

*Standard disclaimers apply.*

*A/N : A plot bunny at the Spander Files sparked a memory and between the two, this storyline was spawned.*

*A/N2 : This fic exists in an AUish early season five where Xander is out and he and Spike have a "sports and pool at the Bronze" sort of quasi-friendship.*

# **Predators**

by

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## **It Takes One**

Xander paused at the front door readying himself. It was a big step.

"What's wrong, Baby? I promise not to embarrass you or have them thinking I'm not good enough."

"What, no, of course not." He blushed, ashamed that his hesitation could have made Darren feel that way.

"You're great, they'll love you! I've just never introduced someone to the Scoobies, as the Scoobies, and it seems like a bigger step than meeting them

individually and you have met over half of them indi-"  
His words were cut off by a firm kiss.

"Well, I guess I can only hope that they do love me, huh? I get a little nervous with 'meet the parents' type deals. I hate feeling like a relationship is being decided by folks outside of it."

Xander blushed harder. "It's not like that at all. They're important to me and you're important to me, so it's important to me that you get along, but there's no... you know, veto power or anything like that. All decisions made by us, guaranteed."

He was rewarded by a soft smile from his boyfriend and another gentle kiss. "Thanks, Baby, I needed to hear that."

Another moment of dithering and psyching up was interrupted when one of the muffled voices from inside was suddenly raised loud enough for them to hear "...since they are standing **right outside the bleeding door** as the pizza cools!"

Torn between laughter and an embarrassed cough, Xander opened the door and stepped in with an obviously unneeded knock. "And I guess that's our cue, thanks Spike, that wasn't at all annoying or pushy."

The bleached blond flipped him off British style with one hand while using the other to grab a slice of the aforementioned pizza, now left unguarded by Willow's

move to greet the latecomers. "Bad enough to be spending time with the White Hat Brigade, not gonna be put off of my brekkies any longer than needed."

Xander rolled his eyes while giving a more American bird and then turned to the rest of the room with enthusiasm. "Everybody, this is my boyfriend, Darren. Darren, you've met Willow and Buffy..."

"Yeah you said Buffy was a slayer?"

"The Slayer," she corrected with a grin. "Singular."

"And rarely doub-ular... which isn't a word, and only happened because of the drowning thing, but that's not the issue, Riley here is Buffy's boyfriend and used to be with that Initiative group I told you about, but he's a good one, the lovely and witchy Tara is Willow's girl, Anya here has a complicated past but consults with us on a lot of things..."

"And Xander used to give me very good orgasms."

"Yes, that's exactly the way you should greet my boyfriend, Ahn, but the Xan-man prepared for this contingency with that little thing we humans call 'private conversation'..."

"Humans?"

"She is now, I explained that. Giles is Buffy's Watcher and our all around mentor and patriarch..."

"It's an honor to meet you, Sir."

"Why, yes, thank you, I'm quite pleased Xander has found someone he wants to bring into the family as it were."

"And the Dawnster here is Buffy's little sister and should slow down on the pizza before she gets the hiccups."

"Whatever, I can handle my pizza better than you! Hi Darren, you should have worn that green sweater you had on at the mall that time, it totally set off your eyes."

"Heh, thanks, Dawn... So, uh... who's the Billy Idol fan?"

"Oi!" The disgruntled vamp returned from the kitchen with a mug in his non pizza holding hand. "That tosser-"

"...stole the look from you, yeah, yeah, we know, Bleachie. This is Spike, he's... um... Spike." At the offended roll of the eyes, Xander added, "He's kinda an independent contractor to the gang, I guess you could say, rather than a real Scooby... Which leads me to ask why he's here tonight, I thought this was a general purpose meeting, no serious threats on the horizon?"

"Watcher had some blood he owed me and when I got here there was pizza." He dipped the latter into the former and took a bite, smirking slightly at the chorus of feminine 'ew's that followed.

Darren made a small sound that came close to 'ew' itself. "Uh, blood?"

"Harris didn't mention? I'm a vampire, mate." As an illustration, he dropped his game face, took a swig of blood and morphed back as he licked a stray drop from the corner of his mouth.

"SPIKE!" Most of the room got in on the yell as Xander busied himself guiding a very pale boyfriend to a chair.

"Yes, Spike's a vampire but he's..." A series of words ran through his mind, examining and rejecting 'good' 'harmless' 'nice' and 'neutered'. "...not able to hurt humans. So he drinks bottled blood and gets his violence fix helping us pound demons once in a while."

"Well, that's... um... kinda cool actually. Fighting fire with fire and stuff. Um, can you turn into a bat?"

Various snorts, giggles and dignified explanations ensued as Spike's face became hilarious to Xander for it's sheer lack of emotion.

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"So, shagging this bloke's got you too busy for the Bronze lately, eh?" The vampire's calm blue eyes were following Darren around the room as he got to know those Scoobies he hadn't really met yet and charmed Dawn silly. Xander had been trying to walk the line between hovering and abandoning, but he had to admit his boyfriend's social skills were more than up to the challenge.

"I'm not too busy just 'shagging' him, Fangless, we have a really good relationship and do a lot of stuff together. You'll just have to find someone else to sucker into pool bets for a while."

"No shortage of candidates..."

"Xander!" Slayer hearing brought Buffy from across the room to defend his honor. "You're betting on pool with the bleached menace? I'm sure he cheats!"

"Buff, he's been playing pool or billiards or whatever they used to call it for over a hundred years, do you really think he needs to cheat to beat me?" He grinned at Spike's complimented smirk. "And trust me, I'm not dumb enough to make real bets, we just play for the drinks while he sizes up serious marks. Saves him the bother of stealing my wallet when it's 'his turn'. But it is sweet that he's been missing me."

Xander laughed at the rolled eyes, and the grumbled, "How would you cheat at pool anyway, 'cept maybe mojo..." then went to check on how Darren and Riley were getting along.

Darren and Riley got along great, Giles was impressed by a college student with some manners, Anya thought he was an acceptable source of new orgasms for Xander and even Tara had emerged from behind her hair to exchange a few words with him. Overall, Xander

was feeling pretty good about the night as he watched his boyfriend say his goodbyes.

"All things to all people, eh?" He jumped, but before he could make his traditional 'bell' threat, the vampire had gone on in a low tone. "So who is he to himself? The new boytoy is bad news, Harris. Run far, run fast, don't give him a forwarding address."

And before he could even think of a reply, Spike was gone in his customary swirl of black leather.

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"Wowser, he actually had the nerve to say that to you? I mean, seriously, rude much?"

Xander snickered as he polished off his french fries.

"This is Spike we're talking about, Buffy, of course he's rude." He leaned back on the grass of the quad and considered Willow's fries with a marked lack of subtlety. "I'm more curious what would make him think something like that."

"Eyes off the spuds, buster, you had your chance to order a large." Willow looked intently at her burger to avoid any accidental contact with the puppy eyes as she considered the topic. "Anyway, you're assuming that he really does think that instead of just saying it for whatever nefarious purpose. I mean, last time he was handing out personal insights, it was to try to break us all up so that Adam could kill Buffy,

remember? Maybe he just wants to stop you from being happy, since that kind of low grade evil is the only sort he can get up to. Or he doesn't like seeing new people in the Scooby Gang. Or he thinks he'll be able to mooch off you less..."

"M-maybe he's jealous?" Tara suggested quietly, causing simultaneous spit takes from Xander and Riley.

"Jealous?" Xander spluttered as Buffy endangered her boyfriend's ribs with well meant but Slayer-strength slaps to the back. "Even if Spike isn't straight, or possibly Dru-sexual, I don't think he's pining for the donut boy. Come on, guys, even Darren is dating down and we all know it." Before the girls could jump in with well meant but insincere rebuttals, he continued. "And besides, Spike was fine when I had those dates with Charles, and I think he was even more disappointed than I was when Sandson left town. Those two were all bonding over The True Roots Of Punk or something."

Riley made a face, though whether it was over punk or the thought of Spike bonding was unclear. "Of course even if he did mean it, why should you care? He's a soulless monster, remember? Not exactly where you want to look for valid relationship insights."

Xander snickered, Willow nodded. Buffy... frowned.

"Well, I don't know about that. I mean, Spike *was* the one who pushed me and Angel into ending things

senior year when we had spent months fooling ourselves..."

"Spike broke up you and Angel?" Riley obviously had no idea how to deal with that tidbit.

"Right," Willow munched a fry contemplatively. "When you guys were running around fighting the Mayor's thugs that time that me and Xander were trapped in the warehouse..." She and Xander suddenly found very interesting things to look at far, far away from each other.

"Yeah, we were holed up in a store and Spike just got really annoyed at all the unresolved sexual tension." She blushed slightly at Riley but he nodded for her to continue. "And we fed him the same line we'd been feeding everyone else and ourselves about being friends and he totally mocked us. Told us flat out that love wasn't something you could settle with your brains, and we could fight or 'shag' or hate all we wanted but we'd be in love until it killed us both and **never** be friends. Then he got all drunkenly self righteous and said that he might be Love's Bitch, but at least he was man enough to admit it."

Willow and Tara giggled and Xander couldn't help but grin. "He totally is, too. He tells me stories sometimes about the good old days with him and Dru and I swear he doesn't even realize how whipped he was. If she'd

told him she wanted him to have a soul like Angel, he'd have shown up on Ms. Calendar's doorstep with one of those magic orbs and the hearts of her enemies."

Riley blinked and visibly put that image aside. "But he was right, Buffy? About you and Angel?"

"At the time, yeah." She contemplated her Diet Coke, but it didn't appear to have any secrets of the universe to share with her. "I think we could make a go at friendship eventually, but that year? We were playing chicken with our hearts, and it was gonna end badly if something hadn't changed. And Spike spent a couple of hours with us when we were distracted by him and those other vamps and worrying about Xander and Willow and cut right to the heart of it."

"E-even when he was trying to separate you guys that one time... He wasn't exactly wrong." Tara twisted her sandwich wrapper between her hands and peeked at Xander from under her hair. "He used the cracks in your relationships to make things worse, but... h-he had to see them to do that, before any of you a-acknowledged them..."

"Hmmm..." Xander casually took some of Buffy's fries while she was still in Angel-land. "Okay, so I guess we can put 'weirdly insightful' on the list of Spike's super-villain powers, right above 'incredibly annoying' and

below 'ridiculously durable'. But that brings me back to square one on what to do with the advice."

"Maybe just... remember it?" Riley suggested. "I don't think anyone, even Seven- er Spike, would expect you to dump the guy on his say so. But what he said about Darren being all things to all people - sounds like he thinks that his reactions to all of us were conscious manipulations. So just be a little more aware of Darren and try to tell for yourself if he's just nice and outgoing or if he's pushing people, including you, into things."

"A-and protect yourself." As soon as she had spoken, Tara blushed, but forced herself on. "I mean, you two are at a... a point in your relationship where people sometimes make commitments they aren't really ready for. Don't... you know, b-burn bridges with your family and move to the other side of the country with no job and count on him to support you and the baby... or- or, you know, anything like that..."

After a brief pause to wonder if this was insight into the shy witch's family history or evidence of too many Lifetime Original Films, he nodded. "Right then. I am actively aware and independence maintaining man. Though Darren's hints that I would save money chipping in on his rent and be more comfortable than in the Basement of Doom have been tempting... Are you going to finish those fries, Ri?"

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Spike quietly considered his chances if things went bad. There were three of them, which meant that they could flank him pretty easily, but they were slow and noisy, so if they went for an ambush, he'd likely avoid it. Still, they seemed like the type to drink a little more and decide money lost at pool could be taken back with fists and it was somehow righteous...

"Come on, baby, your shot." ...and the fact that the girl they came in with had been practically climbing inside his duster wasn't helping. He might be better off if they just flat out refused to pay up, he mused while quickly and efficiently wrapping up the game.

"Right then, mates, we done here? Just that it's a little late to go 'double or nothing' **again**..." He slipped past the clinging tart and reached for the pile of money on the table, but not too fast. As much as it burned his pride, it was better to back down with the money in their hands. Getting beaten up by the Happy Meals wasn't any better on his pride, after all.

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you?" Great, three hours of truly expert hustling, winning the games by just enough that they were sure they could take him next time and he was going back to the crypt broke and with a reputation as a pushover. "Well, little English faggots may like to string things out and then walk off, but-

"But you're going to introduce him to the Great American tradition of welshing on bets instead?" Spike tried not to smirk too much when he felt Harris ease casually into a defensive posture beside him.

Xander gave his patented disarming goofy grin to the group of frat boys as he slipped between Spike and little Slutty McShortSkirt. "Though I suppose that would be more of a Welsh tradition... Do you suppose that the term 'welshing' is offensive to the people of Wales, like 'gyp' or 'indian giver'?"

"Dunno, pet," he could hear the grin in the vamp's voice as the guys in front of them went from aggressive to defensive to vaguely confused. "Had an aunt married a Welshman, but they're both passed so I can't ask them. Not to worry though, sure these blokes weren't planning on backing out of the bet, seeing as they were the ones insisted on the last game..." A hint of menace crept into his tone, and Xander knew while it was partly bluff, they had a decent shot at the guys together. Spike couldn't hurt them, but he could dodge, distract, push a punch away while putting a dizzying spin on the attacker or just take a hit knowing he'd heal, all keeping the human safe enough to go on pure offense.

"Fine, take your money, buy your boyfriend a drink. We're out of here." Gathering the tatters of their

dignity (and their bimbo) the three stalked out while Spike collected a rather impressive pile of cash off the pool table.

"Could do that, seems, beer or Coke, Xander?" And if the use of his name and a drink was as much gratitude as vampire ego was capable of giving a human, well... he was okay with that, really.

"Coke's good, thanks." He knelt to pick up the duffel bag he'd set to the side when preparing to rumble and Spike gave it an assessing look as he flagged down a waitress and flirted for drinks.

When they'd had a seat, the vamp nodded to the bag.

"Going somewhere, Whelp? Holiday with the boytoy?"

"No. No holiday, and no more boy, though it looks like I was the toy." Xander glared into his soda. "And no more basement, which is all your fault, I might add."

When he merely got an inquisitive eyebrow raise, he sighed and gave in. "Fine it's not exactly your fault, because Darren was the one who 'accidentally' outed me to my parents when he couldn't push me to do it myself, then was all hero with the apartment that he'd coincidentally really wanted me to move into already... but it's your fault that I was actually paying attention to the manipulation and said no and am thus single and homeless instead of financially and emotionally dependent on a user but with a roof over my head!"

Spike took a long pull on his drink. "Sure you didn't want the beer?"

"No, kinda need a clear head at the moment..."

"Amount those tossers of parents charged you for the dank hole, you should be able to afford a real place. Still working construction, yeah?"

"Yeah, and my boss had mentioned before that he could get me into an apartment in one of the buildings we're working on without putting down last or security right away, so it's mostly a matter of staying out of the rain until Monday. But the girls are in LA for the weekend and Riley is, well..."

"A homophobic wanker?"

Xander worked hard to keep his Coke going down the right pipe. "He's not that bad, he was even helping out with relationship advice last week, but when it comes to the whole 'can I sleep in your room' thing, yeah could be a bit much for him."

Spike grinned. "After you get a proper flat, I'll burn down his place, and you can offer to let him crash then do the whole 'Oh, no need to be squished on the couch, the bed is plenty big for two' thing!"

"Only you would casually include arson in a plan to make someone emotionally uncomfortable... Only you."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Harris. Come along, I'll pick the lock on the witches' dorm room, you know they'd let you stay if you could get in touch to ask."

"And this is me seizing on a weak justification for immoral behavior because I don't want to sleep in an alley..."

"Baby steps, we'll have you mugging little old ladies any day now." They joked their way to campus and by the time they were approaching the dorm, Xander got up the nerve to ask the question he'd been worrying since before he'd entered the Bronze.

"Spike, how did you... I mean, what made you say that Darren was bad news? He was, obviously, with the outing and the housing manipulation and the almost guilting me into breaking my sex timetable with his little 'I trust *you*, Baby, I just want to know it's not one sided' bullshit and whoa, watch the fangs and growlies, we're about to be in public!" He coughed and waited until the other man had shaken off his game face to continue. "But he was playing it really smooth that night and even Giles thought he was great, so I guess I'm just wondering what you saw that no one else did?" After a short pause at the dorm entrance to put out his cigarette, Spike gave an almost embarrassed sounding chuckle. "Suppose you could say it takes one to know one, mate." At the blank look, he laughed more

honestly while starting up the stairs. "Vampires are predators, yeah? But it's not always done with a smash and grab, fangs and claws. Dru liked pretty things, and I never minded taking arrogant snobs for a ride. We could walk into an exclusive invite only party and have everyone there honored to meet us even as they were embarrassed that they couldn't quite remember quite how we were connected. Make friends with some rich bloke and be living in his mansion in a day and accepting thanks from all his friends for watching his affairs while he was 'ill' within a week. Not hard to recognize the moves on some cub what's been doing it a twentieth as long, is it?"

"I guess not..." Xander kept watch while the cheap room lock was defeated and snatched up Miss Kitty before she could escape. Then he snorted softly.

"Seems Darren was more right than he knew about you being the 'fight fire with fire' guy of the group. I'm a little sorry I didn't believe you sooner, wasn't sure why you would say something like that." He grinned at the vampire in the doorway. "Tara thought you might have been jealous."

"Well, of course I am, mate. Jealous of all of them, aren't I?" He stared up, waiting for the punch line or the smirk to show it was a joke, but Spike just continued in a completely factual tone. "Still, better to

be jealous of someone who's good for you, yeah? Have a good night, Harris, I'll see you on patrol."

Xander stared at the closed door for quite a while before he could fall asleep.

## **2 Operation Kiss**

Xander dropped his end of the couch when they reached roughly the middle of the floor and promptly collapsed onto it. "Okay, I think I'm ready to declare Operation Con All My Friends' Parents Out Of Their Old Furniture a success." He looked at the eclectic jumble filling the living room and dining nook with exhausted pride.

"That's a horrible operation name," Riley complained from the floor by his end of the couch. "The operation name should be shorter than the mission statement."

"Yeah but Operation Mooch got used when he was gathering linens and dishes." Buffy was perched cheerfully on the matching armchair that she had carried herself, watching Willow and Tara trying to

organize mismatched kitchen chairs to look quirky rather than accidental.

Dawn looked up from her homework. "Maybe Operation Salvage? Since most of this stuff would be either at the dump or goodwill if mom had actually gotten around to it?"

"I stand by my operation name. I'm trying to introduce new thinking in literal naming. For instance, Operation Repair Slipped Discs Through Positive Visualization is beginning now."

"Aw, it's not that bad." Dawn abandoned her homework to come over and rub Xander's shoulders. "And you lift stuff all the time at work, this should be easy for you."

"We have a notable lack of stairs on the job sites. And I spend half my time doing paperwork these days."

"Poor Xander... Feels like you've still got plenty of muscles, though." Before her sister could be properly scandalized she sighed. "I just can't believe Darren turned out to be a weasel. He seemed so nice."

"Let this be a lesson to you, Dawnster. All men have the potential to be giant jerks and the only safe dating strategy is to remain celibate until you're thirty."

After giggling at Dawn's annoyance, Willow responded, "I can't believe Spike admitted that he recognized it from his own weasely ways."

"Yeah, well I can't believe he told me he- um, yeah the same thing Willow said..."

Buffy perked up with interest. "Xander?"

"So how about Dawn's future in a convent, is there a local one we should be considering?"

Willow also smelled blood in the waters.

"Xaaaaander..."

"Hey Ri, you want to help me set up the DVD player and cable box while the girls order some pizza?"

"Um, X-Xander, did Spike say something the th-the other night that you didn't... didn't tell us about?"

Crap, if Tara was joining in, he was pretty much doomed. He made one last heroic effort. "Well yeah, I mean obviously he said things I didn't tell you about, it's not like a complete transcript of the evening would have been very interesting, right?" Activate guileless puppy eyes... NOW!

"Yeah right." Damn, even Dawn wasn't falling for the puppy eyes tonight. He was off his game. "What **specifically** did he say that we **would** find very interesting and you know it?"

Sigh. "Fine, it wasn't like I was keeping it from you guys, I don't even know what he meant by it. I joked with him a little about how Tara thought he was jealous of Darren and, well, he basically said that yeah he was but that didn't have anything to do with his warning."

The three older girls looked interested and mildly concerned, Riley had his usual air of squick at the idea of a demon holding any non-evil feelings and Dawn... Dawn squealed with the joy of a teenaged girl who knows she will never marry either of her crushes but can now imagine increasingly unrealistic scenarios for them to live happily ever after together.

"Omigod! Spike wants to **date** you!"

Riley changed from squick to panic. "No! Spike can't want to date Xander, hostiles don't date, do they, and if he tries we can stake him, right?"

"Y-you can't stake Spike for liking Xander!" Tara looked offended. "He's sort of our ally, and he's good with Dawnie and- and Joyce would be angry."

"Guys, just calm down." Xander held his hands up for peace and was surprised to get it. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I'm at least ninety-five percent on Spike not wanting to date me. It was... weird, okay? He didn't say it like it was some big confession, he was totally casual like I should have already known it. And he said he had been jealous of all my boyfriends, but it was better to be jealous of someone he liked or something like that. I'm telling you, weird."

Weird was generally agreed on, and pizza ordered.

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The next night, Xander answered a knock just after sunset to find a chipped vampire with a cardboard box and a wary expression. "The Little Bit came by my crypt today and said she found more things you might want and would I bring them by for her once it was dark enough?" He glanced past the man in the doorway and sniffed slightly, seemingly looking for clues of what ambush or prank would follow such an obvious set up. "Huh. And did she say why she didn't just bring them herself?"

"Claimed that you lived in an unsafe part of town." The scorn for this excuse was clear.

"...And when you compared that to your part of town that she had walked to?"

"Said she could come through the graveyard in the daylight but it would be dark by the time you were here to take them from her."

"Right... and about Buffy and Willow having spare copies of my keys she could have borrowed?"

A slight smirk peeked through the wariness. "Pouted and said 'just take them to Xander, you poop head!' then flounced off."

Xander laughed out loud. "Flouncing, huh? Sounds serious. Come on in, no buckets of holy water whitewash over the door..." Spike gave a flash of a

smile and walked over to set the box on the coffee table.

"Nice little place, and the neighborhood actually isn't that bad - that Joyce's old couch?"

"Yeah, she and the Rosenbergs provided most of the furnishings. Bought the bed new on an installment plan though." He gestured towards the bedroom door, then blushed slightly. Not that he thought Spike would care how big and comfy his new bed was. Yeah. New conversation, stat! "So, let's see what the Dawnster was so eager to get to me, huh?"

Spike smirked and opened the box. "Hrm, we've got a toaster..." He glanced over at the one already sitting on the counter, "In case you need four slices of toast at once. A pasta strainer, 'cause the Bit knows you just can't cook enough, particularly non-meat meals... A whisk? And..." He held up a DVD of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and matched incredulous gazes with Xander. "Wow, was she even trying?" He took the box from the vampire and dumped it on the counter on his way to get a couple of beers. "Well, *since you're here...*" he snickered along with Spike as he handed him one of the bottles and poured chips into a bowl on the table. "I don't suppose Dawn mentioned the level of cable that came with the place?" He dangled the remote with a grin.

"Might have done. Something about 50 channels of sports alone?" He snatched the remote and started flipping.

"Okay, since I already know that there is an entire channel devoted to soccer, I'm gonna have to lay down a hard and fast rule here." He scowled at the openly skeptical look and elbowed his couch mate. "For each sport that LA does not have a professional team playing, you pick **one** team, and we watch your weird sports **only** when that team is involved! I already know one of them, we'll make a list of any others and keep it by the TV."

Spike made a great show of considering this then gave a bright smile. "Fair enough, mate. We getting pizza? I've still got some dosh from those wankers at the bar." "Sure I'm hungry- Wait, are you actually offering to pay, or was that some sneaky misdirection to get me to order, then you say *'just said I had dosh, didn't say I would spend it, did I?'* and smirk?"

Having been caught, the vampire skipped straight to the smirking. "Hadn't actually decided yet, but seeing as you're probably short of cash at the moment, I can spring just this once." Xander grinned as he went to the phone and checked out his pile of menus, turning his face to hide a laugh when he heard, "And that was a **horrible** imitation..."

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Two weeks later, the front door was kicked open to the accompaniment of grumbling.

"It's my apartment, I have the keys, you know."

"I know you're bleeding like a stuck pig, and I'm not wasting any time. Hold still." By the time the complaint and rebuttal were done, Xander was on the couch and Spike had torn open his pantleg, doused his own hands in alcohol and was opening a sutures packet from the "first aid" kit. Belonging to a Scooby, it was closer to a field medic's pack than the bandaids and triple antibiotic that most homes boasted.

"At least it missed the femoral artery, right? *Ow!* So just stitches, instead of micro surgery and *Ow!* transfusions for the Xan *Ow!* man." He grabbed a pillow to squeeze so he wouldn't jerk with each needle jab. "I know I was the one who voted for home stitching as closer and less paperwork than the ER, *Crap!* but some pain shots wouldn't have gone awry..."

"Just a couple more." The vampire's voice had gone clipped and controlled and Xander glanced down in confusion to see brow ridges starting to form then soothing again as each stitch was made.

"Oh crap, Spike!" He'd only thought of a century of experience with torn flesh and a distinct lack of squeamishness when they'd quickly debated how to

handle the injury, not... "It's fucking zapping you for doctoring me?"

"Sticking a pointy object through your flesh and causing you pain, aren't I?" Spike opened and clenched his hands quickly to control the trembling then set his jaw so hard Xander thought he could hear teeth cracking as he finished up the last stitches. "Chip could give bugger all for intent, pain plus human equals migraine." He started to reach for the bandages, but the other man pushed his hands away.

"I can do this part, there's some JD in the cabinet over the fridge, and a couple of packets of blood in the freezer, take care of yourself before what brains you have drip out your ears..." The vampire snorted but went and rattled around the kitchen. As Xander taped gauze he muttered to himself, "Can't believe the chip would rather you stand by and watch me bleed out, that thing is **so** not Three Laws compliant."

"Asimov had a story on that." Damn vampy hearing. "A robot was altered to eliminate the 'through inaction' clause of the First Law, and it became homicidal and almost started a robot rebellion."

"You've read the I Robot stories? And you make fun of me for being a geek..."

Spike returned with a steaming mug of blood and a tall glass of orange juice that he handed over. "I make fun

of you for watching awful TV and obsessing over comics, good literature can be found in any genre and Asimov was bloody brilliant."

"Shouldn't that include comics then?"

"Comics are a medium, not a genre..." He took a sip of blood. "Though Maus deserved the awards it got."

Xander laughed and drained the juice in one long chug.

"Thanks. Feel like I just did my duty to the Red Cross."

"You lot lose enough blood to save puppies and Christmas as it is, can't imagine you need the karma points of official donation."

"Yeah well, for some unknown reason, a lot of folks show up at Sunnydale general needing transfusions, so if I haven't been badly injured for a couple of weeks I let it out that way. I mean, I'm not sure if my body could handle not losing blood every once in a while, it would be like a cow not getting milked."

Spike hid his snicker in his mug. "Yeah, you'd be so used to replacing it that you'd make all this extra and just swell right up."

"I'd be a big water balloon of blood, sloshing around on patrol..."

"...And then some vamp would get the drop on you and try to bite you..." They were both shaking with suppressed laughter by now.

"Right! Only I'd be so full, that the blood would shoot out like a fire hose and knock him out!"

"No, no, you'd burst like the water balloon, and there would be these big splashes everywhere..."

"...And Buffy would be all 'ack my shoes!' while you just yelled 'Blood Pinata!' and danced around!" Xander collapsed giggling onto his friend's chest as they both gave in to the image.

After a couple of minutes, Xander came to two conclusions. One, he was a little light headed from blood loss, and two, Spike had a very nice and comfortable chest. He felt that together, these were sufficient explanation for the fact that he was still resting his head on one vampiric pec and strongly considering petting the other.

"Hey, Spike?"

"Yeah, Harris?"

Spike's chest rumbled nicely when he talked.

"I didn't realize it would hurt you to stitch me up, I wouldn't have asked if I did."

"I know, mate, it's okay. Didn't think of it myself till we were halfway here."

"Thank you."

"No worries." An arm tightened around his shoulders briefly. "Think it's time to tuck you in, though."

"Hmmmm... Okay. Just, wait one sec..." Xander lifted his head from the comfy chest and looked Spike in the face. Pretty vamp. Nice lips. And if it got awkward he could blame the serious head spin he had going on. He leaned in for a kiss.

### **3 Intro To Demon Dating**

While no Casanova, Xander felt he had developed a decent sample size of girl kisses before he realized he was slightly more interested in guys. And with two official boyfriends and a few first dates under his outed belt, he considered himself fairly familiar with boy kisses as well. He'd had a few conversations with Willow about the differences, though her sample sizes were smaller for each, and would have bet good money that he could tell the difference blindfolded, even without stubble in the mix.

Spike didn't give boy kisses or girl kisses. Maybe these were vampire kisses, with their own special technique based on not needing to breath? Or possibly after over a century of practice, they were just Spike kisses,

honed to their kissy essence through thousands of repetitions. Xander felt whatever the pedigree, the result was worth many, many hours of further study, and he was willing to embark on this research now, and wait to write a grant until he had preliminary results. Unfortunately, it was then that the kisses drew gently away. "Hate to say it, pet, but it's time for you to sleep."

Spike kisses leaving! Inconceivable! "No, no, not time for sleep. Time for more kisses, and possible nakedness and maybe even awkward negotiations of who's on top! But no sleep!" He really was feeling head spin-y. Spike would probably need to be on top...

There was another gentle kiss and a soft laugh. "I'd take you top, bottom or sideways, Harris, but I don't want you to get the wrong idea, so we'd need to talk first. And since I crushed three of the codeine from your last ER visit into that juice, I don't think the talking would go very well." As the vamp spoke he used his Jedi powers to levitate Xander towards the bedroom. Wait, Spike didn't have Jedi powers, so maybe he was just lifting him, but it felt very floaty.

"Three codeine? That's like a dose and a half and I have less blood than usual to dilute it... You drugged me? The chip doesn't want you to stop my possibly fatal bleeding, but it lets you drug me? I'm writing a letter. A

letter of complaint. And you talked about arson. You could drug us all then set Giles' flat thing on fire. The chip sucks."

His levitation moved slightly up and down as if Spike's Jedi powers had shrugged. "Suppose I could at that but then who would buy me blood, yeah?"

"And you wouldn't like it as much, you like fighting more than killing. If Angelus had the chip we'd all be messily dead and he'd be starving, but you wouldn't enjoy us dying if you couldn't do it yourself. I'm surprised you hired those Order of Taxidermy guys that one time." He was floating on a cloud now, a cloud with a pillow being placed under his head and a sheet pulled over him.

"Dru was getting worse and I needed the Slayer out of our business long enough to cure her. Looked like I was never gonna get a chance for a fair one on one anyway, with all you lot and Peaches and a mum with a fire ax." Lips brushed his forehead and he remembered being very young and sick and Willow playing doctor with the stethoscope and stuff. "Joyce is a bit of alright. Almost makes me not want to bathe in her daughter's blood."

"That's very sweet in a completely disturbing way... More kisses?"

"Sorry, mate, you need to sleep. We'll talk in the morning, yeah? Or possibly afternoon. Got a message

to deliver to some demons, but I'll check on you again before I head back to the crypt. Sweet dreams, okay?" Okay. Maybe kissing dreams. That would be a start.

---

There were dreams of kissing, with partial nudity and cool hands running over his body. They were interrupted at some point by a bowl of some sort of broth and cool hands checking his injury and when he next fully awoke it was past noon. His bedside table held his cell phone (which was ringing) a glass of water, several varieties of pain pills and a note.

"Um, hi?" He swallowed some water and tried again.

"Xander here."

"Xander, what's going on?" Buffy sounded concerned and relieved all at once. "I stopped by the site for lunch like we planned and your boss said that he'd gotten a call from the hospital about you being attacked by a wild dog and he wasn't expecting you in for the rest of the week. Are you alright, you weren't patrolling alone, were you?"

"No, Spike was with me and it was more a trouble spot check after some pool than a real patrol..." He glanced through the note which confirmed that he was called into work by an imaginary Dr Pratt and should drink as much of the soup in the fridge as possible and go easy on his leg. There was also a new crutch by his bed.

"Something orange with kinda a lobster claw hook thing tore into my leg, but it's fine and Bleachie said its species wasn't poisonous. I'll limp for a few days, but I'll be okay."

"Crap, that's the Howitzer demon or whatever Giles was talking about yesterday, is it dead?"

"Very dead. Spike ripped the claw thing right off and shoved it up what I can only assume was its ass. Then he ripped its head off and complained all the way home about not having time to send a proper message. Um, hang on a sec." He left the phone on his dresser while he limped into the bathroom to eliminate the pressure on his bladder, then made his way to the kitchen. "Hey, homemade soup."

"Huh?" He could hear clicking in the background and figured Buffy must be multitasking as well, probably writing an assignment.

"One of my pots is full of soup in the fridge and there aren't any empty cans. There's a bunch of big round bones like we used to get Oz on his wolf nights, though." He spooned out a bowlful and started it nuking while he drank some juice.

"Oh, yeah, I think marrow broth is supposed to be good for blood loss. Cause it's the part that makes the blood or something?" Her voice took on a deceptively casual

air. "You sound well taken care of, you sure Spike doesn't want to date you?"

He sighed heavily as he carried the soup to the table.

"Honestly, I have no idea what Spike wants right now. And the scary thing, Buff? I'm not sure what I want either."

"...Really? I mean, you're considering...?"

"Could have been the drugs and blood loss talking, but there was some serious consideration going on last night. And he turned me down because he didn't want me to have the wrong impression or something, supposedly we're gonna talk today."

He could practically hear her blinking over the phone.

"William the Bloody didn't want to take advantage of you?"

"I don't know, maybe he just didn't want you staking him if I had morning after regrets. Look, we can talk about this later, right? I have surprisingly good soup to drink and platelets to regenerate."

"Sure, I'll call after classes tomorrow. Get some rest!"

---

Xander was enjoying a TV haze when a knock on the door preceded the scratching of lock picks.

"Should I get a key made for you?"

"No need, mate, just didn't want you to get up. Birds been by to fuss yet?" Spike sat on the couch and began

rummaging through his duster pockets for various drinks and snacks which he set on the coffee table.

"Willow and Tara did a quick incantation to ward my leg against germs or something and gave me ice cream. Hey twinkies! Wait, are these stolen twinkies?"

"Will they taste any different if they are? Give over the remote, Man U is playing." Xander bid farewell to his movie and contemplated the joys of twinkies versus contributing to the delinquency of a vampire. Then he remembered that Spike was possibly less delinquent now than he had been in the last century and nothing he did was likely to get the Big Bad to give up shoplifting.

"So um... Assuming I didn't hallucinate any crucial parts of it, are we going to talk about last night?"

"Is it going to stop me from watching this match?"

"Spike!"

"What?" Confused blue eyes turned to him, but the vamp's impatient look softened. "Alright, but if I miss a good play I'm never stealing you twinkies again. You want to go over what you consider the crucial parts so I can tell you if any of them were hallucinated?"

"Um, we kissed and you indicated a willingness to have sex with me but said we needed to talk first which I gotta say is so outside what I would expect from you in

terms of hooking up I'm considering checking your crypt for pods."

"Right then, all that happened, and no I'm not usually a chit, but when you talked about that bloke from work you tried dating, you were pretty clear that you wanted relationships before sex, yeah?"

"Well, yeah I do, and don't think I missed you implying that that makes me a girl, which it doesn't, I just got used enough **by** girls, I didn't need to replay the same mistakes with guys..."

Spike was momentarily distracted by his team doing something that might or might not have been illegal but replied after a brief discussion of the ref's lineage.

"So yeah, didn't think you'd like it if we tumbled into bed before I explained that we can't actually have a relationship."

Xander blinked. "Why not?"

"Well, because then you'd have broken your rules without meaning to and there'd be all sorts of wrong assumptions and-"

"No, Spike, I mean why not as in why can't we have a relationship? I mean, I'm not looking for a lifelong commitment or even a joint checking account, but we spend a lot of time together already and you're over here all the time and you took care of me and even made me soup when I got hurt, unless you didn't make

the soup and kidnapped someone off the street and held them captive in my kitchen, which if you did, just don't tell me because that's kinda creepy and-"

"Breathe, Harris!"

"Why don't you want to date me?" He promptly felt warmth fill his face. "Not really backing up my 'I'm not a girl' stance, am I?" He stared intently at the screen, trying to figure out how anyone knew what they were doing in this game.

Spike sighed and spoke over his shoulder as he went for a beer. "Didn't say I didn't *want to*, Harris. Yeah, we're mates, and you're a good sort to get involved with, loyal, you know? Told you before I was jealous of the blokes you've been dating and it's not just because you've grown up right edible the last year." He dropped his duster over a chair and settled back on the couch, handing Xander a fresh glass of juice. "Said I **couldn't** be in a relationship with you, is all."

"Oh well, if that's **all**..." He tried glaring, but Spike seemed to be impervious to it and merely watched the match. "Okay, fine, please tell me why we *can't* be in a relationship."

"It's... a little complicated."

"Do I need to turn off the TV so I can focus?"

"No! I mean, no, I'm sure this won't be too distracting, will just take a while, yeah..." Xander counted to 20 in a

demonic language while the vamp waited anxiously on the outcome of a penalty kick then coughed meaningfully. "Right. So, I'm a demon."

"Yes. Yes, I noticed that the first time we met, what with the yellow eyes and fangs. And I'm a human, is this some sort of anti-miscegenation rule vamps have?"

"Not as such. Consensual human-vampire relationships aren't common, but they're acceptable. It's more the way demons see relationships in general... My demon is built to see connections between itself and others in terms of ownership."

"Your demon? I thought your *were* a demon."

"Well, yeah, when vampires talk about what the demon wants or thinks, it's not like there's a separate possessing demon, it's more... like when people are considering something and talk about the angels and devils sitting on their shoulders, or when you say that your lizard brain wants to shag but the man knows it will have bad consequences."

"Or when artistic types talk about what their muse demands."

"Exactly. People don't have actual separate personalities, you know unless they're barmy, but they can recognize when a thought process is coming from their social lessons or their basic instincts or a creative flash."

"Okay, so the demonic instincts that came with being vamped tell you that relationships are all about ownership, and you have a Giles voice that sneaks out when you forget you're supposed to be the Big Bad..." He snickered slightly at Spike's offended look, but forged on. "And since I'm gonna assume that humans don't own master vampires, the issue comes down to my distinct unwillingness to be kept as a piece of property?"

The quiet grumbling about Big Bads being capable of intellectualism broke off. "No, it's not necessarily like that! Some vampires do keep humans or other demons as... pets if you will, but I said before, there are consensual relationships too. Ownership in demonic terms doesn't have to mean one party is a slave - Drusilla owned me as her Childe, but I made all the practical decisions and had to physically stop her from hurting herself sometimes when she had bad fits. It's was a pretty non-traditional relationship by vampire standards, but our demons were comfortable in who owned whom."

"Okay, I guess I can see that..." Xander wished he could stand and pace, but had to settle for picking up one of his pill bottles from the coffee table and tossing it from hand to hand. "Kinda like how Riley has this deep seated midwestern slash macho need to be the

protector in his relationships, so even though everyone involved knows that Buffy can kick his ass ten times over, she lets him do little defensive things for her socially and always asks him to walk her home."

"Yeah, though they're gonna run into trouble if she doesn't let Captain Cardboard take care of her in some real way... not necessarily physically, but she's more likely to turn to you or the watcher on the odd chance she admits she needs any emotional support." Xander cross filed this information under Trouble Spots to Watch and the new Spike is Weirdly Insightful folder as the vamp went on. "The problem is that I can't own you whether you were okay with how it would work out in practice or not."

"And can I get a 'huh'?"

Spike got up and started pacing, ignoring the match entirely. "Okay, when I was a fledge, Angelus told me that the first rule of being a vampire is that you can have anything you want as long as you can take it. But the flip side of that is among vampires you don't own anything unless you can stop someone else from taking it from you. And with this bleeding chip in my head, I can't stop a human being from doing any bloody thing they want to."

Thinking of the jerks at the Bronze, Xander nodded.

Then he glanced over at the coat on the chair. "Is that

why you never take your duster off at Giles' place or when we play pool? You don't trust someone not to steal it and you know you couldn't physically stop them if they did?" And he wasn't getting a warm fuzzy realizing that Spike trusted him enough to take it off. He wasn't.

"Wouldn't even be stealing by demon logic. See, want, take, have. If someone is fast enough to take it and strong enough to keep it, it's theirs." He stopped pacing for the moment but perched on the arm of the couch rather than sitting again. "Not that vampires have no concept of private property. We tend to be very possessive, and within a group of non-enemies there's a general unspoken agreement to leave another bloke's stuff alone because otherwise we'd spend so much time killing each other no one would ever get any quality hunting in."

"Demonic version of the social contract, huh?" He leaned his head back and tried to absorb everything. "So I don't want to fool around unless we have some sort of relationship, and you can't have a relationship unless you own me, but you can't own me because the chip stops you from protecting me from humans. Am I getting this?"

"Well, it also stops me from marking you to tell other demons you're mine, won't let me defend myself from

Slutty or Captain Cardboard staking me for corrupting you and puts a pretty strong crimp in my ability to provide for you."

"I don't need to be provided for! Would you expect me to quit my job if you 'owned' me?" Maybe if he found out enough bad things about a theoretical Spike-relationship, it wouldn't bother him so much that a real one was impossible.

"Have to **be able** to provide for someone who's mine. If you enjoyed work that's something different. Have to be able to kill anyone who looks cross eyed at you so my demon isn't constantly screaming at me to chain you to the bed and not let anyone near you, but if the demon is secure in that ability, I can decide not to kill them for practical reasons and to keep you happy."

Xander snorted then smiled apologetically. "Sorry, I just thought of how guys will sometimes say that they're 'secure enough in their masculinity' to do something girly, and the chip stops you from being secure in your demon-inity..."

"Heh, pretty accurate, mate. Can't live as a demon with the chip, but if I tried to live as a human, the demon would drive me insane knowing I was forced into it. So I survive until I can slip the leash." He shut off the television on the end of the match and offered a hand up. "Hasn't been all bad, though. Demons make for a

better fight than any humans but the Slayer, plus I got a chance to get to know you and the Bit and see more of Joyce. And the chip won't last forever."

After being helped to his bed and mildly fussed over, Xander lay back and gave a wry smile. "It's a catch 22. You can't date me with the chip and you'd be too busy bathing in me and my friends' blood if you didn't have it... Still, wish it could make an exception for self defense and first aid..."

Spike snorted. "Wouldn't kill you or the witches, Harris, less it was to turn you. GI Joe's still pretty high on the 'bathe in blood' list, though. Suppose that would still put a damper on the relationship, yeah?" He grinned and swooped down for a quick kiss, pulling away before Xander could deepen it. "Get some rest, mate. You should be up to the Bronze by this weekend, we'll show you off; see if you can pull a nice human bloke. But next time I tell you a guy is bad news, you better listen or I'll try that drugs and arson plan you came up with."

After the apartment door had closed, he lay awake for a long time, thoughts chasing themselves around his head with no good solution in sight. As he finally drifted off it was to the idle consideration of whether 'I want to date Spike' would be a good enough excuse for a research party or just cause a Scooby Intervention.

## Part Four

"So Xander, what's so important that it couldn't wait for Tuesday? And apparently made you turn research man?"

Marking his place and putting the book aside, he looked around the shop. The Scoobies, sans Spike who hadn't been invited and Anya who had a date, looked back, unused to him asking for a meeting. He steeled himself for possible tears and recriminations and decided to jump right in.

"First off, I need to ask a hypothetical question and get a simple factual answer without you all screaming at me and checking for possession, can we do that?" He glanced around to take in the extremely grudging nods.

"Willow, can you take Spike's chip out?"

The screaming started immediately, though to be fair none of the magic users in the room cast any revealing spells.

"Hypothetically! Can, not Will? I want to broach a topic here and there's no point if nothing can be done."

The others quieted down, with Buffy pulling Riley off to the side a bit as he continued muttering under his breath. Xander looked expectantly at Willow.

"Um... If I was able to see exactly what the chip really looked like, you know like an Initiative schematic or even better holding one of the same make, then I definitely could. There's a few options I could explore otherwise, but they deal with the flesh rather than the chip, and those spells are made to work with living human flesh, not demonically animated dead flesh. So I'll give it a solid 'probably' without further research."

Everyone absorbed this for a moment then Giles cleared his throat. "In this purely hypothetical vein, I'm familiar with the spells Willow is discussing as backup options and can upgrade her response to a 'almost certainly, but with great effort and probably significant pain to Spike.'"

"Well, much as I enjoy significant pain to Spike..." Buffy trailed off under the weight of an angry Dawn glare and quietly disappointed Tara gaze. "Sorry, habit. But you can't be seriously wanting to discuss whether keeping him de-clawed is a good thing or not. He's a killer."

Xander nodded. "He is. But the chip doesn't just keep him from attacking innocent people."

"That's exactly what it does!" Riley looked like he was explaining something very simple to a six year old. "If

he tries to cause a human being harm, it punishes him, usually fast enough to prevent the attack from being carried out."

"No, Ri, not harm. Pain." There was a round of blank looks. "Okay, Buffy, why doesn't Spike try to block you when you feel the need to punch him in the face?"

The Slayer avoided eye contact with her sister as she mumbled, "I don't do it that much anymore..." Xander just waited. "Fine, he doesn't try to block because as hard as I hit and as hard as he has to swing to deflect me, there's a good chance the contact will sting a little on my side and, you know, brain attack."

"Right. It's not as bad with regular humans, but the chip seriously limits what he can do defensively, not just offensively. Hell, if a normal human just grabs his arm tight enough, he can't wrench away without causing them a little temporary pain and setting off the chip."

He looked at Riley, daring him to argue. "That's not preventing harm. That's making him helpless against any human who wants to harm **him** for any reason."

The former soldier scowled but finally nodded. "Fine, yes, the chip not only prevents him from harming humans, it ensures that a human will be able to overcome him if necessary."

"Or even if it isn't." Dawn muttered. She scowled right back at Riley. "We all know being a human doesn't

make anyone a good guy. And Spike can only be out after dark and can't exactly go to the police for help." Xander patted the younger girl's shoulder. "I know Dawnie, and I know you worry about him sometimes, but Ri didn't design the chip or anything, so you can't blame him for it. It's not as if it was even meant to be used on a free vampire to begin with."

"Huh?" Buffy glanced up. "I know they didn't mean for Spike to get loose when he did, but what makes you think they never meant to release vamps or other demons with the chip? Why else would they make them harmless to humans if they were going to keep them locked up?"

Giles coughed quietly and removed his glasses for a good cleaning. "Given the work on ADAM and behavioural modification performed on their own men, it seems likely that the long term plan was to use the chipped demons as a weapon, either against other demons, or, with more fine tuned devices, against foreign nations."

"Or just as slaves," Xander put in bitterly. He'd spent more time than he liked thinking about this since he'd fully realized just what the chip did and didn't do.

"They can go into toxic environments, work without breathable air, and they're strong and tough. And disposable, cause hey, just monsters, right? Maybe if

the world woke up to the Hellmouth side of life they could have moved into the private sector as pets."

"That's disgusting!" Willow's outburst made him feel ashamed of his bluntness, but he refused to apologize.

"It is." Buffy agreed quietly. "But he's right. I had the closest view of the Initiative outside of Riley, I shouldn't have needed to ask."

"Fine." Riley got up and paced. "Yes, the chip was designed to use hostiles in a military setting, not as some sort of 'catch and release'. And I'll give you that without the military providing blood and a layer of protection from violent humans it makes Se- Spike more helpless than harmless. But right now, as things stand, it's the only thing stopping him from killing, and would it really be better to take it out just to stake him?"

"I'm not suggesting just taking it out and hoping Spike's turned over a new leaf," Xander said firmly. "In fact, the other concern I have is that the chip doesn't do enough."

Willow blinked a few times. "It does too much and it doesn't do enough? How does that work?"

"The chip punishes pain inflicted on a human and aiming a weapon at a human. But that's not the end all and be all of hurting people, and Spike's been around long enough to know. Poison, arson, bribing or

threatening another demon, hell he called in out of town assassins once already when Buffy became a real problem rather than a fun challenge." Various shocked looks met his gaze. "He hasn't done any of that, for the same reason he came to us in the first place, because with the chip he needs us... and because he's not like Angelus with the serial killer mentality."

"No," Buffy said quietly. "He's more like some sort of giant cat - he kills for food and he enjoys a fight, but when he offered to side with me against Angelus, I knew I could trust him not to give in to random bloodlust while we were working together. And there's been enough times he could have killed one of us just by walking away and didn't."

Riley leaned his head into his hands. "Again with the 'not meant for catch and release'. That, and when the program was implemented, we all pretty much thought of demons as animals. The scientists would see the vamps' human faces and hear them talk and just go on about mimicry and prey luring behaviors. Even if indirect strategy to harm humans could have been programmed against, it wouldn't have occurred to them."

"S-so we know the chip is.. is a problem..." Tara spoke for the first time. "Do you have a- a solution?"

"Bearing in mind that just removing the chip **isn't** a solution," Buffy put in firmly.

"I don't want to **just** remove the chip." Xander took the book he had been examining when the others entered onto the table and flipped it open to a marked page. "I want to offer him a deal."

Giles gasped in recognition and then a look of simple respect came into his eyes as he slowly smiled at the young man. An excited brainstorming session began between the witches and watcher almost immediately, with Buffy and Riley adding suggestions as they caught on. Xander just sat back, pleased with himself and reread the chapter heading.

***Control of Demons :***  
*Vampiric Oaths and Bindings.*

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Spike paced back and forth in front of the TV, and Xander held back on the desire to ask him to stop disrupting the basketball game he was trying to watch. He'd really only put it on as turnabout for the vamp multitasking their last big talk with soccer.

"So let me see if I understand this particularly insane Scooby plan... Red can take the bleeding chip out of my head, and you and the Niblet have somehow got them all feeling sorry enough for me to do it, but only if I first bind myself, by use of a blood oath spell master

vampires have only ever submitted to with each other to end clan wars, to a policy of human friendliness that is in some ways stronger than what the chip forces. Not to mention that instead of deciding when it's worth taking a hit from the chip, I won't even be able to try to take any forbidden actions."

"That would be the glass half empty take on it, yes." He tried for an optimistic smile and got a scowl for his efforts.

"And by the voluntary nature of the spell, it's almost impossible to break without the cooperation of the others in the binding, which will be the entire bloody gang of you."

"On the other hand, it would gradually and naturally fade once all of us are dead, which by the way, is the reason for the Three Laws Compliant language in the specific case of dealing with us." Xander gestured to the third page of the detailed document the group had hashed out.

"At least you didn't include that for all the happy meals out there..." Spike picked up the papers and growled his way through the differing restrictions on defensive actions, offensive actions for self defense or defense of another, preemptive attacks and lethal force. "And what's this about not stealing? That's just silly, I'm

surprised there isn't a clause against cursing and smoking!"

"Well, Giles suggested... Sorry, seriously, I think there's room for negotiation there. I mean, there's room for negotiation just about everywhere except the whole not using lethal force on innocent victims bit."

"This could last 70 years or more, and that's assuming none of you end up with superhuman lifespans. The chip might burn out in less than a decade."

"Or it might last for centuries. Or it might break down but instead of stopping working, it could start zapping you just for touching people, or scaring them, or just at random." He stepped in front of the blond and grabbed his arms to temporarily stop the pacing. "Look, I know you don't like the idea of trading one leash for another, but no matter how much we agree that the chip sucks, we don't want you bathing in our blood. Or even just Riley's. For it to come out, we need some assurances, and this is the best way short of Willow trying the soul curse on you, and Dawnie and I vetoed that idea right quick."

"Damn straight you better have! I'd rather stick with the chip, thank you!" Spike threw himself onto the couch and stared up at the other man for a moment. Then he smirked. "So, don't want to say that I'm not

complimented, but this is the most trouble anyone's ever gone through to get into my pants."

Xander wondered briefly if it was possible to blush hard enough to set off the fire alarm. "That's not! I mean, it's... It might have, you know, started the thought process, but-" He spluttered helplessly for a bit until the vampire reached out and drew him down to sit beside him. "I only ever thought about you not being able to kill, talking the other night made me realize just how much the chip does to you. If this makes you secure enough in your demon-inity to catch a movie with me, great, but that's sort of faded into the background as far as motivations go."

"It's okay, mate, was mostly teasing... mostly. I'll have to think about this a bit and maybe talk some options over with Rupert." Spike stood and started for the door, papers in hand, but he paused before he opened it. "Thank you, Xander. For thinking this hard about it and selling the others on the idea. Means a lot to me, no matter what got you started on the question."

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When the last words of the contract had been spoken, transmuted into smoky runes in the air that seemed to soak into the skins of the participants, and an indescribable air of completion made all involved aware that their various given words were not merely

binding, but unthinkable to break, Willow stepped forward. A few simple phrases and a grasping gesture as she looked from the schematic in her hand to Spike's head and a small piece of government hardware was held in her hand.

A few minutes later, the chalk and candles on the floor had been joined by crushed silicon, and Dawn and Spike were happily attempting to reduce it to dust. Or taking up line dancing - Xander wasn't sure which. He was tempted to join in, but the heavy atmosphere that lingered in the wake of such a powerful ritual left him feeling happy but somehow detached. He slipped into the alley behind the Magic Box and breathed the relatively fresh air.

"Too much incense for you, Harris?" He jumped.

"Bell. Should have held out for that in the contract - 'Spike must wear a little silver bell'. Everyone else had a suggestion..." He snickered at the highly skeptical look on the vamp's face. "So what are you going to do first? Pick a fight with some frat boys? Spar with the Buffster? Flick Riley in the forehead on general principles?" A lighter flared and the smell of smoke drifted across the alley before the quiet reply. "Probably do all of those eventually, but for now just knowing I can is actually enough... Right now?" He gave a sidelong

glance and took a few more puffs. "Haven't seen the latest Jackie Chan yet... You wanna catch a movie?" Xander felt the sense of detachment lifting from him and didn't fight a tremendously goofy grin. "Dinner at my place after?" A cautious nod in response. "Sure, lemme grab my jacket."

## **The End**

*The plot bunny from Skuzzy: Xander hooks up with a guy who everybody likes... except Spike.*

*The memory it sparked : A scene in Alison Bechdel's Dykes To Watch Out For, where unrepentant player/slut Lois remarks that she didn't think Mo would be interested in someone like her new girlfriend.*

*When Mo angrily asks what she thinks Sydney is like, Lois replies simply "Me."*