. So he just remained, stoically guarding the baby and feeling constrained and edgy and miserable and right on the edge of just saying to hell with it and grabbing Xander and going into the village and getting a couple of beers and playing some pool. He'd been very pleased when Freya had taken Xander outside. He'd also

noted the stir it caused - uptight old guard.

He watched stunned as Xander grabbed some more cake and another glass of punch and hopped up on the table next to Spike. He'd waved at Rolf who inclined his head briefly and then given the vampire a wink.

"I haven't been to a society do like this since, well, never." He leaned in conspiratorially, "Are they always this dull," he whispered.

Spike blinked, felt his eyes shift back to blue, noted the shocked looks they were getting from the room at large, noted the completely un-shocked looks they were getting from Rolf and his family and answered, "Always."

He and Xander shared the waggled eyebrow look and suddenly all the angst of the past two hours just seemed silly. Spike heard Sid Vicious in his head singing 'My Way' and gave a laugh. Xander returned it, relieved. Spike took his hand and turned to the face the assembly, who were staring with various looks of rapt fascination and horror at the pair.

"Hey you lot, listen up. In case you weren't introduced to him earlier, this is Xander Harris. He's my friend and if we

can manage it he's going to be boyfriend. Any questions?" He was greeted with stunned silence. "Right then, whose up for a good game of Spin the Bottle?"

Spike gave a snort at the looks of outrage and turned to Xander and didn't hesitate at all as he gave the young man a sweet kiss. He tried to deepen it but Xander slapped him lightly on the ass.

Spike hopped up on the table next to Xander and took a healthy bite of cake. Xander glanced towards the patio doors and watched Freya silently applaud as he gave her the thumbs up sign.

Nualla sat down on the other side of him. "William, life with you is never dull."

"Sorry pet, it had to be done." Spike said unrepentantly.

"Yes it did. At least we got the drama out of the way before the ceremony, speaking of which," she stood up taking Spike's arm, "if I may borrow your boyfriend for a moment."

Spike took a last quick bite of cake as Xander waved him off.

Rolf lifted the baby from her crib and handed her to Nualla. The room grew silent as the guests moved to form a circle around the small family.

Nualla held the baby up who cooed delightedly at being the centre of so much attention.

"I name thee Morgana for protection." She brushed oil across the baby's brow before handing her to Rolf.

"I name thee Hedvig for strength." He touched his dagger tip to the baby's head before handing her to William.

"I name thee Rose for love." He bent down and kissed her forehead before presenting her to the guests. "I present our daughter, Morgana Hedvig Rose."

There was polite clapping but Xander cheered and a few of the younger members of the audience joined in.

Xander stood by the proud parents who were gazing at their child. "So which name do you call her by?" he asked.

Rolf grimaced and looked at Spike questioningly. Spike rocked his daughter gently and answered softly, "Rosie,

while she's young we'll call her Rosie."

Nualla clasped Rolf's arm and raised her eyebrows. He smiled graciously enough and nodded to Xander. "Aye, Rosie it is."

Rosie, unimpressed in the way of babies, simply yawned and fell asleep.

Part Nineteen

Rolf watched the party become more relaxed. He was content. His daughter was sleeping peacefully; his wife was cuddled close to his side and William would be leaving tomorrow.

He smiled ruefully; William and Xander sat enthroned in the corner, holding court. Since William's announcement, he and Xander had become quite the celebrities among the younger set, real rebels without a clue. He gave a half smile, glancing down at Nualla's contented face as she

watched the boys. She glanced up and gave him a happy grin and a quick kiss.

Well, he thought philosophically, I may not be a leather clad bad boy bucking the system and loaded with charisma but I'm doing all right. Right?

As if sensing his thoughts, Nualla hugged him a little tighter and cuddled a little closer as she whispered in his ear. "I can't wait for all these people to leave, can you?"

"I could try throwing them out?" he offered. "If we got William and Xander to leave, that would account for about half of them."

"Oh stop it, you like them you just won't admit it. Besides, now that William's claimed him, he's almost family." Nualla sighed romantically.

He stared at his wife incredulously, "Claimed him? Claimed him as what exactly?" He gestured in confusion, "How am I supposed to introduce him. 'Hello, this is my wife's husband's possible future boyfriend if they can get everything worked out. It's complicated.'" Rolf huffed. "That was not what we would call a claiming in my day. I mean what precisely did all that mean?"

"It meant that they're in love." She bestowed a gentle smile at the two men.

Rolf snorted, "Yeah, love, fine."

Nualla poked him.

Meanwhile, Xander was absolutely basking in the attention he and Spike were receiving from many of the younger demons. Apparently, Spike's non-traditional declaration had marked the pair as revolutionary heroes to the younger set. For the first time in his life, Xander was cool. Okay, he was cool to a crowd of non-humans but cool was cool, as far as he was concerned. He looked over at Spike who was busy teasing two younger females that both reminded him of Dawn, from the giggling to the whispers. The vampire was on in a very big way.

"And then what happened?" one of the girls asked in awe.

"Well, I kicked his arse, pet." Spike sneered artfully.

"Is it true, do you really know the Slayer?" queried a tall, rather thin demon with glasses. He looked a lot like

Wesley.

"Oh, yeah. We're tight." Xander nodded knowingly.

"Is she really as scary as they say? I've heard she can kill you dead, just like that." One of the other girls snapped her fingers and gave a shudder.

Xander hid a smile. Spike was obviously torn between saying Buffy wasn't so tough and yet trying to keep her reputation alive. The last thing they needed was word getting out that the Slayer wasn't as terrifying as everyone here obviously believed.

"Well you know what they say, "there's only one girl in every generation" and it only takes one so, draw your own conclusions." Xander finished in an ominous voice softening the pronouncement with a smile.

Spike gave him a grateful wink and their audience laughed, albeit somewhat nervously.

"You guys are so brave, going against tradition and lore and everything to be together." One of the girls addressed Spike rather dreamily.

"Yeah, imagine calling someone your boyfriend and a human too. My parents won't even let me date within my species." Her friend pouted.

Spike threw his arm across Xander's shoulders, "I've always done things me own way, don't see any reason to change now. After all it's the bleedin twenty-first century ducks, it's not your grandparents Middle Ages anymore."

"Yes, but aren't you worried about what your Sire might say?" The Wesley look alike asked bravely.

"Drusilla leads her life, I lead mine." Spike said decisively. Xander gave a mental wince. "Gosh I hope he's right," he thought.

"But what about Angelus?" asked one of the other's in a hushed voice.

"I ain't afraid of him," Spike scoffed. "How 'bout you pet?"

"We can handle it," Xander backed him up.

Their audience gave a subdued 'ohhh'. Xander laughed to himself, *And the legend of Spike and Xander is born. Oh*

yeah, this is gonna make building a relationship a lot easier, he thought wryly.

The audience gradually broke up as the assorted guests took their leave. Rosie had received a pile of gifts, some of which looked quite disturbing to Xander's mind but the parent's seemed pleased. Nualla had 'ooed' and 'ahhed' over Xander's barrettes and gotten downright teary-eyed over Spike's little handkerchiefs. Spike had given a discomfited grimace when she hugged him and called him a sweet sentimental old thing.

They'd finally made it to their bedroom with only one comment from Freya, about how she'd always been a light sleeper. She and Spike had traded razor sharp smiles and Xander had just blushed.

So now, Xander was lying in his hammock staring at the ceiling and Spike was lying in his bed staring at Xander.

"You're not actually going to sleep over there all night are you?" Spike whined.

"I'm not just going to jump into bed with you. We had this talk remember?" Xander tried reason.

"We slept together last night." Spike tried logic.

"I was unconscious for most of last night," Xander returned. "I just think we need to ease into this okay?"

"We've been making out like rabid weasels," Spike fumed. "How much more of an easing process do you need?"

"Okay, I'll grant you that, although I wouldn't use the phrase 'rabid weasels' but I concede your point. But c'mon Spike, we're both guys here, don't try to use the 'we might as well sleep together we've done everything else' argument. Because I will counter with the "heavy petting doesn't count as real sex' argument," Xander stated emphatically.

"Who says?" Spike sounded outraged. "It does too!"

"Maybe when you were alive but not anymore buddy boy. Sheesh, Victorians." Xander sniffed teasingly.

"Bloody Hell! I won't be able to sleep you know." Spike began in a sulky singsong voice. "I don't know what I can do to relax myself enough to get some rest before the trip back home."

Xander narrowed his eyes, "Don't you dare," he warned.

"I'm just saying I'm very tense and I can think of only one sure way to relieve the tension. Of course if I were to have a warm human to snuggle up with that might be sufficient comfort to allow me to get some much needed rest." Spike finished innocently.

Xander growled as he rolled out of his hammock and stomped over to the bed, flopping down unceremoniously. Spike gave a happy murmur and rolled up close to the rigid human.

"I want you to know I have issues with this. We haven't even officially become a couple." Xander grouched, slowly relaxing in spite of himself.

"Well, we sorta did tonight," Spike breathed happily.

"We still have to tell our friends," Xander relaxed a little more and made himself more comfortable.

"Actually pet, I don't think we need to worry about that," Spike hesitated and Xander could almost see the blonde biting his lip.

"Why not?" Xander asked suspiciously.

"Because if Angel doesn't know all ready, I'm pretty sure he will by morning," Spike said in a rush.

"Oh god." Xander sighed deeply.

"Did I mention I was very fond of you pet?" Spike asked brightly.

Xander grabbed the hand that was wandering south, bringing it back up to his chest and patting it consolingly. "Just keep reminding me Spike, just keep reminding me."

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"Angel Investigations. We help....who? No, there is no one here by that name. Who is this? I will not, look buddy," Cordelia Chase pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it incredulously.

"Who is it Cordelia?" Wesley asked the highly irritated young woman.

"It's someone asking to speak to Angelus," she growled.

"Perhaps I'd better wake him. Put the caller on hold."
Wesley looked troubled.

"With pleasure. Yes I heard you, you'll just have to hold."
Cordy hit the hold button viciously.

Wesley knocked softly on Angel's door. It was best not to startle sleeping demons, even friendly ones.

"Angel, Angel. Someone on the phone is insisting on speaking to Angelus." Wesley spoke softly.

Angel blinked at him, "Huh?"

"You have a phone call," Wesley tried again.

Angel grabbed for the receiver knocking the phone to the floor before speaking into the wrong end. "Hello, hello?"

Wesley reached forward and turned the receiver right side up, Angel just blinked in thanks. "Hello, who is this? Who, yes I know who Spike is? He did what? He claimed a what?" Angel sat up; seemingly more awake as he

listened to the tirade at the other end before his eyes flashed gold as a sign he was losing patience.

"What am I going to do about it? Well I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to mind my own business and I suggest you do the same." He slammed the receiver down.

"Wow," said Cordy from the bedroom door. "Whose business are we not minding?"

Angel ignored the question, instead staring off into space with a look of long suffering patience on his face. "Cordy, please get me some aspirin and Giles' number."

She raised an eyebrow but a quick shake of Wes's head stopped her from pursuing her question. She left the ex-Watcher with a world-weary vampire shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"And if we can manage it he's going to be my boyfriend? What the Hell does that mean?"

Part Twenty

Graham hesitated at the tent opening; Riley was staring at 'her' picture again. He knew it was wrong to speak ill of the dead but was it wrong to think ill of them as well? She'd really done a number on his best friend; Graham almost hadn't gotten him back and at times like these, when he caught the soldier looking at her picture it made him think that maybe all he'd really gotten back was the body not the spirit.

"You going to come in or stand out there all night?" Riley slipped the picture of Buffy back into its place in his bible.

"Just wanted to let you know, the men are ready," Graham shifted uncomfortably.

"We're sure Spike and Xander are leaving?" Riley checked his pistol and gave Graham a sharp look.

"The boat's back and Hooper and Logan radioed in that they spotted Hostile 17 and his hostage down near the docks." Graham shrugged.

Riley stared at his friend, watching him shift uncomfortably from foot to foot. He bit back a smile and waited. Graham had something to say.

"Look I know what you're gonna do and I'm asking you to please not do it." Graham began with forced patience.

"What is it you think I'm going to do Graham?" Riley interrupted serenely.

"You're gonna make sure Hostile 17 never makes it back to base." Graham snapped at the end of his patience with his friend and Captain. "Look, I understand, okay, I really do but you can't afford even the hint of questionable loyalty Ri not after Sunnydale, not after her."

"Buffy, her name was Buffy," he said softly meeting his friend's eyes. Graham felt his anger drained away by the quiet sadness in Riley's eyes. He'd been a soldier long enough to recognize a losing situation when he saw one.

"Why, could you answer me that, why? Why are you gonna risk your entire career for a demon and a dead girl?" Riley gave his oldest and best friend a sympathetic smile. Graham sounded so young.

"You know I never really understood why she wouldn't stake him. For the longest time I didn't get it; so what if he couldn't fight back he was a vampire, she was vampire slayer; it was her job. And it wasn't as if he was some helpless animal crippled by a collar; he was a demon, evil and of no use to anyone so why not just kill him?" Riley opened his bible and smiled down at his picture of Buffy.

"It took me a long time to realize that it wasn't about him, it was about her and who she was and wasn't. She wasn't a killer. She was a protector of everything that couldn't protect itself, human or animal or demon or anything else for that matter. And that protection extended itself to chipped demons with bad attitudes. Do you understand Graham?" Riley gave his friend a hopeful look.

Graham shook his head slowly and sat on the bunk with a sigh. "Yeah, maybe I do, I don't know. Anyway that explains her but what about him? Don't try to tell me he's not a killer because I know better. You said yourself he's a demon and evil, so what about him?" Graham gave his friend a hard eyed stare.

"Yeah, he's evil. He'd be the first to tell you that too and

you're right he's a killer and somebody should probably take him out but it's not going to be me or any of us if I can help it. Because we lost that right when we put a chip in his head; when we experimented on him and all the others. We lost the moral high ground Graham and just became people living in glass houses who shouldn't throw stones. Don't get me wrong, I still believe in good and evil and defending others and myself against the things that go bump in the night but judgments? I can't do that anymore I just try and follow my conscience. So, you want to relieve me of command or what?" Riley looked only mildly interested and that almost re-energized Graham's irritation, almost.

"No, I'm not gonna relieve you of command because we never had this conversation." Graham stood and finger combed his hair. "You know what we're gonna do?" Graham looked at his friend in the mirror. Riley had a half smile on his face but shook his head solemnly enough.

"We're gonna hope that all that crap you were giving me about the divine luck of Xander and Spike is true." Graham said.

"And if it isn't" Riley asked mildly.

"Well, then we're gonna do what soldiers have done for centuries." Graham straightened and met his friend's eyes. "We're gonna make our own." He gave a curt nod, saluted and went outside to double check the troops he picked for the retrieval mission.

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"Okay, one more picture of Rosie and the entire family, say cheese." Xander smiled happily and snapped the last shot on this roll. There was an almost inaudible sigh of relief from Rolf, Nualla and Spike. Rosie, on the other hand, was up and raring to go absolutely basking in all the attention.

Nualla and Rolf had come down to the docks with the boys to wish them farewell. Freya had said her rather dignified good-byes earlier, deigning to let Xander take some pictures of her with her great-granddaughter. Spike had been at his least obnoxious and almost polite in his farewells to the older demoness.

Nualla had tried to persuade them to stay a little longer but Xander only had so much vacation time however he'd invited her and the family to come back to

Sunnydale for a visit. Rolf had said they would consider it.

And so here they were down at the cantina making a phone call to Giles to let him know they were on their way home. Xander was trying to dial, which wasn't easy because Spike was literally leaning over his shoulder trying to pretend he wasn't nervous. Xander had tried to convince him to go outside and sit with Nualla and Rosie but he'd refused. He was sure there was going to be a 'dust up' because Angel was sure to have called Giles and he intended to stay right here by Xander's side and support him.

Xander was torn between thinking that was sweet and wanting to thump the vampire over the head because he wouldn't back off.

"Spike, let me explain again the concept of personal space," Xander hissed as the looming vampire caused him to mis-dial for the second time.

"Here, let me do it." Spike made a grab for the phone card. Surprisingly enough, Xander managed to keep it out of his grasp and slapped his hand.

"Let go Mr. Grabby! That's mine; Willow gave it to me not you. Now just settle down and let me dial!" Xander made a shooing motion with his hand. Spike drew himself up to his full height, very much on his dignity.

"There's no need to be rude. I can take a hint you know." Spike sniffed. Xander just rolled his eyes. He noticed he did that a lot around the blonde.

"It's ringing," Xander listened carefully, turning the phone just a bit so Spike could hear as well.

"The Magic Shop, Rupert Giles here."

"Giles, hey, it's Xander!" As much as he'd enjoyed his visit to South America, aside from the attempted kidnapping, Giles' voice gave Xander a pang of homesickness.

"Xander, is everything all right?" Giles quickly asked.

"Yeah, everything's great, party went well. I'm calling to let you know that we're on our way home." Xander frowned at the vampire. Spike was mouthing "He knows" at Xander and shaking his head in disgust.

Xander mouthed back "No he doesn't," and missed Giles

next question. "What was that, sorry." Xander stammered and glared at the vampire who was now nodding and mouthing "Yes he does, " at the annoyed human.

"I said how have you and Spike been getting along?" Giles questioned politely.

"Fine, great, no real problems aside from the usual ones caused by his personality." Xander said sarcastically. Spike rolled his eyes and mouthed, "Ask him if he's heard from Angel."

Xander frantically shook his head 'no'. Spike made a grab for the phone and Xander rapped him on the forehead with the receiver. Spike snarled and Xander could hear Giles calling his name worriedly.

"Sorry Giles dropped the phone. Anyway, we'll see you sometime tomorrow I think. We'll give you a call when we touch down." Xander frowned at the sulky vampire.

Spike, in a sudden burst of supernatural speed and sneakiness, grabbed at the phone, "Oi, Rupert, heard from any of the LA bunch lately?" He smirked at a now highly irritated Xander who was fuming, having decided

that playing keep away with the phone was beneath him.

"Angel's team, no, no of course not. Why do you ask?"
Giles asked curiously.

"Ha," mouthed Xander, "I told you he didn't know."

"Does too," Spike refused to give in.

"No reason just asking, so we'll see you then. Give my love to Nibbet and tell the rest of the Amazons that we've got their bloody pictures."

Xander leaned in and yelled, "Let the girls know I've got presents. See you soon."

With a final "Be careful" from the Watcher they disconnected; Xander glared at the unrepentant blonde. Spike didn't seem to notice, digging out a cigarette.

"Bloody Hell, I knew it. He knows. Did you hear how calm he was when I asked about Angel's bunch. Rupes only gets that calm when he's lying. Yeah he knows." Spike nodded to himself.

Xander just threw up his hands in disgust and stomped outside muttering.

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"Well, I think that went rather well. I don't think they suspected a thing." Giles said into the phone having hit speed dial as soon as the boys hung up.

"You said he asked about me? Damn, he knows." Angel sighed.

"I can assure you I was the epitome of calm. He didn't suspect a thing." Giles said in a slightly miffed tone.

"Trust me, he knows. Spike always suspects something." Angel said dryly.

"Well, regardless, they will be here tomorrow. Shall we expect you later tonight?" Giles asked politely.

"I'm not coming to Sunnydale." Angel said bluntly. "I did my good deed by passing my information along; what you choose to do with it, well Giles, that's up to you."

"But he's your grandchilde, you need to have a talk with him." Giles sputtered.

"About what? Giles, I should think that you of all people would know, there's not a lot of vampire lore concerning boyfriends, in fact, I don't think there's any. Do you know why? Because vampires don't date; we don't date each other and we certainly don't date humans. So what would this hypothetical talk with Spike entail; curfews, how to act when meeting the family, what?" Angel asked dryly.

"There's no need to get snippy. I simply meant that you could speak with Spike while I did the same to Xander. They need to be made to understand the consequences of this liaison. I mean this is Spike we're talking about." Giles laughed rather condescendingly.

"Well, as I understood it there isn't any liaison yet. There's the idea of one, which I'll grant you, I find highly disturbing and not because it involves Spike." Angel said somewhat defensively.

"You surely aren't implying that there's anything wrong with Xander? Why Spike should consider himself lucky," Giles began ominously.

"I didn't say wrong I said disturbing and I'll stick by that statement. And, I'll grant you that Spike can be annoying but he was a damn fine vampire in his day." Angel felt Angelus floating towards the surface.

"I see, so Xander should feel honoured that Spike has decided he might take Xander as a boyfriend, is that it?" Giles abruptly stood up. The nerve of the man; as if Xander wasn't good enough to be going out with his grandson.

"Yeah, yeah that's right boyo. Maybe he should. There's not a blessed thing wrong with being the boyfriend of William the Bloody of the Line of Aurelius." Angel practically snarled, very much on his high horse now.

"I don't think we have anything further to discuss, sir. I bid you good day." Giles answered frostily and hung up the phone with a satisfying click.

"So that's how it is then? As if it weren't an honour and tribute to be courted by our Line. Well, more power to ye Will!" Angel shouted slamming the phone down and muttering as he stomped up the stairs.

Wesley and Cordelia cautiously poked their heads around the corner and watched their former boss stamp upstairs, jumping slightly as they heard his bedroom door slam before turning to give each other a wide eyed look of disbelief.

"You know, when you think you've seen it all," Cordy shook her head.

"Quite," agreed Wesley.

Part Twenty-One

The same little riverboat that had dropped them off appeared at sundown to take them back to the meadow where they would meet up with Maurice and Yvette. Xander had greeted the taciturn captain and was busy petting his dog while Spike suffered through a teary eyed farewell. Nualla sniffled that he shouldn't be a stranger. Rolf gave her a sidelong glance before briskly shaking William's hand and giving Xander a good-bye wave.

Xander carefully hid his smile; the big demon couldn't wait to get rid of them; Rolf's life was probably going to be a lot quieter now.

Spike finally extricated himself from the bear hug Nualla had him in and with a last kiss for Rosie jumped on board, joining Xander on deck. They waved their good-byes, shared a sigh and kicked back to get comfortable for the boat ride down river.

Nualla waved until William and Xander were out of sight. Rolf gave a quiet sigh and handed her a handkerchief. She gave him a teary smile and hugged him closer.

"I'm going to miss them," she blew her nose delicately.

"Uh huh," Rolf grunted.

"They really are a sweet couple." She smiled softly.

"Uh huh," Rolf said. She fixed him with a mock glare before poking him in the stomach lightly. He merely raised an eyebrow in a look very reminiscent of William. Her face softened.

"Let's go home."

Rolf grinned, "Uh huh."

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Xander rummaged around in the cooler pulling out a beer for Spike and a soda for himself. Spike caught the tossed beer and settled in comfortably. The vampire stared at the human seated across from him with a frown. Xander was busy looking up at the stars.

Spike didn't like to be ignored so he flicked his beer cap at the brunette. Xander gave a hiss of annoyance, "What?"

Spike waggled his eyebrows and patted the space on the bench next to him. "Want to fool around?"

Xander snorted, "Gee, you're such a romantic, Spike."

"Get your arse over here Harris," Spike growled. After the obligatory grumbling, Xander dropped into place beside his vampire. "Happy now?" he asked dryly.

Spike just draped an arm around his human before dropping his head to Xander's shoulder and nuzzling at his neck with little licks.

"Hey, knock it off, hey, c'mon, that tickles." Xander cringed and wiggled. "Stop it you undead fiend." Spike only added nips to his licks using the distraction to work both hands underneath Xander's t-shirt. Xander twisted around trying to get his hands free enough to reach up to grasp Spike's hair but between Octopus Spike and his giggles he was having difficulty.

Now to anyone not being familiar with the boys' relationship, it would be easy to misconstrue the situation, especially through a pair of long-range binoculars.

"Oh my God, Lieutenant, Captain, Hostile 17 is trying to eat the hostage!" The private was horrified; the poor guy was obviously fighting for his life.

Graham and Riley exchanged looks. "Right, well let's move in. Remember, be careful of the civilians and we want Hostile 17 unharmed and undamaged." Riley barked his orders.

Graham sent up a short prayer to whoever was listening, "To please let us all get through this fiasco with a minimum of fuss."

The two army issue cigarette boats sprang out of the darkness, the spotlights illuminating the couple on the deck. Spike reacted to the threat by dropping to the deck and pulling Xander with him. Again, this little manoeuvre did not look good to the attacking soldiers.

Riley winced and blew out a puff of air in irritation. *Dammit Spike, I'm trying to get you out of this, work with me here.* He knew this was a completely unreasonable request but honestly; why did everything involving the blonde have to be so hard.

The little riverboat didn't stand a chance although her captain made a valiant effort to flee the approaching vessels. She was quickly boarded and awash in Special Forces.

Spike sprang forward, snarling and hissing; if this was it, he wasn't going down without a fight, never mind the warning twinges the chip was already sending out with increasing force.

When Xander had been pushed to the deck, he'd landed in some rope and was now desperately trying to get untangled and scramble to his feet in an attempt to help his future boyfriend.

Both men soon found themselves surrounded by soldiers, in Xander's case solicitous ones who kept telling him that everything was all right now and not to worry sir, you're safe.

Three soldiers armed with taser sticks who were keeping him separated from Xander had backed Spike against the railing. One of them was taking aim with a tranquilizer gun.

"Hey, no, what are doing?" Xander tried to brush the helping hands away and get to Spike. He knew the odds weren't good but maybe if he could get Spike into the water, the vampire could swim to safety; get help at the village or something.

"Sir, it's all right, we've got the Hostile under control. He won't hurt you again," one of the soldiers said soothingly.

Xander gave the guy a look and got ready to launch

himself at the soldiers surrounding Spike when a familiar hand grasped his shoulder. He looked up into a face he hadn't expected to see again - Riley Finn.

"Sergeant, there's no need to tranquilize the Hostile. You might damage him and we can't afford that. The hostage appears to be unharmed." Riley gave Xander's shoulder a quick squeeze before moving forward to stand in front of Spike.

"Hostile 17, my name is Captain Riley Finn, Special Retrieval Unit. You're lucky we got to you before you were able to eat your hostage." He turned to an unusually silent Xander who was watching the proceedings with growing understanding. A lot of people thought Xander wasn't too bright, but Riley and Spike were two of the few that knew differently. Riley was counting on that innate intelligence now.

Spike was also being abnormally silent aside from the almost continuous growling. He hadn't lived all this time without realizing when something was up. Riley knew he couldn't eat Xander but apparently the rest of these blokes didn't and Riley hadn't told them, interesting. Xander didn't appear to be in any immediate danger, so Spike was willing to let this little scenario play out, for

now.

"Sir, are you all right?" Riley asked Xander with the hint of a smile on his face. Xander nodded slowly in response to the silent message before answering.

"Yeah, yeah I am but thank god you got here just in time." He stepped to Riley, grabbing his hand and shaking it heartily. "Names, Bob, Bob Franklin, Toledo, Ohio. I don't even know how I got here." He gestured to the vampire expansively. "He picked me up in the airport, said he needed change to call his sick mother and the next thing I know, I'm in South America. It was like I had no will of my own." Xander said earnestly.

There was an almost audible gasp from the assembled soldiers. One of them glared at Spike, "You monster!"

"Yeah, and what was your first clue? Wanker." Spike rolled his eyes in exasperation before turning to Xander with a well placed two-fingered salute. "That's for being an idiot Bob," he said stressing the name in a bad imitation of an American accent.

One of the soldiers raised his tazer threateningly.

"Soldier, don't damage the package." Riley barked.

Xander was impressed; Riley sounded tough. He still wasn't sure how they were getting out of this but at least they had an ally.

"Lt. Miller, secure the Hostile." Xander blinked in surprise at seeing Graham here as well.

"Don't give us any trouble 17, we've read your file." Riley spoke to the vampire briskly, the soldiers moved forward threateningly as Graham moved behind the vampire to secure the manacles to his wrists.

Spike tensed, wondering if he should make a break for it and come back for Xander. Miller grasped his hand pulling it back and securing one shackle and then the other before moving away. Spike snarled and hissed menacingly but was very careful not to lose his grip on the key the lieutenant had slipped into his palm.

Xander was hoping that the commandos would continue on their way down river, getting them closer to Maurice and Yvette, and they did for about a quarter mile before docking and taking off overland.

Riley had let the riverboat captain go and Xander had his fingers crossed that the guy would head straight back to the village and get help and that Rolf and clan would come running, that is until he thought about the consequences of a run in between the soldiers and Rolf's family.

He groaned silently, no, no, no, that would so not be of the good. Somebody would end up getting hurt or killed and Xander didn't want that. Riley and Graham were obviously trying to help Spike escape and he couldn't really fault the rest of the soldiers for 'coming to his rescue.' And he couldn't bear it if something happened to Rolf; it would just crush Nualla and poor Rosie. Nope, not going to happen so that meant it was pretty clear that he and Spike were going to have to get out of this mess on their own. As if hearing his thoughts, Riley called a short halt to give the 'civilian' a chance to rest.

"Ah ha," Xander thought before mentally squaring his shoulders; time to come up with a plan or at least a clear

escape route and that meant talking to Spike. Hmmmm, tricky, but doable; he caught Riley's eye and with a slight motion of his head indicated his desire to speak with Spike. Riley's eyebrows raised slightly and he watched Riley nudge Graham. Graham rolled his eyes before calling the soldier on guard duty over on some pretence or another.

Spike watched Xander try to nonchalantly edge his way over to where he sat. "Right, I love the boy but he couldn't do casual to save his life." Spike winced when Xander tripped over a root, a rock, his own feet; Spike wasn't really sure. Xander hit the ground and Spike had the insane desire to yell "Timber!" He didn't get a chance, Xander popped back up like a jack in the box, waving his hand and smiling at the startled soldiers, "I'm fine, I'm okay."

Xander felt his face flush bright red; his only consolation being the fact that Spike alone could see his embarrassment. He fumed silently and threw an apologetic look towards Riley and Graham.

"Are you sure you're all right Mr. Franklin?" Riley asked dryly. He was beginning to wonder if Graham wasn't right; perhaps this whole idea was just insane but than

he caught sight of Spike's face, the vampire had a half exasperated, half adoring look and in a flash, Riley realized that Spike was in love. The blonde wasn't just playing with Xander or in it for quick sex (he shuddered slightly at that) or had some nefarious plan to use Xander to get back at the Scoobies, no one could look that sappy and be up to no good, at least not at the moment.

Riley sighed when he understood that the stakes had just gotten a little higher. He heard Graham next to him, grumbling under his breath, "Okay that was just unsettling," and realized his friend had also caught the unguarded look on the demon's face. A quick glance at the rest of the squad confirmed that, luckily, no one else had seen it.

Graham stared at Xander, than at Spike and then gave Riley a "you owe me big time" glare before standing up and stalking over to the bound vampire.

Xander watched in trepidation as Graham approached Spike with a set expression on his face before stopping directly in front of the vampire and hauling him to his feet. Riley too had risen and was watching the proceedings carefully.

"You're scum, you know that demon?" Graham snarled at the blonde.

"Oi! Trying to prove you've got a pair eh?" Spike smirked.

Graham gave the vampire a slow once over, "You've got a real mouth on you don't you demon? I have problems with mouthy demons, they bother me. How about it Mr. Franklin? Do they bother you?"

Xander rubbed at his chin and did his best to channel his inner Buffy. "Yeah, I have issues with them." He raised his chin; fists clenched and met the vampire's sneering visage.

"Why don't you take a walk with Mr. Franklin and Hostile 17, lieutenant?" Riley spoke quietly but clearly. There was an almost audible sigh of disappointment from the other soldiers; clearly their captain was giving the hostage a chance to get some of his own back.

Graham hustled the blonde ahead of him deeper into the jungle. As Xander turned to follow them he felt Riley's hand on his shoulder and a pistol was slipped into his palm. The two men shared a look and Xander gave a small wink. Riley gave the young man a slight smile and a

final squeeze on the shoulder in farewell.

Xander hurried to catch up to Graham and Spike. The trio walked in silence for about a quarter mile before they stopped. Spike easily slipped out of the manacles before dropping them at Graham's feet and turning to greet Xander.

"Hey there pet," he gave a soft smile and reached forward to pull a twig or two out of the brunette's hair. "Can't let you out on your own."

Xander just gave him a big grin and a hug.

"Here now pet, not in front of the help eh?" Spike wiggled a bit in the taller man's grip, but not too hard, and threw a pointed look in Graham's direction.

The soldier was sitting on a fallen log, studiously ignoring the pair and muttering under his breath, looking vaguely disgusted with himself.

"Thanks Graham. I was working on a plan of my own for springing Spike." Xander smiled brightly at the soldier before smacking Spike on the arm in response to his fervently muttered, "God help us".

Nualla walked out on the porch of her little house, restless and anxious. Rosie was in her arms; she'd been fussy all evening and refused to go to sleep. Something was wrong, but she wasn't sure what. Nualla hugged the baby closer, feeling an unnatural chill in the equatorial evening air.

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes." Nualla gave a startled squeak as Freya joined her on the porch, her cigarette holder firmly in hand.

"Someone's playing with something they shouldn't," she intoned.

Suddenly all the howler monkeys and every other animal in the entire jungle seemed to awaken at once. The din was tremendous. Rolf rushed outside, weapon in hand to protect his family. Rosie was crying, Nualla was fretting and his grandmother looked uncharacteristically grim. Then just as quickly as it began, it ended. The silence was eerie and the village held its breath.

Nualla felt a strange prickling up and down her spine; the

likes of which she had hoped never to feel again. "Oh no," she breathed, "Someone's used the book."

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Graham stared at the still kissing pair. He was going to need a crowbar to pry those boys apart or beat them over the head with, he wasn't sure which when suddenly the jungle went crazy. He leapt to his feet, the three men automatically falling into a defensive circle.

Xander and Graham readied their weapons while Spike slipped into game face. The caterwauling and howls cut off, like someone had thrown a light switch. The two humans held their breath, eyes scanning the darkness while Spike stretched forth his senses, scenting the air for the cause of the disturbance.

The eerie silence was abruptly broken by the sound of automatic gunfire coming from the direction of the camp. Graham snarled wordlessly, running back toward his embattled comrades.

Xander started to follow when Spike grabbed his arm. "Here now pet, where do you think you're going?" the

vampire asked in surprise.

"They're being attacked Spike," Xander motioned towards Graham's retreating back.

"And I should care because?" the vampire asked dryly.

"Damn, that's right, no point in you going back." Xander frowned in concentration while Spike smirked, having just made his point. They would be out of here in no time and back to the really important things in life, like kissing.

Xander snapped his fingers and Spike groaned; no, bloody hell he recognized that look. "You stay here, I'll go check it out and I'll be right back." Xander said brightly.

Spike stared at him like he'd grown another head. Xander winced, "Nope, not gonna do it are ya?" Spike smiled thinly.

"Stupid suggestion?" Xander asked self-consciously.

Spike just nodded. Xander kicked at the ground in frustration as more gunfire sounded. "Spike I just gotta; it's Riley," he begged.

Xander knew he was asking a lot but he'd always liked the soldier and Riley had tried to help. He also knew if Spike flat out refused he wouldn't push it. He'd be disappointed but he wasn't going to put his vampire at risk.

Spike glared at the hopeful human before snarling and stalking off in the direction of the gunfire, throwing over his shoulder, "Not a happy vampire here mate. I'm expecting serious sexual favours in payment." Xander gave a quick grin and followed his irate boyfriend into the fray.

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Meanwhile, back at the village Rolf was close to tearing his fur out. Nualla was trying to explain that someone had obviously found the Lost Grimoire and definitely called up some very old magic from the depths of the forest. Freya was of the opinion that invasion was imminent. "Mark my words, we're about to be overrun," she stated before turning on her heel for the bedroom and 'supplies'. They were both sure it had something to do with William and Xander.

Well of course it would, thought Rolf and everyone was proven correct when Smiley, the riverboat captain showed up on their doorstep, beagle in tow, complaining loudly about commandos and kidnapping and piracy on the river.

"Commandos! Oh Goddess, Rolf did you hear that, they've been captured!" Nualla was busy bouncing the baby on her hip and digging frantically through her box of magical implements for her scrying bowl. "Darn it, what did mommy do with it?" she muttered under her breath.

"Why would commandos be using the Lost Grimoire? I mean they've already got William and Xander, why use a spell? Besides, why would American commandos be trying to invade Brazil? This doesn't make any sense." Rolf tried in vain to inject a note of logic into the proceedings.

"I don't know but we have to save them honey." Nualla got to the bottom of the box and bit her lip before uttering a triumphant, "ah ha!" She stood up, black bowl in hand and marched purposefully to the kitchen sink to fill the bowl with water.

Rolf rolled his eyes at Sven who'd also showed up and

with a muttered curse told him to round up the clan; they'd be needed to protect the village and rescue his wife's idiot husband. He was getting a headache and it got noticeably worse when his grandmother emerged from her room carrying his grandfather's broadsword.

"No Grandmother, absolutely not," Rolf argued, gesturing to the sword. Freya just patted him on the arm consolingly before ignoring him.

"I'm still the head of this clan and this family," he fumed to the two oblivious women in his life. He threw up his hands in despair.

"Nualla have you got that thing fired up?" Freya waved at the scrying bowl.

"Just about," Nualla finished casting and squinted into the water as it began to mist over. She tapped her foot impatiently, waiting for the water to clear while Freya and Rolf peered over her shoulder. There was a sudden sparkle and a picture began to form becoming clearer by the second. "Oh no," Nualla cried as the picture solidified.

"Big Mike, well we should have known," Freya muttered

in disgust. "What an idiot."

"Are those what I think they are?" Rolf asked in confusion. The women nodded morosely.

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Riley and his men were barely holding their own. He'd already lost one man. Rifkin had been snatched and devoured while on guard duty but not before yelling out a warning. If it weren't for the grenades they carried they'd be in bad shape; unless the gunfire was highly concentrated it didn't seem to do much damage to their attackers. The good thing was that Graham had always maintained that you should never go anywhere without lots of explosives; the bad thing was that most of said explosives were in the boats.

The situation was grim and made grimmer by the fact that whoever was controlling these monsters had guns, making their position even worse. They were poor shots but they were enthusiastic. The commandos had to get to cover and soon.

Riley grimaced as he and his men continued to fall back.

Their enemies were trying to herd them away from the boats and the river; their only sure escape route. Well he couldn't let his unit be backed into the jungle; it could be swarming with these creatures, they'd never make it out alive. The only cover anywhere near them was a small shack about a hundred yards away across open ground. The creatures may have been large but they were surprisingly fast moving and those tentacles were lethal. Well there was no help for it; they would have to chance it. At least Xander was well out of it. He doubted Spike would let the boy get anywhere near this mess. Riley laughed; too bad, they could use a little of the crazy Xander luck right about now.

He raised his hand to give the order to make a run for the shack when an explosion off to the right stopped him. Two of the creatures flew apart in a spectacular display of pyrotechnics. It had to be Graham. Riley swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat; best damn lieutenant in the military. He frowned though upon hearing "Cowabunga you slimy critters!" shouted from the jungle followed by an irritated "Bloody Hell mate, get your head down!"

Riley felt a smile form and he offered up a silent thank you to whoever was listening for crazy kids and sappy

vampires.

A second explosion took out another three of the creatures and he signalled his unit to make a run for the shack under the resulting chaos.

"Nice one Spike, you got three!" Xander enthused with a double 'thumbs up' sign.

"Pet, get your arse down, I mean it!" Spike pointed to the jungle floor as a wild flurry of shots were fired in their general direction.

Xander nodded his head in agreement before taking aim into the darkness and firing three quick shots in succession. There was a startled yelp and the gunfire abruptly ended.

Graham raised an eyebrow in respect. "Not bad."

Xander blushed, "Thanks." He gave his vampire a superior smile. Spike just growled.

"You know, these things look really familiar," Xander pursed his lips in concentration.

"I was thinking the same thing. It's hard to tell though, can't get a clear look at them." Graham agreed.

"Well, we're about to get up close and personal if you two don't move it. They've spotted us." Spike yanked Xander to his feet and pulled him towards the jungle. As far as the vampire was concerned they had done the hero bit. Riley and his group were under cover in the shack and it was time for he and Xander to go. Unfortunately, events conspired against him.

He jumped back with a yelp, pushing Xander out of the way as two of the creatures attacked from behind. He managed to evade one but the other wrapped a tentacle around his foot and began to drag him forward. Spike gave a hiss of pain, it wasn't the tentacle itself; it was the woody thorns that were causing him trouble. His leg began to smoke and he flailed about trying to get a grip on something when he felt both hands grabbed in a warm firm grip. His pet had him and judging by the look on his face wasn't letting go anytime soon.

Spike looked around wildly, spotting two more of the creatures advancing on their position. "Xander let go of me, run! I'll be fine pet."

Xander just gave him a 'don't be stupid' look and braced his feet more firmly against the soil. Spike felt his cold heart warm, *Bloody idiot, but he's my bloody idiot and I can't let anything happen to him.*

Spike braced himself for the jolt of agony the chip would surely fire into him when he used his talons to force Xander to let him go. He'd completely forgotten about Graham but the commando hadn't forgotten them; he emptied close to a full clip into the creature holding onto Spike. The tentacle snapped in two. Xander fell backwards in a graceless heap. He didn't remain on the ground for long; Graham grabbed one arm and Spike the other and the threesome made a break for the only available haven, the shack.

Riley saw them coming, ordering covering fire until the threesome made it through the door. Riley greeted Graham with a hug, protocol be damned. The lieutenant gave one of his customary half smiles in greeting before the two turned to face their 'guests'.

"Welcome back gentlemen," Riley smiled thinly. Xander stiffened and Spike gave a low growl when a soldier stepped forward with a set of manacles for the Hostile.

"Those won't be necessary. No one's going anywhere Jacobs, at least not right now." Riley waved the man away. Riley turned to face the vampire and his boyfriend, "Do you two have any idea what those things are?"

Xander shook his head hesitantly; "Nope but Graham and I thought they look a lot like those things from that movie..."

"Yeah," Graham nodded in agreement, "That one where everyone goes blind because of the meteor shower?"

"Hey, I saw that film, and those things were eating all the blind people," one of the soldiers added.

Xander, Graham and several of the soldiers were all nodding in agreement at a perplexed Riley. He and Spike shared a look.

"Bloody Hell, they're not from a movie, these things live here. They usually live deep in the jungle and don't hunt in packs. Obviously someone's worked some serious mojo to get them all riled up like this," Spike snapped in disgust.

"Oh, are these the man eating trees you told me about?"

Xander asked.

"Right, these would be them," Spike nodded, "And the only way to kill them is with fire or"

"Seawater right?" Xander interrupted with a bounce. He was so happy that all his late night TV viewing was finally coming in handy.

"Yeah, actually," Spike frowned at the interruption but Xander was beaming so proudly he didn't have the heart to be snarky.

"Now see that's from the movie," Xander said sagely. Graham nodded in agreement and Riley made a mental note to explore this heretofore-unseen layer to his best friend.

The discussion was interrupted by a call from outside the little shack. "You in the shack, we want to talk to you."

"I know that voice," Spike moved to the window and glared, "Bleedin Hell, it's that little rat Ernie!"

"Hey, that's the guy who tried to kidnap me." Xander pointed at the rumpled demon in outrage.

"You know these people?" Riley raised an eyebrow before holding up his hand and yelling back. "What do you want?"

"We're not interested in you or your soldiers. Big Mike just wants the leech. Give him to us and the rest of you can leave." Ernie nervously wiped his brow with a handkerchief. He hated this; everything was way out of hand as far as he was concerned. Big Mike had seriously lost it calling up these creatures. He was barely controlling them now, in another hour or so he wouldn't be able to control them at all and they'd turn on any meat in the vicinity. Ernie did not intend to be anywhere nearby when that happened. He was going to deliver this message and then get the heck out of Dodge.

"How do we know you'll keep your word?" Riley yelled back. He and Graham shared a look; there was no way this guy was going to let them out of here whether they gave him Spike or not. Besides, Riley did not like coercion even when he was the one exerting it.

"Hey we don't want any hassle with the government we just want the vampire. My boss has a score to settle with him. Besides, he's nothing but trouble." Ernie yelled back.

"Hey, he is not! The only reason your boss wants him is because Spike wouldn't let you make a scrambled egg out of the baby you toady!" Xander was incensed. The nerve of this Big Mike guy, boy and people told him he held grudges! Man, the guy just had to learn to let it go, move on and get a life.

Xander was unaware that he was muttering to himself until Spike gave his hand a quick squeeze. The vampire's face was grim but his eyes were smiling with a soft light.

Spike was fairly glowing with happiness and it was making his demon queasy but he didn't care. Xander had just defended him in front of everybody. It was official, they were a couple and in that moment Spike knew that he would do anything to protect this man who'd stumbled into his life all those years ago. He looked around and grimaced slightly, even if it meant doing the right thing by this lot as well.

"Give us ten minutes," Riley called back.

"You've got five!" Ernie screeched. Riley winced and rubbed at his ears.

"We need a plan," he looked to Spike, Graham and Xander.

"You could throw me out the door," Spike shrugged.

"Spike, please, be serious, this is important," Xander shook his finger at the blonde and bit his lip in concentration. "Maybe we can make it to the boats, cause another distraction like before?" He looked to Graham.

"We're almost out of explosives and you can bet they're watching those boats." Graham shook his head.

"They're afraid of fire, if only we had some gasoline or something we could set up a defensive perimeter and make it to the river." Riley mused.

"Mate you don't want to be swimming in the river at night. You do that, you won't have to worry about Mike and his trees." Spike warned.

Xander nodded his head in reluctant agreement, "Spike's right, we'd have all sorts of things nipping at our heels."

Spike watched his pet fret over what to do. He watched

Riley and Graham try to come up with a plan to get away and even though he didn't like the Initiative soldiers, he realized that for whatever reason, they weren't going to give him up. "Probably want the pleasure of dissecting me themselves", he thought sourly.

He squared his shoulders both mentally and physically before slipping his beloved duster off with a resigned sigh. He petted it briefly before looking up to meet Xander's puzzled gaze.

"Could you hold this for me a second pet?" Spike gave him a crooked smile and handed him the duster.

Xander returned the smile uncertainly, questions in his eyes. Spike's smile stretched into his devil may care trademark grin and there in front of God and everybody he grabbed Xander Harris firmly by the shoulders and kissed him soundly and with all the passion he had in him before shoving him into Riley and Graham and then hurling himself through the window and into the clearing.

He could hear Xander yelling bloody murder before he let out a loud bellow of derision, waving his arms wildly and shouting, "Come and get me you pouncy bugger and I'll

take your other hand as well," before taking off away from Xander and his best bet for happiness in years.

Part Twenty-Three

"Spike! Spike! You get your ass back in here right now, do you hear me?" Xander had made a dive for the window and was now struggling with Riley and Graham as they hauled him inside.

"Let go of me or so help me I'm gonna deck you!" Xander put up a terrific struggle while trying to keep an eye on his 'when I get a hold of you, you're gonna be sorry' boyfriend.

Spike was waving his arms and dodging bullets and tentacles as he ran around the clearing gathering up carnivorous trees in an attempt to lead them off into the forest.

"Give him covering fire!" Riley snapped the order,

seriously considering just sitting on Xander.

"But Sir, he's a hostile?"

"Yes soldier, but he happens to be our hostile, now give me covering fire!" Riley growled.

"Either this guy has the most serious case of Stockholm Syndrome I've ever seen or something very odd is going on here." Pvt. Hanks muttered to the soldier next to him as he lined a tree up in his sights.

The soldier gave Hanks an incredulous look, "Gee, what was your tip off, the kiss?"

"More shooting less chatter," one of the other soldiers interrupted as he fired a grenade, hitting a tree that was getting too close to the crazy vampire. The soldier shook his head, what was this vamp thinking? Did he even have a plan?

Meanwhile, Riley had managed to get Xander's attention. "Listen to me Xander, you can't go out there, you'll only get yourself killed or captured and you know it. Also, you could get Spike killed trying to watch out for you." Riley shook the irate teenager to make his point.

Xander fumed but dammit, Riley was right. Spike was jumping around and moving so fast, he was almost a blur. The only reason they could see him at all was because of the glow sticks and lights the soldiers had trained on the clearing. Xander winced as Spike barely evaded a tentacle. He was obviously trying to get the trees to follow him but they weren't cooperating.

Whoever was controlling them wanted Spike to stay right here. Every time he got close to the open jungle a gunshot would drive him back or a tree would appear to block his path.

Xander gave a worried and frustrated sigh, looked like another trademark Spike plan.

"There's got to be something we can do, they're gonna get him." Xander gestured wildly at his vampire who was doing a good impression of a jackrabbit and gave the soldier a pleading look.

"Xander," Riley began.

"Wait a minute! I'm an idiot!" Xander slapped his forehead and frantically began rummaging in his pockets.

"Only to be used in case of dire emergency, that's what she said, well this is definitely a dire emergency. Man I hope this friend of Anya's can help." He muttered under his breath as he searched for the summoning spell Anya had given him before he left Sunnydale.

"Got it, I got it!" he crowed holding aloft a ratty looking piece of notebook paper.

Graham and Riley exchanged worried looks but it was Graham that asked, "What's that supposed to do?"

"Summon a powerful being who owes my ex girlfriend a big favor." Xander squinted, trying to decipher Anya's scrawl. "Maklash urp or is that orb?"

"Are you sure you should be fooling with that, you're not a magic user; it could be dangerous." Riley looked deeply worried as did Graham but their concern was interrupted by the sound of breaking wood and a yell from the back of the shack, the side facing the water. Two of the tree creatures had gotten around behind and were busy dismantling the back wall. Tentacles were flailing and the soldiers, unable to use grenades were hacking at the creatures with machetes.

had to do was figure out where the bugger was hiding himself.

"Now if I were an arrogant bastard with an insane desire for revenge where would I be hiding? Bloody Hell Spike; c'mon think, you've had years of experience with Angelus. Right, the river!" Spike grimaced, the river would be through that rather large group of hungry tree critters; why was nothing easy? Was it too much to ask for a clear path so that he could wreck havoc and destruction on an enemy?

"To Hell with it! I'm comin' through; top of the world ma!" Spike howled and starting swinging enthusiastically at every tree in his path, grabbing tentacles and tearing them off. By the time he got well into the midst of the creatures he was covered in a horrendous sap like mixture and he stank to high heaven. He was also surrounded with nowhere to turn and tentacles flapping all around him.

"Well Spike, looks like you bit off more than you could chew. If Xander were here, he'd probably say 'I told you so'. Hell, pet, I'm sorry." Spike tensed for his final stand as the jungle seemed to hold its breath in anticipation.

The trees parted slightly and Big Mike stepped into the gap, a distraught and highly edgy Ernie could be seen behind him.

Mike's eyes were positively glowing red, his face gaunt beyond belief, little more than a skull. He was smiling although it more closely resembled the grimace of a corpse. A large book was floating in the air in front of him. He hissed and wheezed; Spike thought he'd gotten lucky and Mike was having a stroke until he realized the demented creature was trying to laugh.

"Well Spike, this is where most villains would make a long speech about the culmination of their vengeance, thereby giving the hero a chance to get away," he wheezed. Spike's ears perked up.

"This is your lucky day; I'll spare you all that. Kill him!" Big Mike waved his hand, teetering a bit on unsteady legs. Tentacles lashed out grabbing the vampire's arms and legs.

"Here now, what kind of a villain are you?" Spike struggled in outrage. Stupid bloody pillock, what kind of a bad guy didn't like to crow a bit in victory eh? It was a requirement of the job; hell he'd done it! "Two bit

gangster demons, no respect for tradition," he fumed as the tentacles starting pulling him apart.

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"Captain, two more have shown up, they're breaking through!" The soldier yelled, hacking at another tentacle, this one was coming through the thatching of the roof.

Riley took a quick assessment of the situation and realized they didn't have much time left before the whole shack came down around their ears; his soldiers were barely holding their own. Graham was keeping the creatures busy in the front and trying to cover Spike's insane attempts to, well who knows what the vampire was trying to do and Xander was continuing to decipher Anya's handwriting.

"Riley does this look like an "L" or an "N" to you?" It didn't help of course that he was trying to keep an eye on his vampire at the same time.

"Xander, I never thought I'd say this but, concentrate on the damn spell, Graham will watch out for Spike."

Graham rolled his eyes.

"Spike will be fine as long as he doesn't do something," Riley stopped himself; he was about to say stupid. He gave a mental sigh, that was close, he could have hexed the whole thing.

"Man I hope that vamp don't do anything stupid," huffed one of the soldiers.

Riley winced.

"To Hell with it! I'm comin' through; top of the world ma!" he heard the vampire yell.

"Son of a ..." Graham snarled, firing several short bursts in quick succession.

"Spike!" Xander yelled in distress before cursing and holding the paper aloft.

Maklash, eaneth sokra luf morlvida! I command you to appear and fulfil your obligation!" Xander finished the incantation and held his breath.

The soldiers held their breaths even the creatures

hesitated in their attack.

Riley and Graham looked at each, than Xander.

"Somehow I expected more," Graham said dryly as the creatures renewed their assault with redoubled fierceness.

"I don't believe it! She told me it would work!" Xander was irate, peeved, incensed even and if he survived this, he and Anya were going to have words.

He took a deep breath, drawing himself up to his full height. "Well fine then." He pulled off his shirt, wrapping it securely around a broken table leg, oblivious to the chaos. He slipped on Spike's beloved duster, pulling a lighter from the pocket, preparing to light his makeshift torch.

"Xander," Riley started.

"Don't try to talk me out of it Riley. That's my boyfriend out there, well unofficially anyway, and I'm not going to just sit here and do nothing while he's out there doing something incredibly brave and stupid." Xander looked the soldier squarely in the eye. "That's my job." Xander

finished, lighting his torch with a flourish.

Riley stood at attention and saluted. "Covering fire Lieutenant!" Graham nodded, clearing a small path in the direction Spike had disappeared.

"Yee ha!" Xander yodelled before jumping through the window and running full tilt in the direction Spike had taken, swinging his torch wildly and snapping off shots with his pistol.

Graham watched the young man disappear in to the jungle, dodging creatures right and left. "So why the Hell didn't we make torches?"

Riley sighed tiredly. "We've got to start thinking outside of the box," he thought and gave the order for torches. The soldiers blinked at each other in embarrassment.

Graham smiled at Riley, shot a glance to the back of the room and raised his eyebrows. "Getting a little close in here isn't it?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking fresh air might do us all some good." Riley smiled before raising his voice, "People we are leaving!"

"Ten bucks says we're gonna follow the kid and the vamp in an act of defiant heroism which will be loosely disguised as a need to fulfil our mission statement and root out demon activity where ever we find it," Morton nudged his partner.

"You're on," Smith nodded. Hell of a way to run a covert operation, but at least he wasn't bored.

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Xander skidded to a halt in horror at a scene of Spike, spread eagle, suspended in mid air from four of the creatures' tentacles. Something that Xander assumed to be Big Mike was cackling evilly as Spike struggled and cursed in his bounds and Xander didn't have a clue how to get him out of it.

Part Twenty-Four

Xander was frantic; Spike was being drawn and quartered, tortured by that sadistic bastard Big Mike and Xander didn't know what to do. God, if only that spell of Anya's had worked or he had some backup, something! Well, he didn't and he didn't fancy having his boyfriend in pieces so....

He tensed his muscles in preparation to leap into the midst of the clearing. He figured on being able to light at least two of the trees on fire and snapping off his last few rounds at Big Mike. He probably wouldn't survive but it would give Spike a chance to get away, if he was lucky.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand on his back and one placed over his mouth to silence his yell. He whirled awkwardly and landed on his butt staring into the amused eyes, of all people, Freya.

She placed a finger to her lips and removed her hand, leaning down to whisper in his ear. "Hello Xander and how are you?"

"Freya!" He grabbed the older demon yanking her to the ground with him. "What are you doing here? Are you by yourself? Is Rolf here?"

"Oh, Rolf and the clan are back there somewhere. I came because..."

"You're by yourself?" Xander interrupted in horror. He really liked the old demon and the thought of Freya wandering around all these man-eating trees alone; well he was scandalized. What was Rolf thinking letting her do that?

"Well yes. As I was saying I came ahead because..." she tried again.

"Jeez I was hoping for help but well beggars can't be choosers and Spike's about to get shredded." Xander gestured to his struggling boyfriend. This might work, Freya could cause a distraction; for the first time he noticed she was carrying a honking big sword, yeah the two of them should be able to buy some time until Rolf and the others got here.

"I've got a plan for saving Spike or at least delaying things until Rolf gets here. I don't want to put you in any danger though." Xander bit his lip; staring back over his shoulder to make sure Spike was still in one piece although he could listen to the insults being thrown instead. He smiled, that's my guy.

"You don't want to put me in danger? Well that's very kind of you Xander but I think..."

"Darn if only that spell of Anya's had worked." Xander muttered, obviously not paying much attention to Freya.

"Yes, about that." Freya tried again.

"Well, there's no help for it." Xander continued, "I figure to sneak around to the other side, give me about two minutes and then you jump up and cause a commotion and distract them while I take out at least two of those tree things; Spike should be able to get free and we all run." Xander gave the demoness an earnest look. She returned it with a small smile.

She reached out and gently touched his cheek to signal her agreement. "Sounds like a fine plan."

He gave her his confident Xander look before taking her hand in his, "Be careful Freya. Rolf would skin me alive if anything happened to you."

"Yes, I'll be careful; you too." She patted his hand and watched him slowly crawl around the perimeter of the

like his group was going to make it out of here without heavy casualties.

He risked a glance at Riley, who of course being the man he was was leading the charge. "C'mon Ri, be careful." He snapped off another round. He could feel the heat of the fire at his back as he took careful aim, making every shot count.

The soldiers were using machetes and torches in the hand to tentacle combat they were engaged in. Graham saw Riley swinging his machete like a madman, hacking away at one of the creatures that had Pvt. D'Angelo in its grasp. He was so focused on the creature in front of him that he didn't notice the poisoned tentacle snaking up on him from behind.

Graham cursed and yelled at Riley to watch out. The Captain didn't hear him over the roar of the fire and the yells of the battling men. Graham couldn't get a clear shot and launched himself at his unsuspecting friend ready to take the hit in Riley's place when a large spear came flying out of the jungle, pinning the appendage to the ground. Riley, alerted to his danger whirled around; it was at that moment that a strident war cry echoed through the clearing and a group of brightly painted, very

large and fierce looking demons suddenly appeared in the clearing, hacking right and left with swords and axes. The soldiers, unwilling to look a gift horse in the mouth accepted the unexpected help with surprising equanimity.

The leader of the demons was bellowing orders in his own language and swinging his huge broadsword in great sweeping arcs, splitting trees in half right and left. Riley blinked in amazement and a little bit of awe. He wondered who these creatures were and fervently hoped that they wouldn't find themselves on opposing sides after this battle.

Graham found himself fighting back to back with one of the larger demons.

"Good fight eh, little one?" Sven snapped a tentacle in two with his bare hands.

Graham, who was a fairly large individual, shot an indignant glare over his shoulder at the demon and grunted an assent.

Fighting together, the soldiers and demons managed to clear the area of creatures in fairly short order with no

heavy casualties. The demons were laughing and slapping each other's backs picking up some of the severed tentacles and stuffing them in a large sack.

Riley, Graham and the soldiers watched the demons rather uneasily now that the fighting was over. The largest of the demons caught Riley's gaze and moved forward to meet him.

Rolf looked Riley and the other soldiers over carefully before raising an eyebrow and saying, "You do realize that you're in Brazil and have no jurisdiction here?"

Riley took a deep breath and pulled out a copy of his orders and passage papers from the Brazilian government, handing them to Rolf.

Rolf glanced over them and merely smiled before pulling out his own set of papers and handing them to Riley.

Graham watched the Riley's face as he read the paperwork; watched his eyebrows inch up his forehead in surprise and listened to him making those, 'uh huh' noises that indicated he was impressed before looking up and handing the papers back to the demon.

"Your Majesty," Riley said formally. Graham blinked and the rest of the soldiers started in shock. "I'm Captain Riley Finn of the Special Services Branch. This is my Lieutenant, Graham Miller and these are my men.

Graham and the rest of the men nodded to the demon.

Rolf inclined his head regally.

"Apparently we are on sovereign territory ceded to this clan by the King of Portugal for services rendered to the Crown in the early 1800's." Riley explained to his men.

"Why are you here, and what have you done with William and Xander?" Rolf growled as his clan moved closer to the soldiers.

"William? You mean Spike?" Riley asked.

"William or Spike as you say; he's short." Rolf brought his hand up to his shoulder.

"Blonde?" Riley questioned.

"Obnoxious?" Graham added. Rolf bit back a grin.

"Annoying?" Riley and Rolf said together.

"Yes, that is William. Where are he and his 'boyfriend', Xander?" Rolf asked. "Have you harmed them?" Again with the low growl only this time some of the other demons joined in with throaty growls of their own.

The soldiers gripped their weapons nervously and put their faith in their Captain. He seemed amazingly calm considering the situation in which they found themselves and didn't even blink at the word 'boyfriend'.

"Actually we were on our way to find Spike and Xander. Spike jumped out the window in some crazy attempt to lead the creatures away from the shack where we were trapped. It didn't work." Riley gave a shrug and a look of understanding passed between the man and demon concerning Spike and his plans.

"So of course, Xander jumps out the window after him after some summoning spell he had didn't work. Don't ask me, I don't know," Riley said as Rolf raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

"They headed in that direction." Riley pointed through the trees. "As I said, we were on our way to retrieve or

aid them."

"William is an idiot." Rolf shook his head with long suffering patience. Graham stopped himself just in time from nodding his head vigorously in agreement.

"However, he is our idiot and part of my family. He is covered by diplomatic immunity as a foreign dignitary and I would deeply appreciate it if you did not mention that fact to him unless absolutely necessary." Rolf shot a glare at one of the other demons that inadequately covered a snicker at this speech. Graham noted it was the large demon that had called him 'little one' earlier.

"As for Xander?" Rolf sighed heavily and endeavoured to look very put out; "My wife is very fond of him. Indeed she is unfortunately quite fond of William as well and I do not wish to return home without securing their safety. We will accompany you." Rolf informed Riley and the soldiers as he gestured to his clan to follow him into the forest.

Riley signalled his men to fall in while some of the bigger demons took flanking positions, searching for rogue trees. Graham fell in step beside his friend, catching his eye, shaking his head at Riley before letting out a short

laugh.

"You win. You were right; those two have got to be the luckiest bastards I've ever come across. Even if we find them and they're okay, which I'm sure they are, we can't touch Spike without touching off an international incident which lets all of us off the hook; absolutely amazing." Graham shook his head again.

Riley gave the smaller man a quick hug. "I told you. You just gotta have faith." He and Graham caught up with Rolf.

"By the way, my grandmother is about somewhere. She insisted on coming along but then rushed off saying she had something to take care of; be careful of her." Rolf called out to the soldiers.

"Don't worry Your Majesty. We won't hurt your grandmother." Riley assured him.

Grandmother? Graham thought.

"You misunderstand me young human. I was concerned for you not her." Rolf said nonchalantly, hiding a smile.

Riley blinked, "Ah, yes sir."

"Ten bucks you said?" Smith asked Morton, handing him a ten spot.

"Double or nothing if they don't even need our help," Morton offered.

Smith looked thoughtful for a second and then shrugged.
"You're on."

Part Twenty-Four

Unaware that help was coming Xander took a deep breath and prepared to launch himself into the midst of monsters. Another man might have hesitated caught in the knowledge of certain death but if there's one thing Alexander L. Harris had learned in his short life was that nothing was certain, especially death.

He checked his ammunition; nine shots. His torch was

almost gone, Freya gave him the sign and with a war cry Rolf would have been proud of, Xander thundered into the clearing to rescue Spike.

Spike cursed when he heard the infamous Harris yodel. If his hands had been free he would have slapped his forehead with them. *What have I said about announcing your presence before a fight pet? Bloody Hell*, he mentally groaned.

Just as Spike had finished that thought, a second higher pitched cry came from his left. Spike cursed and did his best to twist around to get a clearer view. When he saw Freya rushing towards him and his captors, skirt tied out of the way, a sword Conan would have envied in her hands, a broad grin broke over his features. The cavalry was here!

Freya used the first swing of her sword to hack one of the creatures in two that was holding Spike. She used the second swing to knock Big Mike out of the circle and on to his ass. He landed in an ungainly heap dazed but unharmed, the magic he'd conjured too powerful to allow him to be hurt by a mere sword stroke.

Xander torched one of the creatures, clearing his path to

Spike. The vampire had already used his talons to slice through the tentacle of the other creature holding him. That just left the two holding his legs. Freya was busy hacking at the other creatures, giving the boys all the time she could.

"Get a move on William. You should have been free by now. I expected more of one of the Line of Aurelius," she teased gleefully while decapitating another hapless creature.

Spike growled in annoyance.

Meanwhile Ernie and the rest of the gang could see that the tide had turned against them. Sure, there were eleven of them not counting the critters, against three, and one of them human at that. But the lad appeared to be deranged, William was almost free and everyone knew what Rolf would do to the creature unfortunate enough to harm his grandmother, providing of course that Freya didn't inflict her own brand of harm. There were stories, unconfirmed of course, that she'd had a first husband who hadn't appreciated her properly. The tales of the vengeance called down on that gentleman caused grown demons to collapse weeping in their beer. Ernie did not intend to stick around to find out if they

were true. With a last tip of his hat to his erstwhile boss, he and the boys headed for quieter climes.

Xander grabbed Spike's hand, holding on tightly. The two creatures that still had his legs had apparently decided that all this noise and fuss was not worth it. If the meat meals were going to put up this much of a fight, it was time to leave.

Unfortunately for Spike, the creatures headed out in different directions.

"Bloody Hell!" he snarled, grabbing a well-placed tree root and exerting pull against the tug. What an embarrassing predicament. He refused to be done in this way.

Xander gave a squeak, although a very manly one, of fear. Thinking faster than he ever had before, the brunette quickly pulled out his trusty Swiss army knife and made a dive for the nearest critter and its tentacle, repeatedly stabbing at it with the tiny blade while emptying Spike's duster pockets of everything in hopes of finding a more suitable weapon.

"No pet, don't! Get the Hell away from it. It's poisonous!"

Spike cried as he struggled to hold onto his tree root.

"I'm not leaving you Spike!" Xander continued hacking away at the tentacle.

"In my boot, there's a knife in my boot!" Spike yelled.

Xander froze with a mental 'duh'. Of course, the knife in Spike's boot; throwing a chagrined look at the blonde, Xander grabbed the knife and chopped away at the limb with frenzied speed. The creature abruptly let go with a hissing sound of annoyance and lumbered into the woods.

Now freed, Spike made short work of the feeler trapping his other leg. He felt a warm hand grab his shoulder and lift him to his feet. The two men stared at each other, both breaking into their own version of the goofy grin before hugging and breaking apart to yell "Idiot, what the Hell did you think you were doing?" at each other and than hugging again.

"Boys! Focus!" snapped Freya as she held three of the more persistent creatures at bay.

Xander aimed his gun and snapped a few quick shots at

Big Mike who was now coherent enough to stand, albeit rather unsteadily on his own two hoofs. He glared at Xander and his pistol disdainfully before breaking into an evil and insane cackle.

Spike threw a worried look in the Crime Boss' direction. Insane cackles never boded well for those within hearing range; he'd learned that from Dru. Unfortunately they still had at least a dozen creatures to dispatch or remove so they could get out of here, never mind Big Mike and it didn't look good. Freya had slaughtered with gleeful abandon but she was slowing down.

She gave the vampire a rueful smile. "Not as young as I used to be, either that or they're making these things tougher."

Spike returned the smile, "Definitely tougher luv." He glanced at Xander and caught the young man's eye. Xander gave him his patent pending shrug with the eye roll before smiling trustingly. Spike felt his heart twist a bit; his Xander, always trusting to luck with an innocence that the vampire found endearing. Spike winked back.

The trio set themselves back to back while Freya began a muttered incantation under her breath. Big Mike's ears

pricked up and he gave a scornful laugh.

"You can't harm me or my creatures with spells you old bag." he rasped.

Freya finished the spell and gave the Crime Boss a cold smile. "My aren't you self-centred, who said anything about you?"

There was a sudden boom and a brilliant sparkler erupted over the clearing, falling to earth and dissipating with a thousand little pops. Xander laughed; it was like being surrounded by champagne bubbles and even Spike gave a small smile. He had no idea what she'd done but he was willing to trust the old bird.

"Very pretty," Mike sneered. He was looking worse by the minute, the toll of trying to hold control over the remaining creatures obviously taking its toll.

"Thank you," Freya gave a gracious nod.

Spike heard them coming; the demons nearly silent, the humans like a pack of elephants. The combined forces of the commandos and Rolf's clan burst into the clearing on all sides. Those that attempted to attack Big Mike were

thrown several feet. It seemed that while the spell lasted Mike was impervious to direct harm.

Riley gave a cheerful wave at Xander, which the young man returned. He gave Spike a swift elbow to the side and Spike gave a grudging, "Hey," to the young captain.

The small army easily dispatched the last of the creatures and ended facing Big Mike, his back to the river, the book still clutched tightly in his hands.

"Surrender Mike, you've lost. The spell will fade soon and you are defenceless. If you give up now, I promise you a fair trial." Rolf offered. Frankly, he didn't think they'd need to worry about a trial. It was obvious the loathsome creature was dying but a cornered rat could still be dangerous so Rolf offered and hoped to buy them time.

Mike gave a gurgling laugh, hacking and spitting before pointing a bony finger at Spike. "Do you think you've won? You're wrong, I'll have my revenge on you and your little toy, on all of you!" He gestured wildly before opening the book a final time to a previously marked page. "One last spell; I won't go alone!"

Spike cocked an eyebrow at the frothing demon although

a shiver of fear ghosted down his spine. Xander leaned in and whispered, "He's a bit over the top isn't he?"

Xander realized things had taken a nasty turn and took Spike's hand. Spike looked down at their entwined fingers and then up into the face of the man he loved. He opened his mouth to offer himself to the Crime Boss in return for the lives of the others present but a soft touch on his other hand stopped him.

He blinked and looked into Freya's warm eyes that seemed to say 'trust me'.

Big Mike began to recite his final spell; the soldiers looked uncomfortable, Riley looked at Spike and Xander standing calmly and gave Graham and his men a reassuring look. Rolf and the Clan stood mute and impassive and Freya hid the smile dancing in her eyes.

Mike remained oblivious to the lack of tension in the clearing as his voice rose higher as he chanted the spell. Xander winced as he hit a particularly high note; that sounded painful.

Mike held the book aloft, about to utter the final words of the spell when he finally noticed the somewhat

relaxed attitude of his audience. They should be shaking in fear or at least confusion. Where was the terror, where was the begging for mercy, dammit where was the horror at the knowledge of their impending doom? Instead they all seemed focused on some sight over his shoulder. The looks on their faces ranged from shock to awe to a kind of gleeful wonder. Mike sneered, like he was going to fall for that old trick.

"Incoming!" Spike yelled at the last possible second as he yanked Xander down to the ground. He heard the others diving for the jungle floor as well.

Big Mike's final shriek was abruptly cut off and a great rushing wind buffeted the assembly. Yet it was not so loud that Riley and the others didn't hear Maurice's cry of "Victoire!" followed by Yvette's agreeable though slightly muffled, 'Squawk!'

"Incoming?" Xander asked dryly. "You've always wanted to say that haven't you?" He dusted himself off as Spike helped him to his feet.

Spike gave an agreeable shrug, "Well yeah, I admit it. I have." He turned to Freya who was being helped to her feet by Rolf and Riley.

"And you, you old reprobate, remind me never to play cards with you. Always got an ace up your sleeve luv?" Spike gave the old demoness an admiring look.

"Just because some people choose to plan rather than rush in blindly," she said primly.

"You could have warned me, Grandmother," Rolf grumbled.

"Well, I didn't want to ruin the surprise and we might not have needed them." Freya gave her grandson a pout and Xander had a sudden vision of Freya as a young woman, coquettish, too smart for her own good and headstrong; he and Spike shared a look of horror, "Dawn" they said together and gave a combined shudder.

"Got to keep an closer eye on the Nibblet pet." Spike said.

"Oh yeah, right with you on that Spike." Xander nodded in total agreement.

"Ma'am that was a fine use of tactics." Riley said respectfully.

Freya looked the tall young man up and down before smiling broadly. "Why thank you young man. I don't believe I caught your name."

"Riley Finn ma'am with Special Ops. Ah, we met your grandson earlier." Riley answered diffidently.

"Ah yes, you're the gentlemen who captured William. Shame on you," she scolded lightly.

"Yes, ma'am we've had the error of our ways explained to us." Riley said contritely.

"Hear, does that mean I'm free to go then?" Spike piped up.

"Yes, Spike, completely. No hard feelings?" Riley held a hand out to the blonde. Spike stared at it for a moment before shaking it briefly. Xander gave him a proud smile to which Spike rolled his eyes.

Spike looked around at the soldiers and demons mulling about in the clearing. "Pet, I think I need a vacation." He threw his arm over Xander's shoulder. "Let's go home."

Xander kissed him softly, "Sound's good to me."

"Oh yeah," Spike breathed as Xander ended the kiss without releasing his hold on the blond. "Pet?" Spike whispered the air tickling Xander's ear.

"Yes Spike?" Xander gently stroked the vampire, wishing they were somewhere more private.

"Can I have me duster back?" Spike nipped at the brunette's neck playfully.

Xander licked delicately at the spot just behind Spike's ear causing the vampire to shudder. "Nope."

"Oi pet!" Spike whined.

"Yeah, well maybe you'll think more carefully next time before throwing yourself out windows and yelling 'top of the world ma'. I mean, what was that?" Xander adjusted the duster carefully.

"I was being self sacrificing and heroic you git!" Spike huffed, before folding his arms petulantly.

Xander raised an eyebrow in an uncanny imitation of his

boyfriend. "I'll think about it."

Spike stared hard at his boyfriend before an evil glint lit his eyes. "Gee, I sure hope Yvette's digested all of Big Mike before we have to get on board. Hate to find pieces of the stupid git under the seat cushions and all."

"Ewww!"

Spike chortled happily.

Part Twenty-Five

Spike was tapping his foot impatiently because of course after having been rescued he and Xander had to go through the entire farewell scenario yet again. He was all for grabbing a canoe and paddling upriver to the clearing and Maurice and Yvette but oh no. He and Xander were trapped here until Nualla could make sure that Rosie's daddy was okay.

As Xander was still annoyed with him for bringing up the possible distribution of Big Mike's remains, Spike was amusing himself by watching Finn's total obliviousness to the fact that Freya was flirting with him. The young captain was being his polite Iowa boy self, saying yes ma'am and no ma'am and offering the older demon some cool water from his canteen. And wasn't the old bird eating it up? Spike hadn't seen the like in years and Finn hadn't a clue. His friend Graham did though. Spike hid a smirk and almost felt sorry for the soldier; he seemed an all right sort. The vampire wondered if Miller was even aware of why he was acting like a sullen sod, probably not.

He observed Freya as Graham interrupted and asked to speak with Riley for a moment. The captain excused himself politely as he followed his friend to the other side of the clearing. Freya's lips twisted in a small smile and Spike laughed out loud, earning him a few wary looks from the mix of demons and humans. Why the old goat; she knew exactly what was going on and was playing the boys like well-worn instruments. She frowned at the grinning vampire but the frown didn't hold for long and the two creatures shared an understanding look; they were demons after all and a little human baiting went with the territory.

Xander came ambling up to his wayward boyfriend. He'd decided that the blond had been sufficiently chastised for his teasing and besides; Xander was bored. He'd just answered some decidedly strange questions from a couple of the soldiers about whether or not he thought their help was actually needed to rescue the trio. A few more soldiers had joined the discussion and after much hemming and hawing it was decided that no, Freya seemed to have the situation well in hand although the small army of soldiers and demons were an added bonus. The entire discussion had confused the young man mightily along with the large amount of money exchanging hands between the various soldiers so he decided to seek out his vampire and magnanimously forgive him.

"Hey, I've decided to forgive you." Xander plunked down on the log next to the vampire.

Spike rolled his head to the side and sceptically raised his eyebrows before whirling his index finger in the air.

"Whoopee! I can die happy now."

Xander gently whacked him across the back of the head; earning him a glare and a muttered, "Give us a cigarette

than, if you're going to be such a wanker."

Xander extracted a cigarette and put it in his own mouth to light it before handing it over to the vampire. Spike licked his lips lightly as he watched the brunette suck lightly on the cigarette before offering it to him.

Xander caught the gesture and snorted, "You've got a one track mind, you know that?"

Spike shrugged and leered in return. He was about to suggest something completely inappropriate when Nualla and Rosie arrived. He and Xander found themselves engulfed in five foot one inches of mothering sprite. Spike was kissed and than smacked for being a heroic idiot and than kissed again before she turned on Xander.

The young man allowed himself to be hugged warily, "You're not going to smack me are you?" Nualla simply laughed through her tears. "No, but you can hold the baby for me while I see to this idiot." Nualla handed a chortling Rosie to the wary human before turning to Spike.

"Oh Goddess I saw the whole thing. I was so scared for

you both. Are you all right, oh look at your poor wrists." She held onto Spike's hands, "Don't worry I've brought plenty of salve and ointment. Rolf?"

"Yes sweet," Rolf managed to utter before the sprite jumped up and attached herself like a limpet to the large demon. He suffered through numerous kisses before setting his wife gently on her feet.

"You are so brave." She hugged his arm before motioning to Spike. The vampire grumbled but was shoved forward by Xander into the sprite's waiting arms. "I am so proud to be your wife." She gave each man a teary eyed look before Freya handed her a handkerchief to dry her eyes. "Thank you Freya. You were wonderful." Freya preened delicately.

"It's a good thing someone thinks ahead," Nualla said dryly with a wry glance at the young men.

"Well, enough of this, let's get you fixed up." Nualla turned to soldiers and demons who were busy trying not to stare at the blue whirlwind in their midst. "Does anyone else need medical attention?" She noted several of the soldiers had burns from the poison of the tree creatures as well as numerous cuts and scraps, which

they were patching up themselves.

She waved at one young soldier, "No, no sweetie I have some salve here that will fix that right up and won't leave a scar." The young soldier blinked in shock at being addressed in such a manner. Nualla didn't seem to notice because she was busy fussing over a very embarrassed William the Bloody.

"Here now, pet leave off," he hissed. "It'll heal on its own." He attempted to disengage his hands while simultaneously glaring at a snickering Rolf and fascinated Riley.

"Don't make a fuss William." Nualla scolded.

"Yeah, don't make a fuss," Xander tried to keep a straight face. He was failing miserably.

"There, all finished." Nualla patted him consolingly before turning to the young soldier.

"Ma'am I'm..." He began but Nualla simply smiled, "No need to thank me." She quickly wrapped his arm. "Who's next?"

Sven got a wicked look in his eye and pointed to Graham. "This little one's hurt as well."

Graham fumed at the tall demon, who gave him a 'what' look? Riley laughed at his annoyed friend who lost his battle to stave off the helpful sprite.

"Miller, let the lady fix up that hand, that's an order." Riley shook his head and stared around the clearing at the assembled creatures. Xander was bouncing a little baby on his knee; a cute little thing that obviously had Spike wrapped around her little fingers. The vampire had given up on trying to maintain his reputation as the Big Bad and instead opted to enjoy Xander and the baby's company. Riley sighed softly, lucky man.

Rolf was watching his wife flit about patching up people with a tolerant and loving look on his face. He glanced at William and Xander playing with the baby. He'd been pleasantly surprised at William's selfless actions in the battle. He'd always known that the vampire was different, though like all his kind he had a wild streak that was not conducive to peaceful coexistence with other species. But he seemed to have changed, and for the better in the last few years. Of course a great deal of that had to do with the chip.

Rolf had discovered that little fact after his visit to Sunnydale. He'd never discussed it with Nualla and was unsure whether she knew or simply chose not to mention it in deference to William's feelings.

Rolf was of the opinion, that personal feelings aside, no demon should be left defenceless in a world of humans. Humans were simply too dangerous and changeable and today's events had borne that opinion out. He nodded to himself thoughtfully; perhaps he should look into this matter for William, besides, he could hold such a favor over the vampire's head for quite a long time. Rolf laughed softly to himself.

"Well Spike, this has been quite an adventure." Xander stifled a yawn. "I'll be happy to get home though. Of course we still have to figure out how we're going to tell the gang about us. Do you think we should ease into it or blurt it out all at once?"

"Won't have to say anything pet, told you, Angel's already told them." Spike tickled Rosie who blew a bubble in appreciation.

"No he didn't," Xander snorted, rubbing Rosie's back.

"Did."

"Didn't"

"Did." Spike rolled his eyes.

Xander pulled out a twenty, "Put your money where your mouth is."

"I'd rather put my mouth somewhere else, pet." Spike leered affectionately.

Xander leaned over and kissed the blonde, "One track mind."

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After numerous assurances from Maurice that they would not be finding little bits of Big Mike scattered throughout the cabin, that Yvette wouldn't even think of eating such a disgusting little creature and that he had been deposited somewhere deep in the jungle where he could rejoin the local ecosystem, Xander finally agreed to come on board.

Maurice's assurances, however, did not stop Spike from teasing Xander until the young human threatened the duster.

"Yeah, I'm thinking Dawn's always had her eye on this coat." Xander gave Spike a knowing look. "And I think we all know what happens to a man's clothing once a woman gets her hands on it. You'll never get this duster back." Xander smirked.

Spike eyed his human with trepidation and a touch of respect before sidling up next to him. "You wouldn't."

"Oh, I think I would." Xander petted the coat, flicking off a tiny speck of dirt. "You better be nice to me."

Spike leaned into the taller man, grasping the front of the coat and pulling Xander closer. "I can't wait to show you just how 'nice' I can be." Spike leered before licking his boy's neck.

Xander retaliated by nipping at his vampire's ear.

"Excusez moi gentlemen we are about to take off so please, no standing hanky panky." Maurice shook his

finger at the young men before gesturing to their seats.

Xander blushed bright red and Spike cursed under his breath. Bloody Hell, were they never going to get any time alone?

Xander heaved a sigh before turning and giving Spike a rueful smile. "Can you just imagine how much worse this is going to be at home?"

Spike groaned.

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They arrived in Mexico and once again landed for refuelling. Xander wanted to get another soda and prodded a grumpy Spike into following him inside. But first, they had to unwrap the vampire, so to speak. Nualla had bandaged every cut, no matter how slight on both of her boys and whereas Xander could care less who saw him; Spike absolutely refused to be seen in public looking like he'd been in a fight.

"But you have been in a fight." Xander argued.

"Yeah, all right but I can't look all soft like. What kind of Master Vampire lets himself be coddled, I ask you?" Spike grumbled while making a mess unravelling bandages. "Are you gonna help me get these off or what?"

Xander slapped the blonde's hands away and neatly snipped the remaining wrappings off.

"Gee I don't know, the kind of Master Vampire who has a wife that loves him and worries about him?" Xander groused. "Idiot."

Maurice stood by patiently and listened to the grumbling with a small smile on his furry face.

Spike finally fell silent as Xander made his way to the door.

"Well, you coming or what?" Xander said adjusting his now definitely worse for wear Panama hat at a rakish angle.

Spike didn't answer and Xander looked back to find the vampire agitatedly twisting his thumb ring.

"What's up Blondie?" Xander asked, grasping Spike's hands. "All right, you can have the coat back." Spike didn't answer, instead finally twisting the thumb ring off.

"It's not that, although I will take my coat back." Spike said quickly before dropping his eyes and holding the ring out to Xander.

"I figure you should be wearing something of mine since I can't bite you and claim you proper like." Spike said shyly.

Xander took the ring with a brilliant smile. His hands were bigger than Spike's slender ones but he managed to slip the ring on one finger. He looked up from admiring the ring to find Spike giving him one of his real smiles. Xander gave a sudden whoop and picked the smaller man up, swinging him around twice before setting him down and engaging in a serious 'thank you' kiss.

He flashed the ring at a grinning Maurice.

"I am officially going steady with William the Bloody." Xander kissed Spike again before handing the vampire his beloved duster.

Spike snorted, "Vampires don't go steady." Xander pouted slightly.

"Right, we're going steady, dating exclusively and all that, happy?" Spike rolled his eyes at the human who was once again all smiles.

"Yes, let's go find some caffeine." Xander called over his shoulder as he tried to slide down the airline stair rail. He lost his balance and nearly toppled over but Spike casually reached out an arm and grabbed him, sighing loudly.

"Thanks Spike," Xander grinned repentantly as they made their way down the stairs.

There was a low purr and the lights dimmed briefly.

"I agree, mon cher, they are a sweet couple. Ah amour!" The instrumental strains of "It Had to Be You" began to play softly from the speakers. Maurice laughed and hummed in accompaniment as he watched the two youngsters make their way across the tarmac.

"I hope their other families are understanding as well."

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The rest of the flight was uneventful. Spike and Xander snuggled under one blanket and dozed. Spike tried to get fresh several times and Xander allowed a certain amount of roving hands before putting his foot down. He was not going to fool around inside Yvette. There was something just squiggy about that. He was however, not averse to some serious kissing.

Spike was frustrated and impressed by the amount of steel his human could show if the situation warranted it. When Xander said no, he meant it but Spike still had fun trying to change his mind and so was relatively content until the flight touched down, one hour before dawn at the Sunnydale airport.

Xander blinked, looking out the windows before turning to Spike with a look of confusion.

"How did we manage to get back here so quickly and never mind it's a magical thing right?" Spike yawned, scratched at his chest and cocked an eyebrow in response to Xander's question.

Xander gave a startled gasp, suddenly leaning forward in his seat. "Hey, the gang's out there!" He blinked quickly and rubbed his eyes in disbelief. "Hey, Angel's out there!"

"Ha, vindicated!" Spike pumped a fist into the air.

Xander continued to shake his head in disbelief. "Demons must be the worst gossips. I mean what did someone do, as soon as you declared they ran down to the tavern phone and called Angel?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Spike shrugged.

Xander threw up his hands in disgust. "Well fine then, at least one of us was prepared for this event so go to it. I'll let you do all the talking."

"What talking? We walk down there and we tell them we're dating and they can like or lump it." Spike huffed.

"Yeah, that's gonna go over real well with the girls, uh huh." Xander snorted.

"Well what do you wanna do, lie about it?" Spike snapped back, very unsure and not wanting to show it.

Xander reached over and gently smacked his head, "No Oh Blonde Menace. Per the old adage, how do you get more flies?"

Spike blinked, "Lots of dead bodies bloated by the sun?" he answered hesitantly, fairly sure that wasn't what his human meant and judging by the look of disgusted amazement on Xander's face, he was right.

"I've got to remember who I'm talking to," Xander muttered under his breath before saying, "No, you get more flies with honey than with vinegar."

"Oh yeah, right," Spike nodded.

"So we go down there, tell them we're dating, ask Willow and Tara for help since we're both so new to the whole gay scene, you know." Xander gestured widely. "We ask Anya for advice."

Spike guffawed. Xander glared.

"Or something. We let Dawn coo over us and show Giles that actually we're a very mature couple." Xander finished confidently.

"And Angel?" Spike asked.

"I think if we can promise Angel that you and I won't accidentally bring about the Apocalypse, he'll probably leave us alone."

Spike looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding his head. "Might work."

Yvette came to a graceful halt on the tarmac. Spike stood, offering a hand to Xander. They gathered their belongings and patiently waited for Maurice.

The jaunty pilot appeared to see them off. Xander threw both his arms around the large demon giving him a tremendous hug.

"Thank you so much and please, don't be a stranger."
Xander's eyes were suspiciously bright as he looked up to the ceiling. "You either Yvette, and thank you again, both of you, for saving our lives. You're the best."

There was a low rumble in reply and Maurice clapped the young human on both shoulders.

"Yvette and I were happy to be of service. It was like the old days and a grand adventure."

Maurice turned to the vampire who was doing his best to look cool. "And you my friend, don't be a stranger. You know how to get in touch with us. Do not hesitate to call." He gave the vampire two quick kisses on the cheeks before stepping back and saluting smartly as the door opened to the airline stairs. "Gentlemen, au revoir!"

Xander and Spike turned to the door took a deep breath and clasped hands as they headed down the stairs to face their respective families. Willow and Tara were smiling and Willow was waving wildly and nearly bouncing with excitement. Dawn was grinning from ear to ear and even Anya looked pleased.

"Well, doesn't look too bad." Xander commented in relief.

"Yeah, it doesn't, does it?" Spike agreed with a smirk.

"See we're all adults now and that's the key." Xander stood a little straighter. Spike squeezed his hand in agreement.

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"I see Xander's dressed in his usual sartorial splendour." Angel commented with a polite smile.

"Well he has been on vacation and it is nice to change one's look with the occasions." Giles returned glancing at Angel's customary black ensemble.

"What is it the boy does again? Some sort of manual labour was it?" Angel asked innocently.

"He's an excellent carpenter, very, very skilled with wood of all kinds. The pay's quite good." Giles replied. "I expect that will come in handy for Spike." Giles added with false helpfulness.

Giles gritted his teeth as Xander tripped on the stairs and Spike steadied him. Angel coughed to cover a laugh.

"Did I mention that Xander is in line for a promotion?" Giles snapped.

"Did I mention that Will speaks Greek as well as Latin?"

Angel studied his nails.

"Only those two?" Giles returned politely.

"Well aside from French of course. We aren't barbarians after all."

Angel and Giles exchanged razor sharp smiles.

"See even Giles and Angel are getting along." Xander waved, happy to be home at last.

The End